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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, September 17, 2009

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, September 17, 2009

The House met at 10 a.m.

[English]

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[English]

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian parliamentary delegation of the Canadian section of the inter-parliamentary forum of the Americas, FIPA, respecting its participation in the 39th regular session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, June 2 and June 3, 2009.

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[Translation]

EXTRATERRITORIAL ACTIVITIES OF CANADIAN BUSINESSES AND ENTITIES ACT

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-438, An Act respecting the extraterritorial activities of Canadian businesses and entities, establishing the Canadian Extraterritorial Activities Review Commission and making consequential amendments to other Acts.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to introduce a bill that will ensure that the extraterritorial activities of Canadian businesses and entities are conducted in a responsible and ethical manner, and that they adhere to international human rights and environmental standards.

This bill responds to the recommendations in the report from the National Roundtables on Corporate Social Responsibility and the Canadian Extractive Industry in Developing Countries, published in March 2007. I urge all of my colleagues in this House to vote in favour of this bill.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

HAZARDOUS PRODUCTS ACT

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-439, An Act to amend the Hazardous Products Act (products made with dog or cat fur).

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to introduce my private member's bill, An Act to amend the Hazardous Products Act (products made with dog or cat fur), which has been seconded by my colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

While products that use dog and cat fur are banned in countries all over the world, these products remain legal and can be imported, exported and sold in Canada without labels.

I hope that all members of the House will support the bill to ban this deplorable trade.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

[Translation]

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE PROTECTION ACT

Mr. Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-440, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (war resisters).

He said: Mr. Speaker, this bill is in response to the refusal of the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism to show Canadian sensibility.

[English]

This is a simple bill with a clear purpose, which would apply Canadian sensibility to the issue of war resisters in Canada. The bill would make sure that people of good conscience who leave a war that is not approved by the United Nations and who would be subject to compulsion and stop loss in their own country would be eligible to become Canadian citizens.

The bill reflects the work and the wishes of a great deal of Parliament. It basically takes the spirit of two motions that have already been passed by a majority of Parliament and puts them in the form of law that would have to be followed by the minister and the ministry of immigration and citizenship.

Routine Proceedings

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

●(1010)

PENSION BENEFITS STANDARDS ACT

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-441, An Act to amend the Pension Benefits Standards Act, 1985 (disclosure of environmental, social and governance investment factors).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased this morning to introduce a bill to amend the Pension Benefits Standards Act.

This bill will require public and private pension plan administrators to disclose considerations given to environmental, social and governance factors in the selection, retention and liquidation of investments in their pension funds.

Millions of Canadians have growing concerns about the long-term sustainability of their pension plans. The current financial crisis has led them to a new understanding of risk in pension fund investing. Today risk assessment needs to take into account broader ethical considerations regarding long-term sustainability.

Pension plan members want to know whether their fund managers have asked questions about the companies they invest in, such as how a company treat its employees, where it buys its supplies and from whom, how a company contributes to the community in which it does business, whether its business practices are fair and, most importantly, can the environment, the earth, sustain its business activities.

I would like to thank my colleague, the hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood, for seconding this bill.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are scheduled under government orders today to begin dealing with Bill C-50, and I wonder if I could seek unanimous consent for the following motion.

I move, “That, for the purposes of our consideration of Bill C-50, an act to amend the Employment Insurance Act, which will begin under government orders today, the House agrees to conclude its consideration of this bill at all stages by the normal time of adjournment tomorrow, including examination of the bill in the committee of the whole instead of a standing committee if that is necessary to meet this timetable”.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Wascana have the unanimous consent of the House to propose this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed

Some hon. members: No.

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: There is not unanimous consent.

Does the hon. member for Paquette have anything to propose?

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, perhaps the name of my riding will change to Paquette after I die, but for now it is still Joliette.

Further to what the House Leader of the Official Opposition was saying, several stakeholders have said things that substantiate our fears concerning Bill C-50, a bill to amend employment insurance. A few come to mind, including Pierre Céré of the Conseil national des chômeurs, Marc Bellemare of the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, and Guy Chevette of the Quebec Forest Industry Council. Moreover, the Minister of Public Works and Government Services has publically stated that he could make no guarantees regarding the scope of Bill C-50. All of that leads me to ask for unanimous consent to adopt the following motion:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practice of the House, Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits, be deemed referred immediately to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities pursuant to Standing Order 73(1).

I seek the unanimous consent of this House to refer the bill to committee immediately.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Joliette have the unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: There is no consent.

* * *

[*English*]

PETITIONS

JUSTICE

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to rise today and present this petition on behalf of several of my constituents.

Whereas there is an urgent need to upgrade the level of punishments for repeat offenders under the Canadian Criminal Code, and whereas Canada continues to show inordinate levels of crime have been taking place in our community and dealt with by unsatisfactory outcomes, and whereas the time has come to take measures to ensure that these offenders are held accountable to the highest levels for their actions, we the undersigned respectfully petition the Canadian House of Commons as follows: that the Government of Canada introduce a new bill for punishment and convictions under the Canadian Criminal Code and implement stiffer penalties forcing Canadian insurance companies and commercial firms to pay higher tort suits.

Routine Proceedings

COMPENSATION FROM RAILWAY COMPANIES

We, the people, would like to request to have the Canadian House of Commons pursue the following: introduce a new bill forcing Canadian insurance companies and commercial firms to pay stiffer, higher settlements if the people they insure or employ cause serious or deadly accidents; introduce a new crime bill that will apply stiffer penalties toward repeat offenders; introduce a new crime bill that will give crown attorneys and police agencies more freedom to upgrade sentences from two years less a day to two years plus a day for those who continue to terrorize the safety of the communities via driving offences or violence.

• (1015)

The Speaker: I hesitate to say much, but I want to warn the hon. member, and remind hon. members, that reading petitions is not permitted. It sounded to me as though this petition was being read, but I am not sure; I do not have a copy in front of me. Members are to give a brief summary of petitions rather than read them.

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by my concerned constituents from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers asking that the government improve employment insurance. It belongs to workers, they say. They ask that measures be introduced to reduce the number of hours for eligibility to 360 hours. They are asking that benefits be extended, especially in this difficult economic time, and they are asking that benefits be at least 60% of normal earnings.

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to present a petition on behalf of Canadians who note that Canada is a country that respects human rights, including the right to life. They note it has been 40 years, since May 14, 1969, when Parliament changed the law to permit abortion and that since January 28, 1988 Canada has had no law with respect to abortion.

They call on Parliament to pass legislation for the protection of human life from the time of conception to the time of natural death.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise to support this petition against the Canada-Colombia trade deal. The House has been debating the issue of Canada entering into a privileged trading relationship with a narcostate that has a history of murder against civil society members who have tried to unionize and provide a better life for many citizens.

The petitioners are calling for a commission to first look at the human rights issues, before Canada enters into a privileged trading relationship with such a state.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order to remind all members that a member cannot say whether they are for or against a petition, as the member just did. A member has to simply present the petition to Parliament.

The Speaker: I may have missed the hon. member saying that, but I remind hon. members, as the member for Yukon has so ably done, that it is the case.

The hon. member for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, railways across the region are littered with flammable liquids. Small municipalities barely have the wherewithal to fund a volunteer fire department. Because the Railway Act does not provide for compensation to small municipalities for fires that the railways cause, the petitioners are calling upon Parliament to implement legislation that would provide compensation to the municipalities responsible for putting out the fires in their areas.

TAXATION

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have three petitions today.

The first is another income trust broken promise petition on behalf of the constituents of Mississauga South. The petitioners want Canadians to remember the Prime Minister boasting about an apparent commitment to accountability when he said that the greatest fraud is a promise not kept.

The petitioners want to remind him that he promised never to tax income trusts, but he broke that promise and posed a 31.5% punitive tax, which permanently wiped out \$25 billion of the hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners call upon the Conservative minority government, now the Reform government, first, to admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions; second, to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise and the tax increase; and finally, to repeal the 31.5% tax on income trusts.

• (1020)

PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS' COMPENSATION FUND

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is with respect to police officers and firefighters. The petitioners from my riding of Mississauga South would like to bring to the attention of the House that police officers and firefighters are required to place their lives at risk in the execution of their duties on a daily basis, that employment benefits of those public safety officers often provide insufficient compensation to the families of those who are killed in the line of duty and that the public mourns that loss when one of them loses their life in the line of duty. They wish to support, in a tangible way, the surviving families in their time of need.

The petitioners therefore call upon Parliament to establish a fund known as the public safety officers' compensation fund for the benefit of families of public safety officers killed in the line of duty.

Routine Proceedings

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the final petition is on the issue of abortion. These petitioners, many from my own riding, but from other places across Ontario, would like to draw to the attention of the House that Canada is a country that respects human rights and includes in its Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that everyone has the right to life.

They also state that it has been 40 years, since May 14, 1969, when Parliament changed the law to permit abortion. Since January 28, 1988, Canada has had no law to protect the lives of the unborn child. The petitioners therefore call upon Parliament to pass legislation for the protection of human life from the time of conception until natural death.

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with respect to my many colleagues, I want to present a petition today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 36, I have the pleasure to present a petition that calls upon Parliament to pass legislation for the protection of human life from the time of conception until natural death.

HOUSING

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have four petitions to present today. The first petition is from people in the Lower Mainland who are very aware of the critical need for affordable housing. They call upon Parliament to ensure swift passage of Bill C-304, which we will be debating today in the House in the hopes that this bill will be passed.

MIDDLE EAST

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from people in Toronto who are urging the Government of Canada to immediately undertake a change of position regarding the Middle East and ensure that there is concrete action to hold Israel accountable for its ongoing violations of international humanitarian law.

VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also have a petition from Chinatown residents in Vancouver who are petitioning the Government of Canada to work with all levels of government and community groups to recognize and preserve the rich legacy of Vancouver's Chinatown and to designate Chinatown as a national historical site.

CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have another petition from people in Vancouver concerning the future of the CBC. They are urging the House of Commons to implement the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage to provide short-term bridge funding for the CBC and to increase the long-term core funding to the public broadcaster, including CBC Radio and Radio-Canada.

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition to present to the House today from many citizens of my home province of Manitoba calling upon the House of Commons

to extend some valuation to the unborn, as in Canada we do not have any value associated with our unborn children.

CANADA-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, whereas all trade agreements must be built upon the principle of fair trade, which fundamentally respects social justice, human rights, labour rights and environmental stewardship and prerequisites to trade, the petitioners call upon Parliament to reject the Canada-Colombia trade deal until an independent human rights impact assessment is carried out and the agreement is renegotiated along the principle of fair trade that would take environmental and social impacts firmly into account while unilaterally respecting labour rights and the rights of all affected parties.

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to present two petitions.

The first petition concerns the long-gun registry which continues to be a major source of irritant for many of our rural communities. The petitioners are calling upon the House of Commons to support Bill C-391.

• (1025)

CANADA POST

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the post offices of our country are part of the rural fabric, the second petition calls upon Canada to maintain the moratorium on post office closures and withdraw the legislation to legalize remailers.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to present two petitions on the same subject, signed by my constituents and other residents of Vancouver.

The petitioners assert that every country has an obligation to protect the human rights of its citizens and Canada should be a strong voice for human rights around the globe.

The petitioners, therefore, call upon the government to take all available diplomatic steps to urge the protection of human rights in China and, in particular, to end the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in that country.

THE INTERNET

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition from a number of people from southwestern Ontario calling upon Canada to update its laws regarding Internet counselling to commit suicide, pointing out that counselling to commit suicide is a crime regardless of the medium used.

They are also calling upon the government to fund education programs to empower youth to protect themselves from Internet predators.

ETHIOPIA

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Birtukan Mideksa, the Ethiopian opposition leader, was put in prison on December 29, 2008, by the Ethiopian junta. I have dozens of petitions from the Ethiopian community in the region of Ottawa and 1,800 that were sent in online. They ask the Canadian government to take a very clear position that should force the Ethiopian government to release both Birtukan Mideksa and all other political prisoners in Ethiopia.

As the House knows, there is a very strong Ethiopian community in Canada and they are very concerned about the imprisonment of this opposition leader, which is why they have sent this petition to Parliament. I am presenting it on their behalf.

In this Ethiopian new year, I would like to wish the Ethiopian community *Aderesachihu*.

CANADA-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to table a petition this morning signed by folks from Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Saskatchewan, including a good number from Osler, Saskatchewan.

These petitioners are very concerned about the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement. They believe that such an agreement unjustly favours corporate interests and ignores the terrible human rights record of Colombia when it comes to workers, members of civil society, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, human rights activists, farmers, labour leaders and journalists.

The petitioners call upon Parliament to reject the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement until a full independent human rights assessment is carried out and a fair trade agreement is negotiated.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition from petitioners across the country, including the Northwest Territories, calling upon Parliament to reject the Canada-Colombia free trade deal until an independent human rights impact assessment is carried out, and that this agreement be renegotiated upon the lines of fair trade that would take into account environmental and social impacts.

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, thousands of Canadians have signed petitions that call upon Parliament to reject the Canada-Colombia trade deal until an independent human rights impact assessment is carried out, and that the agreement be renegotiated along the principles of fair trade that would take into account environmental and social impacts while genuinely respecting labour rights and the rights of all affected parties.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Government Orders

POINTS OF ORDER

BILL C-50

Hon. Jay Hill (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think it is important, given the importance of the bill that we are about to debate that I reply to a couple of motions that were put forward earlier to the chamber.

I want to point out that the issue of fast-tracking by the two opposition parties that put forward those motions was not raised at the House leaders meeting yesterday. We have a process, a procedure, that we use to work through these types of procedures. Obviously there was dissension even among the two parties as to how best to proceed with Bill C-50.

It is an important bill and we certainly do not want to make any mistakes with it. It is important that, at a minimum, the minister be allowed to explain it to Canadians and to the House of Commons, as she is about to do.

I would end by suggesting to the other House leaders that they know I am always open to ways in which we can expeditiously move forward the government's agenda.

• (1030)

The Speaker: I am not sure that was a point of order but I guess the hon. government House leader has made his point.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC) moved that Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am proud to introduce Bill C-50 to the House today. What is it about? It is about our government helping workers and their families. It is about extending EI regular benefits to those who have worked a long time and have never or rarely collected EI benefits.

Many workers have lost their jobs through no fault of their own because of the global economic downturn that has cut the ground out from under them. What happens to the workers who have rarely, if ever, collected EI before and who suddenly find themselves out of work? These are Canadians who have paid their dues, have worked hard, have paid their taxes for many years and have, of course, paid EI premiums.

It is only fair and responsible that we support them and their families in their time of need. Many workers have worked in the same job or industry all of their lives and face the prospect of having to start all over again.

Government Orders

[Translation]

In many cases, these workers are now facing low prospects of finding work in their industry, and many will face challenges transitioning to a new career.

These measures will help ensure that long-tenured workers who have paid into the EI system for years are provided the help they need while they search for new employment.

These are temporary changes to the EI program to help workers when they need it most.

The proposed measure would extend nationally regular benefits for long-tenured workers by between five and 20 weeks, depending on the number of years they have worked and paid EI premiums.

[English]

As proposed, this new, temporary measure would cover all new claims established from the start date, which will depend on when the legislation comes into force. Payments would then gradually phase out by fall 2011.

As members can see, this temporary measure is designed to help long-tenured workers find work as our economy recovers. The additional weeks of EI regular benefits would help these workers by providing support for a longer period while they look for work during the economic downturn.

This government is concerned about fighting the recession. This is, of course, in contrast to the official opposition that is more intent on fighting the recovery. This government believes that it is more important to be fighting for working Canadians, rather than fighting an unnecessary election.

This temporary measure is in addition to other measures that we are taking under our economic action plan to help workers. Canadians from all areas of the country and from all walks of life are being provided with meaningful help.

•(1035)

[Translation]

For example, another measure to help support long-tenured workers is the career transition assistance initiative. It consists of two measures to help workers retrain for new jobs.

The first extends their EI regular benefits up to a maximum of two years while they participate in longer-term training. Thousands of long-tenured workers will benefit from this measure.

The second measure gives long-tenured workers earlier access to EI if they invest in their training using all or part of their severance package.

[English]

Moreover, in our economic action plan, we have moved very quickly to provide the advantages of five additional weeks of EI regular benefits. In areas of high unemployment, we have increased the maximum duration of EI benefits by up to five weeks and, through our economic action plan, we are investing an additional \$1.5 billion in provincial and territorial training programs. These programs are effective because they are being implemented by those

closest to the labour market challenges in their respective areas. Close to 150,000 workers across the country will be benefiting from these initiatives that will help them retrain to keep their jobs or transition to new work. These agreements have been signed, sealed and delivered.

[Translation]

Let me now say a few words about work sharing, a federal program under EI that helps protect jobs. This program is another example of successful action taken by this government. It allows employees who might otherwise be laid off to continue working a reduced work week while they receive EI benefits for the days they do not work.

Under Canada's economic action plan, our government has made changes to work sharing that will maximize its benefit during this difficult period. The work sharing program now allows more flexibility for the employer's recovery plan and extends the maximum duration of the agreement by an additional 14 weeks.

[English]

Let me give this House an example of just how this is working. At a Michelin plant in Waterville, Nova Scotia, 550 workers have been participating in a work-sharing program since April 12, 2009. Under their agreement Michelin workers at this plant collect EI benefits for one day a week and work the other four days.

This government has always believed that the best way to help Canadians is to ensure that there are opportunities for work. This is a prime example of the right EI policy providing the right result. That is just one example.

At the beginning of September there were over 5,800 work-sharing agreements in place, benefiting almost 165,000 Canadians whose jobs are being protected.

Sometimes, despite their best efforts, businesses fail. When an employer goes bankrupt, workers have good reason to worry about the money that is owed to them. That is why a wage-earner protection program provides eligible workers with guaranteed and timely payment of their remaining wages, severance, termination and vacation pay if their employer goes bankrupt and cannot pay them.

Since January 27, 2009, the WEPP has reimbursed \$17 million in wages to over 8,000 Canadians who were owed eligible wages by their bankrupt employer.

We know how difficult it can be for young people to find their career paths when they have little work experience. That is why, under our economic action plan, we are supporting two measures to help young people in transition.

[Translation]

Our Canada summer jobs program has seen its funding increased by \$20 million over the next two years. Subsequently, this year we were able to sign approximately 22,000 agreements to support the creation of almost 40,000 jobs for students who will get valuable work experience.

And we have finalized a \$15 million agreement with the YMCA and YWCA to implement the new grants for youth internship program across Canada.

Under this program, up to 1,000 young people will gain work experience through internships with not-for-profit and community service organizations, with a focus on environmental projects.

• (1040)

[English]

In today's environment we realize how important it is for Canadians to develop the skills they need to participate and indeed succeed in the job market. In particular we need to attract young people into the skilled trades. Earlier this month Canada and Calgary were host to the WorldSkills Competition. Canada's young people had an opportunity to become more knowledgeable about world-class expertise in the trades. I want to congratulate all the competitors on Canada's team at WorldSkills Calgary.

Let me announce to the House that Canada's team, known as the "Great 38", won a total of eight medals this year: three gold, three silver and two bronze. To all those participants I would like to say their country is behind them and we are proud of them all the way.

While I was at WorldSkills Calgary, I was particularly delighted to present the first apprenticeship completion grant cheque in Alberta to a former participant in the Canadian WorldSkills competition. Under our economic action plan we added the apprenticeship completion grant to motivate Canadians to complete their apprenticeship training and receive certification in a designated "red seal" trade. The apprenticeship completion grant builds on the apprenticeship incentive grant which encourages young Canadians to progress through their apprenticeship training.

Mr. Speaker, are you aware that an apprentice could receive a total of \$4,000 in grants with both of these programs? That is good news. As many as 28,000 Canadians could take advantage of this excellent opportunity aimed at training our workforce of the future.

We are also providing support, indeed more support, for older workers under the economic action plan. The targeted initiative for older workers will provide an additional \$60 million over three years to enable people 55 to 64 years of age to get skills upgrading and work experience to help transition to new jobs.

[Translation]

These are people who bring a wealth of experience to the workforce, providing invaluable knowledge and mentorship skills.

The economic action plan is helping Canadians in all walks of life. It is helping an older forestry worker in Quebec transition to a new career. It is helping a young woman in Regina train for a job in web design. It is helping a single mother in British Columbia get back into the workforce by learning a trade.

[English]

It is helping the laid-off worker in Ontario who needs extra weeks to look for a new job. Our economic action plan is helping a lot of people who have been knocked down by the economic crisis to get back on their feet.

Government Orders

Not so long ago, as we moved into the summer months, the Leader of the Opposition made a great deal out of how important he felt EI was to himself and to other members of his party. We on the government side agreed to work together with the opposition to develop solutions to this serious problem. Our government brought serious proposals to the table. The opposition, however, became fixated on a program that would provide for a 45-day work year. We said from the beginning that it was the wrong direction. We knew that a 45-day work year would not create a single Canadian job.

Sadly, before our work was finished, the opposition walked away from the talks. Actually more to the point its members decided that they would not even bother to show up. On the advice of the Leader of the Opposition his party walked away from Canada's unemployed. Not only that, but when our government held a briefing session yesterday for the opposition members to discuss this bill and to inform them about it, the Bloc and the NDP were there to learn more, but not one Liberal MP cared enough about the unemployed to show up and learn about the bill.

I will stand in this place today and say to the House that this government will never, ever walk away from Canada's unemployed, especially when they need our help the most.

• (1045)

[Translation]

We are making good progress, but the job is not done.

[English]

I want to re-emphasize that Canadians do not need, nor do they want, an unnecessary election.

The economy is still our number one priority. We need to continue to implement our economic action plan in order to create and maintain jobs.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is very embarrassing, I think, when a minister is introducing a bill and that minister spends most of the time not talking about the bill in question. However, there is not very much in the bill for the unemployed.

I have two questions. If all the feigned sincerity and interest in the workers that was in that speech were true, then why did some Conservative and NDP members "refuse" to expedite the bill a few minutes ago through either the motion put forward by the Liberals or that put forward by the Bloc, and to either finish it off this week or send it to committee?

Second, I cannot believe the minister's speech writers would put a —

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, at no time did a member of the NDP say no to sending the bill to committee or to having the bill go through. I just want to correct the record.

Government Orders

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Yukon is an experienced parliamentarian and knows he should not say things that he does not know to be true in terms of who may have voted.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: How does the Speaker know it is not true?

However, I will go on with my next question.

I cannot believe the member's speech writer would have put in, although it was not related to this bill, the summer student program this year, which was one of the most disastrous years in Canadian history for summer student employment. I would like to ask the minister what she is going to do to rectify that next year. Would she at least vastly increase the number of student jobs available if next year is going to be as bad as this year was?

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, I really take exception to the hon. member's dismissive attitude toward this bill. He is saying that it is simple and that Canadians do not need or deserve to know the details as to what is in it.

We do have a process in this House. We have a process whereby the House leaders of the various parties meet and discuss what will be on the agenda for the following day.

The opposition was very aware yesterday that we were planning to proceed with debate of this bill. The opposition members had the opportunity to change the plan, if that was their choice. They did not. They are trying to pull a fast one now because they do not want Canadians to realize how dismissive of EI and the needs of the unemployed they have been for the last several months. I take exception to his insinuation that they have a monopoly on caring, because they have demonstrated very clearly that they do not.

Our economic action plan has included many things that have helped long-tenured workers, particularly workers who have not had to lose their job because of this recession. Our work-sharing program right now is protecting the jobs of over 165,000 people. I say that is proof we do care and we are helping create and maintain jobs, and we are very proud of that record.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, earlier, the minister announced that workers in a certain category would receive employment insurance benefits for an additional five to 20 weeks. A decision like that has to be based on numbers.

Can the minister tell us how many workers in Ontario and Quebec will benefit from this measure?

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, we know that there is a group of unemployed workers who have been severely affected by the global recession: people who were working in manufacturing and forestry. Their industries are just now recovering. That is why it is so difficult for them to find new jobs right away. It is very hard. Many of them will have to look for new careers. To do that, they will need training. That is why we gave them this opportunity to get training with additional weeks of income support from employment insurance benefits.

The program we are talking about today will help 190,000 people. I am sorry, but I do not have the numbers for each province. Across

Canada, 190,000 people will benefit from this bill if the opposition members support it.

• (1050)

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during this time of global recession, I have seen the strong benefits of the job opportunities program in my riding. I was delighted to hear that the student program is being enhanced and moving forward. We make great use of the work sharing program in my riding.

I am delighted to hear today about the changes in terms of unemployment benefits for long tenured workers. In my mind, it is just sort of rounding a key gap that was there. This will be an excellent benefit for my riding that has been hit during this global recession.

I wonder if the minister could talk a little bit more about the temporary nature of this program and why it was created temporarily.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, it is common knowledge that recessions do not last forever, which is a darn good thing. That is why our economic action plan and many of the initiatives in it for infrastructure, for creating jobs, for protecting jobs, and for expanding benefits to the unemployed are of a temporary nature.

When we come out of this global recession, we do not want to have a structural deficit. All of these extra programs cost a lot of money. We want to make sure that Canadians are not burdened with an excessive increase in taxes as a result of programs lasting longer than they are needed.

Coming out of this recession, we are going to need people back at work. New jobs are going to be created and many of those jobs will require skills that do not currently reside in our workers.

We are helping people in these tough times get the training for the new jobs. We are helping them with this program by providing extra benefits, an extra length of time to claim EI only in the short term, so that we can make sure that they do have the opportunity to get back to work. Even now, in some parts of the country, there are skill shortages and employee shortages.

We are trying to help those who are suffering the hardest to get through the tough times without burdening our grandchildren with greater taxes in the future.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the minister for bringing Bill C-50 forward.

Opposition parties have been working diligently to provide some relief to the unemployed and particularly those who in this case have contributed over a long period of time and never been claimants et cetera. This is an important initiative that will be well received by those in that case.

Government Orders

The point is, and I ask this question of the minister quite honestly, that a mechanism was set up to discuss and entertain proposals on how we could provide relief to the unemployed. The government agreed to this committee and there were meetings. The government's position was that it would never agree to the changes that were being brought to the table by the Liberal Party.

I want to understand from the minister's perspective, why provisions such as these were not presented to the committee that met during the summer, so that we could have entertained this in a more timely fashion on behalf of the unemployed?

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, when the Liberals brought forward their notion borrowed from the NDP and the Bloc last spring that people should be able to qualify for EI benefits after working only 45 days in the year, we made it very clear that was not in the best interests of Canadians and that we would never support that.

When the Leader of the Opposition made an agreement with the Prime Minister to have an EI panel to explore ways that the unemployed could be helped, the Prime Minister made it very clear that the 45 day work year was a total non-starter. The Liberals knew that going in.

Sadly, while Conservative members of that panel presented numerous ideas on how to help the unemployed, including the topic that we are discussing today, the Liberals were fixated on only one thing and that was their 45 day work year.

Canadians cannot afford it. They find it offensive. We will not support it. We will deliver the goods with this legislation that will help those who have been hardest hit by this global recession.

• (1055)

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to have the opportunity to debate, for the second time this week, a bill about employment insurance.

We have heard from the government a bit about the bill. We will hear from the opposition parties how they feel about it, but the sad, overarching fact about all of this which overrides the content, or the lack of content, of this bill is that this is not really about employment insurance at all. It is about politics and about political games.

The Conservative government does not particularly care much about the social infrastructure of this country. We know that and we knew that from the beginning. When it inherited the Liberal surplus, it still cut literacy, the court challenges program, women's groups and many other pieces of the social infrastructure of this country. That is when it was living off our surpluses.

No, this is not a bill about EI. This is about politics and using EI as a tool. To the Conservatives, this is all a parliamentary chess game with politics first and people second.

Let us take a moment to see how we got to this today.

Last year at about this time, the Prime Minister was denying that there was any recession coming down on Canadians. We then had the economic update, which ignored the problem, and a finance minister who referred to the recession as a technical recession.

In January we saw a flawed budget, but there were some investments in things such as EI, extension for benefits and money

for training. We said that we did not think the budget was enough but that it was a start. We supported it. The other parties did not. It was qualified support. The day we announced we would support the budget, we said that we needed to see more to continue our support of the government.

Last spring, employment insurance was a big issue. It was needed across the country. Jobs were being shed in many parts of Canada, including many parts of this country that had not suffered job losses in previous recessions.

The Leader of the Opposition indicated the Liberal position, which was regional fairness and a national standard of 360 hours to qualify. He was not alone on that.

The premier of B.C., Gordon Campbell, said Canadian workers, whether they lived in the Maritimes, the north, or Ontario, should be treated the same way.

The premier of Saskatchewan said that instead of 50-plus different treatments for the number of qualifying hours, we needed to dramatically reduce that.

The premier of Alberta said that unemployed families, whether they lived in Nova Scotia, Quebec or Alberta were equally unemployed.

The TD bank said that the truth of the matter was that during an economic downturn, it was no easier to find a job in a region with a lower prevailing unemployment rate than in one with a higher unemployment rate.

Pierre Fortin from Quebec said of the Leader of the Opposition's proposal that 360 hours was no problem, that it was just and fair.

A number of organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce said that a measure to improve the equity of the EI system that would be consistent with longer-term, smart policy would be to immediately and permanently make the duration of and access to benefits the same.

Perhaps my favourite was from the Reform Party of Canada platform's statement of principles which said: "An unemployed worker is an unemployed worker and deserves to be treated the same, regardless of region of residence. We will urge the immediate elimination of discriminatory EI elements such as regional entrance requirements". The author of that is now the Prime Minister of this country. That is what he said then. We see where he is now.

In the spring, EI was a big issue, a huge issue in this Parliament. There were a number of private members' bills brought forward which Liberals supported as a way of sending a message to the government that this was a serious issue, that we would not agree with everything that was in all these bills that our colleagues from other parties had put forward, but that we supported the principle of investing in people and in the social infrastructure of this country.

Bill C-241, from my friend from Brome—Missisquoi, called for the removal of the two-week waiting period.

Government Orders

Bill C-279, from the member for Welland, called for an enactment providing that pension benefits, vacation pay and severance were not to be included in earnings.

Bill C-280, from my NDP colleague from Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, called for a lowering of the threshold for becoming a major attachment to 360 hours, the national standard, setting the weekly payable to 55% of the best 12 weeks and reducing the qualifying period for receiving benefits.

We had an opposition day motion brought forward by the member for Hamilton Mountain, and I am going to read the whole thing because it is interesting to juxtapose the view of the NDP on March 5 and the view of the NDP here in September. This motion said:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government must address the alarming growth in the number of unemployed Canadians and the increasing number of Employment Insurance claimants; confirm its commitment to a social safety net to help regular Canadians through tough times and bring forward reforms to Employment Insurance rules to expand eligibility and improve benefits, including: (a) eliminate the two-week waiting period; (b) reduce the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment; (c) allow self-employed workers to participate in the plan; (d) raise the rate of benefits to 60% and base benefits on the best 12 weeks in the qualifying period; and (e) encourage training and re-training.

• (1100)

There is nothing in there about extending benefits further.

That was the discussion back in the spring. It was a very long discussion in the House that dominated many question periods. It was called for in private members' bills and in opposition day motions.

Outside of the House, we heard the premiers, economists and labour unions. We heard everyone saying that we had to do something. The first thing they always mentioned was the unfairness of the system, particularly in a difficult economic time, for people who simply were unable to qualify.

As recently as Monday, my colleague on the human resources committee, the member for Chambly—Borduas, brought forward a bill that called for many of those same things.

In June Parliament was paralyzed and the country was on the verge of having an election until the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister said, "Let us try to make an effort. Let us try to take this out of question period and put it into a room where people can discuss ideas". The two things that were going to be discussed were regional fairness, from the Liberals, and extending EI to the self-employed, from the Conservatives. Those were the two issues.

What happened? On June 17 this EI working group, called a blue ribbon panel, was formed to look at those two issues. I was announced, my colleague, the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine was the other member along with Kevin Chan, a very distinguished member of the office of the Leader of the Opposition. We were the three members. The minister was announced by the Prime Minister.

Two weeks later the other two members of the Conservative Party were announced. That was two weeks after June 17, so we were already into the summer.

We had a tele-conference. The minister said, "I cannot meet for two weeks. I have a vacation". We were going to meet the next week and the other member of the Conservative Party said, "I've got a vacation too", so we had to delay it again.

We had our first full briefing on July 14 which was a technical briefing. The minister in the House just said that we only had one position and she had all kinds. The minister presented nothing. There still is not a Conservative proposal to that group. If there is, she knows where my office is. She can send it. We still have not seen a proposal from the Conservatives.

On that day, July 14, in Ottawa we asked a series of questions of the working group. We asked it to cost 360 hours on a temporary basis. We also said, "Give us the cost of going to 390 hours, give us the cost of going to 420 hours, give us the cost of eliminating the three month regional rate system which penalizes people who lose their jobs on the front end of an economic downturn".

My colleague from Montreal said, "Maybe we should look at the extension of benefits. We could at least look at it. Look at what they are doing in the United States". That was a Liberal idea on July 14. We have it in writing, Mr. Speaker. I would be happy to send it to your office because I know you are a learned man.

We also asked, "Where is the position on the self-employed, which is your position?". The Conservatives even promised it in the last election. They said that the Conservative government would extend EI benefits for maternal parental benefits for self-employed people.

The Conservatives said that they could not give us that information. We asked, "You can't tell us what it will cost, you must have cost it for your platform". They said they could not give us that because it belongs to the Conservative Party of Canada.

I said, "You've got a department and you've got all kinds of people". Whenever the minister would come to the human resources committee, she would bring a whole boatload of good people in whom we have faith when they are properly directed. The Conservatives said that they cannot give us that information.

We still do not know what that would have cost, concerning the self-employed. That was the Conservative proposal. They said to the Leader of the Opposition, "We want to look at the self-employed based on what we promised in the last election". We got nothing.

On July 23 we had our first full meeting of the EI working group. We had agreed before that there would be certain protocols followed. The Conservatives would give us documents in advance, we would look at them, and we would all come prepared to discuss them. They would table drafts and we got them at the meeting.

I talked to the minister four or five days before. She was king enough to call when she got back from vacation. She said, "Why don't we present on the self-employed and you present on regional fairness".

Government Orders

We presented on regional fairness. We had a long discussion and all six members of the working group agreed that we should get information on a number of areas. I will come to the exciting part about that later, which is that we never got that information either. We agreed on protocols and we did not get it.

• (1105)

We had a full discussion. There was no proposal from the Conservatives on the self-employed. We agreed to have three meetings in August. That is what our group did.

The meeting on August 6 was a beauty. We arrived at the meeting. The Conservatives provided their costing of 360 hours. They brought it to the meeting, but they gave it to reporters beforehand. I can show members. I have it here. It indicates on the bottom that it is not for distribution. Maybe they meant they were not going to distribute it to wholesalers across the country or something like that, but they gave it to the media who did not take it seriously. The Conservatives said that the 360 hour costing would be four billion and some dollars. Everybody else said it would be \$1.5 billion.

The Conservatives said it would be \$4 billion. How did they get to that number? They would not show us the work. When I was in school, I was not great at math and I was always told to show the work. I was not very good at that. It made it harder for me to guess. The Conservatives did not show their work. It was not the department that did not want to show it. It was the minister who did not want to show it. No answers were given to our questions. They leaked a document that was not for distribution. We responded to that.

On August 13 there was another table drop of documents. They brought in new costing for the 360 hours, which again was inflated. They refused to separate the hard, static cost from what they referred to as the estimated potential labour market impact. They said that if EI was changed, there would be an impact on the labour market. There are a couple of problems with that. The Parliamentary Budget Officer picked that one out fairly easily.

The Conservatives said that back in the 1970s the changes made to liberalize EI increased the unemployment rate by 2%. They are saying it will happen again. Let us picture that. Somebody out there who has a job is just itching to leave that job in order to get, for a maximum of 36 weeks, 55% of what he or she was making. It is an insult to Canadians to suggest that is what Canadians would want to do. It is on a temporary basis, not something that goes on forever. In the 1970s people could quit a job and get EI, but that cannot be done now. There is a whole host of differences.

Again, there was nothing on the self-employed.

On August 20 we arrived at the meeting. Again, we were given documents. There was no information in advance. We said that we would have to go away and look at them. That was probably another time the Conservatives suggested to themselves that we would not come back. The Conservatives did not give us information. They were not treating us seriously. There were no proposals. We kept going back, and going back, and going back.

We looked at some points at issue. That meeting, very significantly, was when the minister confirmed that in spite of the protocols of the EI working group which was that we would all

submit our questions, the questions would go to the department through a secretariat and the answers would come back, she said that she had told the department not to answer those questions. Why would she tell the department that? Well, we are not going there anyway. We all agreed, including the minister, that we would get questions answered. The minister decided by herself that she did not like that.

That is the EI working group. In 10 weeks there were no serious proposals. Protocols were overridden.

On many occasions we offered to meet more often. It was not just for the joy of the company of the member for Nepean—Carleton and the minister. We felt that this was something serious and we should meet.

We suggested that we meet all day on August 19 and 20, or at least meet in the morning starting at 9 o'clock on the Thursday so we could seriously get at this stuff. We did not meet.

On August 20 we said that if we were not going to get information, we wanted to know to whom we could go for an independent analysis of what is going on.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer is an independent officer of this Parliament. We sent him the information about our proposals. He sent a letter to the department asking if it could back up the information by a certain date. The department could not do that. He did his analysis, and I will quote from that now:

The Government's total cost estimate, including static and dynamic costs, presented to the EIWG on August 14 of \$2.425 billion overstates the cost of the proposed 360-hour national standard of EI eligibility as—

The Parliamentary Budget Officer went on to say that he believes that the government's dynamic cost estimate is flawed. He said that only the static cost should be considered because the proposed change to the EI system is in effect for only one year and not longer. In the opinion of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the \$1.148 billion static cost estimate is a reasonable estimate of the costs of the proposed 360 hour national standard of eligibility. I repeat that the \$1.148 billion static cost is a reasonable estimate.

An hon. member: Where did they get the \$4 billion?

Mr. Michael Savage: That is a good question. My colleague asked where they got the \$4 billion.

Government Orders

•(1110)

We look at this bill the Conservatives are bringing in today. They say it might affect 190,000 people and it would cost such and such. How do we know that? How do we trust the numbers? Perhaps the Parliamentary Budget Officer could look at that as well. How do we know what they are actually saying? Even if what they are suggesting is reasonable, people are pretty skeptical.

The head of the CAW, Ken Lewenza, said that what Canadians need is a “full loaf of bread”. He said that the plan to extend benefits for workers who have been employed for 7 of the past 10 years will not help the vast majority of the country's 1.6 million unemployed.

An hon. member: Crumbs.

Mr. Michael Savage: Crumbs, crumbs.

Armine Yalnizyan is one of the smarter economists in this country. We know Armine; she is very smart. She pointed out that the program's restrictions act against the nature of much of Canada's industry.

Laurel Ritchie of the Canadian Auto Workers said that few laid-off members of that union, “only handfuls”, have been able to meet the long-tenure definition.

CLC economist Andrew Jackson said that his understanding of the new proposal is it would fully apply only to unemployed workers who have initiated a claim to EI benefits since the beginning of this year.

That is where we are. We are debating a bill and we cannot be sure of its benefits in a period of time when EI has been the political football for the government.

The people in Canada who need help are not in the Rolodex of the Prime Minister. They are people such as workers across Canada who agreed to work reduced hours to keep companies afloat when things got tough, and then were laid off and found out they did not qualify for EI because they had worked reduced hours. They are people such as a single mother in my riding who struggles to raise her children, who can only work 20 hours a week, who is laid off and finds out she does not have the required number of hours to qualify for employment insurance.

Workers have paid into the system for years and they do not qualify for benefits, and the Conservative government turns a blind eye to them. At best, these people are mere numbers in the bigger picture.

In fact, to the government, it is all about numbers and not even the right numbers. It is not the 1.6 million unemployed the government pays attention to. It is not the 800,000 workers who have no EI benefits that it pays attention to. It is not the alleged 190,000 who it claims will be helped by this bill or the 60,000 who others suggest might be helped by this bill. It is not the \$440 a week maximum weekly benefit, or the 330-hour average weekly benefit that those on EI get. It is not 360 hours. It is not 420 hours. It is not 560 hours. It is not 700 hours. Those are not the numbers that matter to the government.

The only numbers that matter to the government are the numbers 308 and 155, the number of seats in the House of Commons and the number that constitutes a majority.

To make those numbers work, the Conservatives will manipulate, distort and manufacture anything to win. It is always politics before people. This is the game they played with Canadians and the game continues today. We will not play that game. We have no faith or confidence in the government.

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to my friend across the way relay some information and I have to say that I take issue with it.

I come from a riding that serves a large area of Canada. The oil sands are in northern Alberta, and area which employs a tremendous number of workers. Some 40,000 to 50,000 workers have been laid off in that area over the past year. Those people work in many areas in Canada, so I have a pretty good idea of what unemployment benefits are available and what people have had to rely on in the past and, quite frankly, it has been inadequate under Liberal governments. I suggest that even with this new economic crisis, the continuing program is not working. That is why the minister has tabled new legislation to make it work for Canadians who are unemployed, which would allow them to survive this global economic crisis.

Some 300,000 Canadians have already benefited or will benefit from the five extra weeks. The work sharing program which we heard the minister talk about has been very beneficial for employees across the country and, in fact, for taxpaying and non-taxpaying citizens because it helps them.

In an economic crisis like this, why is the Liberal leader and the Liberal Party not working with the government to employ more Canadians? More particularly, why did they walk away from this government's initiative to find more ways to help workers? That is what I would like to know. Why did they walk away from it?

•(1115)

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, we walked away from nothing. We went to every meeting of the EI working group. As difficult and unproductive as they were, every meeting that was scheduled, we went to.

At the last meeting the Conservatives dropped on the table what they called discussion points. We asked if they had a proposal. They said no. We said that if they wanted to meet again, they should give us a proposal and we would have a look at it. That was August 20. The next week I called the minister to ask about the proposals. I called her office and spoke to her assistant on Friday afternoon. She said that the minister would get back to me. I have not heard from her yet about that meeting.

Government Orders

We did not walk away from anything. We brought proposals to the table. We also said that we were prepared to be flexible. We said that they should give us something that works. We think 360 makes sense, as do a lot of other people. Regional fairness is an issue for my hon. colleague, who I know is a serious member. His premier wants the same thing. He wants regional fairness. We asked the Conservatives to give us anything that we could cling to and makes sense. We asked them to give us something. To this day, we have received nothing. We have received no proposals.

I understand people being confused and saying that it is more of the same he said, she said. I tell you, Mr. Speaker and members of the House, we tried to make it work. We kept going back and we got nothing. It takes two, but we were the only ones there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I agree with my colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour. I know that he is sincere when he says that he wants to make things better for unemployed workers, despite his own party's former positions, of course.

Yesterday, I was surprised by the secretary of state's arguments, just as I am by the minister's arguments today about how the program we are now considering, Bill C-50, will fill the gap between the end of employment insurance benefits and the beginning of old age security benefits. But that is not the case. I think that is reprehensible.

My question is about a point that my colleague touched on. How can he explain the fact that the government is not implementing this measure as a pilot project? The program is for a limited time only. What does he make of this measure given that the government decided not to run a pilot project?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, as my colleague from Chambly—Borduas knows, there is a number of pilot projects on EI that have been brought in since 2000 and which have been extended by governments. This could have been a pilot program, but that does not play into the political game of chess that is existing here.

I do not question the motives of people in the House unless I have reason to do so. Regarding my experience this summer, my own discomfort is irrelevant, but what matters is the discomfort of Canadians who need help. We could have done something. We could have moved the ball. We were prepared to do something and not to let perfect be the enemy of better.

My colleague suggests this could be done as a pilot project. He is entirely correct, but that does not feed into the agenda the government has for this and that is unfortunate.

• (1120)

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I noted with interest the hon. member's comments about playing political games. The hon. member comes from a party that did walk away from the table. He said the Liberals did not walk away from anything, but it has been noted in various news articles that they did walk away from the

table and announced that they would vote against everything before they even saw it in the House of Commons.

I am wondering if the hon. member could comment on whether or not he agrees with his leader. It seems that this is the mission statement now for the Liberal Party. His leader wrote in 2007, "Politics is theatre. It is part of the job to pretend to have emotions that you do not actually feel". That was the writing of the Liberal leader in 2007. I am wondering if the hon. member agrees with him.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, on the issue of walking away from the meeting, I have worked with the hon. member on committee before and I ask him to go to his minister and ask her where the agenda for that alleged meeting is. One of the protocols was that we would have the agenda in advance and that the two co-chairs, the minister and I would approve the agenda. They are always very simple. There were two issues, really, regional fairness and the self-employed, and maybe one or two other things. We would approve those the week before they would be sent out. That is when I called the minister to ask her where we were on that. I never got a call back. Where is the agenda for the meeting it is said that we walked away from?

We walked away from nothing. We kept going back time after time. We were prepared to be flexible to find something significant, not like something that is being thrown at us today, but something significant. We never got it. I understand how people would say that this Parliament is dysfunctional and that committee was an extension of it. We tried to make something work. We indicated that we were flexible. We asked them to give us a good idea and we still have not received anything.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, every day we certainly see a lot of theatre from the government. It is all about messaging in terms of what the government tries to do. I have seen the TV shots of the minister and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister sitting in the room. That was theatre. It was orchestrated to try and send a message.

However, that message is confusing to the public, because this Prime Minister is all about division and, in my view, deceit.

I have a question for the member on Bill C-50. I know the member is very experienced on the employment insurance issue and has worked very hard on this file, but what will this proposal from the government do for those who do not qualify for employment insurance?

The big issue is the 40% to 45% of people out there or higher who do not qualify under the current system and are left without a job and without funds for their family and loved ones.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, it does nothing for those who do not qualify, those 800,000 Canadians who have lost their jobs and who are not receiving any benefits, and that is the shame of it.

Government Orders

I want to stress one thing. The Liberal proposal was good on a number of fronts. A lot of people called for the 360 hour national standard. I have gone through the list of people who have. Our proposal was for one year. Why one year? Because now, more than ever, we are in a period of economic crisis and, for the first time that I can recall, Canadians have been talking about stimulus for the last number of months.

EI is perfect stimulus. A 1.61 turnover rate for EI is better than infrastructure and tax cuts. This is the perfect time to do something for Canadians. This is what Canadians need. By the way, the people who get the money happen to need the money an awful lot. They need this combination of a one-year stimulus program and an overall review of the EI system.

This t is not like other recessions. When we cleaned up the last Conservative recession and EI changes were made, we were going into a period of a healthy economy and a robust Liberal recovery. We do not know how far this will go. We are talking about little green shoots in the economy but people are still being laid off. EI is the way to go, both for the people who need help and for this country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the minister's speech earlier, and it would have been appropriate to ask her several questions which have not been answered. Despite the briefing session yesterday by officials from the Department of Human Resources and Social Development, certain questions remain unanswered with regard to the persons targeted by this bill. Who does Bill C-50 include and who does it exclude? These questions have still not been answered.

Yet one has the impression that the department is fully aware of the answers, since it has said that 190,000 unemployed persons will be eligible under these measures, for which there is a budget of \$935 million. Therefore, we are entitled to specific answers to the type of questions I have just raised. But no, there are no answers. So we must look into the impact that this bill may have on the people who have lost their jobs.

First, let us look at what is not covered in this bill. It does not cover the nearly 60% of unemployed people who do not qualify for employment insurance right now. There is nothing to improve accessibility for all those who do not qualify. Furthermore, according to the department's own Web site, over 55% of people are presently excluded from the system. So there is nothing for them.

Moreover, this bill excludes young people, women, the self-employed and a good many seasonal workers, for these are the categories of persons who make most frequent use of employment insurance. Let us remember the rule set forth in the bill: one must not have drawn more than 35 weeks of benefits over the last seven years. In other words, that automatically excludes seasonal workers, women and other persons who move in and out of the labour market. So this applies to quite a lot of people.

The minister says that 190,000 people will be able to benefit from this measure. Allow us to doubt this. In fact, the minister accompanies this statement with another, about the cost of \$935 million. For a budget of \$935 million to be needed, 85% of the people receiving employment insurance benefits would have to

use all of their allotted weeks of benefits. But that is not the case, since only 25% of people use them.

So let us remember this: to arrive at the extra \$935 million projected in the bill, 85% of people would have to use all their allotted weeks of employment insurance benefits.

Facts are stubborn things, and they shed the brightest light. In this case, the fact is that only 25% of people reach the limit of the number of weeks to which they are entitled. In other words, we come back to between 25% and 30% of the amounts already announced.

We were not given specific information. So we asked in writing how one could arrive at this result, but were provided no answer. So we worked it out and understood that, in fact, this will cover 60,000 persons—at the most—out of 1.5 million or 1.6 million unemployed people in the country. This also changes the number of millions of dollars. Instead of approaching \$1 billion, we are closer to \$300 million, at most.

• (1125)

Perhaps they can prove otherwise. This they have not done. They make statements without being able to show the method by which they arrived at the results they present. The calculation must be done over again. If you were to do this as well, Mr. Speaker, you would find that you end up with the same result.

My colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour spoke briefly about the shamefulness of the situation, that is, why there is no pilot project.

Usually, when such a project of a specific duration is presented, the government does not have to formally table it in the House. It says that taking steps to set up a pilot project is one of its prerogatives. It could very easily do this. It does not need to come here. On the other hand, the government is well aware of the shamefulness of what it is doing. To introduce such a bill, it has to create a third category of the unemployed, what the Conseil national des chômeurs is now calling "the bad unemployed". According to the government, there are the good unemployed and now the bad unemployed.

Some people have contributed to employment insurance at such a level that they qualify for the program and have had the good fortune not to have to claim employment insurance benefits. It is the most vulnerable who are excluded. All those who are included are those who have had the benefit—and I am happy for them—of a stable job over the last 7, 8 9, 10, 11 or 12 years, since the bill sets the eligibility rules based on the weeks to which you are cumulatively entitled, on a rising scale. The better a contributor you have been to the fund, the fewer benefits you have received, the more gold stars you earn and the more weeks you qualify for.

Government Orders

Fair enough. Naturally this will favour certain people. In my opinion, the employment insurance system has to be improved from top to bottom, not piecemeal as is the case at present. Some people will see an improvement in their benefits as a result of this bill. This must not be a bill that is discriminatory or arbitrary toward certain segments of society that are being favourably targeted. In fact, it is not a favour, since this it belongs to them as well. But why discriminate against the others? That is the question we have to ask.

Let us return to the idea of a pilot project. What is shameful is having the House and all the parties present vote on and sanction a bill that is discriminatory. Naturally we are not opposed to the principle of this measure. What we do not accept, and what the House must not accept, is discrimination against the majority of unemployed people.

This morning the hon. member for Joliette moved that the bill be referred immediately to committee so that this type of debate can be held and appropriate amendments made for the purpose of removing these discriminatory measures. Why?

In our view, an effort has to be made, even if this is not something that is going to reform the entire system. We believe that it is necessary to make this effort. It must not be done just any old way. We must not abandon those who are in need of the fastest assistance.

• (1130)

This bill also prevents us from debating the crux of the problem—the fact that the employment insurance program has become outdated and does not reflect today's reality. That has happened because it has been drained of the resources required to properly fulfill its mandate of providing benefits equitably and for enough time that people can live with dignity. We know that the former and current governments diverted billions of dollars from the employment insurance fund every year for the past 13 years. The current estimate is that \$57 billion was taken out of the employment insurance fund.

A number of people who participated in this debacle would be quite happy if we stopped talking about it. But we never will because it is an injustice. It represents a serious economic crime that was committed against the unemployed, families, and regional economies and communities in every province. In Quebec, people have had to apply for social assistance because almost 60% of those who should be eligible for employment insurance have been excluded.

In recent years, we have proposed concrete measures. We have tried to make this House aware of the fact that more people must have access to employment insurance. We are looking at 360 hours. We are pleased that the Liberal Party has also taken up the cause. The Liberals rallied to our side when we debated Bill C-269 in the last session. We also made recommendations to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities in the last session.

I would like to talk about the recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities in February 2005. The committee recommended the measures that we now find in Bill C-308, which I was honoured to introduce on behalf of my

party. We had a one-hour debate at second reading this week in the House.

I can list the measures. They include, of course, the 360 hours. We must ensure that everyone, without discrimination, permanently goes from 45 to 50 weeks. We want benefits to be raised to 60% of the claimant's income. This is a sensible measure that immediately injects money into our economy. We are calling for the waiting period to be abolished. That is a measure that costs the government nothing, because the individual receives the money at the beginning of the two weeks instead of at the end. This way, people are able to receive benefits from the beginning, and it puts money into the economy immediately. This spring, the Conservatives promised to introduce changes to allow self-employed workers to voluntarily participate in the employment insurance program. They did not follow up on this, and that is also in our bill. We are demanding that there be no more discrimination against people who work for a family-owned business and are related to the owner.

When we talk about comprehensive reform that truly takes into account the difficulties that unemployed workers are facing, these types of measures are the ones we need to take, and not the piecemeal measures that discriminate against people, as we are seeing now.

• (1135)

A little earlier, I spoke about the fact that the employment insurance system is currently based on two criteria that help determine eligibility and access to benefits, and they are the number of hours worked and the unemployment rate in a given region. The current bill, as it stands, creates a third criterion based on contributions to and use of the system. This is the cornerstone of this bill, and that is what we must focus on in this debate.

That is why, this morning, our House leader made the recommendation to send the bill to committee immediately. However, to our surprise, the Conservatives refused, even though the three opposition parties were in agreement. Why did they refuse? As the others have already said, they were playing politics, petty politics, to stall the debate and put pressure on the opposition parties. By stalling the debate, they are effectively delaying the implementation of this bill. It is hard to find anything worse than that. Once again, they are playing twisted political games with the lives of workers, and that has no place here.

Two examples support what I am saying. The first, which we heard about earlier, is the pilot project. That approach would be perfect. So far, that is how it has always been done, since it is a short term project. The second example is the refusal to debate it immediately in committee. What does the Conservative government have to gain by that? Ultimately, by drawing out the debate, first here in the House with five hours of debate today, and sending the bill through all the normal steps, the deadline, which is mid-October, will not be met. The Conservatives can then say that it was the opposition that was stalling.

This is completely outrageous and unacceptable.

Government Orders

Since this time last year, 500,000 workers have lost their jobs in Canada, including 70,000 in Quebec. We have come back to this House over and over again, trying to have Parliament adopt measures to help these people right away. I cannot help but think of the forestry industry in Quebec, for instance. There is really nothing in this for that industry, which is a shame. We have been refused every time. It has been drawn out. Now the Conservative government is afraid of being ousted, so it comes to us at the last minute with vote-catching measures that take into account only certain needs, and it wants to put all the blame on the opposition for delaying this bill.

In closing, I would like to remind the House of our position from this morning. We remain convinced that Bill C-50 must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for study. Otherwise, we will be forced to vote against it, if this course of action is not done properly. I do not see how we could go back to our constituents and say that we agreed to a bill that is discriminatory, arbitrary and that favours one option that will go on for so long.

• (1140)

[English]

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we all know here in this place that the Liberals walked away from the table of compromise to try to find a solution on this. We also know that the Bloc will never be able to deliver the goods for Quebecers. It is only the Conservatives who can do so. In particular is the addition of five weeks, which will help the 300,000 Canadians in the work-sharing programs and other creative programs.

I have heard this member, in the past, talk about older workers. I wonder, first, whether or not he supports the extra \$60 million to help older workers. We in this Conservative government feel there is a real benefit to having older workers continue on and to finding solutions to their dilemmas in this economic global crisis.

In particular, I wonder if the member believes that the 45-day work year that the Liberal government is proposing, which is going to cost at least \$4 billion, is really sustainable and long term. Does he believe that will really help Canadians to find employment, to find training and to find education, the things the Conservative government is doing for Canadians? Does he really believe that that is sustainable long term?

• (1145)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, the member is both right and wrong. He is right when he says that the previous Liberal policies were primarily responsible for the situation in which the unemployed find themselves. He is wrong to claim that the 360-hour eligibility threshold, if implemented, would cost \$4 billion.

Even the House economic adviser—I do not remember his exact title—who was given a study, or a 20-page report, refutes that claim and has told us what this measure will cost. It was estimated at \$1.2 billion in 2005 when the House committee reported to Parliament. That is a fourfold difference. Here is their theory: if you want to get

rid of your dog, just say that it has rabies; if you want to kill a measure, say that it will cost four times as much.

[English]

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we all know that when a person loses his or her job, it is one of the most traumatic things to endure for the individual, his or her family and the community.

I want to correct my colleague from the government who said that the Liberal plan was going to cost \$4 billion. In fact, the Parliamentary Budget Officer actually took the government to task by saying that the government was flat-out wrong. He said very publicly that the Liberal calculation saying that our proposal would cost \$1 billion was indeed correct and that the government's figures were dead wrong.

Workers from across Canada pay into the EI fund equally and yet the benefits that they accrue can be very, very different. In my province of British Columbia a person has to work almost twice as long to receive lower benefits than someone, for example, in the Maritimes would receive. Does my friend not think it would be fair and equitable for workers from across Canada to be able to receive the same amount of EI for the same length of time?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his very pertinent question.

He should refer to Bill C-308, which we introduced and which contains the 360-hour eligibility threshold, with a general reduction of 70 hours in the number of hours required to qualify for employment insurance.

Regional factors should also be reviewed periodically to ensure that they truly reflect the new reality. With regard to the level of employment, it naturally changes a great deal especially in these times. That has been the case for Ontario in particular. In the past, this province was not as hard hit by unemployment. Now look at the unemployment rate in Ontario. The member is right about that. The committee is also looking at that issue.

[English]

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to ask a couple of questions on this very important item we are discussing here this morning.

Off the top, I would like to ask the member for Chambly—Borduas who has worked very hard on this file over a number years whether it was not a bit ironic that the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca asked about these regional differences in the number of weeks to qualify when in fact it was his government that brought in that regulation in the first place and it is perhaps something he and his party might want to do some soul-searching about.

Government Orders

I know the member for Chambly—Borduas and the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour feel very passionately and strongly about this issue, and we have worked together on the human resource committee to try to put in place a national anti-poverty strategy. There has been a lot of work and I appreciate the sincere efforts of everyone at that committee to try to get this done.

What worries me, and I put this on the table at my caucus meeting before we left for the summer, is the number of people who, if we do not do something, will fall off employment insurance, if they have not already, in the next short while and then end up on welfare, which as we all know is not a very happy place to be. Having spent the summer back in Quebec, how many people does the member expect, if we do not do something about employment insurance right here right now, will fall onto the welfare rolls and the responsibility of communities and therefore create a terrible situation for provinces, municipalities and of course the families themselves?

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, I just want to say how much I appreciate the work my colleague from Sault Ste. Marie has done on this issue. He is very concerned about poverty and takes every opportunity to improve people's understanding of its impact and how it should be addressed.

Earlier on, I demonstrated tremendous courtesy toward my Liberal colleague. It is absolutely true that these measures were implemented by the Liberal Party. We must remember that. It is great that the Liberals are now choosing to cooperate and change some of these measures. However, the measures they have proposed are temporary. They believe that the 360-hour eligibility threshold should be in place only until the end of the crisis. All they would have to say is that we are recovering from the crisis, and then they would not have to implement the measure. We have to be very careful here. The Bloc has a lot of reservations about the way the Liberal Party is framing things when it comes to employment insurance.

Once again, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from Chambly—Borduas not only on his speech, but also on the excellent work he is doing on issues that affect unemployed workers in Quebec and, by extension, in the rest of Canada.

My colleague has been on the committee that deals with unemployment issues since he first came to the House of Commons. Yesterday, in his question for the minister, my colleague said that it was cruel of her to introduce a bill that included such obvious discrimination. I would go so far as to call it cynical. Since coming to power, the Conservative Party has never shown any sensitivity or interest in doing anything to help unemployed workers. Then when everyone starts talking election, they suddenly come up with a new measure. They are even trying to convince older workers that this bill will help them.

I would like my colleague from Chambly—Borduas to clarify things. Personally, I see nothing in Bill C-50 that looks like an income support program for older workers.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Richmond—Arthabaska. He also does an excellent job on agriculture.

What is happening is that the government is trying to make older workers believe that this measure will provide them with income. Older workers are those over 55 who were previously covered by the POWA. Most of these people have already used up their benefit time and will not be eligible. The program for older worker adjustment is completely different. It is misleading to compare the two programs. It is a red herring, and that is unacceptable.

• (1155)

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits.

I have 20 minutes to talk about this bill, but it is not very long, so I will give a brief history of employment insurance.

I would like to start by emphasizing the extent of the employment insurance problem in Canada. Workers are unable to qualify for EI and receive the necessary benefits. There are more bills currently before the House of Commons that target employment insurance than for any other program. I was just counting the number of bills that have been introduced in the House and are under study.

The NDP has 12 bills on EI before the House. The Bloc Québécois has six, and the Liberals, two. Maybe they do not believe there are many problems with the system. The Conservatives have one. The Bloc Québécois has only six bills, but each one addresses a number of problems, which makes for fewer bills.

In 1986, the Auditor General said that employment insurance funds should be placed in the consolidated revenue fund. That is when the employment insurance problems began. That is when the government's cash cow was created. The government began to realize that employment insurance funds were going into the consolidated revenue fund. It was easy to tell Canadians to tighten their belts, that there was a deficit and that it was impossible to balance the budget. Subsequently, however, EI funds arrived by the shovel full. It was a good place to get money, which had been placed where it should not have been.

I recall a demonstration was held in 1988 when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney visited Inkerman, New Brunswick. The people were already demonstrating against the changes being made by the Conservative government of the day.

I cannot repeat enough that on July 31, 1989—I remember it well and it can be verified in the archives of *L'Acadie nouvelle*—the Liberal opposition stated in the papers through the former member for Acadie—Bathurst that all New Brunswickers should fight all of the changes to EI made by the Conservatives because they were disastrous for New Brunswick.

Government Orders

I think it is important to speak of the past. In the spring of 1993, the Liberal leader at that time, Jean Chrétien, sent a letter to a group of women in Trois-Rivières telling them that the problem was not the unemployed but the economy. The economy had to be fixed and assistance to the unemployed could not be cut because they were becoming victims.

Surprisingly, in the fall of 1993, with the election of the Liberals, the changes continued. I cannot say that the changes were any worse than those made during the Conservative era, because we did not know how far the Conservatives would have gone, but the changes continued under the minister responsible for human resources at the time. I think Mr. Axworthy was heading what was known as Employment and Immigration at the time

Then, there was a new appointment, that of Doug Young, the member for Acadie—Bathurst. It was the period of the great changes in 1996. We reached a point where only 33% of women and 38% of men qualified for employment insurance under the Liberals.

● (1200)

Let us talk about economic crises. I do not want people to forget the past. Do you think there was no crisis for plant employees and fishermen in 1992-93 when groundfishing was banned and fishing stopped in the Atlantic? At the time, they were labelled lazy in Atlantic Canada. People said they did not want to work. They said that they were going to put them in their place. That is what the Liberals did at the time. And then they began to build surpluses at the rate of \$7 billion or \$8 billion a year. They were EI surpluses. Where did the money go? It went into the consolidated revenue fund, under the fine formula of Brian Mulroney, who was Prime Minister of Canada in the 1980s. They put the money from EI into the consolidated revenue fund.

It was not workers who were depending on employment insurance any more, it was the government so it could boast that it was paying off the deficit and balancing its budget. On whose backs? On the backs of the workers.

I was elected in 1997 because people had had enough of that in my riding. They had had enough of someone from the area who should have understood the problem and the plight of seasonal workers. If he had understood the situation, he would not have made the changes, or most importantly, he would have told the Prime Minister to get him out of there and put someone else in if it had to be done. I am talking about cutbacks. That is what happened.

They said here in the House that the problem existed only in the Atlantic provinces and not elsewhere in the country. At that point, I went to meet working people all over Canada, from Newfoundland to Whitehorse. I visited 10 provinces and Yukon, 21 municipalities and regions. I took part in 52 public meetings in two months. The people told us what the problem was all over the country. That was when I made 13 recommendations. We are in 2009 now and still talking about the same problems.

The Liberals want to appear now as the saviours of employment insurance, but it is only temporary. It is clear, that is what they said. But it is temporary. Supporters of their party or ours who think the Liberals are going to make big changes to employment insurance

and make them all eligible tomorrow morning should forget it. It is just temporary.

When the NDP tabled a motion in the House of Commons in June 2005 to make it the best 12 weeks, it was the Liberals who voted against it. The Conservatives were in favour of the best 12 weeks.

Some people may know that I am the last in a family of 11 children. In 1972, I had to leave home and go to work in northern Ontario. I was not the only one who had to leave home and go to work in the north of this province. The 11 members of my family left New Brunswick. If anyone knows how tough it can be in the regions where there are no jobs, I think I am one of those people. I was fortunate enough to work, to get a job. I was fortunate enough to be able to return home and get a job in the Brunswick mine. I was lucky. I was fortunate enough to work for the United Steelworkers, to act on behalf of workers, and defend local people who were destitute because of what the Conservative and Liberal governments had done. I had that opportunity.

● (1205)

I had the honour and privilege to be elected by the local people to come and work for them here in Ottawa.

We have always supported employment insurance bills in the House of Commons so long as they were moving in a positive direction. I am not talking about budgets because some people will say we may have voted against budgets that made changes.

Some people say now that there is nothing for seasonal workers in this bill, and that is true. It is a bill for long-tenured workers, those who have worked 17 years or more without ever drawing employment insurance benefits, or very few, under 35 weeks over the last five years. That is what the bill is. Some people are saying that they were ignored. Yes, seasonal workers were ignored. However, we are talking about Bill C-50 currently under study.

When the government introduced the criterion of the 14 best weeks, that was of no benefit to people in Ontario, where unemployment was low. Nonetheless, the majority of Ontario members did not vote against this measure, and it was adopted. When the government wanted to extend benefits by five weeks, not everyone in Canada was able to benefit, since this measure targeted the regions where unemployment was high. All the same, the others gave their support.

For my part, I would not be ashamed to vote today in favour of Bill C-50, but I do not want us to simply take this bill and make it law tomorrow morning. That is not our responsibility. It would be our responsibility if the bill were complete. That is why, this morning, I liked the position of the Bloc Québécois that this bill be sent immediately to committee so that it can be studied and amendments can be made, and if possible, be changed. That is what Parliament does. That is what the people have sent us here to do: make bills and changes to improve the lives of citizens, of Canadians and Quebecers. That is what the people have sent us here to do. That is our responsibility.

On the other hand, if Conservative or Liberal governments do not want to grant employment insurance benefits to persons in need who have lost their jobs because they consider them lazy slackers, we shall say no to that.

Government Orders

Our Canadians and Quebeckers are brave people who want to get up in the morning to go to work, to earn good pay and a good income so they can feed their children and their family, and send their children to school so they can receive a good education, so the next generation is better than the one before. They have a right to that.

For example, in France, if a person loses his job, he receives 80% of his salary. When I raised this matter in France last July to some parliamentarians, they told me that this was the workers' program and it was the workers who contributed to it. If the people want their money, that is fine; it is money that goes back into the community. I said this to the House last week, or earlier in the week.

The idea that a change in employment insurance would be an inducement not to go to work is an insult to workers. It is as if GM were given \$10 billion and then the company did nothing more and closed its doors because it was not given enough money. It is as if the government were to decide to give billions of dollars in tax reductions to big corporations, and after receiving it, those corporations stopped investing because they had received enough money. Yet the government has no hesitation about granting tax reductions to the big corporations and those persons.

Since we have such a large deficit today, perhaps the government should eliminate the huge tax reductions it is offering the big corporations that have made money. Perhaps it should instead assist the corporations experiencing problems in times of economic crisis, like the forestry and fisheries sectors, for example, where the price paid for lobster has fallen to \$2.75 for small lobster and \$3.50 for large.

● (1210)

In the fisheries, for example, the price paid for lobster has fallen to \$2.75 for small lobster and \$3.50 for large lobster. The amount of \$65 million was injected into the fishing industry, but fishers were receiving only \$15 million. The money did not go to the fishers. We must inject money for changes to employment insurance and to bring in the 360 hours we have been demanding for so long. It is not true that this would cost over \$4 billion. It is more like \$1.148 billion to help out these workers who are having difficulty making it through to the time when they start working again.

We have to accept the fact there are seasonal jobs in this country. Parliament has to accept that reality. This is what happens to us. We do not all have the good fortune in this country to go to work in a mine that is there for 45 years. I had that opportunity, but not everyone does. Not everyone has the good luck to go to work in a paper mill that lasts 100 years. All the same, though, the Bathurst paper mill lasted nearly 100 years but it went down too this time because of the economic crisis. As a result of the global way of doing things, the forestry mills lost money and closed their doors. People have to be prepared for that. They need training, and we encourage it. We want people to be able to change jobs and continue working, but at the same time, employment insurance is there so that people are not thrown onto welfare. This program belongs to the workers and employers who contributed to it. They pay for the system themselves. The government does not pay a penny. Actually, it steals money from the system. Fifty-seven billion dollars was taken from the employment insurance fund belonging to working

people. Those who are really dependent on employment insurance are governments, both current and previous.

Last month I met some fishers from my riding who said they would not even qualify for employment insurance benefits this winter. It is the same in the Gaspé, where I spoke with some fishers. The problems in the fisheries and with lobster are well known. These people would not qualify for employment insurance. What is being done to help them?

This all amounts to saying that we are here to work hard to ensure that changes are made to employment insurance. Regardless of who is in power, we will work hard for change. I can say, though, that the Conservatives and Liberals have never exactly been the friends of the unemployed. The economic crisis in the Atlantic region started in the early 1990s. That was when the biggest cuts to employment insurance were made, with the support of the Conservatives.

The question about the bill before us today is whether we are going to vote it down. Are the figures accurate? We do not know. We do not know whether it is 190,000 workers. I hope not, because we do not want people to have lost their jobs. It might cost a billion dollars, but so what? It is their money. There is a \$57 billion surplus in employment insurance, and so what? We want the government to think about these things and have a heart.

We are here in Ottawa to represent Canadians. Everyone wants to have a job and never lose it. We need to have this much respect for our workers and not treat them like lazy slackers who will not go to work any more once they get employment insurance benefits. That is unacceptable.

● (1215)

We will support this bill so that it can be studied. We are going to work hard to improve it so that workers are treated fairly and we will continue to make other changes for working people.

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am really surprised at the member for Acadie—Bathurst getting up and basically supporting a bill on employment insurance that would do absolutely nothing for fishermen in his riding. And he admits that. That absolutely amazes me. Usually we can count on the member to stand up and be counted in terms of people facing unemployment.

I have a double question for the member.

First, with respect to the fishermen who have had poor prices this year, would the bill do anything for them? I would like him to be specific on that.

Second, where is the rationalization plan that the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans announced which would help substantially as well? This plan has not been delivered in my area of Prince Edward Island in terms of actual cash. Is there any delivery on that in his riding in New Brunswick?

Government Orders

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Speaker, the member asked how I could support a bill that would not help the fishermen of our region. If the member had been listening, clearly I said it would not help and I said it was sad. The bill would not help. Bill C-50 is like many of the bills the Liberals brought in. Did they help all Canadians? No.

When it came to the extra five weeks, was that for everybody in the country? Are we not here to help all the people in this country, or are we here to help people just here and there? In areas where the level of unemployment is high, only 420 hours were required. In areas where the level was not high, 700 hours were needed.

Where were the Liberals when people lost their jobs? They were in power for 13 years. Where was my colleague from P.E.I. when I introduced a private member's bill and a motion on the best 12 weeks to help workers in his region and mine? He voted against it. Where was the member that day?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Madam Speaker, the argument made by the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst is very clear and fits in with what he has always maintained here in the House. The Bloc completely agrees with him regarding Liberal politics.

The Bloc is a little surprised by the conclusions on which he is basing his decision to vote in favour of the bill. This morning the Liberals and the NDP agreed with us that this bill should be referred to committee immediately so we can amend it. With things going the way they are right now, amending the bill will be rather difficult. Our colleague summarized his speech by saying that this bill was an insult to workers. Major unions—like the CAW, the CSN and the FTQ, with whom we have been in discussions since yesterday—agree. They think the same thing, namely, that this is an insult to workers. Those major unions do not want us to vote in favour of this bill.

I would like to hear his opinion of that. Like me, he comes from a labour background and I would like to know what he thinks of the unions' position.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague, the member for Chambly—Borduas.

There is not a big difference between saying that we will support the bill today so that it can go to committee and voting for it or unanimously voting to send it to committee. It is the same thing. The Bloc Québécois rose and asked that it be sent to committee right away so we can work on it. The Conservatives refused. Now, what shall we do? Do we say no or do we send it to committee?

What are the unions saying? That is not what they want. However, they are not telling us to vote against it. This morning the president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour told the newspapers that we must accept positive changes to employment insurance, even though they are not enough.

When I say that it is an insult, that is true. We have always maintained that it is not enough. We want real change. However, when we are in the House and a bill makes positive changes, are we going to vote against it? That is what we have to ask ourselves.

Should we accept our responsibilities, study it in committee and try to make the necessary changes? That is what we must do. So, that is exactly what I said earlier or even what the Bloc Québécois said. The Bloc said that it should go straight to committee and the Conservatives refused. Since we cannot send it immediately, let us vote to send it to committee and then work on this bill, call witnesses, experts if necessary, to say that other changes also need to be made. There are some things that need to be fixed in this bill.

● (1220)

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for all the work he has done on this. It certainly is not the full buildup we want but it is a start.

One thing that will be raised is how we can afford this \$1 billion bill. What I want to point out is that with the redistribution of the Canadian economy, the Conservatives and Liberals have voted to reduce corporate tax cuts right now so that in 2012 they will be down to 15%. I had the parliamentary research division, which consists of independent economists, do an analysis of what this will cost and they have project that it will cost Canadian taxpayers an additional \$86 billion.

I would remind the public that as these tax cuts are taking place and we now have a deficit, we are borrowing money from ourselves and our children to give tax cuts to profitable companies, like the banks, the oil industry and the pharmaceutical companies, while at the same time other struggling industries do not get any benefit whatsoever.

I would like to ask my colleague whether we should be again looking at freezing those large corporate tax cuts and redirecting some of that money back as stimulus to workers and ensure we can expand the actual provisions for communities. That is one of the opportunities we still need to seize. If not, we will need to continue to borrow money for tax cuts for corporations and pass that debt on to our children.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Speaker, the money would be much better spent if it were directed to the communities and the regions. Instead of cutting corporate taxes, the government should spend the money in the communities. That would help people make changes to their infrastructure or correct problems in their cities or towns, which would create employment. When people work, they pay taxes, and that money comes back to the government after providing work for people and giving them a living. It would have been much better to take that route.

Ask the towns and municipalities or talk to mayors across the country, and they will all say the same thing. They need to repair their infrastructure, whether it be water lines or sewers. There is a lot of renovation work to be done, enough so that people who have lost their jobs can find work and will not have to live on welfare.

Government Orders

That would have been much better for the economy than just sending the money to friends who already have enough. Only big, profitable corporations are going to benefit from the tax cuts. Companies that do not turn a profit will not benefit from tax cuts because they are not paying much tax to begin with. No profit, no tax. Why should some companies that are making a profit be rewarded when others are in need? They are the ones the government should be helping. These people who are in trouble today are able to help the economy.

Regarding the \$1 billion, I have to say that the EI fund has a \$57 billion surplus. There is money in the EI fund, and that money belongs to workers and employers. The government has the money to make the necessary changes to employment insurance.

• (1225)

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Madam Speaker, I am here this morning in the House to support Bill C-50, which the government wants to have passed. We are hoping of course to have the support of the opposition parties.

Why do I support this bill? The economic recession has hurt our country. It is a worldwide economic recession. We have tried, through various initiatives, by stimulating the economy and by establishing programs, to help workers facing difficult times. We have put a variety of measures in place.

This morning, we are adding another. What do we want to do? We want to protect long-tenured employees. We want to ensure that employees who have paid EI premiums for 10 or 15 years, for example, or even longer and who have worked for the same company may benefit from more weeks of EI benefits if the company has to close. We want to give them 5 to 20 weeks more than they would usually have.

In principle, those who pay EI premiums for a number of years should be entitled to nearly a year of benefits. So it is to a year of benefits the 5 to 20 weeks are added, according to various criteria. One of the criteria requires that the claimant not have received EI benefits for over 35 weeks in the past five years.

Why are we choosing these figures? Because the line has to be drawn somewhere. The cost associated with this initiative—that is, \$935 million—must be measurable. We can call it \$1 billion. It is estimated that 190,000 people in Canada could benefit from this new measure, which will help them through these most difficult times. It will ensure other opportunities for employment as the economy recovers.

The schemes of the Bloc members are bothering me somewhat. They are trying to play down what we are doing here and to confuse people. Let me give an example. They are saying that seasonal workers are not included. That is true, because this is a measure intended to help long-tenured workers who have paid premiums for years.

Seasonal workers, however, are currently protected. They receive EI benefits under the usual criteria. They are entitled to them after working between 420 and 700 hours. It depends on the region they live in. This measure is in place for seasonal workers.

Today, a specific measure applies to people who have contributed for a long time and find themselves in a much more difficult situation.

What sectors are affected? There are of course the forestry, automobile manufacturing, manufacturing and mining sectors. There are others as well. We want to help them and others like them during these difficult times.

I would also like to mention something else. This week I heard Bloc members saying that many people who paid EI premiums were not eligible. Statistics were compiled in 2008 and show that 82% of those who paid EI premiums and had to draw benefits were indeed eligible. That is an important statistic.

We want to help people in the sectors we have been talking about who have contributed to employment insurance for a long time. Some 190,000 people should benefit from nearly \$1 billion. This is in addition to the other steps we have taken. It is not all we have done over the past year.

First, we extended the employment insurance period by five weeks. The Bloc Québécois wanted to drop the two week waiting period, but we thought it was better to tack an additional five weeks onto the end because it might take longer to find a job. It is estimated that 290,000 people will benefit from these additional five weeks, at a cost of \$1.15 billion.

We did things as well with work sharing. Employers told our government they had good employees whom they did not want to lose and whom they wanted to keep with the company four days a week rather than five. They asked the government if it could upgrade its work sharing program. We listened, and the answer was yes.

• (1230)

These employees used to be entitled to 38 weeks. We increased that by 14 weeks, making it 52. People who share work are protected now for a year and we give commensurate funding to the companies. How many companies are taking advantage of this? At present, 5,800 employers are taking advantage of it, together with the 165,000 employees who benefit from our improved work sharing program.

There are other things as well. Take, for example, someone who works in a plant and is laid off. He had been doing the same job for 10, 15, 20 years. There are no new opportunities in his region in his traditional job. If he wants to get some training, therefore, we will let him have two years of training paid through employment insurance. Some of those workers who were unable to benefit from employment insurance may well be able to take advantage of this program. About 150,000 people should benefit at a total cost of \$1.5 billion.

I also want to mention our most recent measure, the one for long-tenure jobs, from which 190,000 people will benefit. The total number of Canadians who will benefit from all these initiatives is 790,000.

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What more have we done? We are protecting our workers for sure, but we also needed to stimulate the economy. To do this, we first reduced taxes by \$20 billion this year and for the next five years. Canadian taxpayers will have an additional \$20 billion in their pockets.

Then we turned to infrastructure. We are going to try to make Canada one big construction site. Why? The private sector has reduced its investments and so we, as the government, must shoulder our responsibilities. We need to think about protecting our workers and Canadians. We said there are infrastructure projects that need doing in any case. We are going to speed them up. We will inject a total of \$33 billion to replace bridges, build new roads, and carry out major projects in various communities in Quebec, in the regions, and all across Canada. That is what we are doing.

With the renovation credit, we want to ensure that people who need to renovate their home or their cottage are able to do so. To that end we are granting a credit of \$1,350 on an investment of \$10,000 that people make in renovation. This program is administered by the department which it is my honour to manage, the Department of National Revenue. It is working incredibly well. At present, we are even seeing contractors who previously were working under the table now deciding to get their licence and do things officially, because to benefit from our measure, a Canadian has to obtain a receipt from the contractor doing the work on the home. We are giving them \$1,350. That has made it possible to hire plumbers, electricians, carpenters, joiners and others. We estimate that \$3 billion in credits will be allowed on the next tax return of Canadians who have renovated their homes.

I touched upon another aspect when I visited the regions and, indeed, much of the country recently. I want to talk about scientific research and experimental development, since this too is managed by the Department of Revenue. The fact is that the reason we have such a high standard of living in Canada is not because we are called Canada, but because we produce a lot and we export 80% of what we produce elsewhere in the world. If we produced just for our own needs, we would not have this standard of living. What do we do to be able to keep on exporting? What do we do to ensure that our entrepreneurs have the best possible product at the best possible price, with the latest technology? We encourage them to engage in scientific research and experimental development. In recent weeks I have visited different companies and have spoken to the press about our scientific research and experimental development credit. This credit now stands at \$4 billion annually. There is no cap. If more businesses of whatever size want to carry out scientific research, they are eligible for this program. They can take a look at the website of the Canada Revenue Agency. These are some of the measures.

Where does the problem lie? There is always something, somewhere. One has to draw a line. When you draw a line, someone who is missing a few hours or a few weeks may be disadvantaged. It is impossible not to draw a line.

• (1235)

Even if the Liberals proposed 360 hours, that is, 45 days of work, there would also have been a line. There is always a line. Some have the advantage of finding themselves inside the line and so can benefit. There will be 190,000 people who will be able to benefit

from the measure that I am now discussing. There is no perfect system, but we are a government that wants to help the most vulnerable and those who are experiencing hardship during this more difficult economic period. In the month of June, for the first time in a very long time, economic growth was 0.1%. This is not a lot, but the numbers show that what we are doing is working. Thanks to the infrastructure program, more and more projects will be starting up. These projects will have to be implemented by March 31, 2011.

The other thing I would like to mention is the contribution rate. We are freezing premiums for employees who are legally required to pay employment insurance contributions. For 2009-10, the rate is frozen at around \$1.73 per \$100. We have seen to it that our employees, who need to hang on to their money in this difficult times, are protected.

There is another thing I would like to bring to the attention of the House. The newspaper *Le Soleil* said the following, "The downward spiral of the job situation in Canada could be nearing an end, according to the Conference Board of Canada. In the month of August, the help wanted index showed that the number of jobs posted online in Canada increased by 2.6% over the previous month." That means that there are more job offers and more opportunities for work. Employers are gradually getting their confidence back. The article continues, "This is another sign that the worst of the recession is now over, according to the Conference Board. According to the Conference Board, the recovery can be seen from coast to coast. In Quebec, the help wanted index rose by 3% in August." So there is progress.

I would like to talk about the number of hours that an individual must work based on the regions. There are 58 regions in Canada, and the number of hours required depends on the economic activity in the region. We feel it is reasonable to require fewer hours to be eligible for EI in a region like Gaspésie or Saguenay—Lac Saint-Jean, compared to Quebec City or the greater Quebec City region. It is easier to find a job in the greater Quebec City region than in the regions I just mentioned. That is why the system is the way it is. Once again, there will always be a line. If someone accumulated 320 hours, they would be 40 hours short. We calculated the cost, we have an idea of what is needed, and we are trying to help people as much as possible. In Canada, 190,000 long-tenured workers will be able to benefit from this measure.

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have noticed that the debate has morphed into a discussion of more than just what this bill offers but in fact virtually everything to do with addressing the economic needs of Canadians at this time of financial duress.

There were three areas on which I wanted to ask the member for his input.

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I, unfortunately, did not get a chance to go to the government's briefing on this thing. The bill was tabled only yesterday after question period. There was not very much time to give notice. I was not even back in my office until late last night. I wonder, since there are so many questions about the computation of how one comes up with \$900 million, or almost a billion dollars, for 190,000 people—and I assume the briefing provided the basis for that calculation—if the minister would undertake to table in the House a copy of the calculation so that we could understand where it came from.

The second item on which I would ask for his input is that the member, in his speech, actually did say that this bill is just one more item, that it is just one more thing that they are going to do, that they are not fixing the EI system, that they are not addressing the qualification periods or, as the member for Acadie—Bathurst was concerned about, little technicalities, and that they have a computation of additional benefits for long-term workers who have paid over a longer period but have not claimed.

I wonder if he could explain why the government refused unanimous consent to either send this bill to committee or deal with it at all stages before the end of the week if it is so straightforward and he really supports it.

• (1240)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Madam Speaker, I should ask the members of the Liberal Party this question: why did they walk away from the bipartisan committee, which they asked us to form, in order to not bring down the government last spring? Why did they not participate in that bipartisan committee? Why did they decide to walk away in the middle of things, when we wanted their support—

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order, please. Those people who continue to heckle will have difficulty being recognized. The minister is speaking. I would like to allow the minister to complete his response.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Madam Speaker, I was saying that they walked away from the committee when workers and the unemployed would have liked to hear their valuable input in order to adopt as many positive measures as possible to help workers. They turned their backs on workers; they turned their backs on the committee. We continued working, and now we are introducing this important measure to help long-tenured workers, those who have been paying in for many years and who, when the business shuts down, are suddenly going through a hard time. In addition to the year of employment insurance they will receive, we are adding another 5 to 20 weeks, so they will have more assistance from our government and this Parliament.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to the minister and member for Jonquière—Alma. He said they had to draw a line. He also said that 190,000 workers will benefit from employment insurance. He even talked about several sectors, including forestry and automotive. Can he tell me how many unemployed workers, by sector, will benefit from these measures? He mentioned 190,000 workers and various sectors. Can the government table a document giving us the

number of unemployed workers in each sector who will get EI benefits?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Madam Speaker, whom were we thinking of when we set up this EI program to help long-tenured employees? We thought of individuals who lose the jobs they have held for a number of years in Canada, in a region, in a business. We want to help them.

In our country, people in all types of jobs and businesses may find themselves in this situation. We are aware, of course, that there have been more layoffs in the forestry, automobile manufacturing and mining sectors and in the manufacturing sector. This is why we are helping these people.

I would remind the member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord that we have also put measures in place. My colleague, the Minister of State (Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec) and I both come from that region and have put four different measures in place to support workers in Canada's forestry sector, among others.

[*English*]

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Madam Speaker, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to be engaged in this debate here this morning. Members of the Bloc and of our party were cut out of the discussions that happened over the summer, which I think was rather unfortunate. Perhaps it might have led to more success at having something done had we been there.

However, here we are, and we have an opportunity to put on the table some of what we think needs to be done. This is a beginning, but a very feeble beginning of trying to respond to a very difficult circumstance that is now evolving out there. The government has indicated that 190,000 people will be served by this initiative. I suggest that if we did the math, we would find that there are hundreds of thousands of others who do not fit the category that is identified in this initiative. They either do not qualify for EI, have already run out of EI or will run out of EI very soon.

Some economists are referring to this as another wave. As these people find that they cannot pay their bills and they begin to default on all kinds of credit, credit cards, bank loans, mortgages, et cetera, the impact that will have on the economy, not to speak of the impact that it will have on them personally and on their families, is what concerns me the most.

Is there any opening over there to some discussion about that large group of people who, if they have not already, will soon fall onto welfare in this country? As the member knows, that is not a very happy place for anybody.

• (1245)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for his question and comment.

Government Orders

Once again, we are putting all sorts of measures in place in an effort to support Canadians, people and workers in this difficult economic period. We are one of the countries currently coming out of it fairly well compared with the situation worldwide. Seasonal and regular workers have EI when they lose their job. They have, based on the region where they live, between 420 and 700 hours. They are entitled to employment insurance.

The other thing we are doing this morning is adding on. We are saying this: If you lose your job and the business closes for good, you will, in principle, have a year's EI. It is there. The system is in place. We are adding an extra 5 to 20 weeks to help these people. That is what we are doing. There are parameters, of course, which we cannot avoid. There is a budget to manage. Our country has to be managed. At the same time, however, we feel a responsibility to try to help those in difficulty.

If it were left to our hearts, we would give and give and give, but we have to manage a budget and keep within the guidelines set for all governments.

[*English*]

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have a very brief question.

The dollars that we are investing in Canadians and employment insurance hardly match up to some of the dollars that we have put into companies across this country to deal with the impacts of the financial crisis.

Does the member not think that there needs to be proper support for Canadian workers in the future? Is this not really what we are here for?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Madam Speaker, there are two things. Just this morning, Guy Chevette of the forestry sector said he feared that employer premiums could be raised. As soon as we try to help one group in difficulty someone is afraid because there is a cost associated with doing so. In the current circumstances, we have said we were freezing premiums for employees.

Permit me to say this to the hon. member. We should compare what is offered in Canada in terms of employment insurance with what is offered in the United States. There, people get between 40% and 60% of what they have earned. That is all they can get. Here, between 4 and 10 times more goes to help our employees and unemployed.

[*English*]

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I rise to speak to Bill C-50 which is so difficult to support for so many reasons. The bottom line about the bill that makes it difficult to support is that it purports to amend the Employment Insurance Act to increase benefits. The fact is that the bill will not do what it says it will do. The bill is so convoluted that few, if any, of the long-tenured workers it says it will help would actually be eligible. That is what is so cruel about it. It creates a false sense of security for these workers that they are going to be getting help when in fact they will not. I want to read from the bill. It states:

If a claimant was paid less than 36 weeks of regular benefits in the 260 weeks before the beginning of the claimant's benefit period and that benefit period was

established during the period that begins on the later of January 4, 2009 and the Sunday before the day that is nine months before the day on which this subsection is deemed to have come into force—

And it goes on. One would need a lawyer, a linguist and an accountant to figure out as an ordinary Canadian whether one is eligible or not. It is so convoluted.

We even hear from the group that the bill says it is going to help. Ken Lewenza of the Canadian Auto Workers says: "The new EI plan provides crumbs to unemployed Canadians at a time when they are in need of a full loaf of bread". Laurell Ritchie of the Canadian Auto Workers says that only a handful of long-tenured auto workers will actually qualify through the bill. The bill's convolutedness, its complexity, and the fact that it says what it will do when it will not, is a good enough reason in the whole for not supporting the bill.

One of the other things that concerns me about the bill is that it is not helping people in the highest hit sector. Let us look at the forestry sector. Armine Yalnizyan, an economist in Toronto, said that it will not help the manufacturing sector. It will not help the oil patch. It will not help the forestry sector and increasingly, it will not help the service sector". These sectors are all subject to periodic layoffs.

I want to pick the forestry sector because I come from B.C. and this is the sector in B.C. that has been really hard hit. Mr. Kobayashi from the forestry sector in B.C. says that the only workers who have not received EI in the past five years will be eligible for the extra weeks of benefits that the bill says it will offer.

People who live in B.C. know that is a joke because the forestry sector there for the last four years has been subject to periodic layoffs. Because of the softwood lumber issues, mills have been closing down, mills have been idling, and people have been laid off. We see forest fires that have been creating problems and mills not having any lumber to use. We see the pine beetle problem that has hit this sector.

This is not going to work for the forestry sector in British Columbia and that in itself is really sad because these are the people who are losing their jobs and their homes. We have 55-year-old workers who have done nothing since they were 16 but work in the forestry sector in B.C., who are watching everything they worked for over their whole lives falling apart. However, they will not be able to benefit from the bill.

The other thing the bill does not do, and this is what I also find quite cruel, is the fact that the bill does not help many of those workers under age 38 because they have not been in the workforce for the 15 years they would have to be in order to qualify through the bill. The 38-year-old workers have not been in the workforce for 15 years. These are the people hardest hit and most vulnerable. These are the people with very young children. These are the people who are at the beginning of their working careers so their earnings are low. These are the people who are the first to get laid off because they are new to the workforce.

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This is again the cruelty of ignoring this whole group of Canadians who are suffering and who, if they just bought a new home, cannot afford to pay for it. We read recently in British Columbia that this group of people says they are one paycheque away from bankruptcy and they have been ignored completely by the government's inability to deal with this problem. These are the people that we need to talk about.

• (1250)

We also find that the 55 to 65-year-old workers who this is supposed to help in the forestry sector and the automobile sector are not going to be helped at all, nor in the service sector.

It is kind of ironic that in the service sector we find that this is the result of ridiculous decisions made by the government, like cutting visas for tourists from Mexico. The tourism industry has gone downhill in this country, especially in my province of British Columbia, and the service sector is laying off workers: restaurant workers, hotel workers, and all the people who work in this sector. Nothing is being done for these people at all. For me this is a huge and cruel joke being played by this bill.

Apart from the substantives of the bill, we have the politics of the bill. If we want to talk about political games, this is the cheapest political trick I have ever seen in my 16 years in the House of Commons.

We have the NDP members for instance who have suddenly said that there is absolutely no reason for them to vote against this particular bill because they do not want to block the flow of money to workers. It is the same party that did not seem to mind when it voted against a stimulus package in January and when it continued for the last nine months to vote against all of the motions that had to do with ways and means, confidence motions, and job creating motions in the House.

The government promised housing for seniors, money for training and infrastructure. It promised money for all of those things which as we see never actually came to pass.

Even then the New Democratic Party members could not support those bills because they said that they were horrible and not helping anyone. All of a sudden the political gamesmanship of saying that they can support that now is actually a joke.

The government that has actually accused our party in the House of getting into bed with socialists and separatists is now desperate not to have an election. Suddenly, it finds it is okay to have a one night stand with socialists and separatists when it feels like it. This is all a joke. The people who are the victims and the brunt of this rather cruel political game are ordinary Canadians.

That is what bothers me. The cruelty of it all is that this is what government is for. At a time when Canadians are suffering, and we just heard that young Canadians under 38, and single mothers, are suffering very much because these are the people who are working in part-time jobs. These are the people who are laid off regularly. These are the people who are the first to be laid off in an economic downturn. These are the people who are losing their homes, who cannot pay their rent, who cannot put food on the table. These are the people who, 60% of them in my province of British Columbia, were

recently quoted as saying they were one paycheque away from bankruptcy.

This is about taking care of Canadians. That is what a government's role is at a time when Canadians are in need, at a time when Canadian are desperate. This is not about laying blame. This is about doing what we can to help all Canadians, not some Canadians who we deem are better than other Canadians. This is a time when government, which asks us to trust it, cannot even trust its own people.

We have heard in the House over these last few months words from the Conservative Party across the way, and that is supposed to be government, saying we cannot trust Canadians, they are going to cheat on EI, they are going to steal whatever, and they are going to do all of those things. We find here a government that does not trust its people. It does not trust its people because it thinks that people are cheaters. It does not trust its people because of their citizenship or their immigration status. It does not trust people because of their age.

What are we talking about here? This is a time of recession when the people of this country need their government to pull together, to assist them, all of them, not some of them, not those that it picks and chooses that it thinks are worthy.

I could go into this in greater detail, but for these reasons I find the bill completely unsupportable. I find this lack of understanding of Canadians, this lack of compassion, this cruelty and this picking and choosing, to be totally unworthy of any federal government in this country.

• (1255)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, I too am from British Columbia and I actually live in the interior which does have forests. Certainly the impact of this crisis on the forestry workers is very near and dear to my heart.

I look at the work happening throughout my riding in terms of the economic action plan, building infrastructure, building Canada as work is being done on our universities. It was with great pleasure that I looked at the job opportunities program which announced \$60 million and is putting unemployed forestry workers to work.

We know that these workers actually want to work and that is our top priority. Indeed, we have made many changes in EI and the most recent being of course additional support for the long-tenured workers. Therefore, I see many positive things happening throughout my riding that supports forestry workers.

My question for the opposition member is this, and perhaps she could ask this question in Vancouver. If she were to visit my riding, how could she look at those forestry workers, long-tenured, who qualify for this program and say to them, "I could not support giving you additional EI even though you really needed it"?

• (1300)

Hon. Hedy Fry: Madam Speaker, I think this is very interesting because I have been to the hon. member's riding and I have been to the forestry sector. I have been going there for the last five or six to 16 years, back and forth to that part of the country.

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The forestry sector in British Columbia accounts for one in five jobs. In my riding of Vancouver Centre jobs are created because of the forestry sector. I have spoken with these workers, one on one. I was there when the fires were raging in 2004. I talked to workers and to mayors across that area when the fires were raging this very summer. I heard about the hardship they were suffering.

We see towns like Mackenzie unable to sustain itself as a town and being shut down. Schools are being shut down, workers are not being given the assistance they need, and it is cute to say that they are because they are not. They are walking away from houses at the age of 55 that they have built and paid for, and cannot give away because of the dire times.

Not a single thing has been done to help these people. It has been promised. Words are cheap. It has been promised over and over in every single budget, but it has never come to pass.

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for her presentation. She seems to agree that the EI system needs to be fixed. I would like the member to comment on why, when she and her party were in power for 13 years, they did not take any opportunity at that point in time to fix the system the way it should be fixed and is going to be fixed now.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Madam Speaker, it seems to me that this is where we came in as a Liberal government in 1993. It seems to me that this is history repeating itself. Because of the Conservative-led deep recession, a Conservative-led deficit, a Conservative-led debt, and unemployment rates for young people, which today is at 19.2% and was at 22% at that time, that in fact it was as a result of that, which was called the jobless recovery after that recession, that we changed the employment insurance system of the day to meet the needs of Canadians.

We continued to see that employment insurance worked during the good times, which came about under good Liberal management. It made this country recover and become one of the number one countries in the world in terms of economic development, research and development and innovation.

During that time, we shifted the system to meet those times. What we are asking for now, and we were prepared to sit down with the government and work on this, is to equalize this. Regionally today in a recession, which we saw in the last recession when we changed things then, people were losing jobs, different sectors were disadvantaged and different parts of this country were disadvantaged. We wanted to equalize that. We wanted to create an equality of opportunity for Canadians.

We cannot look back at what was done ten years ago. We are in a different place now. The government needs, as we did then, to act and to act swiftly to meet the needs of Canadians of the day. That is what we are asking the government to do, to act now and to act swiftly, because people cannot afford to wait a year and six months when they are one paycheque away from bankruptcy.

Ms. Siobhan Coady (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. member for such an elegant impassioned speech.

The Conservative government has been reluctantly dragged into making some changes to the employment insurance program at a time when there is incredible devastation in our country with regard to employment and jobs.

What I note is that this Conservative proposal is dividing the unemployed into those deserving increased benefits and those not deserving. I assume that is what the government is doing.

I look at the fact that we have so many seasonal workers, so many workers who are in fields who would not meet the criteria to allow them to access this new proposal that the Conservatives have put forward. Five hundred thousand people have lost their jobs, yet the Conservative proposal, using its figures and I am not sure where its figures are coming from, says it will affect 190,000 people.

What about the other 300,000 people the Conservatives are not helping under this program? I am just wondering if the hon. member could answer the question, why does she think the Harper Conservatives are discriminating in this employment—

● (1305)

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I would ask the member to remember not to mention sitting members' names.

The hon. member for Vancouver Centre for a quick response.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Madam Speaker, I am glad my colleague asked that question because she does come from a part of Canada that knows what it is like to be devastated by unemployment and knows what it is like to be regionally discriminated against sometimes in this country.

The bottom line is that I consider it unworthy of a federal government to discriminate against its people, to decide who is worthy of its assistance and who is not, to decide whether it will help people based on their age or entrance into the workforce when they are all at this moment feeling extremely vulnerable.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC): Madam Speaker, I note that it took the hon. member 13 years in office to figure out certain things on employment insurance. However, I think most Canadians know where the member comes from. She is the same member who recently told our brave men and women in the armed forces that they should not be proud to wear the flag on their knapsacks. She is an hon. member who represents a party that walked out on unemployed Canadians recently.

Many good things are happening across this country. A constituent of mine, Mr. Baljit Sierra, an owner of Novo Plastics, raves about everything the government has done with respect to helping him and his business in this time of economic uncertainty and raves about employment insurance and employment sharing programs.

I wonder if the hon. member has noted in her riding all of the companies that have benefited from the economic action plan and what she will say to them now that her party simply wants to close down Parliament and turn its back yet again on the hard-working men and women of this country.

Government Orders

Hon. Hedy Fry: Madam Speaker, this whole thing is a political game. When one is not able to answer questions, one begins to become personally offensive to individuals in the House. I will not go there.

What I will say is that I do speak to the constituents in my riding regularly. In fact, the riding of Vancouver Centre is the headquarters for most of the businesses in British Columbia. It is the headquarters for most of the employment agencies in British Columbia. It is the headquarters for most of the economic development in British Columbia where everyone is headquartered.

I talk to my constituents regularly. I do not wait for them to call me. I bring them together, meet with them and ask them how things are going. I must say that the visa on Mexicans that was denied recently has devastated the people in my riding. Hotels are closing down, jobs are being lost for part-time workers and service sector workers in the hotel industry and the restaurant sector.

What I hear from the constituents in my riding is that people have no work and they do not know what to do. That is what I must speak to and what makes me so passionate, because what the government is doing severely lacks compassion. I guess it is because Vancouver Centre does not have a Conservative MP, which may be why we are so badly treated.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with my colleague from Nepean—Carleton.

I am pleased to rise today in support of the bill to improve employment insurance. It is a good bill and it should be supported by every member of the House. There is no question about that. It is certainly a lively debate, and so it should be.

The current EI program is working. We are seeing positive results of the actions taken by the government. However, while the economy moves toward recovery, our continued action is required and our continued attention is necessary. The new measures we are taking through the bill will assist Canadians who have worked for a significant period of time, have made limited use of EI regular benefits and, through no fault of their own, find themselves laid off and looking for a new job.

These are Canadians who paid their dues. They have worked hard, paid their taxes and paid their EI premiums for many years. It is only fair and responsible that we support them and their families when they need it. Many of these workers have worked in the same job or in the same industry for many years and face the prospect of having to start all over again. In many cases, these workers are now facing low prospects of finding work in their industry and many will face challenges transitioning to a new career. It is a very trying time for sure, and we understand that.

With Bill C-50, our government is doing the right thing.

Bill C-50 would extend, nationally, regular benefits for long-tenured workers by between five and twenty weeks. The longer a person has been working and paying EI premiums, the more weeks of benefits that person will receive.

The measure being introduced today is the continuation of our government's efforts to ensure that the employment insurance program is working for all Canadians.

Through Canada's economic action plan, our government has already made a number of improvements to the EI program to support unemployed Canadians and to help them get back into the workforce. We are providing five additional weeks of EI benefits. We have made the EI application process easier, faster and better for businesses and workers, and we have increased opportunities for unemployed Canadians to upgrade their skills and to get back to work. We are assisting businesses and their workers who are experiencing temporary slowdowns by an improved and more accessible work-sharing program. More than 160,000 Canadians are benefiting from work-sharing agreements that are in place with almost 5,800 employers across Canada. This is a positive change and a positive program. These are jobs that are being protected by the actions taken by this Conservative government.

We believe it is important to ensure Canada's workforce is in a position to get good jobs and bounce back from the recession.

Career transition assistance is a new initiative that will help an estimated 40,000 long-term workers who need additional support for retraining to find a new job. Through this initiative, we have extended the duration of EI regular income benefits for eligible workers for up to two years for those who choose to participate in longer term training. We are providing Canadians easier access to training that is tailored to the needs of workers in our country's different regions.

We made a number of other changes to the EI system, even before the recession began. For example, we extended the eligibility for EI compassionate care benefits by enlarging the definition of family member to include a wider range of individuals. We are improving the management and governance of the EI account through the establishment of the Canada Employment Insurance Financing Board, a federal crown corporation that reports to Parliament through the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. This board will be responsible for EI financing, setting the EI premium rate and ensuring that EI premiums are spent within the EI program to help Canadian workers when they need help the most.

Also important is that the Canada Employment Insurance Financing Board will ensure that EI premiums are not used to finance Liberal pet political projects, which has been the case in the past.

It should be clear to the House that we have not hesitated to test new approaches and to make changes to EI when they are proven to be warranted.

The House can be assured that we will continue to monitor and assess the EI program to ensure it continues to be effective. We will listen to recommendations and place priority on reasonable, affordable measures. We will continue to identify opportunities to ensure that EI helps Canadians adapt to the modern labour market.

Government Orders

●(1310)

Bill C-50 is just such an opportunity. It demonstrates that the government is making responsible choices to support Canadians now. This measure is time limited. We are taking it immediately. It is responsive to the needs of hard-working Canadians.

We are not the only ones who think that this type of measure is the best one at this time. In yesterday's paper, the president of the United Steelworkers, in our minister's own riding, said:

It's going to be quite good and give workers a little more time. This is a good thing to extend benefits to people like that.

Members of the Liberal Party need to get behind this legislation because it is a good thing. They need to support it. If they want other initiatives, that is fine, but this is a good one and it needs to be supported.

The Ontario premier said that it was a step in the right direction.

Back on June 22, Ken Lewenza, president of the Canadian Auto Workers, said in the *Exchange Morning Post*:

In the months ahead tens of thousands of unemployed workers are going to join the growing ranks of Canadians who have exhausted their EI benefits. They need action, not political posturing.

Unemployed workers need the support that we are proposing in Bill C-50. They do not need political posturing by the opposition. They need the support of that party to get the bill through the House as quickly as possible to ensure those who need it the most can get it when they need it.

Action is exactly what we are providing to these hard-working Canadians. We are taking action to extend their EI benefits.

On August 25, in the *Canadian Press*, Don Drummond, TD Bank's chief economist, said:

I think time is going to prove that the debate we're having on the employment insurance system is focusing on the wrong thing. I think this recession will prove it has been less about an access problem than a duration problem.

That is exactly what the bill is addressing.

In this month's *Policy Options*, Jeremy Leonard, of the IRPP, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, said, "The narrow focus on"—and he is referring to a 360 hour work year, is unfortunate, because.... The more serious issues...how to deal with the large number of long-term unemployed who are no longer eligible for EI...."

The duration of benefits is exactly what we are addressing in today's bill.

Also in this month's *Policy Options*, Janice MacKinnon, the former social services minister of my home province of Saskatchewan, with whom I do not always agree, said, in reference to the 360 hour program:

...it be better to expand coverage...and improve the benefits of those who have paid into the program for years but find themselves unemployed?

That is precisely the point. People have been working long and hard. They have been paying their taxes and now they are facing a very trying time. Their benefits are running out or have run out. This program would bridge that for them. They expect our government to respond to that and the parties in the House to get behind it. We are

taking reasonable, fair and affordable actions to help Canadians who have worked hard and paid their taxes for a long time.

Our government will remain focused on the economy and helping those hardest hit by the economic downturn. We are focused on what matters to Canadians right now, helping those hardest hit, investing in training and helping to create and protect jobs. In contrast, the opposition Liberals seem to want simply to fight the economic recovery.

Recently on EI, the Liberals walked away from the table and unemployed Canadians. They turned their backs on those who need their help at this particular time. In contrast, this government is continuing to work to help unemployed Canadians. The most recent example of our continued work is the bill itself.

The Liberals refuse to give up on their ill-advised, ill-conceived two month work year scheme. This Liberal scheme was costed at over \$4 billion. It is irresponsible and unaffordable in our current circumstances and, what is more, it is offensive to hard-working Canadians who have paid their taxes and EI premiums.

In contrast, this government is taking fair, responsible and affordable measures to help hard-working Canadians who have not been able to get back into the workforce yet.

The Liberals have said that they will vote against all government measures, including this measure, the extra support for workers who have paid into the system for years; and maternity and parental benefits for self-employed, which the minister has indicated this government is working toward.

I would ask members of the House not to engage in political posturing but to look at the positive aspects of the bill. It is simple and direct and it is meant to help those who are long-tenured. Members should get behind it, support it and look at other ways to improve the system later.

●(1315)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, in his speech, the member referred to the Canada EI Financing Board, which was included in the last budget. As I recall, that called for some \$2 billion to be transferred to this new board for seed money, then it would administer the ins and outs of the employment insurance program.

My understanding, though, is that the board has not yet been set up and that the \$2 billion of seed money has not been provided. It does not exist, so I would hope the member would provide some clarification on why he even raised it.

If that does not exist, then we still have this EI surplus in the notional EI fund, which has a \$50 billion-plus surplus. Under the rules, two years of surplus have to be retained for recession purposes and a board would determine the premiums to be set. Therefore, the only way to deal with the excess surplus is either to reduce premiums or to introduce new programs, neither of which have been done because those members ignore the fact that the EI fund actually exists.

Would the member care to clarify whether we have a financing board or whether the EI fund still exists and whether either of these are in fact operational for recession purposes?

Government Orders

• (1320)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Madam Speaker, it is quite remarkable a question such as that would come from the hon. member, who is a member of the Liberal Party.

The board has been established and the reason it has been established is to ensure that EI premiums that are collected over a period of time are used for the benefit of those who have paid in, to help the unemployed.

What the previous Liberal government did was use the approximately \$50 billion to which the member refers. Was the purpose to help those unemployed, those who needed it? No. The Liberal government used it as general revenue to fund its pet political Liberal projects. It took that money and spent it during that time. The Liberals tried to balance their books on the backs of the unemployed, on the backs of Canadians, by taking money from provinces, from municipalities and, worse yet, from those who needed it most, the unemployed. Those who need it the most do not have the money because the previous Liberal Party spent it on its pet political projects.

The Liberals have the audacity to stand today and ask us where the money is. It was spent by the Liberal Party of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Madam Speaker, I listened to the member trumpet the proposed measures, such as the additional 5 to 20 weeks, to purportedly improve employment insurance.

A lot of people say that this program was designed for auto workers and that unemployed forestry industry workers were completely disregarded in the proposed measures.

I would like the member to respond that.

[*English*]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Madam Speaker, perhaps what has been lost on the hon. member is that the program has not been designed for a particular person or a particular region of the country. It has been designed for those who have worked the longest.

Those who have paid most into the system, those who have collected the least from the system, those who keep the system going for everybody, where everybody gets to benefit in the good times, are the ones who should be protected wherever they live, whatever they do, whichever industry they are in, whether it be forestry, the auto sector or mining. It does not matter.

What matters is that this is a group of people who have worked hard, paid into the system, find themselves out of work after they have worked for a long period time and now find themselves in this awkward position. They need to be helped and they need the support of the Bloc party.

I cannot imagine the Bloc party voting against something like this, something that will benefit not only members in my riding and other members' ridings, but his riding as well. It is unconscionable for them to oppose a bill like this which deals with a singular item and has nothing else attached to it. If the Bloc members want other

benefits, that may be fine, but this is a positive benefit. They should support it and quite playing politics with EI.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the debate on employment insurance and the Conservative economic action plan.

Hon. members, many Canadians and their families are facing the real and immediate effects of the global recession. It is important for people to be aware of the action this government has taken to help men and women who have lost their jobs during this global recession, through no fault of their own. These Canadians who, as the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development said, have worked hard and paid taxes their whole lives and have found themselves in economic hardship and need a hand up. That is why our government is extending EI regular benefits nationally for long-tenured workers through this legislation. This extension of regular benefits would range from between five and twenty weeks, depending on the number of years they have contributed to the program.

This new measure is in stark contrast to the reckless scheme proposed by the coalition parties. The Liberals, the Bloc Québécois and the NDP had proposed that someone collect EI after working only 360 hours, or 45 days. That is why we call it the "45-day work year".

Noted American thinker, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, once said, "History is a better guide than good intentions".

I have no doubt about the good intentions of my distinguished friends across the way. The 45-day entrance requirement returns us to the failed Liberal policies of the 1970s. These policies had a catastrophic effect on the economy, and they would have the same effect today. The 45-day work year proposal would cost billions, balloon the deficit, accelerate turnover of workers and suppress job creation.

Beyond that, the problem with the 45-day work year is that it forgets the deep-rooted Canadian value of hard work.

The Prime Minister's economic action plan values hard work and it rewards it, too. It helps families invest in their future, with the Conservative tax-free savings account. It lowers income taxes for the average family by roughly \$500. It creates jobs, with construction projects that will help in communities across the land, like the Strandherd-Armstrong bridge for which I secured funds. It lets people put their tax dollars back into their homes, with the Conservative home renovation tax credit. This Conservative tax credit creates jobs for painters, builders, roofers and carpenters. It creates new demand for wood products that helps our troubled forestry sector. It lets Canadians increase the value of their most important asset, their homes.

Government Orders

The Prime Minister's economic action plan not only creates new jobs, it protects the ones that we already have, by expanding work sharing aid for businesses to 52 weeks and simplifying the program to help businesses get it faster. Work sharing programs, for those members who are not aware, are programs that help workers who accept reduced a work week, while their employer recovers from the effects of the global recession. Right now, there are close to 5,800 work-sharing agreements across the country, protecting the jobs of 165,000 Canadians. This measure allows businesses to retain employees, thereby avoiding expensive rehiring and retraining costs. In turn, employees are able to continue working, keeping their skills up to date and holding on to the pride of a good job.

Finally, we have frozen EI premiums for two years during the period of this economic action plan, to help businesses create jobs and to award workers by letting them keep more of their own money.

• (1325)

That is why I would call on all members of the House to put aside the Liberal leader's obsession with an immediate election that would waste tax dollars and disrupt the recovery and focus instead on the economic action plan that the Prime Minister has initiated to create jobs right across the country.

I thank my distinguished colleagues for their attention and I encourage them to support this bill and the economic action plan of which it is a part.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Madam Speaker, having listened to the speech of the hon. member, I feel compelled to stand and ask this question. The question is predicated on challenging the premise that the member has used, which underscores the government's approach to the use of employment insurance: "the deep-rooted Canadian value of hard work".

I come from a constituency where people and many new immigrants are involved in seasonal and contract work. They are involved in absolute bare-essential work that is at minimum wage. They contribute to employment insurance and they have that deep-rooted value. However, the member is acting on the premise that the employment insurance fund is the only fund that can be tapped up on the basis and tapped into to create new opportunities.

I challenge that and the House should challenge it as well. There are many resources available to government, including employment insurance, that can be used to give incentives. That is what the 360-hour work year is about, and I would like the government and certainly the member to consider that.

• (1330)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, my distinguished friend raises the important point about the various resources that we have in our country to create jobs and opportunities for Canadians of all walks of life.

Our economic action plan does exactly that. It lowers taxes for families so they can spend and invest more and create jobs. It brings in a Conservative tax-free savings account that allows families to save for their future, independent of the government. It creates a Conservative home renovation tax credit that allows families to redirect their tax dollars back into the value of their most important asset, their homes. At the same time, they create jobs for carpenters,

painters, roofers, landscapers and others, while creating new demand for forestry products and helping that troubled sector.

That is the Conservative economic action plan. I invite the member to be a part of it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Madam Speaker, since this morning, I have been listening to the Reform-Conservative government talk about Bill C-50. I have a question for the parliamentary secretary.

If the government really cares about what happens to unemployed workers, why introduce a bill? A bill has to get royal assent, and that takes time. Why not just implement a pilot project, which will produce swifter results?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for her question.

The Conservative Party wants to act swiftly. That is why we have an economic action plan that respects Canadian labour values and helps families that need help.

[*English*]

That economic action plan is not only helping people who have lost their jobs but helping them find new ones. I hope the member would support us rather than support an election.

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, we have to recognize that the government inherited the EI rules left to them by the 13 years of Liberal government. With this bill, the Conservatives have clearly agreed that EI is broken and needs to be fixed.

New Democrats have long proposed additional changes like dropping the two-week waiting period, removing severance pay from EI calculations and increasing the amount of benefit received. Could the member opposite comment on these proposals?

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The parliamentary secretary has 30 seconds to reply.

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for making proposals. We do not always agree in this place, but that does not mean we cannot work together.

I appreciate that the member will be supporting this Conservative measure to help long-term workers get through a difficult period brought on by the recession. At the same time I respectfully disagree with the 45-day work year proposal that would cost billions, balloon the deficit and suppress job creation. That is a coalition proposal and I respectfully reject it.

Government Orders

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise on behalf of my colleagues in the Bloc Québécois on the bill to amend the Employment Insurance Act and increase benefits for certain categories of claimants.

First I want to tell the House and the people listening to us that it is false that the Bloc Québécois is going to engage in demagoguery on the backs of people who get employment insurance benefits. The Bloc Québécois has said—and its leader has repeated *ad nauseam*—that when bills are introduced by the Conservative government, the Bloc will react like a reasonable, responsible opposition party and will study each bill and each motion that is introduced on a case by case basis, regardless of any background noise related to minority government, pre-election periods or election alerts.

The Bloc Québécois cannot support this bill as it now stands. To avoid all demagoguery from the Conservatives—of the kind only they are really capable of—I will explain why this is so. I want to warn the House, though, that the Conservative big wigs will launch huge media attacks claiming the Bloc Québécois is against unemployed people.

The Bloc Québécois opposes this bill because it does not get to the heart of the problem, that is to say, the ability of the unemployed to access benefits. The problem—as everyone knows—is accessibility. If the government wanted to act in good faith, it would first resolve the accessibility issue. There is no point in having the best of programs if people cannot qualify for them. That does not do any good. This is why we cannot support the bill.

Together with the committees of the unemployed, the mouvement des Sans-Chemise and the labour unions, the Bloc Québécois wants 360 hours in order to qualify for employment insurance. The problem is that when workers who have paid their premiums ask for EI benefits, they are told they do not qualify yet because they do not have enough hours. It is a bit like someone who pays for fire insurance and then suffers a total loss. He goes to his insurer to make a claim and rebuild his house, but the insurer says he failed to read the fine print saying that the insurance does not cover the first total loss, just the second. What would we call this insurer? We would call him a fraud, a thief. That is the big problem.

In my riding of Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, especially in Côte-de-Beaupré, the Île d'Orléans, the greater Charlevoix area and Upper North Shore, there is a category of workers who are nowhere to be found in this bill. The government could provide 300 weeks of benefits, these workers would still not get anything. I am talking about the situation of seasonal workers.

My colleagues here know very well that seasonal workers face a very unique situation in our regions in Quebec. Even if they wanted to do some planting, some reforestation or silviculture work, I am sorry, but in February when there are four feet of snow in the forest, people cannot go around planting little spruce trees.

• (1335)

Even if we do manage to develop winter tourism in our regions—with Europeans, for example, coming to snowmobile, or dogsled or whatever—there is one fact. Most of our inns in the regions close

after Thanksgiving. Our innkeepers are hospitable. They would like to remain open year round. The problem is the lack of business. When you work in an inn and there are no guests, the employer does not pay you to sit around and knit. The employer has to lay people off.

I see my colleague from Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine. In the winter, when the river is locked in snow and ice there is no fishing. Fishermen are another category of seasonal worker. If this government, then, which claims to be sensitive and attentive—let me say that we know how the Conservative government operates—had a single ounce of sensitivity, it would have taken account in its bill of the reality faced by seasonal workers. It has been shown that the EI plan in its current form, with the initial cuts made under the Liberals and more made by the Conservatives, is unacceptable. That is why we say that Liberal or Conservative, it amounts to the same thing.

The plan is unfair to certain categories of workers. I mentioned the seasonal workers. I could say exactly the same thing about women, young people and older workers. The current system is unfair. The government should have taken this into account and really corrected the situation and not made cosmetic changes in order to use the coming week off to say in the media that the Bloc does not support the unemployed. The people in our regions know that the Bloc is the only party defending the unemployed in this House.

The best proof that the Bloc wants to change and improve this bill, which is totally unacceptable as it is written—and this is why we will vote against it—is that we said that, before a vote is taken in the House, the committee should hear from the groups concerned. We should invite the Quebec forestry industry council. We should invite the representatives of committees of the unemployed, unions and the Conseil du patronat du Québec to tell us where the bill is unacceptable and how it could be improved.

That is why this very morning the House leader of the Bloc Québécois sought the unanimous consent of the House to send this bill to committee before second reading so the groups concerned, those directly involved, could inform parliamentarians from all parties and tell them why this bill, as worded, is not acceptable.

The government will tell us that 190,000 unemployed individuals will be eligible for the new program. I am convinced that they examined the eligibility provisions. They apply to workers who have had a job for a long time and find themselves unemployed, but what about the categories I mentioned earlier? One industry in Quebec has been hard hit by layoffs for five years. In my riding, they are still happening, and I am talking about the forestry industry. Those workers will not be eligible for the measures in Bill C-50.

Government Orders

The *Globe and Mail*, a paper not known for its sovereignist leanings, spoke about the bill. Does the *Globe and Mail* support sovereignty for Quebec? It pointed out that the bill proposed measures that will apply to workers in the automobile industry.

Which automobile industry is that? It is the one in Ontario, because there is hardly anything left of the auto industry in Quebec.

• (1340)

There was one assembly plant left in Sainte-Thérèse, but it closed. There was a Hyundai plant in Bromont, but it is closed too. We have parts subcontractors, I admit, but the automobile industry is concentrated in Ontario, for the most part. So this bill is custom made for Ontario.

We members of the Bloc proudly representing the regions and workers of Quebec cannot support a bill that provides additional benefits to 190,000 people who are unemployed, but practically nothing to Quebec. It is not designed for our forestry workers.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the two groups in my riding that are working very hard to stand up for the rights of the unemployed. I am thinking of Lyne Sirois of Mouvement Action-Chômage on Haute-Côte-Nord and Danie Harvey, who is behind the Sans-chemise movement in Charlevoix. I am certain that these people agree with the Bloc Québécois position that Bill C-50 does not address the needs of the unemployed in Quebec. For these reasons, the Bloc Québécois cannot support the bill.

The Bloc Québécois invites the other parties—because there are talks under way among the parliamentary leaders—to think seriously about the Bloc's offer to hear from the groups directly affected by this bill, before a vote is held, so that they can give us their perspectives. In light of these presentations, the government might listen to reason and amend its bill.

I repeat that we need real reform of the employment insurance program.

• (1345)

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, there is a targeted initiative for older workers of \$60 billion which the member is not totally happy with. There are 190,000 people who are being helped and he is not happy with that. There is a work sharing agreement that helped 160,000 people which he is not happy with. He is not happy with the five extra weeks.

Using his logic, if he were to vote against the bill and it failed, what would he tell the 190,000 people? Would he tell them that the bill did not have everything he liked and he did not support it because of some reason? Would he say to each one of those 190,000 people that he knows they need additional assistance but he will not help them because he does not like everything in there? How can he justify that to the 190,000 who need the support? It does not matter where they live in the country; it is better that they have that benefit than no benefit at all. The member's logic escapes me.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Madam Speaker, my colleague's remarks show the Conservatives' contempt for and insensitivity to the situation in Quebec and especially in the regions of Quebec.

He mentions talking to the 190,000 unemployed in Ontario, but what will the government say to the unemployed in our regions who have been suffering for five years because of the forest industry crisis? Plants are closing left and right in Quebec. People have paid employment insurance premiums.

I think the member should also stop being paternalistic and more or less implying that this money is coming out of his pockets. These workers pay taxes. This money is not coming from Conservative members and ministers. Employment insurance benefits come out of the EI fund, which is made up of employer and worker contributions. The Conservative government and the Liberal government, under Paul Martin, boasted about—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine has the floor.

• (1350)

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Madam Speaker, I do not know if I can put as much passion into it as my colleague just did but at the very least I will say this: with regard to the 190,000 eligible people, when it was time for questions the member for Chambly—Borduas asked the Conservatives where they are. With respect to Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine, one of the Quebec regions, I have a great deal of difficulty finding unemployed workers who might be part of this group of 190,000.

Is it possible that this figure of 190,000 has been exaggerated just like so many other things presented by the government? I believe that the member who just spoke, the Bloc Québécois whip, is surely very aware of the fact that the figures mentioned by the Conservative government are, for the most part, wrong.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Madam Speaker, this would be a good opportunity in the debate. If the government is talking about 190,000 persons, that number is not coming out of thin air, it has not been reached at random. You do not say, "Oh, I just pulled out the number 190,000!" I would like some member of the government who will be talking about this bill to give us the geographic breakdown of the 190,000 unemployed persons. We shall see if we are right. If there are 189,000 of them in Quebec, I will withdraw my words and make a statement in the House. However if it is true that the great majority are auto workers, I hope this government has the courage to say so to our faces.

[English]

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I congratulate my colleague for his speech. I have enjoyed working with him and his great colleague from Chambly—Borduas on issues like this.

Government Orders

We do not agree on everything, but I think we agree on some of the basic issues. One of the things that are particularly annoying and frustrating about the government is its insistence when referring to the 360-hour work year or the nine-week work year is a lack of respect for Canadian workers.

I want to ask the member if he believes, as the government does, that Canadian workers will purposely put themselves in a position to be unemployed so they can get all these great benefits from employment insurance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Madam Speaker, my colleague represents a riding in Nova Scotia. Ridings in the maritime provinces are similar to those in maritime Quebec, in Gaspésie, the Magdalen Islands and the Lower St. Lawrence. The reality of seasonal jobs is not unique to Quebec: it exists in other provinces. I am sure that if someone goes to my riding or those of my colleagues in the Bloc Québécois and asks people if they would rather have a year-round job or go through periods of unemployment every year, the great majority would say they do not want charity, they want the dignity of work. They want to work rather than receive employment insurance benefits. Quebecers are proud people.

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is fairly clear that this bill must be amended in committee. I would like to ask the member what type of amendments to this bill he would like to see brought in committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Madam Speaker, I believe I have said that the main problem with this bill on the employment insurance system is eligibility. The number of hours to qualify should be reduced to 360. Another problem is the duration of benefits, to avoid what is called “the spring gap”. The seasonally unemployed are not receiving sufficient employment insurance benefits to support them until the next work period. Third, to provide people with a decent income the benefit level must be increased from 55% to 60%.

In addition, on account of the economic crisis, the Bloc Québécois has written two reports—in November 2008 and April 2009—in which it suggests improvements to the government. We call for the abolition of the waiting period so that those unfortunate enough to find themselves unemployed can start receiving money immediately. When you receive employment insurance benefits, it takes two weeks before you see a cheque; meanwhile, the bills keep coming in. The credit union continues to send out its mortgage bill, Visa Desjardins does the same, and people have no income for two weeks.

To continue supporting the plan, the waiting period must be abolished. This is a concrete proposal made by the Bloc Québécois for the benefit of the unemployed.

• (1355)

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I certainly listened with respect to the great deal of passion that the hon. member brings to representing his constituents.

I think I need to make mention that our economic action plan recognizes that there is not just one solution to the global recession that we are facing, which is why we have the community adjustments fund. That is why we have created retraining opportunities and that is why we have job opportunities. There has to be a very complex approach during this global recession.

While this EI bill, Bill C-50, is going to help some people in the province of British Columbia, it is not the perfect solution, but how can the member look at the people that it will help in his province and say, “No, I am not willing to provide you with an extra 20 weeks. I voted against that”?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Madam Speaker, my colleague can respond when a member of her party, a minister or a parliamentary secretary, takes the floor on the subject of this bill and gives us, province by province, the breakdown of the 190,000 unemployed persons who will be affected by this measure. She mentioned British Columbia. It is our claim, and in this we are in agreement with the *Globe and Mail*, that the majority of the unemployed affected by this new measure will be workers in the Ontario auto industry. My colleague asks what I will say to the unemployed in Quebec who are affected by this measure. As there will be next to none, I will have nothing of much interest to say to them.

I will tell them that this program, in spite of all the misinformation by the Conservatives in all the media, does not apply to them. That is why it is not working.

[*English*]

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time today with my colleague, the member for Oshawa.

Today I am very proud to express my support for Bill C-50 which will extend EI benefits for long-tenured workers.

Through Canada's economic action plan, we have been helping Canadians in all walks of life to get through a difficult time in our economy. For those who have lost their jobs, we are now providing longer EI benefits and more efficient service. For those who are at risk of being laid off, we have made it easier for companies to participate in work-sharing agreements. We are helping young people get a start in the job market and we are giving them incentives to get certified in the skilled trades.

We are helping older workers make the transition to new careers. We are ensuring that newcomers to this country can get their credentials recognized. We are working to create more job opportunities for aboriginal people. We are making record investments in skills and training to enable Canadians to prepare for the jobs of the future.

Moreover our actions with respect to the employment insurance program are working for Canadians. The actions we are taking are having a positive impact and we are seeing positive results.

Statements by Members

Our government is taking further action to ensure the EI program responds to the needs of those workers hit by this global economic downturn such as long-tenured workers. Many of these workers have spent many years in industries that have been hit hard by this recession. Many of them are forestry workers from many provinces. Many of these workers are in the manufacturing sector and in the auto sector, especially here in my home province of Ontario and in my own area.

These hard-working Canadians have put in many hours over the years. They have paid into the EI system for many years. They are out of work through absolutely no fault of their own and they have seldom if ever collected benefits until now. Now a good number of them need some additional time to get back into the workforce. Bill C-50 will give them that support.

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The member will have approximately seven and a half minutes after question period.

Statements by members, the hon. member for Niagara West—Glanbrook.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

FALL FAIRS

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Madam Speaker, as the temperature cools, the days shorten and the opposition parties threaten to force an election, it can mean only one thing: Fall is approaching.

For many rural communities across the country this means gearing up to host a fall fair. These fairs offer smaller communities the opportunity to showcase the very best that the citizens have to offer as well as paying tribute to the rich agricultural heritage that these towns share.

Hundreds of tireless volunteers are to be commended for their efforts in making these events as popular and successful as they are.

I am fortunate to have three fairs in my riding of Niagara West—Glanbrook, and in the past two weeks I have enjoyed the 152nd edition of the Lincoln County Fair in Beamsville and the 132nd Smithville Fall Fair. I now look forward to the 155th Binbrook Fair this weekend and would encourage everybody in the Hamilton area to come out and experience all the fun and excitement that is a fall fair.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PEACE

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Madam Speaker, next Monday is the 27th anniversary of the first International Day of Peace. On September 21, 1982, the United Nations passed a resolution to dedicate one day per year to promoting peace, cooperation, understanding and a global armistice.

[English]

In 1999 a related initiative was launched by the British film director Jeremy Gilley who put together a documentary that followed him as he travelled the globe, promoting the idea of a day of peace. The film, entitled *Peace One Day*, enjoyed great success and prompted the United Nations to officially declare September 21 as the United Nations' International Day of Peace.

Over the last 10 years, *Peace One Day* has emerged from relative obscurity to become recognized and celebrated in over 190 countries.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Miss Margaret Rochefort, a young constituent who wrote to me expressing her active interest in this issue.

I invite all members of the House to mark this day as we commemorate and strengthen our Canadian ideals of peace at home and abroad.

* * *

[Translation]

OVARIAN CANCER

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Madam Speaker, September is ovarian cancer awareness month. In 2009, some 2,500 Canadian women will be diagnosed with this form of cancer, and 1,750 will die because of it.

Ovarian cancer is the deadliest form of gynecological cancer affecting North American women. The five-year survival rate is 35% or less. The few symptoms are difficult to detect, and the survival rate could decrease considerably because of the medical isotope shortage.

Quebec's Coalition Priorité Cancer, which represents close to a million people, believes that the radio-isotope crisis is the result of negligence and lack of respect for people, as well as lack of vision and consideration for what people with cancer go through.

That is why we, like the coalition, are urging the government to do what it takes to improve the odds for people with cancer.

* * *

[English]

HARMONIZED SALES TAX

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Madam Speaker, many working people in Ontario are losing their jobs and struggling to make ends meet, due to the recession's damaging effects in this province.

The Prime Minister has chosen this moment to borrow \$4.3 billion to bribe the McGuinty Liberals, endorsed by the federal Liberals, to impose an obscene tax gouge on ordinary Canadians.

This massive tax grab will cost the average resident more than \$300 per year to heat their homes and fill their gas tanks alone.

The 8% increase in the cost of everything from funerals to car repairs, hair cuts, school supplies and even retirement savings is the exact opposite of economic stimulus. It is suffocation and strangulation.

The Prime Minister's harmonized sales tax deal with the Liberals will shift the tax burden from price-gouging oil companies and profiteering banks onto families and consumers. The Conservatives cut corporate taxes and they pass the bill on to Canadian workers and consumers.

It is so outrageous that the finance minister's own wife has copied the NDP opposition in having a petition against the Conservative-Liberal tax gouge, proving once again that there is no difference between Liberals and Conservatives. I invite the finance minister—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order, please. The hon. member for Kitchener—Waterloo.

* * *

31 COMBAT ENGINEERS

Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC): Madam Speaker, last Saturday I had the honour of joining Lord and Lady Elgin and Waterloo Mayor Brenda Halloran to celebrate the granting of the Freedom of the City of Waterloo to the 31 Combat Engineers, the Elgins.

The granting of the Freedom of the City is a great honour for a regiment. It means the unit can parade with colours flying and bayonets fixed. It also symbolizes the formal establishment of the regiment in a community.

The 48th Field Squadron of 31 Combat Engineers, the Elgins, now serves our community in Kitchener—Waterloo. They will continue to train brave women and men to the highest standards and provide volunteers for our important missions overseas.

I know all members of the House will join me in congratulating the 31 Combat Engineers and in saluting all of the brave women and men who continue to serve in our Canadian Forces at home and abroad.

* * *

• (1405)

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Ms. Siobhan Coady (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government, at the end of the last sitting, tabled proposed amendments to the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization agreement.

The proposed amendments threaten the sustainability of our country's fish stocks. Further, the changes are a threat to the sovereignty of our nation.

It is of such extreme concern that former senior executives of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans who have extensive NAFO experience have taken the unprecedented step of speaking out, calling the amendments a “sellout of Canadian interests”.

The proposed changes to the agreement give an increased influence to NAFO inside the Canadian 200-mile limit. One clause

Statements by Members

even allows under certain circumstances for NAFO to apply its own measures in the coastal waters of Canada.

At the same time that the Prime Minister speaks of concerns on Arctic sovereignty, his government brings in amendments to an agreement which compromise the sovereignty of the country. The Conservatives promised custodial management but, instead, they tabled an amendment that could allow foreign intervention. How can we trust the government?

The Prime Minister should stand up for Canada and tear up these amendments.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in this House, Canadians expect that we respect one another and that we unite efforts on Canada's economic action plan and on nurturing our fragile economic recovery.

[*Translation*]

This summer we all met with our constituents. Personally, I listened to the message they were sending me.

[*English*]

Actually, it is a high school student who shared with me his understanding and his wisdom about leadership.

[*Translation*]

The primary characteristic of strong leadership is the ability to inspire others to give their very best.

[*English*]

When employers, teachers or parents want employees, students or children to give their best performance, they first make them feel safe.

[*Translation*]

When people feel safe, they will take risks. They will risk trying, risk doing their best. They will even risk being honest.

[*English*]

Once they have experienced the joy of excellence, that experience and that joy can truly be habit forming.

[*Translation*]

This message applies to all of us.

* * *

ROYAL PYROTECHNIE

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate a company from Saint-Pie, in my riding. Royal Pyrotechnie won the Gold Jupiter prize with its performance “Voilà” at the 2009 international fireworks competition in Montreal, the largest fireworks competition in the world.

Yanick Roy, the president of the company—which has been working in this field since 1966—and his team of pyrotechnicians dazzled the judges with the originality and diversity of their technical design, as they set off over 10,000 fireworks.

Statements by Members

Their sound track designer, Serge Pélouquin, who is from Sorel, also won the Jupiter for best sound track, for the same performance. Capturing an audience through music and astounding them visually is definitely one of this company's gifts.

I would also like to commend them for the marvellous performance they put on before over 8,000 people during the celebrations to honour the Bloc Québécois member for Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour and his 25 years in politics.

I wish Royal Pyrotechnie all the best for a long, international career.

* * *

RIGHT HON. BRIAN MULRONEY

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 1984, Canadians set a new course. With its ambitious tax policies and free trade, the Conservative government of the Right Hon. Brian Mulroney opened wide the doors to the economic prosperity of our country.

Through his commitment to fight apartheid and promote rights and freedoms throughout the world, he put his personal mark on essential Canadian values. His successful fight against acid rain and his global approach to the thinning of the ozone layer led to major international agreements on climate change.

A Quebecker at heart and a great Canadian, he recognized the importance of who we are and who we wish to become.

I would like to acknowledge the unwavering dedication of the member for Jonquière—Alma who, yesterday and today, delivers the goods for Quebec with passion. We thank him, Mila and Brian Mulroney, our friends and all those who have crafted this marvellous victory.

* * *

• (1410)

CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if we think about it, we can measure the extent of the Conservatives' incompetence and irresponsibility. It is never their fault; it is always someone else's fault.

While aboriginal people, whose healthcare system is a direct responsibility of the government, are waiting for flu vaccines, the Conservatives sent them body bags instead.

Instead of acknowledging their incompetence and taking responsibility for this scandal, the Minister of Health put the blame on public servants. Public servants take a lot of flack under this Conservative government.

We need only ask Linda Keen, the head of safety of nuclear facilities who was unjustly fired for doing her job and warning the Conservatives about serious problems with the Chalk River reactor.

Instead of taking her seriously, the Conservatives allowed radioactive heavy water to leak into the Ottawa River, and created the worse medical isotope shortage in history, depriving patients access to the cancer and heart disease screening tests they needed.

The Conservatives say that it is never their fault, but they are the ones in power.

* * *

[*English*]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada is protecting Canadians abroad. Recently the Minister of Foreign Affairs met with Iran's minister of foreign affairs to demand the immediate release of Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari. Yesterday, he also met with Secretary Clinton, who made clear their full support on this issue. The Minister of Foreign Affairs once again expressed the Government of Canada's previous call for immediate consular access, full legal rights and clarification of charges against Mr. Bahari.

Our government continues to take Iran to task on its continued and blatant disregard for basic human rights, unacceptable treatment, and the unjustified detention of Mr. Bahari.

The Government of Canada recognizes there is no such thing as a second-class Canadian. This government is standing up for Canadians both at home and abroad. And let me say it again: a Canadian is a Canadian, is a Canadian, is a Canadian.

* * *

SOCKEYE SALMON

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to call the government's attention to the disastrous sockeye salmon collapse in this year's fishery on the west coast, with 60% lost on the Skeena River and 90% lost on the Fraser River. All the while, the minister was off in Europe with 50 of her fish farm friends, all on the taxpayer's dime, rather than doing her job for Canada's west coast.

This was a disaster economically for a region already hard hit. This was a disaster culturally for the first nations that have depended on this fish for feasts and cultural events since time immemorial. This was a disaster environmentally for the grizzly in the great forests of British Columbia that also rely upon this fish.

New Democrats join with coastal communities in calling for an emergency summit to find out what happened to the sockeye, and most important, to create an emergency plan for next year's fishery and to make sure that the fishermen survive until next season.

We simply ask the government to do its job.

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CANADIAN FLAG

Mr. Rodney Weston (Saint John, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have been informed by my colleagues and constituents that the Liberal Party of Canada continues to circulate its anti-flag message in New Brunswick. In fact, I am aware of at least five Liberal members who have sent out this terrible message. It is unacceptable that any member of this chamber would suggest that Canadians be ashamed of our flag in any way at all.

Despite the public outrage, the Liberal Party continues to propagate this message. However, it is not surprising. May I remind all members and Canadians that it was the Liberal leader who once referred to our flag as “a pale imitation of a beer label”.

The fact is that Canada is recognized as a global leader in peacekeeping, international development and economic stability, among many other things. Regardless of what the Liberals want people to believe, Canadians are proud of this great nation.

* * *

●(1415)

[Translation]

NORTEL

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on August 7, members of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology met to assess the economic repercussions on Quebec and Canada of Ericsson acquiring Nortel's wireless division. During the meeting, executives provided assurances that they would respect their investment and employment commitments.

Unfortunately, both the Liberals and the Conservatives refused to meet again, so the committee could not hold additional meetings to hear from Nortel workers and retirees. The Minister of Industry also declined to meet with them.

The Bloc Québécois believes that they have a legitimate right to express their concerns and ask questions about the future of their retirement fund. Our party will ensure that the Nortel sell-off respects the rights of workers and retirees.

* * *

[English]

HEALTH

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, sending body bags to first nation communities instead of doing its duty to help save lives is just the latest example of the government's stunning incompetence and inability to be accountable for its actions. We have seen it again and again and again.

Canadians are unable to get cancer tests because of the government's mismanagement of the medical isotopes file. What is the government's response? Scapegoat Linda Keen.

Twenty-two Canadians died from listeriosis because of the government's cutbacks on food safety. The Conservatives responded with a whitewash review and refused to hold a proper inquiry.

Canadians are being tortured and unjustly jailed abroad, and the Conservatives blame the bureaucrats.

Now, after pleading for months for leadership and resources to confront the H1N1 pandemic they face, aboriginal communities were outrageously sent body bags, and the health minister claimed ignorance. Just who is running that department?

Incompetent, unaccountable, insensitive and incapable of governing for the people; Canadians deserve better than the Conservative government.

Oral Questions

CHILD CARE

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party continues to reveal its disdain for Canadian parents and families. Yesterday in committee, the member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel had this to say regarding giving money to parents to help pay for child care, “The problem that I'm seeing is that the parents don't provide. They may have the money, but they use it for their own purposes”. How belittling. This disdain is also shared by the Liberal leader, who called giving parents money “wasteful and a terrible use of public funds”.

Our government believes in choice for families. We have put money directly back into parents' pockets because we believe they know best when it comes to deciding the most appropriate child care option for their children.

Liberals believe that bureaucrats know best and that parents cannot be entrusted with caring for their families. Remember that they said that parents would buy beer and popcorn instead.

Now, once again, the Liberals show their—

The Speaker: Order. Oral questions. The hon. member for Labrador.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

HEALTH

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, imagine that you, your child or your grandmother have H1N1. Imagine people who live in fear of the spread of this disease. Imagine being a community leader or health worker pleading for help, trying to prepare and too often doing so on your own.

What message does it send to people, their families and their community when the government will not send medicine but it will send body bags? Will the Minister of Health own up to her responsibilities and apologize for this shameful incompetence?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I totally agree with the member for Labrador. What happened in recent events is unacceptable. It is incredibly insensitive and offensive.

The Minister of Health has ordered her department to conduct a thorough and immediate inquiry into this matter, and the results of that inquiry will be made public.

Oral Questions

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the body bag incident was indeed callous. It was disrespectful and insensitive. It brings to mind an episode from history in my own riding. There was an influenza outbreak. The colonial government at the time did not send help; it did not send medicine. It sent planks to make coffins and bury the dead.

That was 90 years ago. I would have hoped, as all Canadians would have hoped, that things would have changed. How can first nations, Inuit and Métis communities trust their health and well-being to the government? How can any Canadian trust their health and well-being to the government?

• (1420)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I again agree with the member opposite. It was unacceptable. It was incredibly insensitive. Indeed, it was offensive.

The Minister of Health put out a statement earlier today in which she was very clear that she finds this act to be totally inappropriate. She has ordered an inquiry from her department. She is incredibly concerned about it and she will make the results of that inquiry public for all parliamentarians and Canadians.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last spring the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development visited Island Lake, Manitoba. What did he see? He saw limited water facilities and overcrowded, mouldy homes. What did he do? He did almost nothing.

The communities were soon hit with H1N1. They waited and waited for help. Little real help came, but body bags came. Will the outcry over this shameful response force the government to get serious about the real needs of Manitoba's aboriginal communities?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we share the outrage at what happened recently with this incident. It was insensitive, of course. It was objectionable, and it understandably got the reaction it did from the chiefs and communities involved.

We have an extensive program. For example, we announced \$330 million in the budget for waste water treatment. We have announced additional funds for housing, both in the stimulus package and in the regular funding. We are working with first nations to do more to address some of these root causes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the investments in housing that he mentioned have resulted in one house per community in Manitoba.

The children have returned to school and the parents are worried. We know very well how preparations are coming along in first nations communities: they have stalled. The Conservatives have had the whole summer to prepare the country for this pandemic, but they could do no better than to send body bags to Manitoba.

Do they not understand that it is their responsibility to protect the health of all Canadians?

[*English*]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course there is much to do in first nations communities across the country, especially in remote communities, to provide things like safe drinking water. When we came to office we had 197 communities with high-risk water systems that we inherited from the Liberal Party. We now have that down to less than 60.

Of course there is more work to be done. The hon. member says that nothing has been done. This summer alone, we announced 21 new schools to be built and hundreds of millions of dollars in new housing. There is always more to do, but I will not be lectured by a party that left us with 197 high-risk water systems.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we learned today that dozens of residents of Vancouver Island have contracted the H1N1 flu. The authorities have told doctors to stop testing for the flue because they are already overwhelmed.

When will these people get the help they need? When will this insensitive government finally accept its responsibilities?

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health has taken great leadership with respect to H1N1. Her department and the Public Health Agency of Canada have done a significant amount of work in preparation, building on the work completed by the previous minister of health.

In recent days they have announced specific measures, giving priority to those communities which are the most vulnerable, and that is as it should be. We are obviously tremendously concerned for those most vulnerable for this and for our health care practitioners.

We will continue to work incredibly hard to ensure that all efforts are taken to combat this challenge.

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[*Translation*]

CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, during his visit to Washington, the Prime Minister talked to the American President about the dangers of protectionism. Under NAFTA, the American government does not have the right to engage in preferential purchasing, that is, buying only goods that originate in the United States. However, Mr. Obama's plan gets around the problem by forcing states and municipalities, which do not come under NAFTA rules, to buy American exclusively.

Does the Minister of International Trade realize that the real problem is not the buy American act, but rather the American President's plan?

•(1425)

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is why our Prime Minister continues to tell the President of the United States that there is a problem. We also have solutions, which are supported by municipalities across Canada.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if I understand correctly, the Minister of International Trade agrees with my analysis.

However, the Prime Minister is proposing that the principle of full reciprocity should dominate trade relations between the United States and Canada. Such an agreement would prevent Quebec, the provinces and the municipalities from using preferential purchasing as a tool for economic development. Furthermore, Canada's position during the negotiations on free trade in 1988 and on NAFTA in 1992 was to maintain that privilege.

Does the Minister of International Trade realize that full reciprocity could have a very negative impact on small and medium sized businesses?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, clearly, it is very important that we strike a balance. That is why Canada's municipalities want to keep the doors open and also want reciprocity. Thus, they could have American representation and their companies, their businesses, could also present their infrastructure programs to the United States.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, opening up government procurement to full reciprocity, which the Conservative government proposed to the President of the United States, is a bad idea for Quebec's economy and for Canada's because it would introduce an all-or-nothing dynamic. That is exactly what happened with softwood lumber.

Instead of creating a new problem, should the government not be working to convince American authorities to allow U.S. states and municipalities complete freedom in choosing their suppliers?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our municipalities were the ones who said they wanted to keep the doors open. So we presented a solution. Some Canadian municipalities disagreed and said that they wanted some regions to remain under their authority. That is what some Quebec municipalities did. We also have the support of Quebec's Premier Charest, who was a leader in developing the program.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, full reciprocity is not only a bad idea for Canadian companies, but it could also cause the United States to call for the extension of free trade to sectors that are currently exempt from NAFTA.

Is the government aware that its proposal gives the United States grounds for demanding access to sectors such as health and culture?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is bad is when the doors are closed and there are no opportunities. It is very important for our workers and investors to have opportunities to submit bids for public works projects in the United States. That is

Oral Questions

why the mayors agree with us about the solution. Maybe the member should talk to those mayors.

* * *

[English]

HEALTH

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, imagine how the chiefs, the leaders and the nurses must have felt when they opened up what they thought were H1N1 kits and found body bags: 30 of them in Wasagamack First Nation, 20 in God's Lake First Nation, more in other communities.

As the chief of the AFN told me today, it demonstrated a disturbing lack of respect for first nations, Métis and Inuit people and their leaders. Body bags will not halt the spread of the virus. It will not stop the disease. These communities need help and I would call on the government to explain when it is going to start working with the leadership.

•(1430)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has been very clear. I have been very clear. The Minister of Health has been very clear. What happened was inexcusable. It was unfortunate. It was regrettable. It was incredibly insensitive. The Minister of Health has issued a statement, and I will read from part of it:

As minister of health and as an aboriginal, I am offended. To all who took offence at what occurred, I want to say that I share your concern, and I pledge to get to the bottom of it.

The Minister of Health will do just that, and she will make it public.

[Translation]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government is all set to bury the dead in aboriginal communities, in first nations communities, but it is not ready to cope with H1N1. Why not? People want a plan. This is the same government that refused to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, that refused to build schools that students need and that even refused to respect treaties. Now it is sending them body bags. Such disrespect is unacceptable.

When will the government start working with aboriginal leaders?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I share the views of the leader of the NDP on one point, that what happened was incredibly unacceptable. I do not think the leader of the NDP is putting much light on it and he does not do himself any service by his comments at the outset of that question.

Oral Questions

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us stop the excuses here. There is no plan for assisting these communities to deal with the H1N1 crisis. That is the problem. If the government wants to respond to the situation of the body bags, then bring forward a plan, put it here so people can know what it is. More important, the government should be in touch with the first nations leadership of this country who are waiting to work with the people in their communities to prevent the spread of this terrible disease. Where is the plan? Put it on the table. That is the best response to the situation we are facing now.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, neither the minister nor this government offers any excuses. What happened was inexcusable and the minister is pledging on behalf of all Canadians to get to the bottom of it.

As we speak, the Minister of Health is meeting with her provincial and territorial colleagues to work on dealing with this challenge. In a statement earlier today, she said:

There is strong co-operation taking place with First Nations people at the community, regional and national levels, as well as with provinces and territories, to ensure that all Canadians are informed of and protected from the H1N1 flu virus. As Health Minister I am fully committed to these efforts."

The people of Canada can depend on the Minister of Health to get the job done.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have convinced the New Democrats that their mini-reform of employment insurance would help 190,000 unemployed workers, but Canadians are not fooled. Adding benefit weeks beyond the current limit will help a lot fewer people than what is predicted.

How can we trust the Conservatives and their numbers, when they are always full of hot air?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I remind members that this summer, Liberals and Conservatives formed a panel to find solutions to the problems of the unemployed. We submitted a number of proposals to this panel which aimed to help people, especially long-tenured workers. However, the Liberals ignored them and wanted to speak only of one thing: the idea of a 45-hour work week, which is unacceptable.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister is misleading the House.

First, the Conservatives did not submit any proposals to the EI working group. Second, she has admitted that she told her officials to stop analyzing the costs of the various Liberal proposals—I repeat, the various Liberal proposals.

When the Conservatives say that the unemployed give up when they lose their jobs, they are treating them like freeloaders.

• (1435)

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us be realistic here. We submitted several proposals, including one that would help long-tenured workers, as we tabled in the House this week.

The Liberals had no interest in that. They had no interest in helping the unemployed. That is perhaps why they walked out. That is perhaps why they did not show up for the briefing yesterday on Bill C-50, which will help long-tenured workers receive five to twenty weeks more benefits, while they look for work.

We are supporting them. The Leader of the Opposition is not.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the finance minister. Does the increase in employment insurance premiums, beginning in 2011, constitute a tax increase, yes or no?

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the simple answer to that is no.

Let me remind Canadians what happened to the notional surplus that was in the EI fund years ago. It is gone. Those people who paid into it never got it back. We provided an arm's-length board to manage that, so this can never happen again.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, he says the answer is "no", but even the dullest former student of mine in economics 101 knows that the true answer is yes. Let us take another tack.

[Translation]

Yesterday, the minister said that unemployment insurance premiums would increase starting in 2011. How much will they increase?

[English]

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned in my previous answer, there was trouble when we got here and saw where the EI fund was at. We have put in place an arm's-length board so a repeat performance of what the Liberals tricked Canadians with cannot happen again.

That board will make the decisions on what the EI premiums will be. We will leave that up to the board. Unlike the Liberals, we do not like to tinker with things like that. We think an impartial board is the right one to make that decision.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, according to the OECD and the Royal Bank, Canada's unemployment rate will continue to rise for several months, reaching 10% at the end of next year. Eligibility for employment insurance will therefore continue to be a problem for workers who lose their jobs. According to the 2008 EI monitoring and assessment report, more than 50% of unemployed workers will not have access to the system.

With one in two unemployed workers excluded, how can the minister keep on denying that there is a problem with eligibility for the system?

Oral Questions

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are currently holding a debate on introducing measures to help long-tenured workers. If a company closes, after one year of EI benefits, these workers could receive from 5 to 20 additional weeks of benefits.

Of course, the Bloc Québécois seems to have a great deal of difficulty helping workers, but we do not. As for the Liberals, they left the table where we were discussing how to help the unemployed.

We are continuing to work toward that goal. No fewer than 189,000 people will benefit, and that is not bad.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, according to the Quebec Forest Industry Council, the Conseil national des chômeurs and the FTQ, the measures announced yesterday will have very little impact in Quebec, because they are not available to seasonal workers, forestry workers, young people and vulnerable workers. But what does the Quebec lieutenant say to those who assert that Quebec is poorly served by the program and access criteria are discriminatory and too strict? He says that he cannot give any guarantees.

Is it not increasingly clear that this plan will not help the unemployed in Quebec?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the Bloc is trying to confuse people by saying all sorts of things. The bill on the table is designed to protect long-tenured workers, people who lose their jobs after working at a plant for 15 or 20 years. We want to make sure they can receive an additional 20 weeks.

The member mentioned seasonal workers. They are already covered by the current EI system, according to regional standards. That is how the system works.

* * *

• (1440)

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this government has just provided another example of its contempt for and insensitivity towards aboriginal peoples. Rather than providing medicine and masks to effectively combat swine flu, they sent body bags.

Given his fiduciary responsibility for aboriginal peoples, how can the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development tolerate this contempt and lack of consideration?

[*English*]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the incident itself, we have already expressed our sense of outrage that we share with others in the House on what happened. That is clear. I think all Canadians feel that. The Minister of Health is getting to the bottom of that and the results of the inquiry will be made public.

On other issues, we continue to work with first nations and the provinces. This summer, for example, I was in Quebec and signed an agreement with the Assembly of First Nations, the Quebec government and ourselves on changing child and family services in a tripartite way, as recommended by the Auditor General.

We continue to make progress in Quebec and across the country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately this is not the first time that the government has shown contempt and a lack of consideration for aboriginal peoples. Is the government's refusal to sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples not the direct result of this government's insensitivity towards aboriginal peoples?

[*English*]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while some people would sign what they say is an aspirational document, we on this side of the House believe it is time to get down to the nuts and bolts of actually making life better for aboriginal peoples.

That is why we have made significant investment in housing. That is why we have rolled out our water and waste water action plan, which this summer alone is 16 new water systems that will go into first nation communities across the country. That is why we have partnered with five provinces across the country on child and family services, and we will extend that across Canada. That is why we are moving ahead with agreements on education, housing, water treatment, training.

Name it, we get things done.

* * *

INDUSTRY

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Liberals welcome foreign investment. As I said a while back, if we play in the big leagues, we follow the rules and we do not step in unless it is necessary. However, sometimes there are good reasons to fight for Canadian interests and the government cannot be trusted to do that.

Nortel's wireless assets drew three large international bidders and the winning bid was over \$1 billion. That says something about the value of those assets.

Why is the minister refusing to review the sale, using the flimsy excuse that the assets are only worth \$149 million? Given the stakes, every other country would certainly have called for a review.

Oral Questions

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, the hon. member is using the figure in U.S. dollars, which is quite consistent with that party actually, but let me get to answer the question.

The hon. member should know we in fact want to follow our laws. We have a set of laws on the threshold for investment. We are following those laws.

On the other side of the House, those members are quite content to muddy around with the laws of the people of Canada when it suits their interest. That is not in the Canadian interest.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the prosperity of Canada depends on the knowledge economy. We all know that the knowledge economy hinges on intellectual property. It is the core and heart of the issue. When there is a possibility that this property could leave the country, we must ensure that there is a net benefit to Canada once its value reaches a certain threshold. The consequences are dire. It is a question of prudence. The sale of Nortel wireless assets is an example of this.

Do the Conservatives understand what is at stake here?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our side of the House believes that we cannot introduce protectionist measures into the laws and regulations of Canada. That is our position; that is not the position of the opposition.

[*English*]

We cannot change the rules of the game, the rules of business, to suit the Liberals' protectionist and nativist impact on the country. That is what they do, but that is not what we do on this side of the House. They talk about opening the doors to India and China, but on this side of the House we are protecting Canadian investments.

• (1445)

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was forced to intervene in the MacDonald Dettwiler case, but it is clear the government has absolutely no interest in promoting Canadian knowledge-based industries or protecting Canadian jobs.

The industry minister's decision regarding Nortel is disappointing and disturbing. It is the latest in a series of shortsighted decisions that are putting jobs at risk in the high tech sector, affecting the future of companies like Research in Motion.

Why will the Conservatives not do the right thing and stand up for the 600 proud RIM employees in my riding in Nova Scotia?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the member who represents the Montreal riding is not asking that question because there are hundreds of employees of Ericsson in his riding. This is the kind of game the Liberal Party plays on these kinds of issues.

We are applying the law. We apply the law equally to Canadian companies and to foreign-based companies. That is how the rule of law works when it comes to foreign investment.

On that side of the House, the Liberals are willing to change the law to suit their own protectionist purposes. That will not help Canadian companies when they seek to invest in other countries.

That is why we are on the side of the law; that is why we are on the side of Canadian business and will continue to be.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government has stood by while Nortel is sold piece by piece, bringing Canada's leadership in wireless technology to an end and costing Canadian families their livelihoods and pensions, including 400 job losses today alone.

It has turned its back on Research in Motion, a made in Canada opportunity to save and create thousands of jobs in hard hit southern Ontario, by not stopping this sale. Again, the government refuses to fight for Canadian industry and the jobs they create for families.

Why has the government turned its back on the people of southern Ontario?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we are helping companies that are international, like RIM, by applying the law equally here in Canada.

If we did not do so, if we sided with the protectionist impulses of the Liberal Party, the effect would be that when RIM or other companies went across the border or around the world seeking to do their own foreign investment, those countries would say, "You are not doing the same in your country. You are applying the rules differently in different situations".

We will not do that because that is not in the best interest of Canadians and it is certainly not in the best interest of Canadian business.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, communist governments were responsible for some of humanity's greatest crimes.

A planned memorial in Ottawa to commemorate the tens of millions of people murdered by communist regimes has met some resistance. Apparently, there are concerns that the feelings of communists may be hurt by drawing attention to these crimes.

Does this Conservative government continue to support establishing a monument to the victims of communism?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Yes, we do, Mr. Speaker. We stand in full solidarity with a coalition of over two dozen cultural communities in Canada that came to this country as refugees from totalitarian communist states, Koreans, Vietnamese, Ukrainians, all of whom remember members of their families and relatives who lost their lives under these systems.

Unfortunately, I hear heckling from the NDP on this point. We take seriously these crimes. We believe their victims must be remembered and we must teach future generations so these crimes are never again repeated.

POVERTY

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government has been given a D for the level of poverty in the country by the Conference Board of Canada, not exactly a left-wing socialist organization.

Imagine Canada, with all its wealth, being 15th out of 17 developed countries for poor working age adults and children and we are slipping further behind. The D is for denial and do nothing. We are not living up to our reputation or our potential.

There have been three years of inaction. What is the government going to do now to improve Canada's record on poverty?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for once, I actually do agree with the NDP member, that the performance reported by the Conference Board is abysmal. That is because it happened up until 2005, if we check the data, under the Liberals. It was under their watch that this report was measured.

I would point out that in 2007, after our first year of government, 400,000 fewer Canadians lived in a low income situation than in 2006. That was the lowest level since 1976.

• (1450)

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the report focuses on how poorly the children are doing in Canada. Too many of them go to bed hungry and have no access to child care.

Provinces want to end child poverty but they do not have the money.

Here is where the money can come from: the billions spent by the Conservatives, supported by the Liberals, in promoting the HST tax grab.

Instead of blowing \$6 billion on the HST, will the minister invest in the children of Canada and provide them with hope, prosperity and child care?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member is citing from the same report that ended in 2005 while there was the NDP coalition with the Liberals.

Let us take a look at 2007. During the first year of this Conservative government, 100,000 fewer children lived in low income families than the previous year. Why? It is because we enhanced the national child tax benefit for low income families. We introduced the universal child care benefit, which alone listed 28,000 families and fifty-six—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

* * *

[Translation]

LOBSTER FISHERY

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the 2009 lobster season was a very difficult one. Sinking prices on the export markets and rising costs have hit the fishermen hard. In response to our pressure, the minister recognized the need to help these workers. However, the assistance plan announced in June

Oral Questions

was not warmly received in Quebec, particularly in the Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

Does the minister plan on revising her plan, to stop penalizing the Quebec fishermen who have been practising conservation measures for a long time now?

[English]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we certainly are not penalizing any fishermen. What we are doing is stepping up to the plate and helping the fishermen when they need it.

* * *

[Translation]

TRANSPORT

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to talk about another subject that has to do with a different minister.

The winter maritime link between the Îles-de-la-Madeleine and the mainland is essential to the economic development of our region. The winter crossing pilot project was a success this year; the number of vehicles transported was 75% higher than expected.

Does Transport Canada plan on renewing funding and making the winter maritime link permanent?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we appreciate the real concerns faced by the member and his constituents with respect to timely and ready access to mainland Canada. I would be pleased to work with the member opposite and to look into what we might do to help his constituents and constituents on the east coast of Canada.

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AGRICULTURE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have known for a long time that farmers cannot trust the government but now the government is enhancing its own bottom line by forcing producers to transfer government debt to banks.

With hog producers facing financial ruin, the Minister of Finance is cutting his financial obligations under the advance payment program but hog producers are left holding a bag of more debt and less hope.

Why did the Minister of Finance perpetuate this scam on farmers whereby the government gets paid and farmers are left mired in debt?

Oral Questions

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I guess the answer is best said in the words of hog producers themselves.

Curtiss Littlejohn, the Ontario pork producers' representative, said, "These three programs provide options and choices for producers and ultimately will help to right-size the industry".

The president of the Canadian Pork Council said, "We think it's going to make a huge difference".

Producers themselves are saying that this is the right way to go. I wish the member for Malpeque would get on board.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, obviously the minister is not talking to ordinary producers.

Has the minister been party to this scam or was he hoodwinked by the Department of Finance into agreeing to impose this injustice on hog producers?

Here are the facts. Hog producers go to the bank to obtain a guaranteed loan. The condition is: repay the unsecured loan under the government's APP. The result: money flows through the farmers' hands to the government and farmers are left holding more debt. How does the government expect this to help hog producers?

•(1455)

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite forgets that this is a three-pronged approach. We put \$17 million in marketing of hog products around the world. We have put \$75 million into a program to help hog producers transition out, should they want to do that, and we have put in the government-backed loan system to term out their credit and ensure they have the credit available to get more cash available to them.

Once they flip this over, they will have access to more interest-free programming from the government. This is a great program for them.

* * *

SENIORS

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I visited 19 communities this summer and seniors from B.C. to Nova Scotia told me of receiving meagre increases to their government pensions of 30¢ to 40¢ per month.

Seniors receiving OAS and GIS are losing money because the CPI does not reflect provincial differences in the cost of living. Programs indexed to the national average of CPI are not adequate and seniors across Canada are suffering.

Will the minister commit today to correct this situation immediately so that seniors will no longer be penalized by their government's inaction?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we do care about seniors and that is why we launched a National Seniors Council and even appointed a Minister of State for Seniors. Those groups have had a tremendous impact. That is why we increased the GIS exemption from \$500 to \$3,500 which provides more money for 1.6 million

seniors. We have increased the age credit twice, a tax savings for another 2.2 million seniors.

We are working to help seniors have more for their retirement so they can enjoy it as they deserve.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that answer just will not cut it with seniors.

After a lifetime of work, all Canadians deserve security and dignity in their retirement years but the government is failing seniors.

As I have said, I have toured communities across this country. Far too many of the most vulnerable in our society are living in poverty. In far too many communities, the cost of living is rising faster than their GIS and OAS.

Will the government, at the very least, accept the call of the CLC and Canadian premiers and call an emergency summit on pensions?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously we are very concerned about the plight of seniors. They are the ones who built this great country of ours.

That is why my colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, has been logging endless miles going across the country consulting with seniors and with sponsors of pension programs so we can take a look at how best we can support our seniors in their time of retirement.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week the UN Human Rights Council released its latest anti-Israel missive.

The Goldstone report began with a mandate to condemn the Jewish state in a process that Canada and many other nations would not support. The report accuses Israel of war crimes in the recent Gaza conflict.

Regrettably, war crimes is the same claim made by the Leader of the Opposition during the conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Could the minister of state please inform this House what the government's response is to this report?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would remind this House that the so-called fact-finding commission was the creation of one of the United Nations' most flawed bodies, the Human Rights Council, which includes some of the UN's least democratic states.

In commissioning this study, the Human Rights Council preemptively assumed Israel's culpability. This government has never equated Israel, a democratic state, with terrorist groups that seek to destroy both it and its people.

Oral Questions

This government will continue to remind members opposite that it is one thing to offer support of words to Israel when it is convenient and quite another to stand with Israel in its—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor.

* * *

• (1500)

FISHERIES

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, recently, four experts and former government negotiators argued that the latest international agreement tabled here in the House regarding the north Atlantic fisheries will be a disaster to Canadian sovereignty. Now the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador calls this agreement “a totally unacceptable situation”.

How can the Conservatives seriously consider this when they talk about Arctic sovereignty and yet are giving away our exclusive rights on the east coast? Will the government take this flawed deal off the table and cast it back stamped “denied”?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador was a party to the negotiations of the amended convention.

When our government inherited management of the international fisheries, the situation in the northwest Atlantic was desperate after years of Liberal neglect. We can thank the former federal fisheries minister for his tremendous work on this file.

Canada is a leader at the NAFO table and we have strengthened Canadian sovereignty. I have no idea why the—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

* * *

[*Translation*]

HARMONIZED SALES TAX

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal government will soon have compensated three maritime provinces, Ontario and British Columbia for harmonizing their sales tax. But the federal government is refusing to give Quebec the same treatment, claiming that the GST and the QST are not perfectly harmonized. Yet according to Privy Council documents, the federal government acknowledges that Quebec has harmonized its sales tax. Quebec took action 18 years ago.

What is the government waiting for to pay Quebec what it is owed?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the federal government and the Government of Quebec made a commitment to negotiate in good faith on this issue. The Government of Quebec itself acknowledged that there were still some adjustments to be made. We are currently negotiating in good faith. If the member wants to ask the same question 15 more times, he will get the same answer every time, because negotiations are being conducted in good faith.

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' sales job on their HST tax hike is completely collapsing. The claim that the HST will remove embedded taxes in B.C. is simply not true.

Property transfer taxes are charged at every stage of building a new home and now the HST will be charged on top of these. For a house on Vancouver Island, it will mean that taxes will make up 18% of the cost of a new home.

Why is the Conservative government shifting the tax burden to new homebuyers in British Columbia?

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as was mentioned in the House yesterday, it is rather ironic that the NDP is talking about taxes. When we decided to reduce the GST from 7% to 6%, the NDP voted against it. When we reduced the GST from 6% to 5%, the NDP voted against that. Every tax cut that this government has proposed, the NDP has opposed.

The harmonized sales tax in British Columbia would be even higher if the NDP had its way.

* * *

FIREFIGHTERS MONUMENT

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, recently, our Conservative government announced the creation of a new national memorial to honour the sacrifices of Canada's firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

On Sunday, I attended an event on Parliament Hill with the Burlington bagpipe and drum band to pay tribute to over 940 Canadian firefighters who have made this supreme sacrifice.

Could the Minister of Canadian Heritage tell us more about this announcement that will honour the lives of those who keep our families, our friends and our communities safe?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, no job is more important than protecting the safety of Canadians. The monument, which will be the first of its kind in Canada, will remind us that firefighters put their lives on the line for our safety every day.

Calgary's Bruce Burrell of the Association of Fire Chiefs said this regarding the new memorial:

There could be nothing more welcome at this time for the families, friends and comrades of the fallen than the news that there will soon be a permanent fallen firefighters monument in Ottawa.

All parties in the House are proud to honour the sacrifice. We salute all those brave firefighters who over the years have lost their lives serving Canadians.

• (1505)

The Speaker: Order, please. It being Thursday, I believe the hon. member for Wascana has a question.

*Points of Order***BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure all members of the House will be very anxious to know what the government House leader has in mind in terms of House business over the next number of days and weeks.

I have three specific items I would like to raise with him. As was mentioned in question period, certain amendments to the NAFO, potentially impinging upon Canadian sovereignty, have been proposed and there is a deadline for implementation which is rapidly approaching.

The minister, at an earlier stage when she tabled those amendments in June, indicated that there would be a full debate in the House. There are only days left to go before the deadline arrives. I wonder, as I asked the government House leader privately yesterday, whether he is in a position to allow a take note debate tonight on this urgent NAFO issue.

Second, with respect to Bill C-50, which is now under consideration in the House, we in the official opposition believe this legislation should be disposed of as rapidly as possible, so it does not get entangled in other issues. Earlier today we asked for unanimous consent for Bill C-50 to go through all stages speedily by the end of the day tomorrow. At that time this morning, unanimous consent was denied. I wonder if the government House leader has any progress to report with respect to that matter, so this legislation can be properly and quickly disposed of.

Third, having to do with the week after the constituency week when we come back, the week of September 28, I wonder if the government House leader is in a position to designate the day upon which the government will table its third probationary report with respect to the economy and the recession.

Hon. Jay Hill (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as usual, my colleague across the way has chosen to get many questions into one.

Perhaps I could begin by expressing my disappointment, as I did this morning in a point of order, on the grandstanding that seems to now be commonplace from this particular member. There is a process. I have been in the House for some 16 years now. The member has been here longer than I have. He has been in positions such as the one he holds now.

He knows that we have a system of exchange and working productively among the four House leaders and the four whips. We work together. We have weekly meetings in which we raise things. In fact, on Tuesday afternoon, we had our regular weekly House leaders meeting. At that time I asked all my colleagues, both House leaders and whips, if they had any issues they wanted to raise. None of them raised any issues on Tuesday afternoon.

Now we find that he has to raise these types of issues on the floor of the House rather than try to negotiate them in good faith. I think that anybody who has worked with me over the years knows that I am always willing to sit down and talk about these things, discuss them, and try and work through compromises.

Mr. Gerry Byrne: Are we going to have a debate or not?

Hon. Jay Hill: It would be nice if members would demonstrate a little bit of respect for me as we did for the hon. House leader from the official opposition when he was making his statement a few moments ago, if he would not mind.

Whether it is the issue of the NAFO deadline, which I am sure the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is seized with, as she is with all fisheries issues, or whether it is trying to negotiate a way forward to expedite the passage of Bill C-50, we need to ensure that we do it right. We need to ensure that that particular bill, which is so important to workers and their families, is passed. However, we need to ensure that the help we are all seeking to provide unemployed people across the country is done in a proper and expeditious manner.

I believe that we will be successful. I am certainly hopeful. I called a special meeting after the two motions from the two opposition parties that made motions this morning. I called a special meeting of the House leaders in my office some two hours ago. I was hopeful that we would have an agreement by now on how to proceed with Bill C-50. That has not happened. One of the parties is still taking a look at a compromise that I have suggested to wrap up debate by tomorrow on this bill and then see it sent off to the committee. I am hopeful that we can perhaps arrive at such a compromise.

That addresses my hon. colleague's issue with Bill C-50. Obviously, as he noted, the House is currently debating second reading of Bill C-50. That will continue after question period.

Tomorrow, pursuant to a special order adopted yesterday, the House will vote on ways and means Motion No. 9 that implements certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on January 27, 2009, and to implement other measures.

Following the vote, we will continue and hopefully complete second reading stage of Bill C-50, so that it can move on to committee as quickly as possible. Backup bills for tomorrow, should they be needed, are Bill C-37, the National Capital Act, and Bill C-44, the Canada Post Corporation Act.

When the House returns after the constituency break, I have planned to call, but not necessarily in this order, Bill C-37, the National Capital Act; Bill C-23, the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement again; Bill C-44, the Canada Post Corporation Act; Bill C-13, the Canada Grain Act; and the Budget Implementation Act, No. 2, that flows from the ways and means motion that will hopefully be adopted tomorrow.

* * *

● (1510)

POINTS OF ORDER

STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. As chair of the Standing Committee on Industry, I noted that during member statements, the member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles said that Liberals and Conservatives on the committee had decided against holding another meeting on the matter concerning Nortel's disposition of its assets.

I note that those discussions took place in camera on August 7 and again yesterday. I am sure the member did so inadvertently, but I would ask that you look at the blues and rule on this matter. I think it is in the interests of all members of the House to respect the rules and procedures of committee. Mr. Speaker, I would ask that you take a look at the blues and ensure that those rules are upheld.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for his intervention. Needless to say, I do not know what happened in the committee, but I will look at the blues and then perhaps there will be some consultations with others concerning that.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: Prior to question period, the hon. member for Sarnia—Lambton had the floor in the debate. There are seven and a half minutes remaining in the time allotted for her remarks.

The hon. member for Sarnia—Lambton.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to continue my remarks on Bill C-50, this very important bill that we are proposing which will do even more for long-tenured workers under the EI program.

These Canadians deserve our continued support while the economy recovers. Bill C-50 will provide between 5 and 20 weeks of additional EI regular benefits to unemployed long-tenured workers. It will help Canadians who have worked hard and paid EI premiums for many years and who now find themselves in need of a hand up.

It does not represent permanent change in the duration of EI regular benefits. It is a temporary response to a temporary situation. We think that that is prudent.

What is unfortunate is that the opposition members continue to advocate for the 45-day work year scheme which is both irresponsible and unaffordable. What is worse is that they walked away from the table and away from efforts to help the unemployed.

Now they are playing political games here in the House today, again without taking proposals to the table where these things are usually worked out.

This side of the House is focused on Canada's economic recovery and on helping Canadians come through this rough time. Further to the help we are proposing for Canadians in Bill C-50, we have already taken other measures to help long-tenured workers.

Long-tenured workers who need a transition to a new industry can get help through the career transition assistance initiative introduced in Canada's economic action plan. Through this initiative our government is providing help to long-tenured workers who have been laid off to upgrade their skills. This initiative has two main parts.

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First, we have extended the duration of EI regular income benefits for long-tenured workers who participate in long-term training. They can collect benefits for up to two years or 104 weeks. Second, it allows earlier access to EI for long-tenured workers who invest all or part of the money from their severance package in training. Thousands of long-tenured Canadians could benefit from these measures.

We are working with the provinces to help Canadians with this initiative. I would also like to remind the House that while all long-tenured workers are not necessarily older workers, for those who are we have other programs in place to help those older workers.

The targeted initiative for older workers, or TIOW, is not a new initiative. It has been around since 2006 when our government introduced it. It has done a lot to help older workers in this country, and now with the global economic downturn it is needed more than ever.

Through our economic action plan we are investing an additional \$60 million over three years in the targeted initiative for older workers to enable people 55 to 64 years of age to get skills upgrading and work experience so they can make the transition to new jobs.

We are doing this because we believe in the skills and experiences of Canada's older workers. We believe they can be retrained and get back into the workforce if they want to continue working.

We are also building on this successful program to extend its reach and scope. The targeted initiative for older workers was designed to meet the needs of people in what we call vulnerable communities; that is, communities with a high rate of unemployment or a high reliance on one employer or industry affected by a significant downsizing or closure.

This year we expanded the number of communities that are eligible for the program to include more cities. Why did we do this? Well, because the recession has been difficult for everyone, but it has been particularly hard on people over 55. In fact, with this change an additional 250 communities could be eligible.

When older workers lose their jobs, we want to help them get back into the workforce as soon as possible. We know it is not easy for an older person to start a new career; however, through TIOW projects unemployed older workers can acquire the skills they need to find and keep new jobs or even start up their own new businesses.

These projects typically offer services such as skills assessment, job search strategies, work experience placements, skills upgrading and income support. This new federal-provincial joint investment will help older workers across the country build their skills and find work.

Government Orders

●(1515)

There are many other success stories from this program. They all involve older workers who had to face a major life change, a change that could have been devastating, but they were able to regroup and retrain for a new career. Thanks to the TIOW, they were able to do that in the company of people their own age. The new funding we are putting into the TIOW will enable more older workers to receive the specialized support they need to make the transition to new jobs. With practical help from the TIOW, older workers can continue to contribute to their communities and to the Canadian economy.

Our government is demonstrating its commitment to supporting all Canadians who are affected by the downturn but especially older workers and long-tenured workers. We do not want an unnecessary election. We want to continue to work to help Canadians. That is what the bill would do. I urge everyone in the House to support Bill C-50.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a simple question for the member regarding this important bill. The minister responsible for the Canada Revenue Agency described the bill as being one more way in which we can add to other things that have been done with EI. It is a very straightforward bill. There was a request for unanimous consent to complete this work by tomorrow. The Bloc recommended that we send the bill to committee immediately before second reading. This would allow for some latitude in terms of the scope of the bill to make substantive amendments at committee stage.

In both instances, the government denied unanimous consent and rejected those proposals. I wonder if the member could explain why.

●(1520)

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to this debate since we first introduced Bill C-50 and started the debate this morning. Certainly that question has been asked many times and it has been answered many times.

Bill C-50 is an extremely important bill. We, as the Conservative government, have been focusing on what matters to Canadians. We have been helping those who have been hardest hit. We know that the global recession has caused a great deal of concern to many Canadians and we are providing the support to Canadians when they need it.

Bill C-50 is just another part of the support we are providing for Canadians. We have introduced legislation today to provide extra support for long-tenured workers. Prior to that we had support for other Canadians who need it through the economic action plan. The best way to help the unemployed, their families and the economy is to get people back to work. We need the extra program to help those long-tenured workers who want to work, who have worked for years and now find themselves unemployed. This program will give them that extra time to find work. It will give the extra time for the economy to rebound and those workers who want to work will be back to work.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have the same question for the Conservative member, because it seems as

though she did not at all understand the question asked by my Liberal colleague.

My question is: why did the government choose to proceed by vote in the House, by introducing a bill, when it could have done what it wanted to do for the unemployed, or what it claims to want to do for the unemployed, through a pilot project that would not even have had to go through the House, and that could have been approved in five minutes by the minister himself? Now, it will take one month, two months, or even three months of discussion to make it through the legislative process. Meanwhile, unemployed workers have nothing.

My colleague said that this bill is here to help the unemployed, but the best way to help them is to take immediate action and to put this in place right away. Why did they choose the legislative route over a ministerial decision?

[*English*]

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Mr. Speaker, I will repeat that we have been having this debate since this morning and this question has been asked many times and answered many times.

Certainly the Conservative government is focused on what matters to Canadians. We are helping those who are hardest hit. We are investing in training. We are creating jobs.

If there were another process the opposition parties wished to pursue, there is an avenue by which they could have pursued it. They chose not to.

We are bringing forward this bill in very good faith. We believe we need to benefit the Canadians who need it most and we will continue to do that.

●(1525)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for Oshawa, it is with great pleasure that I extend my full support for Bill C-50.

This bill will provide further assistance through employment insurance to workers particularly affected by the economic downturn.

The new temporary measure we are introducing through the bill will help Canadian workers who have contributed to the economy for years and years and who, through no fault of their own, find themselves unemployed.

Bill C-50 offers the right and fair way to ensure that the EI program is responsive and responsible. It is responsive to the needs of those long-tenured workers, like the ones in Oshawa, who have contributed to the EI program for a long period of time and have made little if any use of it. It is responsible to all Canadian taxpayers.

Let me follow up on some of assertions made today by one of my hon. colleagues across the floor.

The member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour stood in the House and with great flourish tried to assert once again the Liberal monopoly on compassion. He went on to say that the Liberal Party scheme to create a 45-day work year was sensible, adding that the government was playing political chess.

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The only people playing political games in the House are the members of the opposition who are refusing to be forthright with the Canadian people. This government is taking action to help Canadians after the member opposite walked away from the unemployed. The member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour walked away from 190,000 long-tenured workers. That is shameful. He may call this nothing but this government finds that notion offensive.

I would like to remind the member that it was his party that implemented the failed EI policies of the 1970s that had a catastrophic effect on the Canadian economy. Thirty years later in a blatant political positioning manoeuvre, it was the Leader of the Opposition who proposed similar measures during a global economic downturn. I ask, who is playing political games?

This government is protecting unemployed workers. The Leader of the Official Opposition has shown once again he is in this for himself. Here is the action this government is taking with Bill C-50.

Long-tenured workers will now get the additional support of extended weeks of EI while they look for work. The proposed temporary measure would extend nationally regular benefits for long-tenured workers by between five and twenty weeks. Depending on the length of time claimants have paid EI premiums, the more weeks of benefits they will receive.

Our goal is to ensure that people get these extended weeks of benefits as soon as possible. Through this bill these workers who have contributed to the economy, many of them for decades, will have a longer time to seek alternative employment.

The temporary measure that we are introducing today shows that the EI program is able to provide support to those most in need when they need it most.

We have a record of making fair and timely improvements to EI. Through Canada's economic action plan alone we have provided longer EI benefits, more efficient service, support for training, and protection of jobs through work sharing agreements. We have also introduced the career transition assistance initiative that provides two timely measures. One extends EI benefits to a maximum of two years while workers participate in longer term training. The other provides earlier access to EI to long-tenured workers who invest all or part of their severance packages in training.

Let us also remember that a key component to our action plan provides five additional weeks of EI benefits to regular beneficiaries. In areas of high unemployment, the maximum duration of benefits has been extended from 45 to 50 weeks.

The work sharing program is another way we are helping workers stay in the labour force. It does so by offering EI income support to workers who are willing to work a reduced work week.

Under Canada's economic action plan we have made changes to the program that allows more flexibility for employers' recovery plans. Agreements have also been extended by an additional 14 weeks to maximize benefits during this economic downturn. This measure allows employers to retain employees, therefore avoiding expensive rehiring and retraining costs. In turn, employees are able to continue working and keep their skills up to date. These are

people who would rather work a shortened work week and get a little less income than to be laid off. Work sharing makes that possible. Right now there are close to 5,800 active work sharing agreements across this country benefiting more than 165,000 Canadians.

We know that good programs and service are especially important in difficult economic times. Our government has acted quickly on both counts.

• (1530)

Our government is also helping older workers make the transition to new careers. Through the targeted initiative for older workers the government is providing an additional \$60 million over three years to help workers aged 55 to 64 years get the skills upgrading and the work experience necessary to make the transition to new employment.

We have also expanded this initiative's reach so that the communities with a population lower than 250,000 are now eligible for funding. With this change an additional 250 communities could be included in the program, depending on provincial and territorial participation. This is especially valuable for my area of Oshawa.

Under the economic action plan, workers will also benefit from an increase in funding for skills training. With our strategic training and transition fund, we will be investing to help individuals, whether or not they are eligible for employment insurance, get training and other support measures.

Our economic action plan offers an additional 2,000 apprenticeship completion grants to apprentices who successfully complete an apprenticeship program in a "red seal" trade. This builds on the existing apprenticeship incentive grant. An apprentice could now receive a total of \$4,000 in grants through both these programs. Up to 20,000 Canadians could take advantage of this latest grant. This is great news from my community in Oshawa.

The Government of Canada is also protecting jobs and supporting businesses in key sectors of our economy that are in difficulty, such as forestry, farming and mining, and the automotive industry. To help them we are providing a two-year community adjustment fund that will support economic diversification in communities affected by the decline in their local industries.

This bill is another example of how we are taking action to help Canadians now. We are responding quickly with measures to meet current needs. I ask members to join me in supporting Bill C-50 and helping these workers.

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, New Democrats are pleased that the Conservatives are bringing forward much needed changes to the EI system, but there is much more that needs to be done on this file.

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The report commissioned by the Conservatives on EI recommended that severance pay should not be treated as earnings, moving assistance should be provided to help Canadians find new jobs, and wage assistance should top up low-paying jobs.

Can the member tell this House why these important measures were not included in this particular bill?

Mr. Colin Carrie: Madam Speaker, in my area of Oshawa a lot of workers have been affected through this economic downturn. We have different industries and different companies. What is important for this government is that we give workers choices.

The member mentioned severance. Some people who are laid off may choose to keep their severance and move on with that. What we are doing as a government is strategically offering workers choices. During this tough economic time, they are going to be able to move in a way that they see as appropriate. In my community we have a wonderful community college and a university. Some workers may choose to get retraining.

The purpose of this bill and all the other measures we have put forward is to help communities like mine in Oshawa that have been severely affected through this economic downturn and need choices for different people at different times in their life.

I would really encourage this member, and I hear that perhaps the NDP would be supporting this bill. We are hopeful that they do support this bill, because this bill and this type of reform are very important for people in my community of Oshawa.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Madam Speaker, several days ago the finance minister came into our town of Victoria and proceeded to tell Victorians, indeed Canadians, in the furthest outposts of our country that the government has lost control over the public purse, and that the deficit that was originally not going to exist at the end of last year is now \$59.5 billion.

I am asking this because at the heart of the responsibility of any federal government is the ability to control the public purse. The Conservatives have lost control of the public purse, and therefore the ability to pay for programs like EI.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague from the Conservative Party when his government is going to tell Canadians what the deficit reduction plan is going to be for our country.

• (1535)

Mr. Colin Carrie: Madam Speaker, I do not know where the member has been. The minister has actually done that. He has outlined how the deficit will decrease over the next few years.

It is almost humorous, because anybody who has been paying attention in the House knows that the Liberal Party wants more spending. They want more unaccountable spending.

They are willing to take this government down or are proposing to. They would like to have a 45-day work year. Just imagine what would happen to the system if this actually happened. The cost to the public purse would be unsustainable.

I mentioned in my speech that back in the 1970s the Liberals proposed a similar change to the Unemployment Insurance Act and it took years for our economy to recover.

We are putting these temporary measures in so that once the economy is increasing and moving forward, we will be able to respond with balanced budgets, because that is what this government is all about, accountability and responsibility to the—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): A very quick question from the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, 1.6 million Canadians are unemployed. This winter that number will grow. Many will run out of EI and risk ending up on welfare, and we have a responsibility to help.

New Democrats have long called for improvements to our EI system, particularly during this time of economic recession, and we are pleased that the government has moved forward on this.

With this bill, the Conservatives have clearly agreed that EI is broken and needs to be fixed, and New Democrats have long proposed additional changes, like dropping the two-week waiting period and increasing the amount of benefits received. Can the member opposite please comment on these proposals?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The hon. parliamentary secretary has 30 seconds to respond.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Thirty seconds for a politician is very difficult, Madam Speaker, but I will do my best.

He mentions people running out of EI. I had the opportunity to talk to people in my community, particularly laid-off auto workers. That is exactly the situation they are facing right now and that is why this is so important. That is exactly what this bill does. It allows auto workers in Oshawa who are running out of benefits to extend them while they continue looking for work.

Ms. Siobhan Coady (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to join the debate on this critical issue of employment insurance.

I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine.

This new bill fails to provide any assistance for the vast majority of the 1.6 million unemployed Canadians who are looking to their federal leaders to make it easier for workers who have lost their job through no fault of their own to qualify for benefits during this crucial time of economic downturn.

The bill does, however, succeed in doing one of the things at which the Conservative government excels. The bill divides Canadians. It divides unemployed Canadians into two groups: those who are deemed to be deserving of assistance and those whom the government has chosen to leave out. This politics of division has been the hallmark of the Conservative government.

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It is truly saddening that members opposite refuse to set aside their political differences to address a national crisis of unemployment insurance. Instead the government is showing how truly uncaring it is by further dividing Canadian workers.

If a worker has been laid off once or more in the past five years, under this legislation that worker will fail to qualify for this new extension of benefits. Any worker who collected 35 weeks of EI in the past five years, such as seasonal workers or nonstandard workers or long-tenured workers who lost their jobs earlier in the economic crisis, will be shut out of assistance by the government.

Many of these workers have already faced challenges in their industries in recent years as the manufacturing sector has contracted, as government has failed to protect interests in the forestry industry, as jobs have been shed in the tourism industry.

It simply does not make sense to exclude from this program workers who have been through a previous recent job loss in these chosen industries. These workers have been punished already and now have this punishment extended through this exclusionary policy brought forward by the government.

Consider the fact that we have so many seasonal workers, so many workers in fields and industries who would not meet the criteria to allow them to access this new proposal.

Five hundred thousand people have lost their job during this downturn, yet this Conservative proposal would affect only, according to the government, 190,000 people. What about the other 300,000 people the Conservatives are not helping under this program?

What is the government trying to say to forestry workers, for example, who have worked for 15 years at AbitibiBowater and are now out of a job? Because these workers lost their job before a certain arbitrary date they are simply left out. They are on their own. They have been left by the government to fend for themselves even though they are long-tenured workers, workers who paid into the employment insurance program throughout their careers. Under this legislation the government is preventing these workers from claiming money to support their families now when they need it most, and it is just not right.

It should not be surprising given the track record of the government. An unemployed worker is an unemployed worker, and if these workers have paid into our system of employment insurance, they deserve to be treated the same and they deserve to be able to access the benefits that should be available to them.

Numbers of people have come out and spoken against this particular proposal by the Conservative government. For example, in my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the president of the Federation of Labour said the proposed Conservative employment insurance changes were “inadequate and will penalize the majority of the unemployed”.

According to the Conservatives, these measures help only, as I said previously, 190,000 people, not all of the unemployed.

I can give examples of other reactions.

For example, the Canadian auto workers president described the reforms as “‘crumbs’ for the unemployed”, dismissing them as doing little to help the vast majority.

The Canadian Labour Congress president has called the reforms “welcome” but notes that the measures announced “won’t touch most of the unemployed, including younger workers or mothers who work part-time”.

I speak against the proposed changes because I do not think they go far enough. Our party has made many recommendations to the government. We worked hard over the summer. We’ve made this a big issue. We have basically encouraged, supported and pushed the Conservatives toward making some changes to the employment insurance program, but these fall far short of what we require. These changes just do not help enough people when the economic downturn is really severely hurting many workers.

● (1540)

These new restrictions on accessing employment insurance benefits create more divisions among Canadian workers instead of helping families who need support now. Canadians really do deserve better.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Madam Speaker, I was listening intently to the member’s speech. Obviously she has done her research and she has a number of very interesting quotes. My quote would be that it is interesting that in the 16 years I have had the privilege of doing this job for the people of Kootenay—Columbia, the more things change, the more they stay the same. The change is that we have become the government; what stays the same is the disconnectedness of the Liberals and the Liberal Party.

I would like to ask the member if she would care to reflect on the fact that the regime under which the employment insurance system works was a creation of her government. We are making some very concrete positive steps to do away with some of the more onerous and odious parts of the revisions that the Liberals did, and we are getting 190,000 more people on to the benefit side of the program. Surely she can see this is an improvement. Other than the blind political—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I would like to give time for the hon. member for St. John’s South—Mount Pearl to respond.

Ms. Siobhan Coady: Madam Speaker, as the Liberal Party, we have worked very hard to bring forward proposals to the government. We have pointed out over the last seven or eight months the required changes to the employment insurance system that would include the 500,000 or more people who have had difficulty in this economic crisis.

There are 1.6 million Canadians who are currently looking for work. We want to help them. We are sincere in that. We have worked hard during the summer. We met repeatedly with the Conservative government on this issue, yet we were not able to make progress.

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This is not a government that is open to actually assisting the vast majority of the unemployed Canadians. It is difficult and very challenging. When we have unions in this country saying it is not enough, it is not helping, then I think the government of our country should listen.

• (1545)

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, there are workers in my riding who do not qualify under this bill. They have asked for legislation that removes severance pay from EI calculations. My New Democratic colleague from Welland introduced such a bill this year.

Would the member opposite explain why members of her party voted against the bill that was so important to my constituents?

Ms. Siobhan Coady: Madam Speaker, I think there are a number of proposals that need to go forward to reform our employment insurance program. I think there are a number of things that should be done. That is why the Liberal Party of Canada was working towards having good discussions over the summer, in order to come back to this hon. House and make some of the changes that are required to the employment insurance system.

We have a crisis in our country. People who may have been long-tenured employees, short-term seasonal employees, working mothers, as I indicated earlier, are out of work through no fault of their own. They deserve to have some of the changes made to employment insurance. We were sincere in our attempt to do so. It is truly unfortunate that the Conservative government has not moved forward on those proposals. It is truly unfortunate that it is dividing the unemployed Canadians of our country.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate on Bill C-50.

I would like to begin simply by correcting some of the information we have been hearing in this House, particularly from members of the Conservative government, suggesting that the Liberals brought forward only one proposal during the work of the employment insurance working group, namely, the proposal concerning the eligibility threshold of 360 hours a year, which they described as 45 working days for one year of EI benefits. The Parliamentary Budget Officer clearly said that the government was not telling the truth when it made such a statement and that the government was exaggerating the cost of the Liberal plan.

I was a member of that committee, which met on several occasions. The Liberals presented their plan concerning an eligibility threshold of 360 hours, explaining that it would be for workers who receive regular benefits and that it would be for a period of one year. We estimated the cost of this measure at \$1.5 billion, for approximately 160,000 workers.

We asked the government and its officials to examine our plan and assess the costs involved in such a measure with an eligibility threshold of 420 hours, 390 hours and 520 hours. We also asked the government to show us how it would benefit unemployed workers if, instead of using a three month period to determine the unemployment rate of a region, we used a one month period, or 30 days. In

other words, we wanted to know how many workers who are entitled to benefits would be eligible for EI. We made several requests and several proposals. Everyone agreed that the department and its officials should assess those proposals. It was the minister herself who, in a meeting on August 23, informed the members of the committee that she had unilaterally decided to instruct her officials to stop all assessments of the Liberal proposals because the government had no intention of examining those proposals.

The Conservatives never submitted their own proposals. They did not do it on July 14 or July 23, on August 6 or August 13 or August 20. We were supposed to have our last scheduled meeting on September 3, according to the established procedure, and the two co-chairs were supposed to speak previously with each other to determine the agenda. The Liberal co-chair, the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour in Nova Scotia, phoned the minister on Friday, August 28 and left a message to the effect that he wanted to discuss the agenda for the meeting on September 3. The minister did not call him back that day. She did not call him back during the weekend, or on Monday, on Tuesday or on Wednesday. We decided on Wednesday, therefore, that we would not attend the meeting in view of the fact that the minister had clearly signalled that the Conservatives had no more interest in working with the Liberals. I just wanted to correct the misdeeds of these Conservatives and the disinformation being spread in the House.

Insofar as Bill C-50 is concerned, I think my colleague who spoke before me said it very well. Seasonal workers in Quebec, for example, will not benefit from the measures in it. The same is true of workers in the forest industry and workers in the fishing industry and pulp and paper industry.

• (1550)

There are cycles in these kinds of industries. People may work for the same company for 25 years while being laid off for certain periods because the work is seasonal. The Conservatives have long known that. They are doing with this bill what they always do: cherry pick.

In saying that 190,000 unemployed will benefit from these measures, the Conservatives are trying again to put one over on Canadians. They already exaggerated the cost of the Liberal plan. They did not just double it, they quadrupled it. It is not I who says this, it is the parliamentary budget officer. I wonder if they have not also exaggerated the figures on the number of workers who will benefit. How much, as a percentage, have they exaggerated?

Third party experts from trade unions and business people have studied the bill and cast doubt on the government's figures. In their view, it is false to say 190,000 workers will be helped. It will be more like 60,000. The government has conflated three years but tries to make Canadians think it will be 190,000 workers a year. This is typical of the Conservatives. They say the truth one little drop at a time.

The government is engaging in disinformation and is saying things that are not true. The Conservatives think that if they say things often enough, people will believe them. I was not the one who said that. They inflated the figures in the Liberal proposal and refused to assess the other proposals the Liberals were prepared to examine.

Government Orders

The minister is insisting in this House that it was the Liberals who refused the Conservatives' proposals. That is not true. The minister is misleading the members of this House and Canadians who are watching the debates. The Conservatives never submitted any proposals, not even in connection with their election promise to make self-employed workers eligible for employment insurance during maternity and paternity leave. I was the one who, at the July 23 meeting, asked whether they had any proposals for making EI available to self-employed workers. I asked them to at least present their election promise and to come back on August 6 with a proposal and the figures they quoted during the election campaign.

Sometimes I am just gob-smacked—but not for long—by how the minister and her colleagues are in cahoots. I am sure that the Conservative member who gets up to ask me a question will dish out some more disinformation.

The Liberal Party will vote against this bill, because it has no confidence in this government, which is not telling the truth and is trying to scam Canadians.

• (1555)

[English]

Hon. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is regrettable. I recognize that sometimes we get some words like the member has just used in this place, and it happens from both sides, I grant that. However, I must admit I am a little disappointed with the member. I thought, as a person who has been around this chamber as long as she has been, that she might find a little more appropriate way of expressing her disappointment in the way things have been going.

That said, I want to ask her a question. Does she accept the fact that we represent probably the vast majority of Canadians who think it is really quite, if I must use frivolous words, silly to be thinking of coming up with a revision to the employment insurance scheme that would give a year's benefits for 45 days of work? Does that really make any sense to her? It certainly does not make any sense to any right thinking Canadian with whom I have had any conversation, and it does not make any sense to me. I do not understand why that is the one thing the Liberals put in the window as a proposal. It really is rather—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Madam Speaker, the member has just proven what I said, that the member from the Conservative Party, regardless of who it was who was going ask me a question, would again repeat the untruth that the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and the rest of her caucus have been repeating over and over again. Members opposite do not have to believe me. They should read the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report. When those members say that the Liberal proposal is 45 days work for one year of benefits, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has proved that it is not true. For those members to continue to repeat it, in my view, shows bad faith on their part. They should read the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, what is an absolute fact is that for 13 years, through three successive

majority governments, the Liberal Party did nothing to improve EI for the workers of our country. In fact, the Liberals gutted EI and they took \$57 billion of workers' and employers' premiums and they put it into general revenues. Now they stand here when the government comes forward with some proposal to fix EI and they vote against it.

Could the member opposite explain to me why, during 13 years in power, the Liberals did not take any action?

• (1600)

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order, please. I know these are testing times, but I would ask that we be careful about our language, and that the heckling and the comments when the speakers are not recognized cease.

The hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Madam Speaker, first, when we talk about employment insurance under a Liberal government, the EI payroll tax was reduced 13 consecutive years. That has not happened under the Conservatives. In fact, they are talking about creating a \$13 billion payroll tax as of 2011.

Second, under a Liberal government, EI maternity and paternity benefits were extended. I am quite proud of that as well. I have no apologies to make about the Liberal record with regard to EI under the Liberal tenure. I do, however, ask the member this. Why is his party supporting a Conservative government that has already said that it will increase the EI payroll tax by \$13 billion? It is a job killer.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand and speak to Bill C-50, a bill to once again improve the Employment Insurance Act, this time to deal with improvements to payments and benefits to long-tenured workers.

Before I get into the essence of the bill itself, it would be beneficial to all to take a little trip back in history to try to determine exactly how we got to this point today.

Some of my other colleagues in this place this afternoon have indicated that for 13 years under the previous Liberal administration there were really no substantive changes to the EI program whatsoever. What we did find out though, however, was that during that time there was an incredible amount of surplus in the EI fund, a notional fund, of upwards of \$50 billion which the previous government basically put into general revenues. This was widely known and quite frankly unacceptable to most Canadians.

An hon. member: The Auditor General told us and so did Brian Mulroney.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, I understand you gave admonitions to people with heckles. Maybe we could do the same on the Liberal side.

It is widely known and quite correct that the previous Liberal government took approximately \$50 billion in excess payments from the EI fund and put it into general revenues. By anyone's standards, I would believe that would have to be considered unacceptable. Nonetheless that was the situation of the day.

Government Orders

The Liberals had also put in a formula based EI program, which various regions of the country would react to needs of the unemployed in different fashions. What I mean by that, is in certain regions unemployed workers could qualify for EI after 420 hours of work throughout the year. In other regions of the country they could only qualify for EI benefits after up to 700 or 720 hours.

That certainly was not a perfect system because of the overcharging of employees and employers to the tune of \$50 billion. However, the formula itself had some merit at its time.

However, what happened about a year ago, as we all know, there was an unprecedented economic meltdown throughout the world. This was precipitated not by any actions of our government or our country, but because of the sub-prime mortgage crisis that occurred in the United States. That hit all countries in the industrialized world quickly, swiftly and without precedent.

In fact, every country in the G20, as well as many other countries throughout the world, were reeling from the effects of that sub-prime mortgage crisis. It affected so many countries in a manner in which number one stock markets started to crash, unemployment made drastic increases, economies almost collapsed in some jurisdictions and banks did collapse.

In fact, which I will speak to later in my presentation, Canada was the only country I believe in the G20 that did not have to bail out any of its banks. We have the strongest banking system in the world. I think we all know that and we should all be proud of it. However, that is how severe the economic downturn, the global crisis was.

It affected every country with which we do business. All our trading partners were affected and the G20 was reeling.

One of the many things we did, once the realization of how severe and how widespread this economic downturn was, was to start making plans to change the EI program. We realized that many hard-working Canadians were losing their jobs through no fault of their own. Employees in the auto sector, the forestry sector and the manufacturing sector were losing their jobs because their companies were going bankrupt because of this global economic downturn.

Therefore, it was imperative for our government, and I believe governments throughout the world, that fundamental, substantive and necessary changes were made to employment insurance programs to protect those workers, to give them the benefits they required and they needed so desperately as they tried to recover and transition from this economic downturn that was affecting all of us.

What did this government do? The first thing we did was to start consulting widely and broadly with Canadians from coast to coast and people who had an interest and an expertise in employment insurance. We wanted to find out from average Canadians and the experts what they believed was necessary in EI reforms, what could we do as a government, what changes could be implemented in the employment insurance program that would best serve the Canadian people and Canadian workers.

• (1605)

We heard from thousands of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. They told us the first thing that needed to be done was to extend the benefits because the benefit period was not long enough.

Many workers had been working for 15 and 20 years and had suddenly lost their jobs. They were out on the street, as it were, trying to transition and find new work, but they did not know how long it would take them. This economic crisis was so severe and so widespread that job loss was rampant across the country and countries across the world. It would not be the easiest thing in the world for anyone who had lost a job to find new employment quickly. Therefore, we extended the benefit period for EI.

The second thing we heard was that we needed to put more money into skills training and upgrading so workers who were laid off or lost their jobs in an industry, where they had worked for perhaps 15 or 20 years, could get the necessary training to transition and find work in a different industry. We did that.

I am proud to say we put over \$1.5 billion into training programs. People who could qualify and even those who did not qualify for EI could access these training programs so they would be ready when the time came to take a new job, or perhaps start a new career to be able to fend for themselves and their families. The dollars that we put in were helping approximately 150,000 Canadians. We know that because that is how many Canadians have accessed these training programs to date.

However, that is not all. We expanded a work-sharing program. It was a program currently in place but we expanded the number of weeks that employers could access it. That allowed Canadians to keep their jobs, approximately 200,000 people, Canadians who were able to continue in their jobs because of expanded work-sharing opportunities.

That is one other thing in which our government should take great pride. Canadians, again, from coast to coast told us that is what they required.

We did more than just that. We decided we would freeze EI premiums for the next two years. We understood that employers and employees needed to keep more of their money in their pockets to help them through these troubled times.

All of this was done swiftly. We consulted with Canadians, they told us what they needed and we acted. We put these provisions into place as quickly as possible and they passed in the House. Those provisions are now helping hundreds of thousands of Canadians.

However, there was one other thing we said quite clearly and forcefully. We recognized there might be more required. No one could tell at the time how long this worldwide recession was going to last, how long this economic downturn, which has affected millions of people around the world, was going to last. We stated we would keep monitoring and observing the EI program to determine whether more changes were needed.

I must point out that during this time we heard from members of the opposition who gave their input and suggestions as to what was required to further improve the EI program.

Government Orders

What did we hear consistently, first from the NDP and then the Liberal Party of Canada? We heard that they felt the panacea to all the problems with the EI program could be solved by one single course of action. What was that? They suggested we lower the threshold on which individuals could access employment insurance to 360 hours.

Were there more suggestions? Absolutely not. That was it. That was the single suggestion that we heard. Again, as I mentioned, in their minds that was the complete solution, the panacea to all of the ills.

• (1610)

However, let us examine that a little closer. What does lowering the threshold to 360 hours really do? Does it help those workers who have worked for the last 20 years in the automotive industry and who suddenly found themselves out of a job because one of the big three auto manufacturers was going bankrupt and laying off workers by the thousands? Of course not. Did it help the forestry workers who have worked for 10, 15 or 20 years in the forestry industry and who put in literally thousands of hours in full-time employment year after year? Did it help them to lower the threshold to 360 hours? Absolutely not.

In fact, one could argue that the only people who would be helped by lowering the threshold to 360 hours might be part-time workers or students perhaps, but it certainly did not do anything to assist those workers who had been in the workforce for almost all of their adult life working 40 hour weeks, month after month, year after year. It did nothing to help them.

That is why, as many of my colleagues this afternoon have already observed, we thought it rather, to put it bluntly, silly and counterproductive to accept a suggestion that would do nothing to help those people who desperately needed help. That is why when we offered five weeks of extended benefits it was received universally well by workers across this country. When we decided to put billions of dollars into skills training and upgrading programs, it was universally applauded by workers and industry leaders across this country. When we decided to increase the work share program so that thousands of Canadians who were on the precipice of losing their job would be able to continue to work at their places of employment, it was cheered.

However, never did I hear from any people who had a full-time position, who had worked for years in their industry and had lost their job, that lowering the threshold to 360 hours was what they wanted.

I only point that out to the members of this place because, while it is a legitimate debate point, I have yet to hear a member of the opposition, who had been advocating lowering the threshold to 360 hours, fully explain to me how that would best serve Canadians who had been working for the last 15 to 20 years in full-time employment. The reason they have not been able to articulate an answer is because it does not help them. Workers needed more than just lowering the threshold. They needed money in their pockets and they needed extended benefits, which is why we took the actions that we did.

However, we recognized, as this recession and the global downturn kept churning along relentlessly, that there may still be other improvements that could be made. Again, I reiterate that for 13 years under the previous government there were absolutely no changes made to the program except for the fact that it kept siphoning off money from employers and employees.

In consultation with the official opposition, we decided to set up a bipartisan group of parliamentarians to examine the EI changes that we have currently made and to examine what additional changes and improvements to the EI program could be made to better assist workers. This working group of parliamentarians started their work but, unfortunately, somewhere down the way it was derailed because the Liberal members of that group walked out. When they were attending the meetings, they were still advocating a 360 hour threshold for employment insurance benefits and that was all.

We, on the other hand, wanted to go further than that. We felt there was much more that could be done. Therefore, even though our colleagues in the Liberal Party had walked out of that committee, we decided that we would go it alone.

We again consulted with Canadians from coast to coast to coast and we brought forward some further improvements that are contained in Bill C-50. What are those improvements? Quite frankly, they were targeted at those long-tenured workers that I was referring to earlier in my remarks, those hard-working Canadians who perhaps had been at the same job, but at a job nonetheless, in usually full-time employment, or close to full-time employment in almost all cases, for years and years.

• (1615)

We have all heard the stories. I am sure every person in this place has heard stories from constituents in their own ridings that have almost ripped their hearts out. We have had men and women, age 50, 55 or older, coming and pleading with their parliamentarians for help because they had been working at a job for 20 or more years and found themselves unemployed. They needed assistance because they were not sure how long it would take them to find a new job. They needed our help.

Even though we extended the benefit period by five weeks for those who were collecting EI premiums, we felt there were some special needs for those Canadians who were in that category that we would consider to be long-tenured workers because they were the most vulnerable.

I think we all know that for Canadian men or women who are middle aged or getting close to retirement and they lose their job, it is not easy for them to find a new job. These people would come in with stories of anguish, relating to me, and I am sure every other parliamentarian, stories of their fears and their concerns, not only for themselves but in almost all cases for their families. How do they feed their families? How do they keep a roof over their heads? How do they clothe and feed their families? They feared that in a number of weeks or perhaps up to a year their benefit period would run out and they still would not have new employment.

Government Orders

What could we do for them? We decided to act. As we did when we made our first improvements to the EI program, we decided to specifically target long-tenured workers. We have come up with a program, the provisions of which are contained in Bill C-50, that deals with exactly that.

Bill C-50 purports to change the EI program to deal with long-tenured workers so that an additional five to twenty weeks would be available for those workers who are in the situation of being unemployed after working most of their adult lives.

I can say from personal experience, and I think all of my colleagues on this side of the House can say the same, that when we proposed those changes, they were universally applauded. I have had workers in my riding phone me, write me and tell me face to face that this was something they thought might ultimately save their families' futures.

At the same time we were bringing forth these changes, we wanted to get clear acceptance from members of this House. What did we hear once again? We heard members of the official opposition, through the Leader of the Opposition, state that they would oppose absolutely every initiative this government brought forward. I understand the opposition leader's need to justify his existence by forcing an election but I do not understand why any member of any opposition party could possibly stand in this House and argue against the initiatives that we have brought forward.

We are doing what we feel is in the best interests of Canadian workers. We have heard from Canadian workers, those unfortunate souls who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, and they have told us loud and clear that we are on the right course. The actions we are taking to improve the EI system are necessary and they are appreciated by working families all across this country.

• (1620)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windor, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for talking about the strong banking system that we have. On behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada, I say that he is welcome.

I would like to discuss some of the issues. He talked about the notional deficit and general revenues. The general revenues were used at the time to erase what was a \$50 billion deficit. No, I think it was \$42 billion back then, was it not? It is hard to keep track. However, that was the deficit back then as opposed to the deficit the present government has today.

I would like to touch on one subject. He talked passionately about long-tenured workers and the forestry industry. I would like to show him an illustration, based on Bill C-50, of what we are talking about. There are a few gentlemen in my riding who have called and they are loggers. The logging situation is that it is primarily a seasonal industry. If he is so concerned, and he says that this bill would do so much for people in the forestry industry, what about a logger?

This is the situation. Subclause (2.1) states quite clearly that over the past 260 weeks, "If a claimant was paid less than 36 weeks". Hopefully my math does not fail me, but that is about 7.2 weeks per year over a five-year period, which basically means that Bill C-50 means nothing for that logger he speaks so passionately about. They are out.

I would like him to comment on that. When it comes to seasonal work, why will those people he speaks so passionately about not be accepted by Bill C-50?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague started his comments by talking about the deficit that the Liberals inherited. This is revisionist history that members of the Liberal Party continue to purport. I would point out to the member opposite that the actual deficit that has crippled this country at times was first started in the 1970s under former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In fact, as history proves, at the end of that prime minister's tenure—

Mr. Jim Maloway: How much did Mulroney have?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order, please. If the hon. members expect to be recognized, I would ask them to refrain from heckling or making comments while there is someone speaking who has been recognized.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, as history has shown, at the end of former Prime Minister Trudeau's reign, for every dollar in revenue that the Government of Canada was bringing in, that government was spending \$1.03. Can anyone imagine trying to run a government while it was spending more money than it was taking in? That is why we had such crippling deficits.

The following administration reduced that at the end of its tenure. We all know that once a program is in place in governments, it is very difficult to cut off the tap. However, at the end of the following administration, that government had cut down revenues to the point that the government was only spending 97¢ for every dollar it was taking in. In other words, it was cutting down on the massive debt left by the former Liberal government.

We need to ensure we have history straight.

With respect to his specific question on those workers who are working less than 35 weeks a year, whether they are in the forestry industry or other industries, Bill C-50 deals specifically with long-tenured workers. The provisions in that bill do exactly that.

• (1625)

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I do not think the government member is on very solid ground when he tries to lecture the Liberals about deficits and debt. At the end of the Mulroney period, when there was a huge increase in the debt, it was followed by the Mulroney years, which put us into as big a debt as was there under the Liberal years. He is not on good ground there.

The government member has certainly come a long way when it comes to the issue of EI, from the days of the old Reform Party, when it basically operated on the basis of a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality, to the point where we now have a party looking at bringing in a \$1 billion improvement to the EI program. I think we should be applauding that. Rather than complaining, the Liberal Party should be coming up with some amendments for the committee to try to make the bill even better than what it is right now.

Government Orders

Could the government member tell the House why his party voted against the New Democratic bill, Bill C-279, which would have removed severance pay from the calculation of EI benefits, especially since the Conservatives' own report recommended that severance pay should not be treated as earnings?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, number one, I want to congratulate the New Democratic Party for having the wisdom to support our initiatives on EI reform. I think it is obviously in the best interests of all Canadians to do so.

However, I would point out a couple of things that the hon. member may not quite realize; that is, when I spoke of the former Trudeau administration creating this massive debt that we are still paying the price for today, that is absolutely true. In fact, the following Progressive Conservative administration had reduced the debt. That is fact. That is something we can find in the history books.

However, the other thing I would point out, and this is something that has confused me mightily. On one hand, members of the New Democratic Party seem to be now applauding the initiatives we brought forward, but at every single time previous to this, its members voted against any EI reforms. In fact, I think we all recall our last budget we brought in, the members of the NDP said they would vote against it without even reading it.

So, how does anyone, how does any Canadian put any credibility into anything the NDP says when we know its members are taking such an irresponsible course of action as to start opposing budgets before they even read them?

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I heard several times during the debate and questioning references to get this bill to committee so we can make some changes, and of course other matters we can deal with, like other benefits, et cetera.

I think that is very noble to suggest that we could do that. However, I think maybe the deputy House leader for the Conservative Party, as a learned man on these matters, knows about scope of the bill and knows that when a bill passes at second reading and is referred to committee, it is approval in principle for that bill for the purpose for which that bill was set up, which is to deal with long-tenured employees.

As a consequence, it would appear to me, and I am asking the hon. member if he would like to also share his views with the House, that changes or proposed amendments, such as self-employed worker changes and other things that we have talked about, in fact, would be beyond the scope of the bill being referred to the committee and, in fact, would be out of order.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, I think in all cases our government has taken the position that if changes and improvements can be made at committee, to any piece of legislation, we would welcome it. Clearly, substantive changes that would fundamentally alter the act or the legislation brought forward to committee would not be procedurally correct if it were done after second reading. Sometimes bills are referred to committee, as my learned colleague knows, before second reading, and then substantive changes could be made.

What we are suggesting here is that this bill deserves consideration and deserves consideration of all parliamentarians and all

members of this place swiftly. Swiftly, we would like to see this placed into law. That obviously means we have to get the consent of our colleagues on the other side of the House and their colleagues in the Senate. However, if we can do that, we would welcome any changes that would improve this piece of legislation. If committee can come up with those changes, fine, we will welcome it; but above all, let us get this bill passed swiftly.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order, please. It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Gatineau, the Public Service; the hon. member for Malpeque, Agriculture.

[*English*]

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with my colleague from Sault Ste. Marie.

It is time for leadership. It is time to help unemployed Canadians before they are literally left out in the cold. Presently, 1.6 million Canadians are unemployed and this winter that number will grow and many will run out of EI and risk ending up on welfare. We have a responsibility to help.

New Democrats have long called for improvements to the EI system, particularly during the time of this economic recession, and we are pleased that the government has finally moved forward. These changes will help workers now and New Democrats are more interested in helping the unemployed than we are in provoking an election. Make no mistake, New Democrats are supporting this EI proposal, not the Conservative government.

The NDP plan for EI of reducing the hours needed to qualify to 360, including the self-employed, eliminating the waiting period and raising benefit rates has been passed by the House, and until now largely ignored by the Conservative government. The changes proposed in this legislation are a step in the right direction, but there is much more to do.

New Democrats believe that the best way to effectively use the balance of power Canadians have given to us is not to force another election but to rather force more changes to EI that would see the government work to enact the New Democratic Party plan. It is the responsible thing to do.

I have heard Liberals and Conservatives talk about their economic management and what they think is good. They toss it back and forth like a tennis ball. One party feels it is a better economic manager than the other.

Canadian workers are good economic managers because they contributed to the EI plan for a rainy day. They learned that from their parents. They learned to save for a rainy day. Their savings plan was the EI account and they contributed willingly and dutifully. They thought it would be there for them when the rain came. The rain has come, not as a sprinkle, not as a downpour, but as a torrent.

Government Orders

Where do we find 40% of those Canadians who contributed to the rainy day fund? They are standing in the rain, shivering, freezing, destitute, and without the rainy day fund that they pledged their money to because it was absconded with. Fifty-seven billion dollars would have looked after this torrent.

Canadian workers are asking where that money went. The unemployed are asking what happened to the money they saved. The response, of course, is that someone spent it and unemployed workers want to know what it was spent on. Was it spent on unemployed workers before them? Of course, the answer is no.

Under the changes of Brian Mulroney in the late eighties, continued on by the Liberals in the nineties, the system was gutted so that most folks did not get employment insurance. They simply had to do without.

As that money simply amassed, someone had the bright idea to spend it, and it was spent. First the Liberals spent the bulk of it and the Conservatives spent the rest. The Conservatives are saying they really cannot afford to look after the unemployed because they are running a deficit.

The last number that the finance minister threw out just last week was \$56 billion. If the Conservatives had kept the rainy day fund, they would have a balanced budget and that would be good financial management. Neither one of those parties has been a good financial manager. Workers figured out how to actually be good financial managers because they are the ones who saved.

We owe those workers that money. It was not ours to keep. It was not ours to spend on the things that the Liberal government and the Conservative government thought they could spend it on. The pledge to the workers was to collect it for employment insurance to make sure that when they were unemployed they were protected, that they would receive what was due to them. The pledge was not to have it absconded by someone else who simply spent it on whatever. Unfortunately, that is where we find ourselves.

We should not be debating who is the best financial manager because clearly neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives are good at it. We ought to be debating how we intend to protect those workers who, for no fault of their own, find themselves in this torrent, this huge downpour, standing out there freezing in the rain, looking to us for help. The money might only be needed for a while because workers intend to get back on their feet. These individuals have worked for a long period of time and this money will help some.

• (1635)

However, as my hon. colleague from the Liberals said earlier about the loggers, let me point out what happened to auto workers who got laid off last October for seven weeks and then got laid off again permanently in February. They do not have enough hours between the layoff periods to get a new claim in February. They must go back to October 2008. They have worked for 25 years and have never been laid off before. The government plan does not qualify them.

The government's plan says they had to be laid off and have a claim as of January 2009. Their claim will be October 2008. Yet, they are long-tenured workers. They have worked 25, 30 years at a

workplace and never collected a dime from the old UI system, which is what it should still be called, unemployment insurance, because it is about insurance for the unemployed, not insurance for the employed.

What it really should be about is making sure that long-tenured workers are covered. The government is not going to ensure that they are covered. Those people are going to go without simply because a temporary layoff happened in 2008 just prior to a permanent layoff in 2009, for which they will not qualify.

What will it say to long-tenured workers, I ask the government, when it looks them in the eye and says, "We made a program for you. Yes, we know you never collected before. I'm sorry, we put the wrong date. Should we have reconsidered the dates"?

I heard my hon. colleague, the parliamentary secretary, talk about taking the bill to committee to perhaps amend it and look for ways to do some things that can improve it. Indeed, we are going to have to do that because as much as it is well intentioned, it falls short. It falls short for long-tenured workers who indeed fit the scenario I have just laid out. There are other cases, as well, that will fall short of what has been set up.

We need to look at all of those things because clearly workers are looking at us and asking, "Why aren't you helping us? That is your role, is it not, as parliamentarians? Is that not what you told us you would do when you collected our money"? We have an obligation to them. We have a debt to them. We ought to repay that debt. That is the solemn promise we made to them when we collected their money.

I hear the idea that we cannot do 360 hours because they have only paid for a short period of time. I can hear the car insurance companies rubbing their hands with glee saying, "If you buy a new car, you pay your first premium and you crack the car up the following week, sorry, your car insurance does not cover it because you have only paid one premium".

I wonder how many people have had the great pleasure of having teenage drivers in their households who happened to have a fender-bender and find out, indeed, that their insurance would not cover them because they only paid one premium. Insurance is insurance for a reason. It is there to protect people when they need it. It is not there to deny them because they fell on hard times.

The rules are clear in the EI system. I hear the government incessantly saying, "We are not going to give money to folks who don't want to work. If you quit, you don't get anything". It is clear. The legislation has been clear for years. If people quit their jobs, they do not collect. If they get laid off, that is not their choice. They do not choose to get laid off because if they did, they would be quitting. When people get laid off, they should collect. That is what insurance protects them against. It protects them from being unemployed.

It is there to bridge the gap and make sure they can get from that period of unemployment to a period of employment because that is what the vast majority of Canadians do. When Canadians are asked if they want employment insurance or to go to work, they say they want to go to work.

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Let me explain what the benefit level is. Even if people are making minimum wage in the province of Ontario, let us say \$10 an hour at 40 hours a week, that is \$400. If they go on employment insurance, they do not get \$400. Why would they stay home to get 55%, basically \$225 or so a week, rather than \$400 if they are working? Clearly, no one goes home for less just because they can collect a cheque. People want to work, they will continue to work, and Canadians are proud to go to work. It is our obligation to make sure we see them through these hard times.

We expect this to pass with some changes and we expect the government to bring forward more EI changes that are going to benefit the laid off workers who are waiting and looking to the government to say when it will bring it forward. They need it, they need it now. Let us get on with the job of doing it.

● (1640)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am certain that my NDP colleague will recall—he will be reminded many times in the weeks to come—that the Liberals took out \$57 billion from the employment insurance fund to balance the government books. To accumulate this amount, they had to exclude about half the people who were entitled to unemployment benefits.

Today, we see that the Conservatives have a similar problem. They are accumulating as much debt as the Liberals had paid off. They are implementing measures for the unemployed. However, in order for these measures to help they cannot be given to everyone because we have too much debt. Thus, they are creating two classes of unemployed: the good and the bad. The good are those who have always been employed without missing a day of work. The seasonal or part-time workers, or workers with two jobs who cannot accumulate enough hours, are the bad ones. So you see there is a special class of people among the unemployed.

While we focus on the problem of the unemployed, we no longer pay attention to tax evaders, those who use tax havens, those who file tax returns ad infinitum without paying any tax and white-collar criminals who commit fraud at every turn.

I would like to hear my colleague's comments on this matter.

[*English*]

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague is absolutely correct to ask who took money and where it went.

Regarding part-time workers and seasonal workers, this primarily has affected women. When we look across the board, it is women in the economy who have suffered the greatest with the new changes.

I have heard the government complain time and time again that it was the Liberals who gave us the system. I say to my friends across the way to fix it. It is pretty simple. If they got a bad system from the guys across from them, then fix it. It is that simple. It is not that hard. All they have to do is enact the changes. The changes are before them. Take them to committee. In fact some of them are there. The Conservatives opposed the ones I proposed around severance and vacation pay, as did some of the my friends in the Liberal Party. They turned them down.

Vacation pay, which is earned in the year in which people work, is not new money. It is earned in the previous year, the year they were actually working, and it was taken away from them. Why? It is because you have not thought about the unemployed. What you have thought about is collecting the money, and that is not what the employment insurance is about. Employment—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I would like to remind the hon. member to direct his comments to the chair. I am sure he does not think I do not think about the unemployed.

The hon. Minister of State for Science and Technology.

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Madam Speaker, I appreciate getting up to acknowledge that I support this bill. There are a lot of folks in my riding of Cambridge who have lost their jobs. This will definitely help them.

On the one hand, I do want to thank the NDP for coming to its senses, reading a bill for once, and deciding to vote for it. The member for Welland made a comment that Canadians want to work and sometimes they have to collect unemployment. I could not agree more with that.

This government has brought in a number of initiatives outside of employment insurance: economic stimulus programs that are creating jobs. In his own riding, this government made an announcement for the community adjustment fund and the member voted against money for his own area of Welland to create jobs.

The member never once asked me to help get money into his riding. Other members around Welland did that. We were able to help his riding despite his intervention and despite the fact that he—

● (1645)

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I would like to give the hon. member the opportunity to respond. There are 30 seconds.

On a point of order, the hon. minister of state.

Hon. Gary Goodyear: Madam Speaker, I have been here all afternoon and I have noticed there is often a tendency to cut off the question. I do appreciate that there is only 30 seconds. In fact, I think you are justified in this case.

This is my first opportunity to stand up and ask a question. You did not recognize me the last time and you went to the Liberals. I wonder if you could pay some fair attention and give people proper time to ask their questions so we can have a debate that is democratic.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I can assure the hon. member that I will recognize him in a proper, appropriate rotation as much as I can.

The hon. member for Welland has 30 seconds to respond.

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Mr. Malcolm Allen: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me the 30 seconds.

Clearly we are talking about employment insurance and how to make the system correct. A hodgepodge fix of this and that to cobble together a system that is broken and needs to be fixed will not work.

What will work is revamping the system and making it work for Canadians. They expect no less of us. That is exactly what we are saying. To layer the system with more inconsistencies, to put one piece on top of the other in a broken system will not fix it.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Madam Speaker, this past summer I was one of those people who was quite disappointed in two things. One was that there was a very important discussion in Ottawa between the Conservatives and the Liberals on EI that two duly elected parties to this House were not privy to. We were not invited. We were not included. It was not a complete and inclusive process.

With that in mind, I am pleased we are having this conversation, however limited, about an issue that affects so many across this country. It will continue to affect many people as the recession we are in continues to roll on and more and more people find themselves unemployed.

It was unfortunate that more of us were not engaged in that conversation this summer. I think if more of us had been engaged, there might have been more potential for an agreement.

I have been privy to, and part of, many negotiations, discussions and efforts to bridge gaps and bring people together. I have always found that when there are two people it is difficult, particularly when the divide is obvious and the reason for coming together in the first place is so political, not really looking directly at those who would benefit most.

If others are brought in who can water that down a bit and bring a different perspective to the table, we often find agreement where otherwise it might not be possible.

I was disappointed that we were not invited. There are many in the House, the member for Chambly—Borduas who spoke earlier today and the member from New Brunswick, who have led the fight on EI for so many years. I, and others, have tremendous interest in this, and we have a lot of experience and knowledge. We have been around this issue a number of times. We could have contributed in a significant and important way to that discussion and to the end result, which I think would have gone a long way to assist all our constituents who are struggling with unemployment.

I was disappointed that we were not invited, and I was disappointed that the two parties who came together, as we got reports through the media, seemed to choose to play politics as opposed to getting down to work, rolling up their sleeves and getting something done for unemployed workers and their families in this country.

It was unfortunate and sad that given the amount of time from the middle of June until the middle of September that we were not able to get to where we could say to the people of Canada that we have come together with goodwill, worked hard and this is what we think

we can provide, what we think is necessary for the people of the country.

That is why it is important that we have this opportunity, all of us together in this place, and hopefully at committee, to sit down and seriously discuss what has been put in front of us so we might assess its value. Then, in assessing its value, if it falls short, all of us can come to the table with our best game, bring our best ideas forward.

There are a lot of good ideas out there. There have been a number of EI bills brought forward to the House by individual members, their staff and caucuses, who have worked hard to improve the lot for workers and their families in this country. There is no shortage of good ideas and ways forward that would be helpful to the workers, particularly the unemployed workers of this country.

That is why it is so important that we take full advantage of this moment, that we do not continue, as happened this summer between the Conservatives and the Liberals, to play politics at a time when that is not what is needed—as a matter of fact at a time when it is needed least—and that we do something that will be helpful for those hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers and their families.

● (1650)

That is why members of the New Democratic Party want this work done before considering the possibility of an election at some later date. Getting to the meat of the matter, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are unemployed and will continue to be unemployed, and there are more to come. The economists who are looking at this recession as it moves forward are saying on one hand there are signs that perhaps the recession is over, but it is not over for the workers of the country and it will not be over for a number of years.

There will not be a stalling of the rising unemployment we have experienced over the last number months. They are telling us that actually the number of unemployed is going to increase substantially. It is incumbent upon all of us to make sure that those supports and resources are in place so that those people and their families are looked after, in order to allow them to participate in the economy in a way that will stimulate the economy. If we do not do that, we will be failing those who will not qualify for the unemployment supports that they need to look after themselves and their families, and we will be contributing to the worsening of this recession.

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In June I was at a breakfast meeting in Sault Ste. Marie and listened to an economist from the Export Development Corporation. He told us that this recession is coming at us in waves. He described three of the waves we had already been through. He knew what he was talking about. He said that the third and perhaps most damaging and difficult wave for us to manage as a society and as an economy, is the wave that will see hundreds of thousands of people who have been unemployed fall off the unemployment rolls and on to welfare. Those hundreds of thousands of people would then begin to default on their mortgage payments, car payments, student loan payments, and many other things. Many men and women who have children, families and homes are trying to keep body and soul together, who are working to make their communities well will find themselves in a position where they will have little or nothing. Anyone in this country who has ever had to live on welfare will understand that it is not a happy situation.

I ran a soup kitchen in my community for about seven years before I got into politics. I say in all sincerity that there is no one in this country who of their own will would want to be on welfare. It is a debilitating, mind-numbing, paralyzing experience for anyone who has been forced to be on it. It alienates people from the workplace and eventually from their family and friends. In order to get back into the workforce and participate as they previously had would cost society, government and the community in which they live millions of dollars more than it would if we had simply made employment insurance available to them in the amount necessary for them to provide the basics for themselves, to pay the rent, feed their children, send their kids to school, participate in their community.

Because of the very difficult economy we are in, today in this place we speak about that which is of most importance to the people we represent. I ask all members in this place to work together to do the right thing on behalf of their constituents.

• (1655)

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Madam Speaker, my colleague made a great speech. From my personal interaction with him, I know of his hard work and compassion for the less fortunate in our communities.

One of the things I worked on since first being elected was the issue of providing increased opportunities for skilled trades workers. Recently I was able to participate in announcements at Conestoga College for the expansion of opportunities for skilled trades workers through the knowledge infrastructure program. In addition to that, my colleague will know that our government has made significant strides in encouraging apprenticeships with the incentive grant and the completion grant. These are important initiatives to address the issue of skilled trades labour.

With those provisions and all of the great provisions in Bill C-50 to reach long-tenured workers and provide additional training opportunities, I wonder if my colleague from Sault Ste. Marie could comment on what he thinks the reasons are that the Liberal Party has chosen to ignore the plight of the workers which my colleague has outlined so well.

Mr. Tony Martin: Madam Speaker, I am not going to impugn motive on the Liberal Party.

I will say that even though the government has put in place some initiatives, and I give the Conservatives credit for putting this bill on the table because it certainly is a door we can all walk through and hopefully make some changes and improvements, it will only help, I think by the government's figures, 190,000 people.

There are literally hundreds of thousands of people right now who do not qualify for EI and there are more to come. We need to do more. We are not doing enough. That is my message to the House this afternoon.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the House has a great deal of respect for the opinions and the justifications for supporting this bill that both the member for Sault Ste. Marie and the member for Welland have put forward.

I wonder if I could characterize the situation as being in a profound way like the proverbial joke, if it could be a joke, that the operation was a success, but the patient died.

Is it not clear that if there is a sarcastic and cynical attitude toward the approach of 360 hours on qualification for EI that has been suggested as the right approach to dealing with seasonal and regional disparities, with workers on low fixed incomes, with dealing with the issues of the thousands of people who will go on welfare because we do not have the right approach, are we not falling into that cynical approach where it was quoted, and I say this with respect to one of the members from the government side, we are suppressing job creation with this 45-day work year, we are undermining the deep rooted Canadian values for hard work?

We agree with those, but by supporting this are we going to encourage the government away from the right solution, the very solution that we share in common? How can we avoid that if that is the kind of cynicism that exists on the other side?

• (1700)

Mr. Tony Martin: Madam Speaker, again, just as I did not impugn motive on the Liberals, I am not going to impugn motive on the Conservatives.

I will say that it is not enough, and it really is not enough, and there is a lot more that can be done. I spoke in my speech about the tons of work and ideas that have been brought before this House through the various bills that have been tabled to reform EI. We really need to sit down and look at that and do something with it.

This is an opening to bring forward our best ideas, without cynicism, with great hope. and to spend at least \$1 billion on the unemployed in this country rather than \$300 million on an election that would not give us anything at the end day, or at least would not give it to us quickly enough. It may give us more if the makeup of this place were different after the election, which we can all only hope for.

At this point the question is whether we take advantage, at this moment, of \$1 billion to spend on unemployed workers with the possibility of some improvements when we consider this bill in committee, or whether we simply say we will go to an election and spend \$300 million, which, at the end of the day, would not help those who are unemployed in our communities.

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Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act. This enactment seeks to amend the Employment Insurance Act until September 11, 2010, to increase the maximum number of weeks for which benefits may be paid to certain claimants. It also seeks to increase the maximum number of weeks for which benefits may be paid to certain claimants not in Canada. That is in the summary of the bill.

I believe, and members on this side of the House in the Liberal Party believe, that it is too little too late for Canada's unemployed. Because this is a confidence matter, I and the Liberal Party will be opposing the bill.

It did not have to be like this. Back in June, the Liberal Party was able to convince the Conservatives that we could work together on this issue. We struck an employment insurance working group. However, the Conservatives were more interested in playing games than actually helping Canada's unemployed.

We had agreed to discuss two key issues as part of our mandate. The first was to allow self-employed Canadians to participate voluntarily in the employment insurance system and the second was to improve the eligibility requirements in order to ensure reasonable fairness.

Despite this, the Conservatives did nothing to bring forward any meaningful proposal. Instead, they spent the summer attacking our ideas with fake number that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has confirmed as incorrect.

The Conservatives' total cost estimate, including static and dynamic costs of \$2.4 billion, presented to the employment insurance working group on August 14 overstates the cost of the proposed 360-hour national standard of EI eligibility.

As the Parliamentary Budget Officer believes, the government's dynamic cost estimate is flawed. More important, the Parliamentary Budget Officer also believes that only static costs should be considered in costing the proposal, given the structure of the program and since the proposed changes to the EI system are in effect for only one year.

Based on the material presented to the EI working group, the Parliamentary Budget Officer's calculations show that the government's own estimate of the static cost of the proposed 360-hour national standard is about \$1.148 billion, and that includes the administrative costs.

In the opinion of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the \$1.14 billion static cost estimate is a reasonable estimate of the cost of the proposed 360-hour national standard of EI eligibility. According to the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the government's total cost estimate in excess of \$4 billion presented on August 6 is not consistent with the proposed 360-hour national standard, as it includes unemployed individuals not covered by the proposal, for example, special beneficiaries, new entrants and re-entrants to the labour force.

It was Liberal members who brought forward these ideas on how we could truly and meaningfully help long-tenured workers. Yet the minister stands in the House and says with a straight face that we

walked away from the table. There was nothing to walk away from. The Conservatives had made up their minds right from the start that they would be unwilling to co-operate.

The government says one thing and does another. How can we work with that? How can we trust that?

Just today, as I heard the minister speak in the House, I was astonished to hear the minister state that no Liberals attended a briefing on the bill which she held yesterday. I would have been delighted to attend such a briefing, but I was never invited. None of my Liberal colleagues were invited either.

How did we get to this situation? It did not have to be this way.

This again raises questions about how can we believe the government, how can we have confidence in the government.

After all, the Prime Minister himself broke his promise not to tax income trusts, which hurt many seniors and others in my riding. He promised he would never appoint senators and yet, in one year, he has appointed more people to the Senate than any other person since Confederation. He promised fixed election dates, but he broke his own law and called an election anyway. He promised not to raise taxes and right after being elected, he raised personal income taxes. Now, he will be imposing a \$13-billion job-killing payroll tax, breaking yet another promise.

• (1705)

This flip-flopping and a trail of broken promises would be funny, but this is a very serious matter. The government claims that it wants to help workers, but just as it tries to extend a few crumbs to the unemployed with this bill, it will simultaneously raise taxes on middle-class families and small businesses. How does this help our economy as it struggles to recover through this recession? By the way, it was a recession the Prime Minister would not even acknowledge until it was impossible to ignore. Just over a month ago the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development herself said:

We have to make sure, also, that when we come out of this recession that we are not going to be burdening employers and employees with huge increases in payroll taxes.

How does this reconcile with her comments and her increase in payroll taxes? Have her beliefs changed so quickly? This is the reason. This is an example of why we have lost confidence in the government. We cannot believe a single word its members say.

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What is more surprising than the government's position and the lack of confidence that we have in it is the fact that the Conservative's coalition partner, the NDP, has decided to give up on its principles just for partisan positioning. There was rarely a time in the past two Parliaments when the NDP members did not remind us all about how many times they opposed the Conservatives. The NDP members have not been interested in making Parliament work. In fact, they blamed the official opposition whenever we did work with the government. Any time we worked in a meaningful way to help Canadians, to move the agenda forward, they mocked us. They made fun of us. They thumped their chests. They opposed budgets and other money bills seconds after they were tabled. Yet as soon as the Liberal Party made up its mind that we had lost confidence in the government, the NDP always changed its mind. When their vote really mattered, when their vote really counted, they panicked.

Did their supporters ask them to do this? No. In fact Canadian Auto Workers president has described the reforms that are being presented today in Bill C-50 as crumbs for the unemployed, dismissing them as doing little to help the vast majority of the unemployed. Perhaps then they have found some common ground with the Conservatives. Perhaps the government has given into their demands. Not at all. In fact, the *Globe and Mail* calls this offer thin gruel for the NDP. Why would the NDP members sell out their supporters and their beliefs? I think the *Toronto Star* summed it up best yesterday when it wrote:

...the New Democratic Party, watching its political fortunes tumble and its financial contributions trickle in, is simply trying to stave off another election even if it means breathing life into a right-wing government.

The NDP, which claims to be the voice of Canadian workers, has abandoned those same workers just because it is too afraid to take a stand.

Let me give another example. The member for Windsor—Tecumseh, a well-respected colleague of ours, said, “the bill could be a particular letdown for many in Windsor because contrary to the human resources minister's claim workers having paid in seven of the previous ten years would see extended benefits, the actual time period is much longer”.

There is a reluctance, a hesitation, a lack of conviction, so why are they supporting the bill?

I want to share a few stories in my riding about the importance of EI, because the economic crisis has hit people in Mississauga—Brampton South very hard. Our unemployment rate hovers around 11%, compared to a rate of about 6.5% when the Conservatives came to power. Within four years we have seen the unemployment rate in that region almost double. Nationally, over 1.6 million Canadians are unemployed, and as of June we had 816,000 Canadians collecting EI. That is an increase of 39,500 people over the previous month.

To put that in perspective, Mississauga—Brampton South has 44,000 households. That is nearly one job lost for every home in my riding, and that is in just over one month. This is a situation unprecedented, yet the Conservatives propose only piecemeal changes and only then when they are backed into a corner.

Are people better off today than they were four years ago? That is the question I ask people when I meet them in my riding, and the answer is no.

• (1710)

I have heard heartbreaking stories from constituents who have fallen on hard times and have been treated very poorly by the government. For example, one gentleman was laid off last September but he was too proud to apply for EI right away. Yet when financial circumstances finally forced him to apply, he was told by the government that he only qualified for \$68 a week because he no longer had enough hours. I doubt anyone could survive on such an amount.

Another woman in my riding took a voluntary package from her employer and left her workplace in order to save a colleague's job. The government told her that she would have to wait until her package ran out before she could apply for EI. When she did, which she was told to do, she was denied her benefits because they had given her bad advice. These are all documented cases in my riding.

As another example, a woman struggled to make ends meet with a new baby in the house when maternity benefits were delayed for three months after she had given birth.

One especially tragic story is of a constituent who was denied EI benefits because he was literally one hour short of the standard. Yet, if he lived in Burlington, a short drive from his home in Mississauga, he would have qualified. None of these stories seems to matter to the Conservatives, because they did nothing to bring forward meaningful legislation or proposals on EI reform.

In our critique of Bill C-50, I have been very clear about our concerns and why we in the Liberal Party are opposing it. What is our plan? What is our proposal? What is it that we are willing to present as an alternative?

Having 58 different standards for eligibility for EI is an obvious problem. Every Canadian should have equal access and not be judged based on his or her postal code. This speaks to Liberal values, a belief in fairness and equality, which underpins all of our policies. That is why the Liberal leader has been advocating for one national standard.

We propose the 360-hour standard of eligibility. If implemented quickly and in a timely manner, this proposal could help another 150,000 people out of the 1.6 million Canadians who are unemployed.

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We even indicated that we would be flexible in terms of what that standard would be, but again the Conservatives have responded by ignoring our ideas and replying with propaganda and misinformation. We hear that time and time again. They continue to attack our ideas and misinform and mislead Canadians as opposed to having meaningful dialogue and debate on the substantive matters of our policy proposals.

I demonstrated that very clearly when I talked about our cost estimates, which were verified by the PBO, as opposed to their outrageous cost estimates, which were part of their propaganda and misinformation exercise.

This is not a Liberal way. We have proposals to fix EI and provide the support that Canadians need to weather this financial storm. The government has proven it cannot be trusted to look out for the interests of its citizens. It has lost our confidence and the confidence of Canadians. Canadians do not deserve crumbs. They deserve real, meaningful reform and help.

I have outlined very clearly why we have lost confidence and why we cannot trust the government. I have also very clearly articulated some examples that I have seen first-hand in my riding of how the EI system in its current form is not helping people and how people are falling through the cracks.

We will continue to work hard to earn the trust of Canadians, because I believe the proposal that I described, that Liberals have been advocating for months and months now, on which we tried to work with the government and other parties, is a proposal that makes sense and will really help people.

We can do better, we will do better and I am confident that with the trust of Canadians, whenever the next election takes place we will be able to earn that trust and form a Liberal government that will be able to implement real, meaningful EI reform.

• (1715)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Madam Speaker, I enjoyed listening to the speech of my colleague across the way and I have really just one fundamental question.

I am on the finance committee. Yesterday, we had the Canadian Labour Congress in front of us. The Canadian Labour Congress was talking about employment insurance, the length of time to qualify, and so on. They indicated that they were interested in a qualifying time of 350 or 360 hours. I cannot remember the exact number.

I asked the member from the Canadian Labour Congress who was presenting in front of us the direct question how long they had been asking for this change to EI. I asked if they had been to the budget deliberations before the budget process. They had been here for years and years.

The Canadian Labour Congress have been asking for years and years, long before the Conservative government took office. Why did the Liberal Party not implement the 360-hour EI requirements when they were in power?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Speaker, I am very proud of our track record when we were in government. We extended paternity and maternity benefits under EI. Not only that, we fixed the fiscal house that the Conservatives had left in complete disarray when Mr.

Mulroney left a \$42 billion deficit. We worked hard with the rest of Canadians to balance our books.

However, the question being asked is why we need a national standard today. Why do we need a national standard that can really help Canadians? The answer is very simple. We have an unprecedented number of people who are unemployed. People need assistance. There are over 816,000 people collecting EI. We are fighting for regional fairness.

Now is the time to do it, because when they get that money, they spend that money. Not only does it help people, but it also helps us during our economic recovery. That is why we are advocating for that proposal today.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Madam Speaker, I have a question for the member who is boasting about his party.

How can he stand here today giving advice on employment insurance? We know that when the Liberals were in power, they squandered the money of workers and took more than \$50 billion. That was not the government's money; it belonged to workers and employers. The Liberals took this money to pay down the massive federal government debt. Not even Mulroney's previous Conservative government did that. It did not have the audacity to take money from workers and employers in a misguided effort to run the country. It continued to run the country without taking money from workers.

Today, I would like to know how he can rise in this House and tell us he has recommendations, when the Jean Chrétien government, with finance minister Paul Martin, squandered the money of workers? What nerve. Shame on him.

[*English*]

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Speaker, last time I checked, I thought we were debating Bill C-50, a bill that the Conservatives have brought forward.

Speaking to that bill, the flaw that we have seen and clearly demonstrated is that it lacks regional representation. It does not deal with regional fairness, fairness that would help forestry workers in the province of Quebec and fairness that would help seasonal workers across this country.

It is surprising to see the NDP flip-flop. It is also surprising that the Bloc is so outraged. We are making our position very clear. We are opposing the government and we would count on their support in our proposal.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, my hon. friend talked about propaganda and misinformation. Liberals promised a national child care system. They promised a national housing program. They promised to pull out of NAFTA. Talk about propaganda and misinformation.

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This member has the audacity to talk about breathing life into government. They did it 79 times because they were cowards and afraid of an election. Now, the NDP is supporting this because it is good for people and because Canadians do not want an election. He talks about the importance of EI. They ignored this program for 13 years and did nothing. I worked and helped unemployed workers for 13 years and sat across from them when they got their pittance of a weekly allowance that the government did nothing to improve.

They did nothing to change the rules that disqualified people if they quit or were fired. The Liberal government did nothing for that. They talk about regional differences. The Liberal government brought in the regional differences for EI and they say they cannot survive on the amount of EI today. The Liberal government did not raise the amounts of EI for 13 years. There was only a \$50 difference in 13 years.

They did not care a whit about unemployed workers and he stands up and deigns to criticize the New Democrats in the House. The sweet stench of a hypocrite is something else.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I would ask the hon. member not to use unparliamentary words such as that and to withdraw that particular word.

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, I will withdraw my last comment.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Speaker, I can understand why NDP members are so frustrated. They are supporting a right wing government. They are supporting a bill in which they do not believe. That is clearly reflected in a comment that I made earlier, and I will repeat it once again. I hope the NDP members understand. This comment is from a very well-respected member of their caucus, the member for Windsor—Tecumseh, who said:

—the bill could be a particular letdown for many in Windsor because contrary to Human Resources Minister's...claim workers having paid in seven of the previous 10 years would see extended benefits, the actual time period is longer.

There is a reluctance, a hesitation and a frustration, but nevertheless for their own partisan purposes those members are supporting a right wing Conservative government and they are letting down their constituents. Hence why they are frustrated and hence why they are making those comments. They are panicking and they are nervous. I understand that. They can still change their minds.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Madam Speaker, the bill extends the number of weeks by 20 for long-tenure employees who find themselves laid off. They can get further benefits.

Does the member agree that they should be getting benefits? Does he agree with this extension, yes or no?

• (1725)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Speaker, the fundamental question, as I said in my remarks, is this. Do we have confidence in the government? I gave a litany of examples of why we have lost confidence in the Conservative government.

I raised a second point that we had an EI working group. We put meaningful proposals forward. What did the Conservatives do? They mocked them, they started a campaign of misinformation, but they had no alternative proposals.

When there was speculation of a campaign, the Conservatives panicked, became nervous and created this EI reform in the form of Bill C-50, which would do very little to help Canadians. That is unacceptable and that is why we oppose it.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Madam Speaker, this morning the House leader for the Liberals brought a motion wanting unanimous consent to pass this legislation. Unanimous means the Liberals have to go along with it. That is how the system works. Then this afternoon, they are against the bill. I wonder about the flip-flop in less than five hours.

Where is the logic? Where is the consistency? Why the flip-flop? I would like some rationale behind that.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Speaker, I have a lot of respect for my colleague and I can understand why he is upset. I can understand why he is frustrated. He is now supporting a government that he has not supported in the past.

I would like to quote again because I want to ensure it is on the record. The member for Windsor—Tecumseh said this legislation “could be a particular letdown for many in Windsor”. That is the constituency he represents. He knows he is letting his constituents down.

That is why those members are frustrated. That is why they are panicking. That is why they are standing in the House and attacking us. They have to go back to their constituents next week and explain to them why they supported Conservative Bill C-50, which lets them down.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to speak today in support of Bill C-50, which will temporarily provide additional regular EI benefits to unemployed, long-tenured workers.

The bill would provide a temporary solution to the temporary challenges now faced by many workers who have contributed many years to the EI program. Through no fault of their own, these workers have faced an extended period of uncertainty in the wake of a recession.

Our Conservative government is focused on what really matters to Canadians and helping those hardest hit during this recession by investing in training and creating jobs for those who are suffering. We are providing support to Canadians when they need it.

We have introduced legislation, Bill C-50, providing this extra support to the long-tenured workers. Canadians who have paid premiums for years and are having difficulty finding new jobs now can get an extra five to twenty weeks of EI. That should help about 190,000 long-tenured workers, while they try to seek new employment. This is fair and it is the right thing to do.

We are also moving forward with our campaign promise to provide maternity and paternal benefits to the self-employed, something that is very popular in my riding, especially with all the small businesses in our communities across my riding.

Private Members' Business

Canadians are already benefiting from the economic action plan that we introduced earlier this year. The best way we can help those who are facing unemployment, and their families and the economy, is to help Canada get back to work. That is our number one priority. That is why our economic action plan included unprecedented investments in training for Canadians, whether they qualified for EI or not. We provided an additional \$1.5 billion to help approximately 150,000 Canadians. We also provided an extra five weeks of coverage under the current EI program and that has benefited over 300,000 Canadians.

We are also extending the work-sharing program, protecting jobs for about 165,000 workers across Canada, and that has been really popular. By extending the duration of the work-sharing agreements by 14 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks, manufacturing and forestry companies have been able to adjust to the temporary slowdown in the economy. Their workers can now make work-sharing arrangements that will keep their skills up to date and help employers avoid the expense of rehiring and retraining when they have to find new people.

In my riding of Selkirk—Interlake, the steel mill and the tertiary industries in Selkirk have made use of this program and it has been extremely effective in helping them through this economic slowdown.

We introduced a career transition assistance initiative that extends the EI benefits of long-tenured workers to a maximum of two years, while they participate in longer term training. The program also gives early access to EI if long-tenured workers use all or part of their severance package to invest in training.

• (1730)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I must interrupt the member at this time. When we return to this matter, the member for Selkirk—Interlake will have 17 minutes remaining.

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*]

SECURE, ADEQUATE, ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING ACT

The House resumed from April 2 consideration of the motion that Bill C-304, An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I am now prepared to rule on the point of order raised on April 2, 2009, by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons concerning the requirement for a royal recommendation for Bill C-304, An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians, a bill standing in the name of the member for Vancouver East.

[*English*]

I would like to thank the parliamentary secretary for having brought the issue to the attention of the chair, as well as the member for Vancouver East for her comments.

In his intervention, the parliamentary secretary stated that the bill went beyond the establishment of a national housing strategy by requiring, in clause 3(2), that it provide financial assistance to those who were otherwise unable to afford rental housing. Such a change, he argued, made it clear that a key element of this new national housing strategy would lead to an increase in federal spending on housing and thus should be accompanied by a royal recommendation.

The hon. member for Vancouver East argued that the focus of the bill was not on spending but rather on having the federal government develop, in co-operation with the provinces, territories, first nations and municipalities, a housing strategy for Canadians. She contended that there was a difference between a bill that called for the development of a strategy and one that calls for money to be spent.

In determining whether or not Bill C-304 should be accompanied by a royal recommendation, the Chair must judge if the bill seeks an authorization to spend public funds for a new and distinct purpose.

[*Translation*]

Clause 3(1) of the bill requires the establishment of a national housing strategy. It states:

3(1) The Minister shall, in consultation with the provincial ministers of the Crown responsible for municipal affairs and housing and with representatives of municipalities and Aboriginal communities, establish a national housing strategy designed to ensure that the cost of housing in Canada does not compromise an individual's ability to meet other basic needs, including food, clothing and access to education.

[*English*]

However, it is the effect of the second paragraph of this clause which is in dispute. That paragraph reads as follows:

(2) The national housing strategy shall provide financial assistance, including financing and credit without discrimination, for those who are otherwise unable to afford rental housing.

[*Translation*]

As the Speaker stated in his decision on March 21, 2005, at page 4373 of *Debates*,

—a bill effecting an appropriation of public funds [...] or an equivalent authorization to spend public funds does so immediately upon enactment.

Once Parliament approves a bill that requires a royal recommendation, there should be nothing further required to make the appropriation.

Private Members' Business

•(1735)

[English]

In the case before us, Bill C-304 does not contain provisions which specifically authorize spending for a new and distinct purpose. Rather, the bill seeks Parliament's approve for the minister, in consultation with various stakeholders, to develop a national housing strategy. While the bill requires that strategy to provide for financial assistance to those unable to afford rental housing, the bill itself provides no such assistance. Furthermore, clause 4(2) of the bill provides the minister with great latitude concerning the measures that have been taken to implement such a strategy. The Chair cannot speculate on what these measures might be.

In other words, Bill C-304 requires the government to develop a plan. It does not address the actual implementation of that plan. If Parliament decides to approve this bill and a national housing strategy is developed, it will then be up to the government to determine the financial resources required to implement the strategy and to set about getting Parliament to approve such resources. This might involve an appropriation bill or another bill proposing specific spending, either of which would require a royal recommendation.

However, those decisions lie in the future. Meanwhile it is Bill C-304 that is before the House and is being proposed to members for second reading. The Chair is of the view that the bill does not require a royal recommendation and may proceed.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was just thinking, as you were reading that, the time it took to prepare this speech maybe was a waste of time. Therefore, I am pleased you ruled the way you did.

Next week is a scheduled constituency week for all of us as MPs. With that, MPs from all political parties will be heading home to our respective ridings. I, for one, will spend the week working in my constituency office, meeting with community groups and talking to constituents about the many issues that impact upon their daily lives. At the end of each day, I will head home. I will visit with my husband, our children and our grandchildren, if I am lucky, and I will sleep in my own bed.

For me, as much as Ottawa is a tremendous city, there is nothing that can recharge my batteries like spending time in my riding. The people of York West, and Toronto in general, are kind, community-minded people. Because of this, being home is one of life's great pleasures.

However, Bill C-304 again reminds us that not every Canadian has access to that simple pleasure. In fact, homelessness in Canada is a serious and growing problem, a problem of national scope that is often difficult to determine. While counting the homeless is no easy task, the most recent federal estimates suggest that the number is somewhere around 0.5% of the national population. To put it another way, there could be as many as 150,000 people living on the streets in our country.

As if this reality is not bad enough, it is worth mentioning that in 2007 emergency services, community organizations and non-profits spent as much as \$6 billion to combat homelessness. I cite this number because, if it is accurate, these sources are spending \$40,000 per homeless person and the problem is still growing. I want to be

perfectly clear when I say that these emergency services, community organizations and non-profits are doing a spectacular job of dealing with a very difficult problem. They are in the business of giving hope where none exists. However, I wonder if we could attain even greater results if we were all to work together.

In my opinion, if we could somehow pool our resources, coordinate our efforts and focus various societal institutions on combatting homelessness, we would have the beginning of a national strategy on housing. Unfortunately, the Conservative government has demonstrated a total indifference to the issue of homelessness during its tenure in office. The Conservative government has failed to deliver any substantive policy measures to tackle homelessness. In my estimation, this lack of action demonstrates that the Conservatives are either disinterested in the problem or inept when it comes to solving it.

The Prime Minister has been in office for 1,334 days or 1,333 nights. That is 1,333 nights when 150,000 people slept without a bed. That is 1,333 nights when 150,000 people did not know where their next meal would come from. That is 1,333 nights when 150,000 people had been let down by the Conservative government and a Prime Minister who is supposed to be working for the betterment of all Canadians.

Bill C-304 would force the minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to consult with the provincial ministers of the crown responsible for municipal affairs and housing and with representatives of municipalities and aboriginal communities in order to establish a national housing strategy. This is a good idea that is worthy of our support.

It is a good idea today and it was also a good idea when the most recent Liberal administration created the position of a national minister of housing for Canada. It was also a good idea when that same Liberal administration conducted consultation with stakeholders, community partners and a range of government sources at all levels. It was a good idea when the most recent Liberal administration penned a detailed plan and prepared to launch a comprehensive national housing strategy together with municipalities and with our provinces.

I thought this way as well when the NDP, the Bloc and the Conservatives parties plotted to defeat the Paul Martin government and, in doing so, sidelined that important strategy for housing that we would have had in place today helping the many people who are looking to establish a roof over their head.

For me, access to secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing should be a paramount goal for the federal government to show leadership. Without a national housing strategy effectively targeting societal ills, such as mental health, poverty, addiction, unemployment and domestic violence, we will be destined to repeat the cycle that creates homelessness in the first place.

Private Members' Business

Worse than not spinning our wheels on the issue is the thought that during the course of every meeting, every debate and every round of partisan games that go on here in the House of Commons, those same 150,000 homeless Canadians continue to be out on the street without a safe place to call their own. I believe that affordable housing and homelessness programs are an important part of true social justice and, as an extension of this thinking, the federal government has an important role to play in ensuring Canadians have equal access to safe, affordable housing.

● (1740)

I sincerely regret that the Conservative government has repeatedly failed to deliver a national housing strategy that addresses the significant housing needs of Canadians. I am saddened that the Conservative Party's approach to affordable housing and homelessness is again a true reflection of a fend-yourself approach to social programs. It is almost like it cannot help itself.

Taxing income trusts, shipping body bags to native reserves and slamming the doors to offices with a mandate to protect women's equality are all past examples of the government's head in the sand approach to protecting the vulnerable. Its inaction on homelessness is just another bad example in a shameful trend.

It would seem to me that Bill C-304 is aimed at taking us back to where we were just prior to the Conservatives coming into power, and I am more than ready to support that. Bill C-304 would demand that the Conservatives accept a number of benchmarks and tasks, including a couple of goals, one being to secure adequate, affordable, accessible and not-for-profit housing in the case of those who cannot afford it.

Sustainability and energy efficient designs, not-for-profit rental housing projects, mixed income, not-for-profit housing co-ops, special needs housing and housing that allows for senior citizens to remain in their homes as long as possible. All of those are parts of the puzzle that would be there for a housing strategy. They would also require an inclusion for temporary emergency housing and shelter in the event of disasters and crisis.

However, more than the actual measures demanded by this proposal is the fact that it imposes a timeline for the consultation: 180 days or, more aptly put, 179 nights. To me, this is one of the most significant elements of the bill because it acknowledges the human factor. It acknowledges the fact that this is not just another political file.

A national housing strategy is about tackling a societal problem that is complex, multi-faceted, immediate and long overdue for action and resolution.

The bill should go to committee for further study but I would stress that the study must be mindful of the urgency of the timelines. The solutions to the problems of homelessness have been mired in a political muck for far too long. Private groups and agencies have been expected to provide the leadership needed for far too long.

The Prime Minister has already ignored a serious problem for 1,333 nights. It is time for the federal government, time for the Conservative caucus to stand up for those 150,000 Canadians who deserve better.

● (1745)

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by congratulating the New Democratic Party on introducing Bill C-304. We do not spend enough time talking about housing, and this gives us a chance to point out, as the Bloc has often done, that the federal government has the means to make massive investments in social and community housing. That is what it is supposed to do.

Investment should add up to 1% of federal government program spending, or about \$2 billion per year. That is what the Bloc has always said. However—and this is the problem with the bill—Quebec and the provinces need to be in charge of how that housing money is spent.

The federal government must respect provincial jurisdiction by limiting its role in this area to providing funding to enable Quebec to act on its priorities and special needs. Previous agreements recognize that housing falls under the exclusive jurisdiction of Quebec.

I would like to quote from a document published by the Government of Quebec, *Coûts du fédéralisme pour le Québec dans le domaine de l'habitation*, an analysis of what federalism costs Quebec in the area of housing, conducted by the Société d'habitation du Québec in September 1995. On page 21, it says:

Federal housing measures constitute interference in an area under provincial jurisdiction. The federal government has imposed very rigid rules for housing measures. It has also made its financial participation contingent upon a multitude of administrative rules as well as pan-Canadian objectives and criteria, making it difficult to plan interventions in a Quebec context. The presence of the federal government in this sector of activity has resulted in much administrative duplication engendering additional costs that undermine the coherence of interventions.

That was written in 1995. Nothing has changed. This bill, too, constitutes encroachment.

Quebec has the skills and the experience to take care of its own housing responsibilities. That is the point. We would be better served if we took matters into our own hands.

Quebec is calling for a transfer of all federal responsibilities for housing, provided that this be accompanied by satisfactory financial compensation in light of the criteria of fairness, sufficiency and continuity. Currently, Ottawa's proposal is limited to offering Quebec only the administration of existing federal obligations with regard to social housing stock, which only amounts to a simple management contract. In addition, on the subject of social housing, Quebec has not obtained its fair share of federal expenditures. The Government of Quebec cannot accept this situation, no more than prior administrations were able to tolerate this. Were we to be satisfied with less than our share of financing of the federal effort for housing, this would be all the more unacceptable since Quebec's needs in this area are proportionately greater than those of the other provinces.

Private Members' Business

Bill C-304 in its current form does not respect Quebec's jurisdiction in this area. However, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, if we recall that, in 2007, Bill C-303 concerning early learning and child care faced the same situation as this bill. The solution: allow Quebec to opt out unconditionally, with full compensation, as set out in clause 4 of Bill C-303. Thus, there is hope that this bill could also be amended in committee.

We are in favour of Bill C-304 being studied in committee, with one caveat: it must be amended considerably.

• (1750)

If Bill C-304 comes back to the House in its present form, the Bloc will not support it. The solution is to allow Quebec to opt out unconditionally and with full compensation, as was the case with clause 4 of Bill C-303, nothing less. In addition, the preamble of Bill C-304 includes the principles of housing rights that we support. However, we believe that a more thorough study should be conducted on the consequences of having these principles in the bill and on the possibility of an individual without housing turning to the courts.

Bill C-304 does, however, indicate set out the context in which this strategy must operate with specific points of action that already exist in Quebec. Consultation by the minister with provincial counterparts, which the bill advocates, will lead to subsequent procedures for settling accounts.

Under clause 3, the Minister shall, in consultation with the provincial ministers responsible for municipal affairs and housing and with representatives of municipalities and aboriginal communities, establish a national housing strategy. We do not agree with having a national strategy other than to have our share of the program funds. This national strategy is to ensure that the cost of housing in Canada does not prevent an individual from meeting other basic needs, including those of food, clothing and education.

Under clause 4(2), the minister, in cooperation with the provincial ministers responsible for housing and with representatives of municipalities and aboriginal communities, may take any measures that the minister considers appropriate to implement the national housing strategy as quickly as possible. Note that we in Quebec have the SHQ, which sets priorities. We have absolutely no desire to have our priorities set by the federal government.

The minister's powers to take the measures indicated are not dependent on the consent of Quebec. Clause 4(2) provides clearly that the minister may take any measures to implement the national strategy, regardless of the opinion of the provinces, regardless of Quebec's or the other provinces' prerogative over housing, regardless of the efforts made by Quebec and other provinces in the area of social housing, regardless of the existence of protection for renters provided by the Régie du logement du Québec and regardless of the different social choices being made in Quebec.

The intent of this bill is, in the end, to eradicate and appropriate the decision-making powers of Quebec and the provinces with respect to housing, including social housing. This is appropriating an area of jurisdiction that does not belong to it and forces Quebec and the provinces to become managers for Ottawa.

Even though Quebec is one of the few provinces to have been commended in the report by the UN Special Rapporteur because of its policy to fight poverty and because of the content of its Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms—page 10, paragraph 28—among other things, this bill ignores this reality and ignores the nation that is Quebec.

The agreement should set the conditions for federal withdrawal, including the amount and type of financial resources to be transferred. In addition, a political agreement should establish the form of compensation, namely cash transfers and tax points. Or, the agreement could require the federal government to continue its expenditures in the province concerned. The territories should also be able to avail themselves of this provision. The federal government would be required to negotiate and enter into this agreement within a reasonable time.

Rather than focusing its actions in its own areas of jurisdiction, the federal government is trying to use worthy causes to interfere in Quebec's jurisdictions in order to have the greatest possible visibility. This bill, in its current form, follows that logic.

• (1755)

I will reiterate that we are in favour of this bill on housing but that it must be overhauled in order to respect Quebec's jurisdictions.

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to rise in support of Bill C-304, an important piece of legislation brought forward by my NDP colleague, the member for Vancouver East.

Truthfully, at first I had not really fought my way on to the speakers list for this bill, not because I did not think it was absolutely vital for communities like my home town of Hamilton but, rather, because I could not see any way that this bill would not be passed unanimously by the House.

The bill simply calls for the development of a national housing strategy. It is a crucial first step in redressing the current piecemeal and inadequate system that has been in place since the Liberals cancelled the then existing national housing strategy in 1995.

The bill does not bind the government to specific measures. It does not outline an immediate spending plan. Private members' bills simply cannot do that. The bill just suggests that it is unacceptable for Canada to be the only major country in the world without a national housing strategy and that the need to develop one is immediate and urgent. Housing advocates, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and now even the UN are all calling on Canada to act.

Yet, as I listened to the debate on this bill before Easter, it became clear that the Conservatives are not even prepared to enter into the conversation. Speaking on behalf of the minister and therefore articulating the government line, the member for Souris—Moose Mountain said unequivocally, “I will not be supporting Bill C-304”. He went on to say that the bill would only serve to “severely restrict the ability of the government to adapt and continue to meet the housing needs of Canadians”.

Private Members' Business

Continue to meet? Is he kidding me? The government is clearly not meeting the housing needs of Canadians. Let me give the government a snapshot of what is happening in my home town of Hamilton.

As members will know, the threshold for affordability is paying no more than 30% of gross income for housing. That is the standard set out by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. If people pay more than that, they are in what is called core housing need.

In Hamilton, 90% of households with incomes of less than \$10,000 exceed that threshold, 85% of households with incomes between \$10,000 and \$20,000 exceed the threshold, and in households with incomes between \$20,000 and \$30,000 75% still exceed it. Across Canada, that kind of housing insecurity is being experienced by three million households. These statistics clearly put a lie to the government's contention that it is meeting the housing needs of our country.

However, there are other data that support the urgent need for a national housing strategy. In Hamilton alone, the waiting list for social housing had 4,693 applicants this spring and it is growing. Of particular concern is the increase in the number of priority applicants, which includes women fleeing violence and applicants who are homeless. When the city of Hamilton issued its last report on homelessness, it noted that nearly 4,000 individuals stayed in homeless shelters in 2006.

Lest anyone in the House believes that this is a Hamilton problem rather than a national issue that must be addressed by the government, let me remind members of the words that Miloon Kothari, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, used to describe the housing situation in Canada. "Very disturbing", "devastating impact" and "national crisis" were just some of the phrases he used when he presented his preliminary report.

That report confirmed that Canada desperately needs a national housing strategy. Canada needs to once again embark on a large scale building of social housing units across the country and, as the Special Rapporteur also noted, as part of that comprehensive national housing strategy particular funding must be directed to groups that have been forced to the margins, including women, seniors, youth, members of racialized communities, immigrants and groups with special needs.

That report should have been a call to action. Instead, it was just another in a long series of embarrassments for Canada on the international stage. Canada is the only major country in the industrialized world without a national housing strategy.

However, it is not too late to act. In fact, we are blessed by having housing advocates in this country who would be only too pleased to lend their expertise to such efforts. In Hamilton, I am thinking of people like Jeff Wingard from the Social Planning and Research Council and Tom Cooper from the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. In Toronto, the Wellesley Institute and Michael Shapcott have also done incredible work on housing over the years. Expertise exists from coast to coast to coast and their help is just a phone call away.

● (1800)

Let us strike while the iron is hot. That is exactly what the bill before us is designed to do. It seeks to realign the government's approach to dealing with housing issues by mandating a national strategy for a national problem. It takes our current patchwork of programs and strengthens them, setting national standards, and calling for investment in not for profit housing, housing for the homeless, housing for those with special needs, and sustainable and green homes. It is about rights and dignity, and it is about time that we act.

For those who are not swayed by the argument that housing is a human right, let me take a minute to make the economic argument as well. Part of it is ably articulated by the Conservative Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. In speaking about the need to bring Canada out of the devastating recession in which we find ourselves, he said:

Step one...is to create jobs and to create them now. Because of the economic downturn, many people in the construction industry are out of work. Building and renovating homes is a powerful way to get the economy moving again because it puts those people to work quickly and because most of the materials and supplies that are involved in home construction are made right here in Canada.

Of course, he is absolutely right. However, rhetoric does not build residences, dollars do. Instead of investing in a comprehensive housing strategy, the Conservatives have cut their support for the few programs that still remained. In budget 2006, the Conservatives cut \$200 million of the \$1.5 billion that the NDP had secured in its amendment to the last Liberal budget through Bill C-48.

In May 2006, the Conservatives cut a further \$770 million from the energuide program, which helped home owners retrofit their homes to save both money and the environment. In September 2006, the Conservatives cut \$45 million in administration of CMHC programs. In December 2006, the Conservatives then took the axe to SCPI. Even when pressure from the public and the NDP forced them to reverse their decision on energuide in February 2007, the Conservatives never did restore the \$550 million that was designated to help low-income families.

The government's entire record on housing is one of wilful neglect and abandonment. It has disgraced Canada on the international stage. More importantly, it has undermined the ability of Canadian families to survive this recession. A family under stress from job loss or underemployment should not have to face the additional challenges of finding suitable housing for themselves and their children. Children deserve the stability that comes from being safely housed.

Best practices research confirms that building assets, which include savings accounts, home ownership and stable rental housing, promote family stability, give people a stake in their communities, encourage political participation, enable families to plan for retirement, and pass resources on to future generations. Investing in a national housing strategy that focuses on a continuum of options, from social housing to affordable home ownership, will help families build for their future while ensuring prosperous communities.

Private Members' Business

I believe that is a goal that all Canadians would support. The road to reaching that goal begins with the adoption of the bill that is before us today. Bill C-304 mandates a national strategy for a national problem. It is about rights. It is about dignity. It is about investments. It is about jobs. It is about time.

● (1805)

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while I am not opposed to a national strategy on housing, I am opposed to the way this bill is written.

I think people come to this House and after a time they think that because they say something it is true.

I want to comment on my friend from the Liberal Party's comment, who said the Liberals were just getting ready to put in a strategy after 13 years, that they were so close, and that this government scuttled that and it did not happen.

Once again, just because members stand in the House and say something, that does not make it so.

I look at my friends across the way from the NDP. We were talking about free trade with Colombia yesterday and they were talking about numbers that were totally fictitious. They were talking about things that happened before the president actually came into power in Colombia.

But we are not here to talk about free trade with Colombia today; we are here to talk about this housing strategy bill.

I certainly want to thank the member for Vancouver East for raising this issue. This is an important issue. At the human resources committee right now we are working on looking at a poverty study, and housing is an important element of that. It is something that does inspire a great deal of passion, and I can see why. Canada's housing industry is a powerful engine for economic growth and job creation in this country. Having a safe, affordable place to call home is vital to the health and well-being of each and every Canadian family in the communities we live in.

However, in the face of all the heat that inspires this issue, I think it is important that we create some light. While I thank the hon. member, for Vancouver East for raising this issue, I cannot support this legislation, for the simple reason that the government is already deeply engaged in delivering most of the items mentioned in this bill. Additionally, this government is already providing housing options in a way that respects the jurisdictions of the provinces and territories while reflecting the unique needs of local communities.

I would like to use my time today to address two of the key issues the hon. member has chosen not to address in this bill.

The first is the underlying assumption that Canada is not carrying out many of the items that are identified. That is simply wrong.

The fact is that our government already has a multi-pronged approach that provides housing. Our government is providing housing for Canadians from all walks of life and in all parts of the country. We already have an extensive framework of legislation policy and programs in place at each of the national, provincial, territorial and municipal levels. We already have established a clear federal-provincial-territorial consultation process, with rotating co-

chairs and a strong working relationship. We are already working closely with the provinces and the territories, municipalities, first nation groups and housing organizations across the country to address each of the needs identified in the bill. This action-based multi-pronged approach has allowed for the housing needs of 80% of Canadian households to be met in the marketplace while offering targeted assistance to those whose needs are being met privately.

Unlike the strategy advocated by this bill, this approach respects the jurisdictions of the provinces and territories to administer their housing programs in ways that work best for individual Canadians and communities.

Bill C-304 does not recognize this jurisdiction, nor does it recognize the differences in local needs that require solutions. Instead, Bill C-304 would provide the federal minister with a free rein to implement a national housing strategy in any way the minister saw fit, irrespective of the needs of our provincial and territorial partners.

How should the provinces and territories interpret proposed subclause 4(2) of the bill, giving the federal minister the power to take any measures the minister considers appropriate to implement the proposed legislation? The attitude implicit in this clause is naive at best, and it aims for a one-size-fits-all strategy when in fact one size fits none.

The second area I would like to focus on is the litany of errors and inconsistencies made in the House in April by my hon. colleague and other members of the opposition who rose in support of this bill.

The member for Vancouver East stated that about three million Canadian households live in housing insecurity. That statement is simply inaccurate. However, Bill C-304 does not even go so far as to define what that means. By housing insecurity, we must surmise that the hon. member is referring to the accepted definition of "core housing need". If this is indeed the case, the latest figures show roughly half the numbers suggested by my hon. colleague are indeed in core housing need.

My hon. colleague also stated that Canada has fallen behind other countries in the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in developing a national housing strategy, and that is wrong. Canada's approach is actually very similar to that of the vast majority of G8 and OECD countries, including the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

● (1810)

The hon. member also suggests that our government has never recognized the need for a homelessness strategy. While this may play to the NDP caucus, the facts inconveniently get in the way of the hon. member's story. In 2007, the national homelessness partnering strategy was launched under this Conservative government. In 2008, our government approved five year funding of nearly \$2 billion for housing and homelessness programs.

Private Members' Business

Last, the member thanked those organizations she says are supporting this bill, but she failed to take into account the long list of organizations that are opposed to this unnecessary bureaucratic legislation. This includes the Canada West Foundation, in the member's own backyard, which has advocated for a decentralized approach.

Clearly this is a more sensible approach whereby the provinces and territories, supported by federal funds, are responsible for affordable housing and homelessness. This is precisely the opposite of the rigid and arbitrary national approach advocated by this bill.

The member for Brampton West also spoke in favour of this bill, claiming the federal government cut \$200 million from affordable housing in budget 2006. However, the facts show that in budget 2006, we included an investment of \$1.4 billion in affordable housing trusts to the provinces and territories.

The hon. member went on to accuse this government of cancelling the supporting communities partnership initiative in 2006, but again ignored the national homelessness partnership that we announced shortly thereafter.

Our government is already making significant investments in housing in the areas mentioned in Bill C-304. This bill provides nothing new beyond a promise of endless discussion, additional bureaucracy and ideological pandering. This government prefers timely actions with defined and measurable goals.

In partnership with provinces and territories, first nations and other stakeholders, our Conservative government is taking meaningful action across the entire range of housing requirements and needs.

Mortgage loan insurance through CMHC helps provide mortgage financing to Canadians, wherever they live, at the best possible terms and conditions. Our mortgage securitization activities also help to ensure there is an ample supply of low-cost funding for housing. Access to homeownership is supported through the home buyers' plan and the GST rebate to reduce the cost of a new home.

The \$300 million first nations market housing fund is helping to create home ownership opportunities on reserve. The fund was launched in May 2008 by our government. For low to moderate income households, the federal government provides \$1.7 billion in subsidies annually to some 625,000 existing social housing units.

Furthermore, in 2006 this government made a strategic investment of \$1.4 billion to help Canadians find safe, sound and affordable housing and increase the supply of transitional and supportive housing in all provinces and territories.

CMHC's renovation programs help low-income households, landlords, people with disabilities and aboriginal Canadians bring their homes up to acceptable health and safety standards.

Building on these concrete initiatives, in September 2008 the government committed more than \$1.9 billion over the next five years to improve and build new affordable housing and help the homeless.

In addition, Canada's economic action plan commits another \$2 billion over two years to build new social housing, repair and retrofit existing social housing and help create stronger communities.

Should Bill C-304 become law, the federal government would be exposed to a risk of undetermined, significant long-term spending in addition to the extensive investments we have already made.

The provision of credit without discrimination to all Canadians would, for example, make the government liable for subprime loans. In terms of housing subsidies, the annual cost is estimated to be over \$3.5 billion.

I, for one, cannot support this private member's bill the way it is, first and foremost for the reason that the Government of Canada is already deeply engaged in the precise activities the bill proposes be addressed.

We heard today during question period the concern of what Canada is doing in terms of poverty. I find it interesting, once again, that when we look at what the conference board says on Canada's failing grade on poverty, it relates back to what happened in previous governments.

This government is not talking about doing things; this government is actually getting things done.

For these and many other reasons, I urge the House to reject the bill.

• (1815)

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to Bill C-304, the secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing bill. It was introduced by my colleague from Vancouver East, and I thank her for again keeping this issue of the need for a national housing program before the House and before Canadians. She has done great work on this issue, especially since she was first elected in 1997. One of the first things she undertook was a cross-country tour and survey. She had meetings with community groups and community leaders to determine the exact housing needs of Canadians, which were very serious back in 1997 and have not improved significantly since that time.

One of the things that came out of her work was her first housing bill of rights. That was a very detailed piece of legislation that had been debated in the House on other occasions. It was not successful, but we kept reintroducing it, hoping to convince members from all corners of the House of the importance of this kind of legislation.

The housing bill of rights would have established the right to safe, adequate, secure housing as a basic human right in Canada, in law in Canada. It was excellent legislation, and I hope the day comes when we have a government that is willing to implement a housing program, which ensures housing for all Canadians as a basic human right.

Private Members' Business

Sadly, that bill has had to undergo some readjustment, given the requirements of royal recommendations. I am glad, Mr. Speaker, that you ruled earlier that this latest version of the bill does not require a royal recommendation, that it does not require significant new spending and that it is merely a call to the government to implement and to develop a national housing program. It offers advice about how that can be accomplished.

It is not the bill that I know the member for Vancouver East had envisioned. It is in fact not the bill she prepared. It is not the bill that we in the NDP would ultimately like to see, but it is an important step, given the restrictions that apply to private members' legislation in our parliamentary system.

The bill would require the government to convene a national conference of provinces, aboriginal communities, municipalities and other interested parties to develop a national housing strategy that would provide secure, adequate, affordable, accessible and not-for-profit housing for Canadians, which is a very important step. It is a good process. It is a process that also recognizes the interests of Quebec. It also recognizes the interests of aboriginal and first nations communities and communities of the Inuit as well. It sets out a process that will help us develop the kind of program we need nationally in Canada.

When United Nations officials and officials from other countries come to Canada to look at the housing situation, they are absolutely appalled by what they see, and that is a great embarrassment. A couple of years ago the UN Special Rapporteur said that he saw our housing as a national crisis. He could not understand how a country as wealthy as Canada could have a housing situation as dismal as it was. It is not an appropriate situation and it does require our attention. We did not get that from the previous Liberal government and we do not have it from the Conservative government.

The previous Conservative speaker tried to make a case for what the Conservative government was doing. The reality is if the Conservatives had not come in to government when they did and been able to spend the money that the New Democrats fought for from the previous Liberal government, they would have precious little to show in terms of new acts and in terms of housing. The Conservatives take credit for housing money, money for a national housing program that the New Democrats fought for in the 38th Parliament. It was a one-off. It was not an ongoing program, but that was the money the Conservatives were able to spend and put into a housing program. Now they claim they have done something. I do not think it would have been their inclination to go down that road if the way had not already been established by the action of New Democrats in that previous Parliament.

● (1820)

The economic stimulus budget does have some money for housing projects, which is an important engine for economic development and would help us get out of the recession, but it is a one-off kind of thing. It is not an ongoing national housing program attached to a national housing strategy, and that is what we need. We are still falling short. We are still failing to meet the requirements of a national housing program.

If people were to come to my riding of Burnaby—Douglas and talk to people who work on the issue of homelessness and housing in

my local community, they would hear that one of the things that is absolutely necessary to address the housing needs of Canadians is a national housing program and the involvement of the federal government in solving this crisis.

In fact, if people were to go into any community across Canada and talk to the people who work on this issue, who work with people who are under-housed, who live in deteriorating housing, who live in overcrowded conditions and who do not have homes, they would hear that one of the key things to solving the problem is the involvement of the federal government.

In the last Parliament, when I held the position of NDP spokesperson on housing for a short time, I accumulated a stack of new reports from every corner of this country. The initial recommendation in all of those reports was the need for a national housing program and the involvement of the Government of Canada to solve the housing and homelessness problems in Canada. Every report from every community from coast to coast to coast made clear the importance of that.

I know the people on the Burnaby task force on homelessness appreciate the importance of the federal government's involvement in solving the problem of housing and homelessness in Canada. They have been impressed with the work of the member for Vancouver East in putting forward solutions and tangible ways of going about ensuring that the program exists and goes some way to addressing the ongoing need for housing in Canada. As I mentioned earlier, report after report from international observers have said the same thing. The UN rapporteur called it a national crisis in Canada.

The other important feature of this bill is that not only would it require the federal government to produce a national housing strategy but it would require the federal government to do that in consultation with other levels of government in Canada.

The sad reality is that the Conservative government has refused to participate in any provincial housing meetings since it came to power. The federal government refused to attend the national housing summit with the provinces and territories just this last August. In fact, it has not attended a national housing summit since September 2005. That is unacceptable. We need to ensure our federal government is involved in those discussions and this legislation would make that a requirement.

The Wellesley Institute, which has done great work on housing and homelessness in Canada, is about to release its 2009 state of the nation's housing report. It will draw our attention yet again to the needs of Canadians for housing. That report will draw our attention to a number of statistical situations that exist here in Canada. It notes that Statistics Canada has shown that 705,000 households in Canada live in overcrowded conditions where too many people share a small space. It estimates that attached to that, two million women, men and children now live below the national occupancy standards.

We know that is an important factor in the H1N1 situation. Overcrowded housing makes it possible for the virus to flourish in those kinds of conditions. That is a good example of why we need to pay attention to housing.

Private Members' Business

More than three million Canadians are paying too much for housing and live in situations of needing housing, and that needs to be addressed as well.

The bottom line is that a national housing program in Canada needs to be ongoing and it needs to be a program that actually builds homes. That is the need and that is what has been missing. That was what was missing with the Liberal government and what is missing with the Conservative government. That is what New Democrats would do instead.

People across the country who work on this issue know that we need a long-term national housing program that would actually build homes for Canadians.

• (1825)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first of all I would like to say thank you to my colleagues in the House who today spoke in support of Bill C-304 and also thank you to the Speaker for his ruling on whether or not this bill required a royal recommendation.

It was written very carefully to avoid a royal recommendation and I appreciate the ruling from the Speaker today which will allow the bill to, hopefully, pass second reading, go to committee and then come back to the House for a final vote.

I have to say that as a signatory to the United Nations International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Canada has an obligation to provide adequate housing for all its citizens. However, we have to note that in the past decade, as my colleagues have pointed out, we have fallen perilously behind on our commitments, leaving about three million Canadian households in housing insecurity and with thousands of others who are homeless.

The bill I believe is a much needed pan-Canadian framework from which to address homelessness and invest in social, cooperative and other non-profit housing solutions.

I want to affirm again to my colleagues in the Bloc that I understand their concerns with the bill, and I wish to commit again that it is the intent and the commitment of the NDP that should the bill go through second reading and into committee, we will ensure that there is an amendment along the lines of recognizing the unique nature of the jurisdiction of Quebec with regard to social housing in Quebec, and, notwithstanding any other provision of the act, that the Government of Quebec may choose to be exempted from the application of the bill, and that should there be a transfer of funds that it may choose to be exempted but shall receive in full any transfer payment arising from the implementation of the strategy. I give that commitment that we will seek that in the committee, and I know that the Bloc members will support that.

It is very disappointing to hear again that the Conservatives reject the bill and characterize it as a liability. How could the provision of housing be a liability for goodness' sake? However, I did want to let the members across the way know that since the first hour of debate, the bill has had tremendous support across the country.

I want to thank my colleague, the member for Halifax, the NDP housing critic, who has done tremendous work on the bill. We have presented hundreds of petitions with thousands and thousands of

signatures in the House, from right across the country in support of the bill. We have organizations like the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada; StreetLevel: The National Round Table on Poverty and Homelessness here in Ottawa, which are supporting this bill and urging their members across the country to support it; the MultiFaith Alliance to End Homelessness in Toronto; The Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group in Kitchener. We have mayors across the country, from Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson; Victoria; Sudbury Mayor John Rodriguez; Tracadie-Sheila; Maisonnette Sainte-Marie-Saint-Raphael; Petit Rocher. The list of municipalities that at the end of the day deal with this crisis in their own backyard is staggering. That is why they are supporting the bill.

Organizations like the Canadian AIDS Society and the Wellesley Institute, which my colleague mentioned earlier, have done very fine work on bringing forward the research and the issues around the crisis of housing in Canada.

We have other organizations such as the Salvation Army, which has called for a national housing strategy in its report. It states that poverty should not be a life sentence.

We have Campaign 2000. We have the 2010 Homelessness Hunger Strike Relay. The organizations are growing and growing in terms of supporting the bill.

It is just outrageous that the Conservatives are somehow still saying that they see the bill as a liability and as something they will not support.

I hope very much as we approach the vote, when we return from our constituency week that a majority of members of this place will have heard the message from their own constituents that this is a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed in our country. The right to housing, the right to adequate, safe, secure, affordable housing is a fundamental human right. We are committed to working on this until we actually get that achieved in this country.

The bill is one step in that process and I very much look forward to the support from the members of the House so that we can get this bill through. We want to get it into committee so that we can look at appropriate amendments. I would even hope that some of the Conservative members will finally see the light of day and look at the organizations that are supporting the bill and recognize that it is in the interests and needs of their constituents too, those who need this bill, who need a national housing strategy to finally be developed in this country.

• (1830)

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 6:30 p.m., the time provided for debate has expired.

[English]

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Adjournment Proceedings

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Pursuant to Standing Order 93 the division stands deferred until Wednesday, September 30, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[*Translation*]

PUBLIC SERVICE

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in 1983, the Canadian government made a formal commitment to fairly distribute federal government jobs between Ottawa and Gatineau. It committed to establishing 25% of federal jobs on the Gatineau side, and the other 75% on the Ottawa side. This was calculated on a per capita basis.

This type of balance would make it possible to share the wealth between Gatineau and Ottawa.

Thus, the City of Gatineau could collect the municipal taxes that would result from the 6,218 extra jobs it is entitled to. People would move to Gatineau. This would be in addition to the revenue from municipal taxes from the federal buildings that would be built in Gatineau for those extra federal employees to work in. More Quebecers from Gatineau would work in their own city. With respect to the environment and car traffic, there would be less north-south traffic on the bridges crossing the beautiful Ottawa River.

Since 1983, we have been short of the mark. Little concrete action has been taken to establish a balance between the two cities. In 2007, the distribution was still just as unfair to Gatineau, since the federal government job rate in Gatineau was only 20%, which is 5% short. We are talking about 6,218 federal jobs in Gatineau.

When we talk about federal jobs, we mean all federal employees in departments, government agencies and crown corporations.

The 1983 promise goes back to the days of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, over a quarter of a century ago.

When it comes to this important issue, we must continually point out that the 25:75 ratio applies to jobs, not federal buildings, as the current Conservative minister responsible for the Outaouais, the member for Pontiac, would have us believe.

Maria Fitzpatrick, Public Service Alliance of Canada Regional Executive Vice-President for the National Capital Region agrees. This is what she said in *Le Droit* on April 27, 2009:

What the government said [in 1983], and what then became a commitment on the part of each successive government, was that one federal government job in four had to be on the Quebec side to ensure balanced economic development on both sides of the Ottawa River.

Warehouses are all well and good, but the real goal is jobs because they create a ripple effect in the regional economy...

There is still work to be done...

We are concerned about the Conservative minister responsible for the Outaouais, the member for Pontiac, because his flip-flops and hesitations will probably cause senior managers to think that the status quo with respect to allocation of office space is fine.

Gatineau's economy is entitled to its fair share of economic spin-off from the federal government's activities. The Conservative minister responsible for the Outaouais, the member for Pontiac, should acknowledge that and make sure everyone knows it.

It is clear that the federal government has not always kept its promise, nor is it doing so now.

●(1835)

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to address the question from the hon. member opposite concerning the federal government presence in Gatineau. There appears to be some confusion about what the ratio of 75:25 refers to. The 75:25 ratio refers to the ratio of accommodation space in Ottawa versus Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

The federal government is doing everything it can to achieve an office space ratio of 75:25 in the national capital region. In recent years, the office space ratio for the PWGSC portfolio has been 77:23.

[*English*]

In September 2006, we announced an action plan to meet the target by acquiring four buildings in Gatineau. We intend to meet our office space ratio target of 75:25 by 2012-13.

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring a real and viable presence for the federal public service in Gatineau. However, I have to wonder if the member opposite has a real and viable presence in that city himself.

The hon. member complains that there are 27 research centres in Ottawa and none in Gatineau. That is simply not true. The fact is there are two federal government science facilities in Gatineau, both operated by Library and Archives Canada: one is the Preservation Centre and the other is the Archival Processing Centre. These are not trivial institutions. I would say they are quite central to preserving the past and future of Canada's historical legacy. I suggest the hon. member drive by these facilities that he claims do not exist and get to know the city he represents.

Let me also remind the hon. member that while Treasury Board is the employer of the core public administration, each federal department or agency is responsible for shaping its own workforce.

Adjournment Proceedings

[Translation]

That said, the distribution of federal employees between the two cities is more or less equivalent to the 75:25 office space ratio.

[English]

I would also remind the hon. member that Quebec means all regions of Quebec and that the Minister of Public Works is analyzing the presence of the federal government not only throughout Quebec, but in all provinces with an eye on fairness.

Finally, the hon. member says he is concerned about job creation in Gatineau. How can he be? He is the same member whose party voted against the economic action plan which is supporting jobs and building futures in every region of the country, Quebec and Outaouais included. Our government has demonstrated time and time again that we are responsive and responsible. We will continue to act in that manner.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Speaker, this just goes to show once again that they do not understand anything. When we talk about the 75:25 ratio, we are talking about jobs, not buildings. The research centres come under the National Research Council of Canada. The government needs to stop denying the truth once and for all. There are no federal research centres in Gatineau, but there are 27 in Ottawa. And those 27 research centres are served by 200 small and medium-sized businesses in Ottawa.

Federal goods and services procurement breaks down to 1.4% for Gatineau and 98.6% for Ottawa. When it comes to Canadian Heritage funding for festivals, 3% goes to Gatineau and 97% to Ottawa. The federal government refused to provide financial support for L'Outaouais en fête.

Given all this, including the fact that for 27 years we have been waiting for the Science and Technology Museum in Gatineau, it can hardly be said that Gatineau is treated equitably.

● (1840)

[English]

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Speaker, the national capital accommodation strategy and the 75:25 ratio will deliver value to taxpayers while contributing to sensible and smart growth in Ottawa and Gatineau. We are on pace to meet the ratio in the next two to three years. The government has already announced it will be acquiring four more buildings in Gatineau.

While the Bloc members continue to be the number one whiners, we continue to achieve results for Quebeckers and Canadians.

AGRICULTURE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hog crisis in Canada continues to worsen with the government offering desperate farmers to either acquire more debt or quit the industry. The question I asked on May 15 was very specific: Is the government going to come to the assistance of Canada's hog industry? The answer then and the actions of the government to date clearly offer a resounding no.

This is an industry that contributes \$7.7 billion in economic activity, 70,000 jobs and \$2.1 billion in wages. We are now losing

hog producers daily. Whereas we started the year with 8,310 producers, down 30% from 2006, those numbers are dropping daily, and the government fails to act other than to provide more debt to producers. Hog producers are ending up with lost hope and lost dreams.

When federal and provincial governments over the last 30 years asked farmers to take up the challenge of increasing efficiencies, increasing production and increasing exports and contributing to Canada's balance of trade, farmers stepped up to the plate and took up the challenge. They are among the most efficient producers in the world. Now that they have done all that and contributed to the economic activity of this country, having done what governments asked them to do, the federal government is telling them to face the difficulty on their own. These were events that were beyond the producers' control.

This is an industry which clearly the Conservative government has decided is not worth saving or really worth assisting. That is sad. What is worse is that the program the government is now offering farmers is not the opportunity to move forward with any increased cash flow. What it has offered producers is an opportunity where it tells them that it will guarantee them a loan at the bank, but first they must pay back the advance payment program money they received last year from the government, which is really unsecured funds.

In effect, the government is involving itself in a scam. It is a scam that is seeing the men at Treasury Board and the Department of Finance paid off while producers either have the same amount of debt or more debt with the lending institutions in this country. That is absolutely unacceptable. Who continues to lose in this process while the government gets paid? It is hog producers in this country. That is awful. It is nothing but a scam.

The consequences are severe. We are losing hog producers right across Canada. They are facing financial ruin and are leaving the industry, all because of events beyond their control. Instead of standing up for Canadian producers, the government is basically allowing them to be sold out.

Part of the reason they are in trouble are the actions of COOL in the United States. The Canadian government ought to be putting money out there, showing the U.S. that it is going to be standing by Canadian producers and not allow an illegal trade action by the United States to drive them out of business.

I ask the minister tonight to come forward with a realistic solution and help Canada's hog producers financially.

● (1845)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member should be ashamed of himself for polarizing and politicizing the crisis in which pork farmers find themselves.

I would like to read a quote about our recent actions. This comes from Jurgen Preugschas, the president of the Canadian Pork Council, who stated:

Both the Pork Council and the federal government understand the urgency... Both organizations are committed to getting money into the hands of producers as soon as humanly possible.

That is where I am starting from. This Conservative government is committed to supporting the Canadian hog and pork industry as it continues to face challenges affecting its competitiveness. Industry stakeholders understand that competitiveness is key to the survival of the Canadian hog and pork industry and, in response, the industry and our government are taking the necessary steps to adapt to the new market realities.

On August 15, 2009 the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food announced the creation of three new programs to provide additional financial assistance to the hog and pork sector: first, a \$17 million international pork marketing fund for market research, promotion and access initiatives to find new customers and new markets for Canadian pork products; second, long-term loans with government backed credit that financial institutions can offer to allow viable hog operations to restructure their businesses; and third, a hog farm transition program to allow producers to tender bids for the amount of funding they need to transition out of the hog industry and cease hog production for at least three years. This program will invest up to \$75 million to gradually reduce production and oversupply issues.

This Conservative government is working closely with the pork industry and financial institutions to finalize program details.

In addition to the new measures announced in January, this government announced a stay of default on advance payment plan advances issued to hog and cattle producers during the 2008-09 production period. This means that no repayments will be due before September 30, 2010 and the first \$100,000 of each producer's advance will continue to be interest free.

Also, this Conservative government made a \$50 million commitment to strengthen the slaughterhouse sector in various regions of the country to support the livestock industry in budget 2009. This investment will help to ensure that Canadian pork producers have viable and sustainable slaughter options available to them.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I have just a couple of points to make, Mr. Speaker.

The \$17 million will actually be used to promote American pork on Canadian store shelves. That is what will happen to that money.

Adjournment Proceedings

The transition program taking people out of the industry is really a reverse auction, where producers bid against each other for whoever can get it the cheapest and drive them out of the industry. More loans is not the answer.

For the parliamentary secretary to spout the words of the farm leadership is, indeed, sweet, because to a great extent the farm leadership in this country has been neutered by the fear and intimidation of the minister and the Prime Minister.

The minister goes so far as to ask the farm leadership to come out with a release and support the government and it knows it changed its first proposal because the minister threatened he would close the door on it. That is not responding to the needs of the industry. That is the minister playing games with the livelihoods and the economic reality of those producers on the farm. That is a sad commentary on this government.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, again, shame on the member for insulting the leadership of our farm organizations. The leaders of these farm organizations many times are actual farmers today, including pork farmers.

Let me quote Curtis Littlejohn of Ontario Pork who said, "These three programs", the three that I just mentioned, "provide options and choices for producers and ultimately will help to right-size the industry".

I also underline that the Canadian Pork Council supports our measures, as does the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and other groups and associations.

This shows the important co-operation and consultation that our government has done. This is something the Liberals did not do. Oftentimes they delivered either no programming to help farmers or programming that completely missed the mark. Shame on the Liberals. We are taking action for our pork farmers.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): 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.)

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