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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, February 2, 2012

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

CONTENTS

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

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, February 2, 2012

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian delegation of the Canada-France Interparliamentary Association respecting its participation at the 38th annual meeting of the Canada-France Interparliamentary Association held in Paris, Normandy, Pays de la Loire, France, August 31 to September 7, 2011.

* * *

NATIONAL VITAMIN D DAY ACT

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-388, An Act to establish a National Vitamin D Day.

He said: Mr. Speaker, abundant scientific research in the past decade has underscored the vital role of vitamin D in boosting immune response and reducing the risk of serious diseases including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, multiple sclerosis and even viral infections such as the flu. The B.C. Cancer Agency recommends 1,500 international units to reduce the risk of cancer. A recent study suggests health care savings in the billions of dollars by increasing Canadians' levels of vitamin D.

This bill would expand the initiative by municipalities from Vancouver to St. John's. It would establish November 2 as National Vitamin D Day. Everybody ought to know.

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

* * *

PETITIONS

ELECTRO-MOTIVE DIESEL

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from several of my constituents and members of

the community in regard to the lockout of Electro-Motive workers by Progress Rail, Caterpillar.

The company refuses to negotiate in good faith. It has asked the workers to take a more than 50% cut in their wages and a significant cut to their benefits. It is seeking to undermine their pensions that they have paid into all of their lives.

The workers are petitioning the Government of Canada to investigate the conditions of sale of Electro-Motive to Progress Rail, investigate the bad faith bargaining by Progress Rail, award employment insurance benefits to locked out workers and request that a constructive dismissal package be made available.

These workers have devoted their lives to making this a profitable corporation. Profitable it is; \$1.14 billion in the last quarter and profits are up 60%. These workers need and demand justice.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from people all over Ontario who are concerned with the proposed mega-quarry in Melancthon Township in Dufferin County. If implemented, it would be the largest open pit quarry in Canada at over 2,300 acres.

The petitioners are concerned with a number of things. The proposed mega-quarry threatens the Grand and Nottawasaga river watersheds, including various freshwater fish species. The petitioners are asking that the Government of Canada conduct an environmental assessment under the authority of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act on the Highland Companies' proposed mega-quarry development

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of people in Newfoundland and Labrador who have indicated their concerns about global warming. This group represents the Canadian interfaith call for leadership and action on climate change.

Business of Supply

The petitioners recognize that we are in a serious situation in our country, that we have seen such change in our climate and that it impacts on all Canadians. They are asking that governments get involved and take this issue seriously, do what needs to be done to deal with climate change and not wait until things get worse than they already are.

On behalf of the individuals who have signed this petition, I am asking the government to take what is happening within our environment much more seriously and to put in place some kind of leadership to deal with global warming.

IMMIGRATION

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I present a petition that deals with the Minister of Immigration's super visa. Members may recall the minister announced the super visa back in November of last year. It is turning into a super disappointment.

The petitioners call upon the government to look at ways by which the super visa could be made more universal for individuals who do not have the money to bring their parents and grandparents to Canada for a visit. The health insurance requirement is unrealistic. It is adding great problems in terms of people being accepted.

The petitioners call upon the government to re-evaluate and change the super visa so that the multiple entry visa can be more affordable to all individuals who are living in Canada.

* * *

• (1010)

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

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—OLD AGE SECURITY

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP) moved:

That the House reject calls by the Prime Minister to balance the Conservative deficit on the backs of Canada's seniors by means such as raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security and call on the government to make the reduction and eventual elimination of seniors' poverty a cornerstone of the next budget.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek.

Today's motion is about seniors' poverty. The NDP has taken a clear position on the conjectures and hypotheses about old age security that the Conservative Party leader raised during his speech in Davos. We need an open, honest, transparent debate so that we

can start working together right now to plan changes to old age security, the guaranteed income supplement, and all other aspects of Canadian pension plans. Our seniors need us when they retire.

I would like to give a brief overview of the pension plans and the social safety net in place for seniors in need. First, there are people who work and who have the opportunity to participate in a registered pension plan. Some people also have the opportunity to put money in an RRSP or in another fund that enables them to save for retirement. Naturally, we are pleased that they can do so.

Then there is the Canada pension plan. This plan is offered to all Canadians and provides them with income when they retire. However, this plan is not always enough to keep seniors from living in poverty. In that case, seniors have access to old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. These programs help seniors live in dignity and keep them from suffering a life of poverty. That is why we are concerned about the vague remarks the Prime Minister made in Davos recently. If old age security is either cut or delayed, this would have very serious repercussions on our society.

I would now like to read an email I received from one of my constituents this week.

[*English*]

This constituent wrote, "Should the electoral headlines have read "[Prime Minister] to cancel OAS, CPP", he would never be sitting in the Prime Minister's chair today. I am a self-employed worker owning a small business. I already bear the burden of constantly increasing costs and reduced profits. Five years ago my household budget for food was \$700 monthly, and we are currently down to \$400. We have no dental plan, no private medical insurance, no RRSPs, no company or private pension and I am 58 years old. As I age, I have fewer breaks, less services, no corporate tax cuts and now I am threatened to have no pension."

• (1015)

[*Translation*]

I think what this person is trying to tell us is that he is worried because he was promised certain things, because he has worked his entire life and he is seeing cuts to programs and services. Of course, he will definitely have access to some sort of income when he retires, but he is right to worry about his retirement in a few years.

The issue of poverty among seniors should concern us all, and we cannot cut programs arbitrarily. We need to have an open debate, which we will do here today. I look forward to hearing the intentions of all the members. For instance, if we were to push back the age for receiving old age security, this would primarily affect the most financially vulnerable seniors. What kind of impact would that have? If we look at old age security as an isolated program, there would be a number of negative effects and the most vulnerable seniors would suffer. But let us look at the overall picture.

Business of Supply

Poverty among seniors affects many other things, for example, our health care system. Seniors who do not have enough to eat, who do not have heating and cannot pay for medication use our health care system more, which merely transfers the problem somewhere else. Here is another example. Some people can continue to work until they are 67. Good for them. Some of them want to do so. But some cannot. Remember that when we are talking about old age security, for example, we are talking about seniors who do not necessarily have RRSPs or a registered pension plan. We are talking about seniors who are the most likely to live in poverty. These seniors worked all their lives on their feet all day as cashiers; they worked in warehouses and factories. Their arms are tired and they have likely sustained a number of injuries. Perhaps they will be able to continue working at 65, but most likely they will not.

What will happen to these seniors who are unable to work longer? They will have to seek assistance elsewhere. Where? They may have to seek social assistance from the provinces, for example. What is the government doing once again? It is transferring the problem and sticking the provinces with the bill. This is not the way to find a real solution to a problem or to overcome a societal obstacle. We have to look at the bigger picture, seriously consider the issue, have a debate and listen. All parties in the House must be heard, but so must the people who work with seniors every day. We must listen to seniors who have needs. We must listen to the future generations. We have been talking a lot about these future generations since the beginning, and I am going to come back to them.

I would like to mention the choice that we, as a society, are facing today. Clearly, the government has plans to change programs that help seniors. We still do not know how. We hope that we will know soon and we hope that we will be able to participate in a discussion before the government presents us with a fait accompli. However, the Prime Minister and the Conservative Party are saying that this is a crisis situation. First, they are using skewed data that make the situation seem much more alarming than it actually is. They are also saying that this is a crisis situation for future generations, a situation that is not viable in the long term. They are presenting these cuts as though they are the only solution. However, such is not the case. We have a choice. It is not true that we must cut services and programs. We can do something different. We have a choice. We have resources and we have alternatives.

What the NDP is saying is that we should first start a dialogue and listen to what people and experts have to say. Then we could start improving the Canada pension plan. This would require a little more investment, but as I was saying earlier, we are not necessarily getting further ahead by cutting services or programs since we will end up paying the price in the long run and it will be a high price. Why not look at the big picture and see where we can make strategic investments in order to reduce the overall cost? There are other solutions.

• (1020)

What is often presented to us as an inevitability, a result of the economic crisis or the aging population, is not an inevitability. It is a choice among so many others that the government is making. It is important to address this.

I would like to say a few words about the so-called best interest of future generations. We are told at every turn that the population is aging and that we have to do something for the sake of future generations. Allow me to say that I am part of that future generation. I do not intend to retire in the next few months or the next few years. Increasing the eligibility age for old age security does not affect me in the short term, but I am still worried. I am part of the future generation and I do not want these cuts to programs and services.

I believe we have a social choice to make today. Are we going to make further cuts to social programs and social services? Are we going to widen the gap between the rich and the poor? I say no. No, because that is not the Canada I want to grow old in. As a member of these future generations, I say we should think this through and make informed decisions that will benefit everyone.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to this particular NDP motion.

In his recent speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the Prime Minister suggested that, as a broad part of the social transformation, the Canadian retirement system should undergo significant changes. Government documents distributed to the media suggested at that time the possibility of changing the eligibility to collect OAS from 65 years to 67 years.

Following the Prime Minister's speech, which set off alarm bells across the country, the government quickly started backtracking on its own materials. Out came the almost obligatory cover statement assuring Canadian seniors that there would be no changes to the present benefits currently received by Canadian seniors. In addition, the government also repeated that the Canada pension plan was fully funded and in need of no change.

All I can say is that this is a rather classic tried and true Conservative tactic, "Don't worry, seniors, we'll never sell you out. You'll be just fine. It is your kids and your grandkids, those generations behind you, who will have to face the burden of our cuts, but don't you worry. You're okay".

Unfortunately for the Prime Minister and the government, Canadian seniors are not buying any of that. Conversations I have heard over the last few months, from government circles, from certain academia and from the mainstream media, seem to have been telling Canadians to prepare to work until 70 years of age.

These trial balloons remind me of a bully who, with a clenched fist, says that people will need to work until they are 70 years old. Then he smiles and says that they should not worry because he is just kidding. He tells them that they will only need to work until they are 67, and then, of course, people are supposed to feel relieved at that point. Somehow, Canadians are supposed to believe the government is doing them a favour. I can tell the House that the government will not do our seniors any favours when it comes to their pensions.

Business of Supply

Instead of tearing down our cherished retirement security program, New Democrats have been working hard for three years putting together a retirement security program designed to ensure that all Canadians are able to retire with dignity. To that end, we propose the phase-in of a doubling of the CPP over an extended period of time so that generations to come will have more of a sense of a foundation on which to retire.

Part of our plan would eliminate poverty among seniors by increasing the guaranteed income supplement. New Democrats will also create a national pension insurance program to protect existing pensions paid for out of premiums from the plan's sponsors.

New Democrats want to further protect existing pensions by ensuring that pensioners are among the creditors who are paid out of a company's remaining assets when it goes bankrupt.

What do we get from the government? We get talk of forcing seniors to work longer, a pooled registered pension plan that provides no security and, worse, the PRPP would have Canadians investing their retirement savings in the very same marketplace that caused such catastrophic losses in the value of RRSPs and other pension funds.

Unlike the CPP or private savings, the OAS is a universal pension that does not depend on retirees' work history or their participation in a registered pension plan or other savings plan. OAS, along with the GIS, has, over the years, made impressive gains in lowering, although not eliminating, poverty among seniors. Full OAS is based on residency and is available to Canadians who have lived here a minimum of 40 years. Partial OAS pensions are pro-rated for Canadians who have spent less of their lives in Canada. For example, if a person has lived in Canada for only 20 years, he or she would receive half of the monthly benefits, or, if a person has lived in Canada for 10 years, he or she would receive a quarter of the monthly OAS benefits.

Unlike CPP, which is funded through equal contributions from employers and employees, OAS and GIS are paid directly from government general revenues. High income seniors must also pay back some or all of their OAS benefit. The guaranteed income supplement is entirely means-tested and available only to our poorer seniors.

• (1025)

I will now talk about our more vulnerable seniors for a moment. Economist, Andrew Jackson, and others have noted that raising the age of eligibility by two years would especially impact low-income older workers. Today, people whose income is in the bottom 20% of the workforce, and I hesitate at this, they tend to die earlier than those in the top 20% because of the lives they live. Half of all lower income men, on average, will collect OAS-GIS cheques for a meagre 10 years.

Raising the retirement eligibility by two years would also have a negative impact on persons aged 65 and closing in on 65 who are in poor health and have difficulty working. At what cost? The latest actuarial report on the OAS-GIS projects that the number of recipients will increase from 4.9 million today to 9.3 million in 2030. However, the increase in total cost that is projected is actually much

more modest. Today's current level of 2.5% of GDP would become 3.5% in 2030. That is because our economy will continue to grow.

I would suggest that a cost of under 1% of GDP is a very small price to pay for maintaining basic retirement levels for all Canadians, especially the one in three seniors who have low incomes. Because many of these low income people are senior women who are not part of the paid labour force, the OAS and GIS are particularly important retirement instruments for them. Senior women are less likely than senior men to draw income from CPP, private pension plans, RRSPs or employment earnings. This makes universal programs like OAS-GIS particularly important to female seniors.

In 1927, when J.S. Woodsworth first envisioned OAS, he believed it was essential to have such a program to address seniors' poverty of the day. Today, we are being told by the government that the old age security program is unsustainable. Essentially, the government wants to restructure the entire Canadian retirement system because of what we see as a clearly affordable, short-run, short-term demographic change. This resulted from the gradual retirement of baby boomers, which actually started last year in 2011.

According to the government's own reports, the anticipated growth in cost is driven largely by the retirement of the baby boomers. Its own reports do not describe any longer term issues of sustainability. Therefore, in the long run, the current system is clearly affordable and will even be a smaller share of the budget than it is today following the decline in baby boomers. Simply put, in the medium run, this is a cost increase that Canadians can clearly afford.

While speaking at Davos, the Prime Minister scolded our European friends for their spending, so let us look at that for a moment. According to the OECD, total public social expenditures on pensions as a percentage of GDP is estimated at 4.7% in Canada. The equivalent average in OECD countries is more than 7%. Even crisis countries, such as Italy, pay 14%. Canada, in relation to that, pays one-third of what Italy pays. Australia, France and Greece spend roughly 12%. Germany, Poland and Portugal spend roughly 11%. Therefore, such comparisons to the troubled eurozone are simply not appropriate and are only used to create fear for our time-tested Canadian programs that they might be unsustainable.

In addition, it should also be noted that the Canadian public pensions, OAS, GIS and CPP, are not overly generous when compared to other OECD countries. In fact, a recent study ranks us 20th out of 30.

Business of Supply

The Prime Minister's priority is to spend billions of dollars on corporate tax giveaways while cutting support to Canadian seniors, particularly women, and that is wrong. We should be taking practical, affordable measures to lift every senior out of poverty by expanding the GIS, not making it worse by slashing the eligibility to OAS. New Democrats have been meeting with seniors' groups to talk about how seniors will be affected and work on the best ways to oppose these reckless Conservative cuts. A better option for Canadians is to expand the CPP.

• (1030)

In closing, in response to the Prime Minister's triumphant speech, economist Jim Stanford asked, "If Canada has been so wonderfully successful, why must we take money away from Canadian pensioners?"

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member has been here a number of years, as I have. I know that he sometimes speaks and then does not follow through with action.

I am wondering if this particular case is going to be the same as before when the Federation of Canadian Municipalities identified \$123 billion in infrastructure deficit and this Conservative government and the Prime Minister brought in \$45 billion in economic stimulus and infrastructure investments across the country, and the NDP and the member in particular voted against it.

We brought in income splitting for seniors and the NDP voted against that. We brought in increased benefits of \$2.3 billion per year for seniors and the NDP voted against that. We brought in the family caregiver tax credit, which the Canadian Caregiver Coalition thought was wonderful, and the NDP voted against that. We enhanced the GIS for over 680,000 seniors and the NDP voted against that.

The Prime Minister has been clear that it is not going to affect seniors, but is the member doing the same thing again?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Speaking of diversionary tactics, Madam Speaker, the member talked about \$123 billion in infrastructure. We would be thrilled if the government invested in infrastructure. We would be thrilled if it had a plan. It does not seem to.

The member talked about why we choose to vote against particular issues. When the government introduces omnibus bills and puts budgets together that are hundreds of pages in length and have many things in them that are detrimental to Canadians, the government can expect us to vote against them.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, in Manitoba over 7,000 seniors rely in part on food banks in order to sustain themselves. They are having to make difficult decisions quite often, whether to buy prescription drugs or food. At a time when one would think the government would be trying to lift seniors out of poverty and improving the quality of life for seniors, the government is saying it is committed to putting more seniors into poverty by making changes, such as increasing the age from 65 to 67.

I am wondering if the member would like to comment in terms of more seniors going into poverty because of government decisions today.

• (1035)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Madam Speaker, that is a very important question. If the government increases the eligibility by two years, it is going to take \$5,500 per year out of that income block for seniors. The people at the lower end, the people who are already on social assistance in our provinces are going to remain there two extra years. Social assistance pays far more, on average, across this country. The government would be taking \$10,000 from the neediest of Canadians if it did this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek for his excellent speech. I would like him to comment on the Conservative government's timing of this debate as well as its decision to drop this bomb in Davos before a group of millionaires and billionaires.

What does he make of it? We know that the statistics, taken from actuarial reports dating back to 1990 that were trotted out by the government, have been available for a long time. There is no excuse for not having included this issue in the government's platform. It makes us wonder about this hidden agenda—

The Deputy Speaker: I must allow enough time for the answer.

The member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek has 30 seconds left.

[*English*]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Madam Speaker, in my office I am getting phone calls from very angry seniors. They are saying very bluntly that had this been in the budget, had this part of it been in the platform in the last election, they would not have voted Conservative. They are absolutely offended that the Prime Minister would make these kinds of announcements outside Canada, on the world stage.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Souris—Moose Mountain.

I stand here in the House to provide some clarity on a significant demographic shift that is happening in our country. I will provide some detail on that in a moment, but first let me be very clear with the House and with Canadians. Over the past few days, the opposition has created, and indeed perpetuated, fear and confusion among Canadians. They are intentionally misleading Canadians, and particularly our seniors, about the old age security program and I would like to put an end to that today.

Let me confirm right now that our government will ensure the security of retirement benefits for Canadian seniors and for future generations. Specifically, as I have said in the House many times, seniors who are currently receiving benefits will not lose one cent because of any potential changes. Any changes to OAS will be implemented gradually and with substantial notice for all concerned.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

We will not jeopardize the well-being of our seniors. We want to protect the OAS and ensure that it is sustainable for future generations. Therefore, we are changing some measures in order to protect Canadians' pensions in the long term.

[English]

Let me put this in context. It is no secret that Canada's population is aging and that this is going to bring significant changes to our society. These are changes that we need to think through and that we need to prepare for right now.

Why is Canada aging? There are two main factors. First, our birth rate is low. In fact, it is less than the level needed to replace ourselves. At the same time, average life expectancy for each individual has gone up. The average Canadian can now expect to live to 81 years old.

When it comes to longevity, our country ranks among the world's leaders. We are living longer than ever and we are enjoying more years of good health as we get older. However, with fewer people being born and more people living longer, the age structure of our population is being significantly reshaped.

● (1040)

[Translation]

By 2030, 25% of the population will be over 65, compared to the current 14%. This new reality will have a serious impact on the labour force. With fewer workers, our productivity will decline, which could slow down our economic growth.

[English]

With fewer workers to pay taxes, we will also face a shortfall in revenue. A shrinking tax base means it will be harder to finance our unfunded social programs. Looking to the longer term, that means some programs, like OAS, will soon become too expensive and unsustainable if not addressed.

This is not a short-term problem, nor does it have anything to do with deficits or deficit reduction. Frankly, the issues with old age security sustainability will come into play long after we have achieved balanced budgets, but they are tomorrow's challenges that need to be addressed today.

Any important decision needs to be assessed carefully and implemented responsibly. We all make important decisions every day, at home and at work, for ourselves and for our families. Some can be made at lightning speed, reactively, and they really do not make a dent in the grand scheme of things, but others take longer to make. We need to look at all of the angles and assess all of the facts. Some decisions cannot be made in a snap because the future is involved. We have to plan or invest for those moments down the road.

As a government, when we talk about potential OAS changes, we are talking about prudent planning for the future, for the long term. It is one of those decisions where we will examine all of the angles and assess all of the facts. In doing so, our job is to take time today while we still can to think about how we can introduce changes gradually that will improve Canada in the future.

It is our job to figure out how to ensure the sustainability of programs that Canadians cherish, like OAS. The opposition, of course, has the luxury of ignoring these looming challenges, but our government does not. We will not sacrifice seniors' benefits in the future for the sake of recklessly keeping our head in the sand, as the opposition would have us do.

I promised some detail when I started my speech this morning. I would like to paint a picture of the present versus the future.

Today there are four working Canadians for every person who is retired. By 2030 that will be cut in half to only two working Canadians for every retiree. With fewer citizens working there will be less revenue to invest in programs for retired Canadians. Here is the kicker: the estimated cost of OAS will nearly triple. Half the people will be paying three times the price.

I want to pause at this point to make an important distinction between OAS and CPP, the Canada pension plan. When I talk about retirement benefits today and their cost, I am not referring to the Canada pension plan. The CPP is 100% funded by contributors. It is paid by employers, employees and the self-employed through premiums.

In the 1990s, important changes were made to the CPP to address the potential impact of the aging population. Now it is secure and it is sustainable; in fact it is rock solid for at least 75 years.

In contrast, OAS is 100% funded by tax dollars on a pay-as-you-go basis. There is no reserve; there is no fund. Since it was created in the 1950s, the OAS has never been adjusted to reflect our aging population, nor has it been updated to incorporate the fact that people are living longer and collecting OAS for a longer period of time.

It has not been changed to address the fact that very soon there will be an unprecedented number of Canadians retired and eligible for OAS. The outdated nature of the OAS program becomes important when we return to the point that taxpayers fund it each and every year.

● (1045)

[Translation]

This means that today's Canadian workforce pays for today's OAS recipients. And tomorrow's Canadian workforce will pay for tomorrow's OAS recipients.

Business of Supply

[English]

Today, OAS is the largest single transfer that we make to Canadians, at around \$36 billion a year. By 2030, it will be \$108 billion, nearly triple the cost. The number of basic OAS pension beneficiaries is expected to almost double. The per cent of GDP expenditures will increase to 3.14%, in 2030, accounting for billions of dollars in increased costs. By that time, as I mentioned, we will have fewer Canadians contributing to the tax base and active in the workplace, compared with those retired. With those dramatically changing costs and statistics, the current OAS program will present a tremendous burden on tomorrow's workforce and taxpayers if it stays the way it is.

Our government holds the responsibility for protecting future generations, whatever the opposition may believe. This is not a crisis that we invented. I am very disappointed that its only apparent interest is in deliberately misleading and confusing Canadians on this issue. It is clear that the opposition is not interested in facing reality. It is also clear that it is not interested in proactively discussing Canada's long-term challenges and opportunities.

The opposition's irresponsible approach to Canada's finances would, quite frankly, put the entire OAS system at risk. Actions speak louder than words and its flawed actions today and over the past few days show that it does not have the best interests of Canadians at heart.

The motion would indicate to hard-working Canadians that the opposition prefers to play tricks and games in the House. It prefers to ignore the facts that hundreds of experts are confirming. It prefers to ignore the changing landscape.

As I close, I want to acknowledge the Canadian seniors who built our great country. We are not considering change for the sake of change. We are considering change because it is in the best interests of Canadians.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened very closely to what my colleague opposite said in her speech, particularly when she was talking about our seniors' quality of life. She said that seniors have an average life expectancy of 81 years. The maximum old age security benefit is \$540 per month. I do not know if there is anyone here who would be able to make ends meet on \$540 a month, particularly given the cost of food and rent. That is absolutely unbelievable. How can seniors live with dignity and enjoy quality of life on \$6,481 of old age security a year?

Why is the government giving big oil billions of dollars instead of investing in quality of life for Canadian seniors?

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: Madam Speaker, OAS was never designed to be a complete retirement income in and of itself for seniors. It was to be in addition to the Canada pension plan and in addition to individuals' own savings. For those seniors who are at the poorest level, there is also the guaranteed income supplement to raise them out of the lowest poverty line.

OAS is only one part of our retirement income system. We also have RRSPs and the TFSA program. As is being debated this week,

we are looking for the pooled retirement savings programs, which would be of benefit to millions of Canadians who now do not have access to employer funded pension schemes.

• (1050)

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the words of the minister and the Prime Minister are now written in stone. We need to find out if their actions are written in stone.

I want to ask the minister a very direct question. Is there any intention to either create a change in policy or in legislation to the Old Age Security Act, as it applies to the guaranteed income supplement, to limit the use of optioning when it comes to the withdrawal of registered retirement income funds?

The minister has said that no current beneficiary of the OAS, which, by implication, includes the GIS, will have any benefit or any opportunity of a benefit reduced or cut in any way.

We know there is a requirement of the government to make a technical amendment to the Old Age Security Act for the allowance of optioning as it applies to RRIFs to be a legal initiative. It is, however, the policy of the government to allow that. Will that be retained? Will there be a technical amendment to the OAS Act in the upcoming—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hon. minister.

Hon. Diane Finley: Madam Speaker, as the hon. member said, the Prime Minister and I have both been very clear, here in this House and elsewhere, that no senior who is currently receiving old age security benefits will lose a penny. We have also been clear that those who are near retirement will not be affected by any changes that are being contemplated. Not only that, we will ensure that those who are in my age bracket or even younger will have sufficient time to plan for these changes to their own retirement. We want to ensure that we are sustaining the old age security benefits that currently exist, not just for this generation of retirees but for generations to come.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Madam Speaker, I represent the riding of Kelowna—Lake Country in the Okanagan which, in the last census, had the oldest demographic and the highest number of seniors in Canada in the census' metropolitan areas. Therefore, this issue is very near and dear to my constituents and I appreciate the fact that we are looking at this issue to have sustainability for future generations as well.

My colleague clearly said that the facts are that our population of seniors is doubling. Basically, there will be two times as many people who are beneficiaries. Costs are going up three times and at the same time—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I must give the hon. minister time to respond. There is only 30 seconds left for a response or comment.

Business of Supply

Hon. Diane Finley: Madam Speaker, it is exactly the kind of people that my colleague represents so well who are interested in this. Seniors today need not worry that there will be any impact on their retirement income as a result of the changes we are contemplating. We will protect their current and future retirement income and that of their children and grandchildren.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Madam Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to correct the record on what is a misguided, misleading opposition motion.

I can state with certainty that the changes being contemplated for the old age security have nothing to do with deficit reduction. Because of the long notice period and the gradual phase-in period, any changes to the OAS will happen long after Canada's return to balanced budgets. For opposition members to suggest otherwise is reckless, misleading and speaks ill of their understanding of this issue.

To avoid the rhetorical excess that appears to have consumed this debate, I will add some facts to this discussion.

We will provide a lengthy notice period before any changes occur. As the minister has stated, seniors who are currently receiving benefits will not lose a penny by the changes being contemplated. The old age security program is an important feature of our retirement income system. Together with the guaranteed income supplement, it helps alleviate poverty among seniors by providing a modest base upon which they can build. This is a universal program for all people over age 65 who have resided at least 10 years in Canada.

I stress from the outset that the survival of the OAS is a priority for this government. That is why we are acting now to ensure this critical social program that Canadians have come to rely on is and will be affordable for current and future generations. We will not turn a blind eye to the numbers that illustrate this looming crisis. We will not continue the unfortunate trend of past governments in ignoring this pending challenge until it is too late to act. Instead, our government will take action.

We have a proven record of balancing the economic interests of Canada with the compassion Canadians expect from their government. That is why Canadians gave us a strong majority mandate in the last election to guide Canada through these fragile economic times. Thanks to the strong leadership of our Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, Canada can approach this democratic challenge from a position of relative strength. Many of our OECD counterparts do not have the flexibility afforded to Canada because of the strength of our fiscal picture.

We have also been consistent over the past six years of our mandate in our support for our most vulnerable seniors, providing fiscal support, such a GIS top-up announced in budget 2011 and implemented over the summer months. I say that to drive home the point that we are committed to ensuring that social programs remain sustainable for future generations and continue to be available for the most vulnerable individuals. We are ready to take action now and make the tough decisions that are necessary for Canada's future because it is the right thing to do.

On January 26, at the World Economic Forum, the Prime Minister once again demonstrated Canada's economic leadership on the world stage. In his speech, which outlined how Canada would make the transformations necessary to sustain economic growth, job creation and prosperity, he demonstrated a vision that stretches beyond the next election cycle and the immediacy of politics in this place.

It is my hope that all members of the House will see the need to ensure that Canada makes the necessary economic choices now to prepare for the demographic pressures we will face in the future. The issue of the demographic shift is one that is well-known to world leaders. Unfortunately, it is evident that some countries have been unable to avoid their own crisis, sometimes through lack of leadership or political courage, for which their populations are now paying a very heavy price. That will not be the case here.

Thankfully, our Prime Minister has the foresight to explore changes now well in advance of any future crisis. In less than two decades, close to one in four Canadians will be over the age of 65, a drop from one in seven today. Meanwhile, the number of Canadians below age 65 will remain almost flat. The result is that by 2030 we will be living in a country with the same number of workers but with twice as many seniors.

• (1055)

Furthermore, the number of Canadians over the age of 65 will increase from 4.7 million to 9.3 million over the next 20 years. By 2030, OAS program expenditures will triple to \$108 billion from \$35.6 billion in 2010. Here it is important to remember that OAS is the largest statutory program in the federal government. Finally, by 2030 the number of taxpayers for every senior will be two, down from four in 2010.

This is not a short-term problem: it will affect many generations to come. As a government, it is our responsibility to future generations to ensure that this type of growth is addressed. At the same time, we will ensure that any changes will not affect current recipients. Therefore, any seniors currently receiving benefits as well as those nearing retirement will not be affected.

We are raising these issues now to be transparent and open with Canadians about the road ahead. We are considering these important steps now to ensure the viability of OAS for future Canadians. It is the right thing to do.

We are currently engaging the public on this issue through our debate here, at the kitchen tables of the nation and across the airwaves. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. We cannot misinform Canadians for our narrow political gain. Unfortunately, this has not been the case to date.

There may be some misunderstanding as to how the OAS system works. All OAS benefits are paid from taxes collected that year. This means that any benefits that cannot be paid from taxes collected that year will have to be borrowed.

Business of Supply

Canadians understand that continued deficit spending is not a viable alternative. Beyond our own history, the economic crisis in Europe serves as a fresh reminder of the dangers of debt financing.

By acting responsibly now we can address this issue of intergenerational fairness and ensure that our children and their leaders are not forced into unacceptable financial choices because of our actions. We want to ensure that the OAS will be there for future generations. We have a responsibility to future generations to take action now to secure their future as well as our own.

The situation, thankfully, is not the same with the Canada pension plan. The chief actuary recently reviewed the CPP and pronounced it actuarially sound for the next 75 years.

Some confuse the CPP with OAS when they are talking about retirement. Many people are familiar with the CPP simply because of the deductions off their paycheques every month. They do not realize that hidden in the income tax deductions is another pension contribution.

Let us be clear in this debate that when we are talking about sustainability, we are only talking about the OAS system and not the CPP.

Demographic changes are putting pressure on our retirement income system and on many other programs. This has been clearly documented by many experts.

All of us, young and old, cherish our future and want to grow old knowing that we have a secure one. It is this security that this government is committed to providing to every Canadian at every stage of life. This government will act to ensure that our programs are viable for generations to come. Sadly, we are not seeing the same foresight from the opposition. Instead, we see the tired politics of fear and misinformation. Such wilful ignorance of the facts in the face of demographic trends that have been known for decades is disappointing to say the least.

We have an opportunity here to look beyond this sitting, to look beyond this session and this Parliament to the future of our nation. The trends are clear; the facts are unmistakable. Now is the time.

The opposition motion before us here today is sadly misinformed. It does not provide a solution to the demographic challenges our nation faces. For these reasons, our government cannot support it. I would ask that all members of the House do likewise.

• (1100)

[Translation]

Mrs. Sana Hassainia (Verchères—Les Patriotes, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member spoke of crisis and compared Canada's situation to that of other countries. I suppose he was talking about Greece or Italy. I would like to point out that public spending on pension plans is an estimated 4.7% of Canada's GDP. In the countries he mentioned, it is 12% to 14% of GDP.

Why raise the spectre of crisis and make cuts to a program that is essential but still inadequate?

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Madam Speaker, it is not a crisis, but it is time to look at the facts and to deal with them responsibly and in advance.

The reason it is not a crisis, as it may be in some other countries, is that we have done the planning for our economy to continue and to ensure that there are jobs with people who pay taxes. We have also looked at the most vulnerable by ensuring that we have programs in place to take care of them in their time of need. We want to make sure that these programs continue now and into the future.

We would ask the members of the New Democratic Party to support us when we put provisions forward, like the increase in the guaranteed income supplement, like the increase in the age credit, and like income splitting and a number of initiatives to help ensure the protection of our seniors and the enhancement of their benefits. Unfortunately, the members opposite voted against those measures for whatever reasons, reasons they would know. However, I would ask them to join us in looking forward into the future to ensure that these programs can be preserved.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the problem is that they are getting people worried, sparking a totally superficial crisis, and pitting one generation against the others. The Quebec seniors' federation, FADOQ, has released numbers that speak volumes. FADOQ has 265,000 members. All Quebec MPs have seniors in their ridings. According to FADOQ, the average retirement age is 59.9. If the retirement age is raised from 65 to 67, the provinces will have to bear the additional burden of providing social assistance to many people for an extra two years. This will cause a lot of anxiety. Instead of pitting generations against one another, let us look to the future and see what we can do for people aged 60 to 65, such as implement tax incentives.

Why is the government manufacturing a totally superficial crisis and pitting generations against one another? Why is the government scaring people, particularly society's least fortunate?

• (1105)

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Madam Speaker, if there is any fear being perpetrated it is by the misinformation and the position taken by the opposition parties, including with respect to this particular motion.

I think it is prudent to look at the demographics that will emerge in the future. We have clearly said that any proposed changes will be well past the balancing of our budget and will go into the future. I think it is important and prudent that we look past political rhetoric and deal with the issue in a responsible way that will ensure that the system will be protected now and into the future for the present and future generations.

What we will not do is what the previous Liberal government did and cut \$25 billion from transfers to the provinces and balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable, on the backs of seniors, and in lieu of health care and education. We will not do that.

Business of Supply

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, I represent a riding, Simcoe—Grey, that has many seniors who have built this country and are continuing to volunteer as seniors, such as Paul Ruppel, Bill McDougall and others.

The member commented on how the government is acting responsibly to deal with both seniors as well as young people in this country. Could he outline the things this government has done since 2006 to support seniors in this country?

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Madam Speaker, unfortunately, I will not be able to fully address that in 30 seconds, except to say that we have taken a number of steps and initiatives to help both the seniors and the younger generation. However, NDP members have voted against each and every one of those initiatives. Thus is interesting that they take the position they are taking today.

I can only say that we will be there for the seniors, the vulnerable and the young people now and into the future.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is with real sadness this morning that I listen to all of this talk about political rhetoric and the rest of it. This is such an important issue for millions and millions of Canadians. This is something that we should all have been working on together.

We all know that the population is aging; this is nothing new that just popped up yesterday. We as a party have been working on retirement issues and moving these things forward. To be standing here blaming each other for political rhetoric, fear-mongering, and all the rest of it is sad. It is sad because there are thousands of people watching, listening to every word and worried now about what they are going to do in their future. Seniors today have a hard enough time coping with retirement at 65, never mind going to 67.

If this is the direction we are going in, I do not think this is a day in which anyone is happy. Not only did our groundhog see his shadow and tell us that we were going to have six more weeks of winter, but I also think it is an ominous reflection of the kinds of shadows we are dealing with here in the debate today.

On January 26, the Prime Minister stood in front of the world, not here in Canada, because I am sure he would never have had the courage to stand up to some audience in Canada and make the kinds of comments he did. He had to go over to Switzerland to make those kinds of comments there. Whatever he was trying to prove over there, I am not sure what it was. When he was telling them what they needed to do to clear up their debts and so on, one of the things he forgot to mention was that Canada did all of those things. We got our house in order years back. It was all under the prudent leadership of Liberal governments. He opposed all of that, including the CPP. At one point he wanted to privatize the CPP because he did not think we needed it either.

During this diatribe in Davos, the Prime Minister let one small detail of his own design float out. He suggested that Canada's old age security pension plan would have to be changed forever. Specifically, after the Conservatives had money for \$6 billion in corporate tax cuts, \$30 billion for untended jets, another \$1 billion for fake lakes and gazebos, the Prime Minister decreed to the world,

not just to Canada because he did not want Canadians to know, that Canada's lowest income seniors would have to tighten their belts. After giving away all of that money and umpteen millions on a bunch of other stuff, he did not have the courage to come here and make that announcement in Canada, telling seniors they were going to have to tighten their belts after all they have done to build the country we are enjoying.

I will just provide a bit of background because people sometimes forget why we have and how we got some of these programs. Our old age security was first created by a Liberal prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, in 1927. Back then even he recognized the fact that seniors' poverty was rampant and totally unacceptable.

In 1952, again, another Liberal prime minister, Louis St. Laurent, expanded the program because he felt it was unfair for the provinces to have to deal with so much poverty when it came to seniors.

Then in 1967, Liberal PM Lester Pearson created the guaranteed income supplement, again to reduce the incidence of extreme poverty among our seniors, because we recognize that when people get to their senior years those are not the years when they should be eating macaroni and cheese three times a week.

Then in 1975, again in response to seeing too many seniors in poverty, Prime Minister Trudeau created the spousal benefit.

For 90 years, successive Liberal governments have worked to build and maintain an old age security pension system that would make sure that seniors could live with dignity. Even today, in spite of all of that, we are still not doing enough because we still have seniors living in poverty. In fact, if they do not have a private pension, the most they will get is \$15,000. Try living today on \$15,000. I still consider that to be poverty.

We wanted to make sure that the provinces did not have to deal with these issues alone. We wanted to show the world that we had a heart when it came to the very people who built the country so that we and our children and grandchildren could enjoy it, not cast seniors aside when they are 65 and no longer able to work, never mind now moving the age to 67.

●(1110)

However, on January 26, the Conservative Prime Minister took the first step toward reversing all of those things.

The Prime Minister said that raising the qualifying age for the OAS will have no real impact. He did not stop to think about the triple effect it would have on umpteen other levels of support, like the provincial drug card. People do not get the provincial drug card unless they are getting OAS, and they cannot get GIS unless they are getting OAS. If seniors are receiving OAS, lots of our municipalities give them municipal tax breaks in a variety of ways to help seniors move along.

Business of Supply

Between 1965 and 1968, Liberal Prime Minister Pearson recognized that having to work to age 70 was far too difficult. Many of the people in those days were farmers, people who were working all day at heavy jobs and their backs and their physical bodies would not carry them to age 70. That was why the age was moved down to 65. We cannot ask people to work until they are 67 years old, never mind 70 if they are in hard jobs where they are standing on their feet all day. Their health just will not carry them.

We understand that. Our seniors deserve better than poverty during their golden years. There was a time when we thought the Prime Minister actually understood that too.

During the April 12 leaders debate in the most recent election—which I remind people was only eight months ago; it may seem like a much longer period some days, but it was only eight months ago—the Prime Minister said that he would not cut pensions. Canadians believed him, sadly. We told them not to trust him, but that was not the way it went. Canadians did trust him, just as they did with income trusts and some of the other things he said he would not touch, but the next day he turned around and did exactly the opposite.

Perhaps the surprise should not have been so great. After all, it was the Prime Minister who campaigned against the CPP and said it should be privatized. At that time he vowed to create a super savings account so Canadians could invest all their extra money for retirement, as if all Canadians have a lot of extra money.

I wonder how much extra money a 66-year-old widow with an annual income of less than \$20,000 might have to invest. The average Canadian family that is trying to survive on a \$40,000 or \$50,000 income does not have any extra money to put into a pension either.

I will mention a few of the facts, according to the government's own numbers.

Twenty-four per cent of all women over the age of 65 qualify for GIS. That means they have an income of less than \$16,300 per year. I wonder how much money our Prime Minister can invest in his various retirement plans, but he has lots of money, contrary to many Canadians out there today.

Over the next decade, 4.5 million Canadians will turn 65, and of this group of people, 92% will qualify for the OAS. In 2009, for all of the OAS recipients with an income under \$20,000, the OAS and GIS accounted for 50% of their total income.

The numbers paint a very simple picture. If the Conservatives carry through with their threat to take away the OAS, even phased in over time, they will be dealing a crushing blow to the seniors of tomorrow in this country.

Why is this on the table? In the last election the Prime Minister said that seniors' pensions would not be touched. Now he says that the economy just cannot afford to lift seniors out of poverty, that we just have to keep them working longer and harder.

Setting aside all of the money that has gone into jets, jails and gazebos, that is very short-sighted, given the fact that all of this has happened in the last eight months. It was not as if everybody woke up and suddenly found out that we have an aging demographic and

we have to do something, so we should go after the OAS and penalize that group of people.

The economists are telling us clearly that it is a sustainable program. Edward Whitehouse, who researches pension policy on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank, says the analysis suggests that Canada does not face major challenges of financial sustainability with its public pension scheme.

In Europe, in Greece and Italy, many of them have very rich pensions. It is a real pension that they have. What we have in Canada, and the minister made a point of that, we call it a pension, but it was always meant to be very modest. It was not meant for people to live on.

Part of the challenge that is facing all of us is to make sure that people understand that when they get to be 65 and they get the OAS and GIS, that is not meant to be all of what they are to live on. They are supposed to have been supplementing those programs, but unfortunately, most Canadians think that is the pension.

• (1115)

When compared to countries like Italy and Greece, and I certainly hear a lot about how they have great pensions, that is not the system we have. We have a job on our hands of making sure that people are educated to understand their need to invest in the various programs, which are quite limited.

There is talk about our heads being in the sand and not planning for the future. On this side of the House, we have been working very hard on this issue. A plan was recently adopted at the national Liberal convention to bring forward a companion program to the existing Canada pension plan, similar to what is now being offered by the OMERS, which is a program for those who are in municipal politics in Ontario. People can add on to their Canada pension plan as a companion piece. It is not a payroll tax, which is what the NDP is proposing. It is a companion plan to people's existing Canada pension plan. All that is needed is a social insurance number. People do not have to be working to put the money in. It is for homemakers, farmers, the self-employed. It is helping Canadians prepare for the future.

That is the kind of thing that has to be done. That is the kind of involvement that should have all parties working to help Canadians prepare for the future. We all know the demographics. We all know that changes are coming, but we should not go after the most vulnerable in order to make those changes.

Governments have choices. All of us in government or wherever we are have choices to make. Our choices are clearly to help people, to help the poorest of the poor, not to penalize them. There are lots of areas where budgets can be balanced without having to balance them on the backs of seniors and future seniors of this country. We should look at some of the choices that government has made in the past and make some different ones.

Business of Supply

I want to talk about how this affects women in particular. Some women get married and drop out of the workforce to care for their children. Sometimes they have to care for parents. A man who works in construction for his entire life may have a wife who goes in and out of the workforce, and always earns somewhere between \$25,000 and \$30,000 because she is never employed long enough because she is caring for her children or elderly parents, a sick husband or whatever. When she turns 65, she has next to nothing when it comes to CPP because she was not in the workforce long enough or with a high enough salary.

Most women do not max out on their contributions to CPP. Men do, if they are fortunate, but not the majority of women, unless they are career women. I am talking about average women who take time out of the workforce to have children and leave and return to the workforce a couple of times. When they turn 65, a husband and wife, for the most part, are living on \$16,000 a year. If the husband dies, all of a sudden the woman is living on \$10,000 or \$11,000 a year. These are not magical things I am saying. If members do not have people with lives like that in their ridings, they are very fortunate, but they are welcome to come to my riding and speak to many people who live that life. As we plan to make changes for the future, which I hope involves all of us as parliamentarians, to help Canadians better prepare for the retirement, I hope we move forward with positive things.

The other sad part about this is the issue of trust. We get smeared all over the place because we are politicians and people say that nobody can believe a word we say. The Prime Minister clearly outlined that he was not going to make cuts to seniors' pensions and people trusted him. People need to be able to trust their legislators and parliamentarians at all levels of government, the Prime Minister especially. Even if he decides to do this for the seniors of tomorrow, it is a big move to change it from 65 to 67. It is going to have huge impacts. I am not talking about little things. It is a sad day for Canadian politics when that happens.

We are talking about working together and building this country together. We are not trying to increase poverty. That is why we are bringing forward a supplementary Canada pension plan. As I said earlier, it is a companion piece to the current Canada pension plan which would be easily administered, would have low management fees and would be secure. That would help the seniors of tomorrow have a much better retirement and would put less onus on the government.

● (1120)

Remember that at a \$65,000 income the OAS is clawed back. That means fewer Canadians would end up in the poverty levels of the people we are dealing with today. Today we are dealing with many people who never had opportunities to get a higher education, so by and large, if people have good jobs, they are earning a higher level of money. This means they will be paying more taxes, which also means they will be less apt to draw the OAS and the GIS. But that takes investment in the kinds of programs and plans so that all Canadians have access to this.

I know that everyone is feeling the pressure of this kind of a discussion. I would hope that my colleagues on the other side would stand and fight on behalf of all Canadians to make sure that we are

doing the right thing as legislators and that we will not have more people in poverty at a time where the challenges are out there for all of us.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Madam Speaker, this morning I have listened to members say that we need to take the time to come up with alternatives and that is why we are starting early. In the House this week time allocation was moved in order to hurry along some very ill-thought out ideas on how to help people prepare for their old age with the pooled registered pension plan fiasco, which is what I would call it.

In my riding there are senior citizens who have to use food banks, who cannot survive now. We have heard the government say that it is trying to address poverty for the senior citizens of the future. What could the government do to make sure that seniors can live in dignity today?

Before this debate started, I received letters from young people in my riding. Every one of them talked about addressing seniors in poverty. What could we be doing today to lift seniors out of poverty?

● (1125)

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Speaker, clearly my colleague is in close touch with her constituents.

When we were knocking on doors in the last two elections one of the things all of us heard from seniors and senior organizations was they were asking for more. People who are age 65 today did not have access to great jobs. Again, many of them are women who are struggling for a variety of reasons. They are telling us that they need more today.

We are not hearing the government say it is going to increase the allocation of what seniors are getting today. We are hearing about increasing the age limit, possibly decreasing the clawback to \$60,000. That is not the way we need to go. We need to go the opposite way by investing more so our seniors have a better quality of life and do not have to live in a garage or someone's basement apartment because they cannot afford anything else.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened intently to the comments of my colleague across the way and I heard how wonderful the Liberal Party was in the past and how its members have done wonderful things to ensure the financial stability of the country. We know in fact that they actually cut \$25 billion from the provinces which was done directly on the backs of the provinces and citizens, including seniors.

We also heard the member talk about trusting the Prime Minister. My recollection is another issue regarding the Gomery inquiry where funds were missing under one of the Liberal prime ministers.

I also heard the member talk about a companion pension plan. It is my understanding that the provinces do not want any kind of companion pension plan.

Business of Supply

Should we not be looking far enough ahead to ensure that all citizens who should be eligible for old age security will get it?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Speaker, I would love to take on every one of those questions, but I would need another 20 minutes. If I cannot have that, then I will have to be really quick with the answers.

When we came into power in 1992, after the previous bunch over there, we had a \$43 billion deficit. The country was already being referred to as a third world country. In and around the world that would have really had an impact. Instead, we made the cuts necessary. In 1995 the CPP was reinforced. The reason it is on great stable footing is because our prime minister and Paul Martin put it on that footing.

I hope those guys on that side of the House will have the guts to stand up and fight for their constituents.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I commend the work done by my colleague from York West. There is no point in repeating the insanity coming from the other side; there are enough dinosaurs over there to make another *Jurassic Park* movie. In reality, we took control of the situation. Some even said Canada was going bankrupt. Now we need to look ahead: the Conservative Party has once again run up a deficit.

What I care about is making sure that we can improve people's quality of life and help young people feel hopeful about the future, without scaring those who gave everything to build this country.

My question is very simple. Given that my colleague also has experience at the municipal level and the fact that integration is a reality at that level, can she tell us what it would mean, for the people of her riding, to increase the eligibility age from 65 to 67 and increase the burden on the other relevant authorities?

• (1130)

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Speaker, one thing we want to see happen is people working together, not pointing their fingers.

Part of the very groundwork that our pension has been based on is the whole intergenerational issue so people do not have to feel they are paying for other people's pensions. We all contribute and it is something we all share. It is what unites us as a country, because we care about each other as we move forward.

All of these issues need a lot of planning and in-depth looking into, which is why I go back to the companion plan to the Canada pension plan. It would allow homemakers to put some money aside. All they would need is a social insurance number and they could have a pension plan. I could put \$50 into my daughter's companion CPP plan, while she is home raising her children. Then I would know she would have something when she reached 65 and would not have to live her life in poverty like today's seniors.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Madam Speaker, what was the member's reaction when she listened to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development who spoke in this place about half an hour ago? She talked about the fact that there was a shortfall in revenues in our country. The shortfall of revenues is because the government has given away \$16 billion

annually in corporate tax breaks to profitable companies. It is not even tied to supplying jobs.

Now the government expects the shortfall of revenues will have to be adjusted by moving the age of retirement eligibility for seniors, which is absolutely beyond belief. The government talks about us being reckless, but it has been absolutely reckless.

I would like to hear the member's response to that.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Speaker, I was hoping the minister would reassure us that the government realized, with the backlash it has felt, that it would not be a plan it would pursue this morning. I was disappointed to hear the minister say differently.

Clearly the government knows what it will do. It will turn around and make that change, unless all Canadians continue to go after their members of Parliament on that side until someone has the courage to break rank and starts to stand up for the seniors of tomorrow and against the insanity, which I know they are walking themselves into.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Madam Speaker, we are talking about old age security. I remind the member that in the previous Parliament one of her colleagues, Ruby Dhalla, introduced a bill to reduce the residency requirements from 10 years to 3 years for the old age security program.

In the 39th Parliament, another member brought in a bill and it actually passed, with the support of opposition members, in spite of the fact that Conservative members voted against it.

Could she tell us if that is still the Liberal position, to support a reduction of the residency requirement to exacerbate the problem that we are facing here?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Speaker, that never had anything to do with the Liberal government. That was an individual member of Parliament.

On this side of the House, we believe in having democracy and being able to express the concerns of people. It never came to a vote and it was never supported by us. The Conservatives used it to circulate it all over the place as if it would have been. We do respect democracy in individual MPs who want to put something on a piece of paper reflecting their constituents' voices. We have some freedom on this side of the House, contrary to that side.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Edmonton—Strathcona.

[*Translation*]

I rise here today to defend the rights of the people of my riding, Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel. These Canadians, including men and women from Thurso, Brownsburg, Saint-Placide and Lachute, will be affected by the Conservatives' attack on old age security.

Business of Supply

My riding is definitely not the only one to lose industries, but my constituents have been hit hard, because they are losing their jobs. Plus, young people are leaving the region because of the shortage of opportunities for work and education. Problems accessing health care are also not unique to my riding, especially considering our aging population. There are many ridings like mine, and I urge all families and all workers from those regions to rise up against what this government is proposing, that is, reducing the deficit by attacking people's pensions.

Like many of the cuts proposed by the government, the planned attack on OAS and the GIS is very insidious because it is directed against the most vulnerable Canadians. In fact, this measure affects those already dealing with poverty, illness, advanced age and, at times, disabilities caused by aging. This is a particularly despicable attack because those who will be most affected are middle-class workers and the poorest Canadians. They work at physically demanding jobs and often cannot continue working until 65, let alone 67. It is also difficult for the disabled and those suffering from chronic illnesses to work past the age of 65.

It is obvious that increasing the retirement age and making cuts to social solidarity programs for seniors will harm the less fortunate, especially women and particularly single mothers. The Conservatives have an unfortunate habit of attacking those groups in our society who have the greatest difficulty being heard. By actively attacking these groups, the Conservatives are ignoring the problems of seniors, women, the less fortunate, aboriginal peoples, people who need employment insurance and a number of other groups. Because of the Conservatives' attitude, we should not be surprised that they are trying to attack those who will retire in the future. These groups often believe that they do not have a voice. But they do have a voice in this House. The people of my riding can depend on me. People in every Quebec region have a voice thanks to the NDP.

According to Statistics Canada, the median income in Argenteuil and Papineau is 10% to 20% lower than in the rest of Quebec even though household size is the same. Families in my riding are not rich like the big businesses that have been given tax breaks by the Prime Minister and have then moved a staggering number of jobs outside Canada.

That is the situation for many workers in my riding. Young people from the region are leaving because there are no jobs. These young people do not have access to higher education. Although the region is not far from major centres, the public transit system that would give them access to colleges and universities is either inadequate or non-existent. As a result, young people are leaving the region and cannot take care of their aging parents.

The median age in Argenteuil and Papineau is about 10 years higher than in the rest of Quebec and will continue to increase in the future. The average income after taxes is approximately \$17,000 and decreasing as a result of the economic situation affecting Canada and the world. People like the ones in my riding are in dire need of support from programs such as old age security and the guaranteed income supplement.

• (1135)

Income inequality continues to grow in Canada. No one can really predict what type of long-term damage the economic crisis will

cause for Canadians. We absolutely must not play sorcerer's apprentice with social solidarity programs because they have been helping retirees with modest incomes since the 1960s.

[English]

In my riding, those are the fallouts.

First, I will speak for the women of my riding. I sit on the Status of Women committee and we have spent the past three months studying senior women. Anything that hurts our seniors, hurts our senior women the most. Women are substantially poorer than men, both in my riding and across Canada. Fourteen per cent of single women live under the poverty line and a staggering 52.1% of single women with small children live below the poverty line. The reasons for this are systemic and not that complicated. EI, parental leave and pay equity are needed to close the gender gap, but what this means to my argument today is that women are far less likely than men to benefit from CPP, private pensions or RRSPs. Women are not the top income earners in the country since so much of their contributing labour is unpaid.

There are far more senior women than men. Women live longer than men. The fact that senior women are much poorer than senior men has deeper roots. This makes OAS and GIS so important to women.

Women today need to understand that the factors that plunge them into poverty in their old age are systemic and require structural solutions.

We assume that our public health care system will give all seniors what they need to stay healthy. I thought this, too, until I studied the case of elder abuse. I learned that of all the forms of health care offered in Canada it is seniors' care that is not necessarily covered under the Canada Health Act. Long-term care, both in home and in facilities, is not necessarily covered, and the exorbitant costs of pharmaceuticals, wheelchairs and walkers are also not provided for. Of all the forms of health care in this country, it is seniors who suffer the most from a two-tiered, inequitable system.

When a senior's income hovers around \$18,000 a year and the children have left the hometown because the factory has closed down, for that senior to lose any part of his or her OAS and GIS will be a major blow that will necessarily plunge the individual below the poverty line.

Business of Supply

Here is another thing that plunged the workers in my riding below the poverty line. When Fraser Papers closed in Thurso, Quebec, it declared bankruptcy, which meant that it was legal for it to divest itself of all workers' pensions. The fact that the company declared bankruptcy is dubious enough since the major financial corporation that owned the controlling shares of Fraser Papers is Brookfield Asset Management, a company that continues to turn huge profits on Bay Street today while it thanks our Prime Minister for its tax breaks. These workers, who invested in their pensions throughout their entire lives, lost them entirely through a corporate sleight of hand. We need to pass the NDP bill that would protect pensioners such as those.

Now I must now go to those pensioners, who have already lost so much, and tell them that they can no longer rely on their OAS and GIS.

Until the Prime Minister looks the hard-working people of Thurso and the women of my riding in the eyes and offers them a way out of the poverty they are facing, it is deplorable to talk about needing to shrink the deficit because of changing demographics.

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

Let us speak about demographics. The Prime Minister likes to remind us that the population is changing. Yes, we are aging. That is a fact we must prepare for. What he fails to say is that poverty among seniors is also on the rise and, according to forecasts, will continue to rise. Middle-class jobs are disappearing and being replaced by low-paying jobs that are often only part time. People who work in these low-paying jobs, who do not get enough hours and do not receive any benefits, will not be adequately protected by employment insurance. The rich are getting richer. The government is rushing to invest in big business and grant tax breaks to the wealthy, while the poor continue to sink deeper into poverty.

The Conservatives' threat to old age security is another measure that will increase inequality. This is not the time to invest in oil and in fighter jets. It is not the time to impose an austerity budget.

The Conservatives are questioning our ability to invest in social programs. I would respond by asking them these two questions. How can we not invest in social programs? What could be more important than the health, security and dignity of Canadians?

Mrs. Sana Hassainia (Verchères—Les Patriotes, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her excellent analysis of the situation.

I would like to take advantage of the fact that my colleague is a member of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women to ask her how old age security and the guaranteed income supplement are important retirement vehicles for women in particular.

[*English*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Madam Speaker, as I mentioned briefly in my speech, it is often women who do not work in jobs with benefits that allow them to save for pensions. Women make 50% of what men make. Therefore, drawing on the implications of that, it is women who benefit overall from GIS and OAS.

Also, women tend to live longer. The majority of seniors in this country today and in the future are and will be women, so it does affect women disproportionately.

• (1145)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, while we have pension challenges in Canada, we do not have a crisis. A study was undertaken for the federal Department of Finance in 2009 by the head of the social policy division of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The finding was that Canada does not face major challenges of financial sustainability with its pension schemes. The study projected that spending on public pensions will increase from the current level of 4.5% to 6.2% by 2060. In comparison, 27 European Union nations were spending 9% in 2009.

Does the hon. member think that people should be able to expect that the rules under which they made their retirement plans will still be in place when they retire?

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Madam Speaker, it is extremely important to point out that the OAS and GIS are easily sustainable and are actually projected to decrease in cost relative to the size of the economy in the long run. We should not be considering this the time to cut back. What we should be doing is taking practical, affordable measures to lift every senior out of poverty by expanding the GIS, not by making it worse by slashing old age security. We need to be able to tell all generations that they can live in dignity in their old age.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to commend my colleague on her speech and tell her that in my riding of Saint-Lambert I, too, have a large population of retired women who are slowly but surely slipping into poverty.

The hon. member also did a fine job underscoring the importance of maintaining the old age security program in order to protect women from poverty in all its forms.

I would like her to tell us why, in her opinion, the NDP is speaking out against the government's suggestion that seniors and the aging population are a threat.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Madam Speaker, my colleague from Saint-Lambert has asked an excellent question.

[*English*]

It gives me the opportunity to talk briefly about a lovely elderly gentleman from my riding whose name is Jacques. He relies on his community involvement to keep him positive because he and his wife can hardly make ends meet. He tells me that we need to do something to help protect seniors who have worked so hard to build this country.

Instead of spending billions on corporate tax giveaways and cutting support to seniors, which will particularly affect senior women, we need to expand the CPP. We in the NDP have long urged this. A modest increase in premiums could finance the doubling of the CPP benefits for all Canadian workers. This would provide real, sustainable retirement security for Canadians.

Business of Supply

I urge that we protect our retirees from being robbed of their pensions, such as the retirees of Papiers Fraser. The NDP is also working on that.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I rise in support of the motion tabled by my colleague, the member for Pierrefonds—Dollard. Her motion has been brought before this place on the heels of the announcement by the Prime Minister, which was made outside of the country, in Davos, Switzerland, of his intention to change our pension system, including old age security.

New Democrats are calling on this place to reject calls by the Prime Minister to balance the Conservative deficit on the backs of Canada's seniors. The member for Pierrefonds—Dollard recommends instead that the government make reducing and the eventual elimination of seniors' poverty a cornerstone of its upcoming budget. I fully endorse her motion. I cannot conceive of any member speaking against her call.

One hundred and six million Canadian seniors are now living in poverty, and the majority are women. Eleven million have no workplace pension plan. Canadians are reported to have acquired a record household debt. Many lost much of their retirement savings in the recent economic crash.

Far too many Canadians remain underemployed or unemployed. Those underemployed in part-time jobs usually have no benefits. Many are unable to save because they simply have no surplus dollars at the end of the day to set aside. A mere one-third of Canadians are reported to be saving at levels to cover the basic cost of retirement. They are unable to even consider a tax free savings account, let alone investing in yet another risky saving system such as the proposed PRPP.

In 2009, the premiers called for a national summit on pensions. This has yet to occur. However, the Conservatives continue to deny, or have continued up until Davos, that Canadians face any pension crisis whatsoever. That was until the Prime Minister suddenly announced from afar that Canadians were apparently facing an imminent old age security plan crisis. In other words, as a nation, we can no longer continue to offer struggling seniors a meagre \$540 a month. This, regardless of the fact that the government's own commissioned report found no crisis into the future in financing the OAS.

What is the option? Is it to download the problem to the provinces' welfare rolls, or perhaps to our cities and churches to finance additional shelters for homeless seniors, or how about more food banks for our struggling veterans?

It has been duly noted that any concerns raised with the government have received the same carefully scripted reply, "We are not cutting programs for existing seniors". This offers little comfort to those who will be reaching retirement age in a few years or in a few decades. Has the government simply decided that some seniors just are not sustainable? Is that what fiscally responsible government means to the government?

The government finally, reluctantly, partially increased the GIS payments but it refused to raise GIS payments to the level New Democrats called for, to rates that would actually lift all seniors out

of poverty. This would have cost an additional \$700 million a year. Now, post election, the Conservatives are suggesting that OAS payments could be cut back or delayed.

It is not a question of finances. It is a question of priorities. Do we offer all of our seniors a life of dignity or do we buy one more F-35? Do we assist all of our elders and grandparents to enjoy a reasonable quality of care or do we give an additional unnecessary tax break to profitable banks and oil companies, both reporting, by the way, record profits?

New Democrats have based our budget priorities on what Canadians have expressed are their preferred routes to retirement and dignity: to increase the GIS to levels that will lift all seniors out of poverty and double the CPP over time through small increases in contributions. It would cover all workers. It would be indexed, have defined benefits, be secure, a proven portable pension plan and the majority of Canadians support it. CARP supports it.

We propose building into the CPP potential for workers or employers for voluntary additional contributions. We have called for and tabled in this House an amendment to federal bankruptcy laws to put pensioners and the disabled at the front of the line. We have called for greater investments in caregivers, home care and long-term care.

● (1150)

A recent poll reported that 80% of Canadians view increasing the CPP benefits as their first priority for retirement.

The current Prime Minister has a propensity to seek parallel policies with our major trading partner, the United States of America. What do Americans provide, under their social security? Thirty thousand dollars a year, I am told. In Canada, the maximum provided is close to half of the American benefits.

Across Canada, we benefit from the dedicated efforts of volunteer organizations, such as CARP, which advocate for a decent retirement for all Canadian seniors. In Alberta, two advocates for seniors stand out: Carol and John Wodak.

When I spoke yesterday with Carol, she shared this sentiment. A quality of life for our seniors requires that we consider more than just the amount of the pension. We must give equal attention to policy shifts that are making the lives of our seniors already living on the edge even more perilous. Where income security is delayed or reduced, it may mean denial of basics of life, most certainly of quality of life, in our so-called golden years.

Business of Supply

The National Forum on Health advises that income is one of the primary determinants of health. There is a growing problem in affordable housing and care for seniors, as some jurisdictions, including Alberta, move from long-term care to what they call assisted living. Elder care is increasingly provided by for-profit corporations. No longer can seniors expect that their housing fees will cover all services once considered basic. Many now must pay extra for palliative care, home care, cardiac post-surgery rehabilitation, prescription drugs, dental care and eye care. The cost of a wheelchair is beyond the means of most on basic pensions.

Seniors need these social benefits to enjoy a basic quality of care.

Let us not only maintain these basic benefits. Let us make OAS automatic. We are finding in my riding many could have benefited earlier from these supports were they aware they had to apply. I received many calls from seniors concerned with delays in receiving these important benefits needed to pay their rent, their rising electricity bills and their prescription medicines.

In closing, it is important to address my concern with the implications of clawed back retirement benefits for aboriginal elders. Canada may rank among the top countries of the UN human development index, but our treatment of aboriginal populations has been ranked near 75th place.

The director of health for the Native Women's Association of Canada has testified that almost half of aboriginal women live in poverty and, consequently, experience high rates of chronic illness. This leaves a substantial portion of their communities with little capacity to save for retirement.

Concern has also been expressed to me by a number of first nations that seniors' housing and support services are simply non-existent in their communities. Elders are either poorly cared for or relegated to extended care in centres far from their communities. This leaves them without family support and often struggling to communicate in their traditional language.

I will close by echoing the comments of my colleague. How can we afford not to make retirement in dignity for all Canadian seniors our priority?

•(1155)

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member and her party had two opportunities in the pre-election budget and in the most recent budget of this past June to endorse an increase of 25% in the guaranteed income supplement, the largest increase in history.

Would she now admit to her hypocrisy of not supporting that initiative? Does she regret that move right now? Would she just address that for us, please?

Ms. Linda Duncan: Madam Speaker, if the member had been listening closely to my speech he would have known that I have already referenced this fact. I very clearly voted against the meagre increase in GIS. It was leaving half of Canadian seniors in poverty or merely lifting our seniors halfway out of poverty. It is incumbent upon the government in this coming budget to make the investment and make its priority ensuring all Canadian seniors can retire in dignity.

•(1200)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, leading economists argue the government is wrong when it states Canada's pension fund is under financial threat. It is incumbent upon each and every one of us to hear the fears of Canadians close to retirement as well as those who will be retiring in the future. Ninety-one per cent of Canadians have retirement worries. Sixty per cent of Canadians plan to continue working in retirement in some form, most because they need the money.

Why would the government force seniors, especially those with little savings or no company pension, into a position where they must keep working well beyond normal retirement age just to pay rent and buy food?

Ms. Linda Duncan: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her very cogent question and I think the cogent word is "force".

As we know, many seniors at the age of 65 choose to continue working. They would like to contribute to the economy, to put the bread and butter for their table, and support their grandkids going through university. However, they should have the choice of how much longer they are going to work or how many days of the week they have to work.

The member is correct that we are already finding, certainly in the jurisdiction I come from, rapidly rising electricity rates even though deregulated electricity was supposed to offer cheap rates. The eco-energy retrofit program has been killed. That program would have saved seniors a lot of money and there was a lot of interest among the seniors with whom I spoke. The member is quite correct that we should not be forcing our seniors to work past the time when they are able to or choose to work.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Madam Speaker, the speech was fact based. Yet on the other side the Conservatives are constantly fudging the numbers to suit their hidden agenda, on the backs of our seniors who have worked hard to build this country. Those seniors should be able to enjoy some of the benefits in their senior years, to be able to live in dignity.

Is this the beginning of the end of how the public pension system works in Canada?

Ms. Linda Duncan: Madam Speaker, certainly on our side of the House we do not believe it should be the beginning of the end for seniors. We strongly believe that all seniors have a right to retire in dignity. They have built our country and our economy. They include our veterans, many of whom are struggling and using food banks, including in Calgary.

Business of Supply

I am hoping it is not the end. We will look to the coming budget for signals of the direction the government is taking. I think the Conservatives are going to be hearing from a lot of seniors in their own ridings who are saying, "Get a grip, rethink your priorities".

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Simcoe—Grey.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this misleading motion and talk about what our government is doing for Canada's seniors. In my role as minister, I have travelled across Canada meeting many seniors. I have listened to what they consider to be important. Let me be clear. No senior who is receiving benefits today will lose a penny because of the changes we will be proposing. Any changes will be announced with a long notice period and be brought in gradually.

It is unfortunate that members of the opposition are attempting to scare seniors to score cheap political points. This motion falsely attempts to connect deficit reduction with the necessary changes to the OAS. There will be no change to the OAS until well after the budget has been balanced.

I can assure Canada's seniors that the support our government has shown them will continue. We all know someone, a family member, friend or neighbour, who is a senior. We care about their financial future. We want to ensure that the social programs we have come to rely on are sustainable for the next generation.

As someone who was not born here, I can speak from personal experience. Canada is an example to the world when it comes to the care of seniors. We are committed to ensuring seniors have the highest possible quality of life for today and tomorrow. We must ensure the programs and services that give us this quality of life are sustainable for all citizens in the future. Striking this balance is not a choice. It is a necessity. Good choices now mean we will be able to maintain our quality of life today and in the future.

I will take a few minutes to talk about what Canada is doing to help seniors currently. Our government has consistently shown a commitment to helping the most vulnerable seniors across the country, not just with promises but with action.

This summer I was excited to see the new guaranteed income supplement top-up benefit start helping Canada's most vulnerable seniors. This top-up is the biggest increase to the GIS in 25 years. It represents a \$1.5 billion investment over the next five years. This top-up works out to \$600 annually for a single senior and \$840 for a couple. That is just the latest improvement we have made to the GIS.

We increased the GIS in 2006 and again in 2007, for a total increase of 7% above regular adjustments for inflation. In budget 2008, we increased the GIS earnings exemption from \$500 to \$3,500, meaning that GIS recipients keep more of their hard-earned money. We also reduced bureaucratic red tape by introducing automatic GIS renewal for seniors who file annual income taxes. Our work does not stop there. There are a number of areas where seniors want action and we are responding.

Seniors want leadership in their communities. In budget 2011, we provided \$10 million over two years to increase funding for the new horizons for seniors program. This helps seniors use their leadership,

energy and skills to benefit communities across Canada. Everywhere I travel seniors tell me how much they appreciate low taxes, thanks to our government. We have provided over \$2.3 billion a year in additional tax relief to seniors through measures such as income splitting and increasing the age credit.

Affordable housing is an important measure to combat senior poverty. We invested \$400 million over two years under Canada's economic action plan for the construction of housing units for low-income seniors.

Now more than ever, good health is a concern of seniors. We are supporting positive and active aging through the collaborative age-friendly communities initiative, physical activity tips for older adults and falls prevention initiatives.

• (1205)

Having a voice in decisions is also important to seniors. This is why we created the National Seniors Council in 2007 to provide advice to the federal government on the well-being and quality of life of our seniors.

We proudly established October 1 as National Seniors Day in Canada. On this day, we recognize the significant and on-going contributions seniors make to families, communities, workplaces and society.

I think we can all agree that seniors abuse cannot be tolerated. That is why in budget 2008 we invested \$13 million over three years to help seniors and others recognize signs and symptoms of elder abuse and to provide information on available support.

Outcomes matter. The sum of the efforts I have highlighted so far today are resulting in a better Canada, a safer Canada, a Canada that respects seniors and makes them a full partner in the decisions we make as a country. Statistics show we are moving in the right direction.

The low income rate for seniors has declined dramatically from 21% in 1980 to 5% in 2009. The low income rate among seniors in Canada is now one of the lowest rates among member countries of the OECD. That is a record of which we can be proud.

To stay on the right track, we have to plan for the future. That starts with looking at facts, not just opinions, because facts give us a very good picture of what the future will look like, both in terms of opportunities and challenges.

Canada, like many other countries, is facing major demographic challenges because of an aging population. Our aging workforce will present a growing and serious economic challenge for Canada and other developed countries. In Canada the number of seniors will nearly double within two decades.

Among that growing number of seniors, the number of basic OAS pension beneficiaries is also expected to grow, from 4.7 million reported in 2010 to 9.3 million projected by 2030. Population aging involves both current and future generations.

In the future, there will be fewer workers to support higher costs of programs such as the old age security, which is funded from general tax revenues on a “pay-as-you-go basis”. OAS benefits are paid out of the tax revenues collected each year. As the ratio of workers to seniors changes, it will mean less workers have to pay for more benefits.

Currently there are approximately four workers for every retiree. By 2030, that number will have changed to two workers for every retiree. This is why it is critical that we must make changes to the OAS program. As the ratio changes, the cost to the taxpayer of these benefits becomes increasingly high.

The Canada pension plan is a different story. This program does not involve any tax dollars. It is entirely funded through the contributions of employers, employees and the self-employed. These contributions are invested over the life of a worker and grow to cover the cost of their retirement benefits.

The chief actuary recently examined the CPP and said that it was sound for the next 75 years. Therefore, it is clear that we need to make changes to the OAS to ensure our retirement security system stays strong and that it is available to for our children and our grandchildren.

I can assure Canadians that we will provide the time required for younger generations to plan for their retirement. Let me reiterate that people currently receiving OAS will not lose a cent.

The NDP is attempting to confuse seniors. The changes we are proposing will happen long after the budget is balanced. This has nothing to do with deficit reduction. Whether it be through lower taxes, increased funding to fight poverty or simply to make our economy stronger, Canada's seniors are the winners.

Because the motion does not reflect the intent of the government and because it is hopelessly misguided, we simply cannot support it. That is why our government will vote against the motion. I encourage all members of the House to do the same.

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after listening to the hon. member's speech, I wonder who is trying to scare whom here. The government talks about the situation being critical, but the report by the Government of Canada's chief actuary says that our old age security system is viable and that the challenge of the aging population is a one-time challenge. We are not the ones who are trying to scare anyone. What is more, we are not trying to scare seniors. If gradual cuts to our programs and services are being announced then it is our young people who should be scared. People retiring in five, 10 or 30 years should be scared. They are the ones who probably should be worried about this government's cuts.

Does the minister promise to open discussions before her party makes changes to programs and services for seniors? Does she

Business of Supply

promise to consult people and work with the other parties to come up with a comprehensive solution to a global challenge?

• (1215)

[*English*]

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, to be very clear, there will be no changes to benefits seniors currently receive. We will ensure any changes are done with substantial notice and an adjustment period in a way that does not affect current retirees or those close to retirement. It gives others plenty of time to adjust and plan for their retirement.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, expert evidence is that OAS will not cause the federal budget to crash. Instead of pushing through something during this session of Parliament, the government should publish a white paper that lays out the problem that needs to be solved, along with a range of possible solutions that Canadians can consider.

My constituents in Etobicoke North want real options for improving their pension outlook for the next several decades. It appears the government is considering raising the age of eligibility from 65 to 67. Only people who depend on OAS to stay out of poverty will have to put off retiring. Higher income earners, those whose OAS is already clawed back through their taxes, will not be affected.

Does the hon. member think this is a fair and equitable solution?

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, we will not put the financial security and well-being of seniors at risk. We will take balanced, responsible and prudent action to ensure the OAS remains sustainable for future generations of Canadians.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, we hear there will be reasonable time. I find the message from the government confusing. We are told on one hand that we are panicking needlessly about things the Prime Minister said in Davos. On the other hand, seniors are very concerned and so are people approaching retirement age.

When the minister says that there will be reasonable time for a phase-in of, for instance, moving the point of earliest receipt of benefits to age 67, how much time does the minister think is reasonable?

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, we are currently working on that and when the budget comes down, the details will be there.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the tremendous work she does on behalf of our seniors.

The government is acting responsibly. We are ensuring that Canada's seniors have a secure future as well as for generations to come. The NDP and Liberals are misleading and scaring seniors because the facts are clear. If we do nothing, OAS will become unsustainable.

Which initiative implemented by the government does the minister hear about the most that is helping Canadian seniors?

Business of Supply

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, what we have done for seniors with the new horizon program to keep them active and healthy, also the increase in the GIS, the continual care of our seniors with housing and all the other things I mentioned in my speech are very much welcome. They thank me and ask me to bring their positive response back to the government.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to respond to this misguided and misinformed opposition motion.

It is unfortunate that the opposition would attempt to confuse Canadians and misrepresent the intentions of our government with its own narrow political gains. This demonstrates how reckless the opposition is with the facts. I am pleased to have this opportunity to set the record straight.

The changes our government is considering have nothing to do with deficit reduction. In fact, the budget will be balanced years before any potential changes to OAS come into effect. I will repeat what the Prime Minister, the minister and the minister of state have already said. No current recipient of OAS will lose any of their benefits because of potential changes, not a penny.

It is unfortunate that the opposition is attempting to use these tactics. It demonstrates how out of touch it is with the reality of the demographic challenges that are facing our country.

Let me focus for a moment on the intentions of our government.

Our government wants a strong and sustainable future for Canadians. We believe Canada's seniors are valuable members of our society. They are more than a demographic or a statistic; they are the individuals who built our country. People like Alex Currie or Elsie Cruikshank from my riding in Simcoe—Grey built our country. That is why our government has made seniors a priority in every budget we have implemented.

Since forming government, we have provided \$2.3 billion annually in additional tax relief to seniors and pensioners. This has been achieved through pension income splitting and increasing the age credit. We brought in a new guaranteed income supplement top-up benefit to help Canada's most vulnerable seniors, the biggest increase in the GIS in 25 years, and the opposition voted against it.

This is in addition to the 7% increase in the GIS above regular indications between 2006 and 2008. We invested \$400 million over the two years for the construction of homes for low-income seniors. In budget 2008 we increased the GIS earnings exemption from \$500 to \$3,500, and the opposition voted against that as well.

In budget 2011 we provided \$10 million over two years to increase the funding to the new horizons for seniors fund. The funding supports seniors to use their leadership, energy and skills to benefit their local communities. We are supporting positive and active aging through collaborative initiatives, age-friendly community initiatives, physical activity tips for older seniors and fall prevention initiatives, all initiatives that my constituents in Simcoe—Grey utilize.

We appointed Canada's first ever Minister of State for Seniors and created the National Seniors Council in 2007 to provide advice to the

federal government on matters that related to well-being and quality of life of seniors. We proudly established October 1 as National Seniors Day in Canada.

These actions demonstrate how much we value our seniors, and we are proud of our record.

• (1220)

[Translation]

We will not endanger our seniors' well-being. We want to protect the old age security program and ensure its viability for future generations. That is why we are considering changes.

[English]

We are committed to ensuring seniors have the highest quality of life, not just for today but also in a way that will be sustainable for citizens in the future. These are not mutually exclusive goals, these are things done properly and we need to meet both of these goals.

We understand the importance of a secure and dignified retirement for people who have spent their lives building Canada through their hard work, people like John Nell of Collingwood or Tom Walsh in Adjala. The evidence of all the good work our government has done to improve the lives of seniors is evident by improved quality of life of seniors from coast to coast to coast.

The low income rate for seniors has declined dramatically, from 29.4% in 1978 to 5.2% in 2009 under this government, according to Statistics Canada, post-tax low-income cut-offs. The low income rate among seniors in Canada is now one of the lowest among members of the OECD.

However, there is a looming demographic challenge that we can see on the horizon, and that speaks for itself. The World Health Organization says that the average life expectancy in Canada is increasing and is one of the highest in the world, something of which we as Canadians should be proud. It is almost 81 years.

In 2010-11, \$35.7 billion in OAS benefits were provided to Canadians. This includes \$7.9 billion in the guaranteed income supplement payments for 1.6 million low income seniors. In 2030, the cost to the Canadian taxpayers will escalate to \$108 billion a year. A similar trend is observed in the number of recipients.

[Translation]

In 2010, 4.7 million people collected basic old age security. By 2030, the number of people collecting OAS will have nearly doubled to 9.3 million.

• (1225)

[English]

This is not a local trend. Canada is not alone in its demographic shift, as population aging is a worldwide phenomenon.

[Translation]

According to the United Nations, in 2005, 10% of the world's population was 65 or older.

Business of Supply

[English]

By 2025, that proportion is expected to reach about 15%, or slightly more than one in six.

[Translation]

This phenomenon is even more marked in developed countries like Canada. Today, one in seven Canadians is over 65. By 2030, less than 20 years from now, one in four Canadians will be over 65. This new reality will have major repercussions for the labour market.

[English]

A smaller number of working taxpayers will be supporting a larger number of OAS recipients. We owe it to future generations to leave both a solid OAS program and an affordable tax burden.

Looking at these facts, the coming challenges are clear. What is not clear is the reason that opposition members are attempting to mislead Canadians about the health of the Canada pension plan. The CPP is directly funded from contributions made by employees, employers and the self-employed. According to Canada's chief actuary, it is sustainable for the next 75 years. The reason the CPP is so robust is that the contributions of individuals are invested over their careers, thereby growing the fund to cover the benefits in their retirement. This is a fundamentally different model than the OAS program. The OAS is funded from general tax revenues on a pay-as-you-go basis. This means that all the benefits are paid for by the taxes collected that year. There is no reserve fund. This is why the worker-to-retiree ratio is so important.

This is not just a problem for Canada. According to the latest OECD report, "Pensions at a Glance 2011", two-thirds of OECD countries are already increasing statutory pension ages, and will do so in the coming decades to respond to this issue.

We must get things right now to ensure that our retirement security system stays strong and sustainable for generations to come. Thankfully, because of the strong economic leadership of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, we can begin from a position of relative strength and can afford to make changes over time. Younger generations will have the time to plan and adjust. Older generations, who have planned accordingly, will play by the rules of today and will not be affected. We will address this issue in a manner allowing Canadians to continue to enjoy the quality of life we all cherish. To be clear, any changes that our government implements will provide a lengthy period of notice and adjustment.

In summary, our government is reviewing measures to protect Canadians' pensions in the long term. We will implement any changes fairly, allowing significant notice and time for adjustment. We will not follow the opposition and stick our heads in the sand and pretend that we are oblivious to the obvious problems of an aging society in Canada. For these reasons, our government will be voting against this motion, and I urge all members of the House to do exactly the same.

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to the member from the government and her other colleagues, and with all the numbers they have been mentioning, I just cannot believe they really want to lift seniors out of poverty.

In my riding, a rural riding, I have been receiving phone calls and letters from seniors on the verge of committing suicide. Suicide rates among seniors have increased for the past 10 years to a number we cannot believe.

The number of senior citizens with OAS and CPP will double in the next 15 years. Everyone has seen that coming for the past 20 years. Why can I not believe what the government is saying about lifting seniors out of poverty? I would like to hear of some action, real action, because this is a serious matter. Despite all the bills and economic action plans they have been talking about doing, I cannot see this in my riding. Why can I not believe them?

• (1230)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear. The number of seniors who are in the low income bracket has declined substantially since 1979, from 29.4% then to 5.2% under this government.

This government has initiated a number of measures that have allowed low income seniors to come out of poverty, whether an increase in the guaranteed income supplement or in the base rate from \$500 to \$3,500.

Our government is acting. Why does the opposition not support us?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member needs to have a bit of a reality check.

Imagine the reaction of the thousands of workers 60 or 61 years old who have been working for 25 plus years in the manufacturing industry, whether in Manitoba, Ontario or the province of Quebec, when they heard the Prime Minister announce outside of Canada that the government would increase the age for OAS from 65 to 67. Then the government said that seniors would not be penalized. Imagine the reaction of those thousands of workers who have been looking forward to potentially retiring at age 65 after being told that the Prime Minister has decided that 65 is too young to receive OAS and that the age will be put to 67.

When the Liberals on this side of the House challenged the government to make a clearer statement on whether it was going to increase the age to 67, not one Conservative MP has stood up for his or her constituents who have been calling the members' offices and telling them to leave it at 65.

Will that member stand up for those workers who are 60 or 61 years of age and looking forward to retiring at 65? Will she guarantee that the Conservative government will not increase the age to 67 from 65?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before, the current benefits provided to seniors will be maintained. My father is a senior and his benefits will be maintained.

We have done things to aid those seniors whom the member is talking about, whether by increasing the GIS or providing them with the opportunity for pension income splitting. Those members voted against those things. We encourage them to step up, take action, and support the government in what we are doing for seniors.

Business of Supply

Mrs. Susan Truppe (Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I support my colleague from Simcoe—Grey.

Events around the world make it clear that our government needs to make responsible decisions to ensure that social programs remain sustainable. That is what our government is doing.

We will make the changes necessary to ensure sustainability for the next generation, while not affecting current recipients. These changes will not affect today's retirees or Canadians who are close to retirement. The facts are undeniable: If changes are not made to the old age security program, it will become unsustainable.

I would like to ask my colleague what will happen to the program if our government does not do anything? Why is it important that we continue to look after our future seniors?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, we need to make sure that this program is sustainable for future Canadians. That is why our government is acting responsibly and moving forward.

As has been mentioned, current seniors' benefits will be maintained. We will continue to take action to support seniors across this country.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine.

We have heard a great deal today about the OAS, but I would like to take this opportunity to remind the House that just this past June, we all made a commitment to lift every senior out of poverty. To date, the government has taken no action on that NDP motion and has demonstrated complete disregard for seniors living in poverty in Canada. The Conservatives have touted tax breaks and income splitting but neither of those helps those in this country living in or near the poverty line. Tax breaks do not help the poor because their incomes are too low to benefit from any tax break.

Now the government is shifting gears. Instead of ignoring the poor, it is making suggestions that the poor should be the ones to pay for the financial mismanagement of the Conservative government. By suggesting cuts or other such changes to the OAS, the government is chipping away at the security of seniors in this country. Asking the poor to pay while giving tax breaks to the rich is despicable, unacceptable and unfathomable. The rumblings of changes to the OAS show complete disregard for the motion passed unanimously in this House last June. The government is well aware that the OAS and GIS are critical to keeping seniors above the poverty line. The government's own responses to the petitions calling on the Conservatives to end seniors' poverty trumpet how successful the OAS and GIS have been in reducing the levels of poverty among our seniors. I do not understand why the Conservatives are trying to create more challenges. Clearly, they do not even believe their own rhetoric.

Over the past couple of weeks, as the NDP seniors critic I have received many emails and letters from seniors across the country reacting to the Prime Minister's suggestion that there may be changes to old age security. People are outraged and insulted, but most of all they are terrified of what the future may hold.

I have heard from seniors living at the poverty line, who are wondering how on earth they will make their monthly payments and afford to buy food if their OAS is cut. Seniors have shared their fear that they may have to return to work but they have no idea what kind of job they would do. They have no skills for some of the jobs out there.

I heard from Nortel workers who have not only lost their jobs but also lost significant portions of their pensions and are relying on the OAS when they turn 65 just to make ends meet.

People wrote to me concerned about how this would impact first nations who already live in some of the worst living conditions in Canada. How can they be expected to take yet another hit?

I heard from seniors who have been forced to sell their homes because they do not have the money to keep them. They cannot keep their homes because of the reality of retirement.

Our seniors are worried that any changes to the OAS would push them over the edge into poverty.

I heard from one senior who was actually forced to move to the country, far from friends and neighbours, because he could not afford to live in the city on his meagre pension. For rural seniors, finding work is not an option. Unemployment is high and competition is fierce for the few available jobs, which are often seasonal. Services for seniors are reduced in rural areas, further adding to the burden of making ends meet. Changes to the OAS would be doubly detrimental to them.

People have carefully tried to plan for retirement at age 65. Making changes to the GIS now would have a significant and negative impact on their lives.

Many of those with health problems are already struggling to keep working until they reach age 65. If the government plans to raise the age of receipt of OAS to 67, this would be a significant burden, in particular for those with little CPP or other pension savings and who are forced to rely on OAS and GIS. The people who rely on OAS are for the most part those who have struggled their whole lives. The reason they have not saved is that there is no money to save: every penny has been spent on the necessities of life, in raising kids and getting by.

I had people point out in no uncertain terms that changes to the OAS should have been brought up during the election.

Business of Supply

•(1235)

What is proposed by the government is a future that is bleak for retirees. How can the Conservatives pretend, just eight months after the last election, that they were taken by surprise by this so-called crisis in the funding of OAS? The scramble that followed the announcement at Davos and the suggestion that changes will be a few years down the road and seniors now will not be affected is a tactic that will divide future and current seniors.

I also have letters from younger people in their forties and fifties who are concerned about what access to OAS they may have when they are ready to retire. They are afraid for their retirement and they see that the government is looking to divide Canadians.

The politics of division will not work this time. People have written to me and have pointed out the economic benefit of the OAS to all of society. Seniors on OAS spend all of their money in their neighbourhoods. That is money we invested in our economy. OAS is not a burden on the economy. It is an investment in our economy.

A constituent in my riding of London—Fanshawe has called the government and its actions an abusive act on the average working person. I could not agree more.

I wish to be very clear. The money for OAS is readily available. We have the money to lift seniors out of poverty in the present and the money to address additional expenses the government will face in the future as our population continues to age.

Instead of investing in Canada, the Conservatives chose to saddle the treasury and Canadians with corporation tax giveaways that will not create and have not created a single new job.

Seniors represent one of the fastest growing populations in Canada today. The number of seniors in Canada is projected to increase from about 4.2 million to 9.8 million from 2005 to 2036. With so many more people retiring in the years to come, we need to have the social safety net in place now to avoid dramatic increases in the rate of poverty in the future.

The current government is clearly making the wrong decisions regarding how to care for the increased number of seniors in 2036 and its plan falls far short of what we really need.

We need investment in home care and in pharmacare, increased access to resources, appropriate and affordable housing and investment in geriatric studies. Investment in our communities and in our families are essential.

Our actions now will have an impact on how we treat our seniors in the future. If we fail to invest and make plans for an aging population, it is our own retirement that will be in jeopardy. Future seniors will not have the choice to age in their homes and will not have access to the care that they need. The concerns for the future are very real.

Today, only 38.5% of Canadian workers have workplace pensions and nearly one-third have no retirement savings at all. More than 3.5 million Canadians are not saving enough in RRSPs for what used to be called their “golden years” and 75% of workers are not even participating in a registered pension plan.

Clearly, the notion that retirement savings can adequately account for retirement through purchases of RRSPs does not work and urgent government action is needed.

It should further be noted that private retirement savings are concentrated in a small percentage of families. According to Statistics Canada, 25% of families hold 84% of these assets, while three out of ten families have no private pensions at all.

In total, more than a quarter of million seniors live below the poverty line and, since the mid-1990s, incomes of seniors have reached a ceiling. Now there is a significant gap. Seniors' incomes have increased by about \$4,100 while other Canadian households' incomes increased by \$9,000. The situation is even more pronounced among seniors living alone.

Seniors have worked hard all their lives, have played by the rules and now they simply want access to the programs and services that their hard-earned tax dollars helped to build. They saved that money, made that money available and now they demand that it be made available to them in their time of need.

•(1240)

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has been clear that we support seniors. We introduced pension income splitting and the new tax free savings account. In my riding, good friends, like Mr. Bob Weeks, spent an entire lifetime building his own house.

As I said, there are four pillars of a retirement income: one, the principal house; two, the CPP; three, the RRSP; and four, the OAS.

Why did member vote against the GIS increase and the funding for low-income seniors' housing?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, I will point out a number of issues. Pension splitting is only good for a couple with reasonable assets. If one is single, there is no one to split with. Tax benefits are non-refundable. It makes absolutely no sense to have them because they mean nothing to those with incomes so low that they cannot get the benefits.

In terms of the OAS and the question regarding why we rejected the budget, of course we rejected the budget and we will continue to reject budgets that give \$60 billion to the most profitable corporations in this country while cutting and slashing the benefits that the people of this country have paid for, have earned and deserve.

Business of Supply

•(1245)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her speech and her compassion. According to experts, the problems being put forth by the government are more apparent than real. The birthrate was three children per woman in the 1950s. It is now about 1.5 children, which is actually less than the population replacement rate of 2.1 babies per woman in the absence of immigration. These facts are already included in pension system projections.

Maintaining pension systems is not so much a matter of actuarial estimates but rather a matter of governments having the political will to keep public pensions alive and well.

I would ask the hon. member if she would outlay what she thinks are the critical questions that should be asked in a national debate on pensions and whether raising the age of eligibility for OAS from age 65 to age 67 is a fair and equitable solution.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, my esteemed colleague raises some quite important issues in terms of some of the actuarial estimates in regard to what is available and what is not. She is correct when she says that pension plans have built in the reality of this surge in the number of seniors.

We also know that 2.4% of our GDP right now is for OAS so our seniors can live in dignity. By 2030, it is estimated that will rise to a peak of about 3.2% and then will decline. Essentially, what will happen is that the government will tell everyone that it cannot afford to give them a proper retirement and will reduce the amount they receive. Then, in 2030, there will be a resurgence in terms of government funding. However, we can bet that there will not be a resurgence in the amount given to seniors in terms of OAS. In fact, by 2030 and beyond, they will continue to live in poverty and continue to be ignored.

Right now, 250,000 seniors in the most affluent country in the world are living in penury. That is a disgrace. That is what this debate is about.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise today to defend the seniors in my riding of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine and in Canada. I would also like to thank the hon. member for Pierrefonds—Dollard for introducing this motion, which is very important to me, today.

I would like to start by reading the motion because the government has clearly stated that it is going to reject it. I would like to explain to my fellow citizens what the Conservatives are going to reject today.

That this House reject calls by the Prime Minister to balance the Conservative deficit on the backs of Canada's seniors by means such as raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security and call on the government to make the reduction and eventual elimination of seniors' poverty a cornerstone of the next budget.

It seems that the Conservatives want to balance the deficit on the backs of Canadian seniors and that the age of eligibility for old age security will be increased from 65 to 67, as we have heard. The government will not consider the reduction and elimination of seniors' poverty in its next budget and will allow the threat of poverty to hang over Canada's seniors.

On Monday—three days ago—I was in my riding because a round table on seniors was being held. The Notre-Dame-de-Grâce community council called upon the public to help resolve the problems faced by seniors. The main issue was poverty. There are three organizations in my riding that take care of seniors: the Table de concertation aînés de Lachine, the Table de concertation pour les besoins des aînés de l'Ouest-de-l'Île and the Conseil des aînés et des aînées de N.D.G. They are all concerned about the same thing: poverty.

Their action plan involves improving transportation for seniors. Seniors want more affordable transportation since they do not have the means to pay to take the bus. The action plan also involves making seniors aware of existing organizations and services that can provide them with financial assistance. Once again, we see that seniors are having difficulty making ends meet. This is the Table de concertation aînés de Lachine's action plan. Rather than taking the time to read the whole thing, I will simply say that all the reports and mission statements of the consultation committees for seniors in my riding talk about poverty.

Today, we are asking the government to take this into consideration and to help the seniors in our ridings. It is not right to prevent people who worked hard their whole lives from living in dignity.

There were about 20 seniors and 20 observers at the round table I attended on Monday, and they were all scared. The government keeps saying that we are trying to scare the public. On Monday, my constituents did not know that we were going to have this opposition day today. It was not the opposition that was scaring them; it was the government's proposal. To tell older people that their old age pension is going to be delayed by two years, that is serious and very negative.

The Montreal Health and Social Services Agency has released a number of statistics on this recently. For instance, the number of seniors living below the poverty line is proportionally higher in Montreal than anywhere else in Canada: 36% of seniors live below the poverty line, compared to the Canadian average of 19%. That is almost double. Furthermore, 48% of female seniors without a spouse tend to have a low income. The use of food banks by people over 60 has doubled since 1995.

People come to my office and ask me how I can help them. All I can say to them is that, unfortunately, the government simply dismisses any motions that could help seniors in a tangible way, like the one we are presenting today.

I repeat: 48% of female seniors without a spouse tend to have a low income. As we know, most women over 55 spent most of their lives at home, raising children. Their husbands were the bread winners. So they have less income. More women than men have a low income, because they did not contribute to CPP, a private savings plan or an RRSP, or they receive nothing from former employers.

Business of Supply

•(1250)

They are expecting the government to thank them for founding our society, for having children and for building our communities. Instead, they are abandoned at retirement age. I cannot accept this. I want the government to listen to us and to really read the motion instead of saying no right from the outset. I will read the motion once again. It is shocking to be told that it will be defeated.

That this House reject calls by the Prime Minister to balance the Conservative deficit on the backs of Canada's seniors by means such as raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security and call on the government to make the reduction and eventual elimination of seniors' poverty a cornerstone of the next budget.

What I cannot accept is the idea of increasing the OAS eligibility age from 65 to 67. Throughout the last session, the government tended to pass the buck to the provinces to balance its budget.

In my riding, which is part of Montreal, many 60- and 61-year-old seniors are on social assistance and must wait until they are 65 to receive the old age pension. Today, the provinces are being told that the eligibility age will be pushed back to 67 and that they will have to provide social assistance to these people for two more years.

An organization in my riding, the Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC), published a report entitled *A Profile of English-speaking Mature Workers Residing in the Greater Montreal Area*. In Montreal, we must deal with the challenge of anglophones who have difficulty finding work. Imagine someone who only speaks English, is 62 and is looking for work. That is tough. I understand this and I even understand the employer's point of view. I cannot deny that there may be less incentive to hire a 62-year-old who will be retiring soon. These people have a great deal of difficulty finding a job, and CEDEC works hard to help them with their job search. Now, we are telling these people, who are having a hard time and are forced to go on social assistance, that they will have to wait two more years because they have a hard time finding a job and that the Canadian government is abandoning them by increasing the eligibility age for OAS.

I have a very hard time accepting that. I want to know how this government, which is supposed to be closer to the people—or so I would hope—can refuse to help seniors who have contributed to society their whole lives.

Today I am appealing to the government's human side. I am asking the government to reconsider its decision and support the motion moved by my colleague from Pierrefonds—Dollard. I want to be sure the government understands that we are talking about living with dignity, a concept we have been hearing about for a long time. We have been hearing more and more about dying with dignity. Dying with dignity is not just about the last few months of life one spends in a hospital; it is about being in one's sixties and finding life a little more difficult, finding it a little harder just getting around in the winter. We all know what winter is like in Quebec. Last Wednesday, the farm women's association I visited told me that there were not many people in attendance because of the winter. Seniors have a hard time getting around when it is icy, so it is difficult for them to have a social life.

We are asking the government to help these people, but it only replies that it needs to reduce the deficit in its next budget, that it has

goals to achieve between now and 2015, that it has cut taxes, that it gave money to its friends in big business and that it is really sorry it cannot help seniors because it has to balance its budget instead.

In closing, I would ask the new government to reconsider its position and support my colleague's motion.

•(1255)

I hope to soon be able to tell my constituents that the government has listened to reason and has decided to help them.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the hon. member. Why is she criticizing our government's foresight in ensuring the sustainability of the old age security system for future generations, including her own generation, which is concerned about its future?

We simply want to ensure that future generations will have the same old age security system that exists today. Why does my dear colleague not take that into consideration?

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question. I will answer him by quoting Edward Whitehouse, who leads the team analyzing pensions within the OECD, who said that according to his analysis, Canada is not facing major challenges in terms of the financial viability of its public retirement system.

He added that long-term projections show that the public retirement benefits are financially viable. In his opinion, the aging population will naturally cause increased spending on public pensions, but the rate of increase is lower than in a number of OECD countries and the starting point is better. He also says that the earnings-related public plans—CPP and QPP—have built up substantial reserves in order to cope with these later-stage expenditures.

It is easy to see what is happening. It is not a matter of foresight; it is a matter of saddling seniors with the debt burden.

•(1300)

[English]

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure we have all been receiving emails and phone calls about the issue of pensions and the Conservatives' misguided approach to pension reform.

I just spoke to someone from Guelph. He mentioned that the Conservatives are spending tens of billions of dollars on new prisons when crime rates are going down and spending tens of billions on jet planes without getting a second price. Then he reminded me that we are getting 30 more MPs unnecessarily, renovating the West Block so we can move there and spending tens of millions of dollars renovating this House to accommodate 30 more MPs. He reminded me about how misguided the government's priorities are.

Business of Supply

Would the member speak about the misguided, misdirected priorities of the government and why the Conservatives should not be placing the future burden of debt on the backs of seniors?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, that is precisely what I was saying in my speech. I thank my hon. colleague. I do not understand it, either, and I deplore it. This government can never find money for voters, for ordinary Canadians and for seniors, but it can always find money for its friends. That much is clear. It makes no sense for the government to help large corporations and prisons.

I said the same thing about prisons. I used to teach in a prison and I can say that we do not need more prisons. We need programs in our prisons to facilitate rehabilitation. That is what the NDP has always supported and will always support. It is not normal for a government to spend money on a bunch of programs like prisons, the F-35 jets and corporate tax cuts. Several analysts said that cutting taxes was a bad idea. The upshot is that the government is going to raise the eligibility age for old age pensions, because there is no more money; it was spent elsewhere. That is a poor excuse.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord for a brief question.

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, many things do not make sense in this debate. Earlier we heard from the hon. member for Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, one of the only Conservatives elected in Quebec. He should understand the question I am about to ask.

In this case, who gets the bill? My colleague talked about this earlier. We know that anyone who loses two years of benefits will turn to social assistance. In that case, who will pay for this at the end of the day?

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for the question. As I said in the last part of my speech, the idea was to send the bill to the provinces. That seems to be the Conservatives' answer to dealing with their budget and their deficit. I think it is a very bad idea. We know this is already causing problems, in Quebec and Ontario in particular. I think the provinces are going to refuse once again to pay these bills for two more years.

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my honoured colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville.

I appreciate being invited to participate in the debate regarding the old age security program, or the OAS, as it is commonly known. This discussion provides the perfect context to clear up some of the confusion, the miscommunication and misinformation that surrounds the issue of seniors' poverty.

I would like to start by assuring everybody that the Government of Canada recognizes financial security as a factor that has an obvious impact on our seniors' quality of life. As the Prime Minister has said, any seniors currently receiving benefits as well as those nearing retirement will not be affected.

Our government is vigilant on this issue and we truly appreciate the contribution seniors have made and continue to make in building our communities in Canada.

A key priority for the Government of Canada is to help Canadians prepare for and achieve financial security in their later years. We know that seniors are concerned about the economy and maintaining their standard of living in retirement. That is understood. This is an issue that has come into even greater focus in light of the demographic shift that we are experiencing.

It is no secret the Canadian population is aging. Events around the world and our aging population make it clear that the government needs to make responsible decisions to ensure that social programs are sustainable.

In 2011 the first baby boomers reached the milestone of turning 65. At the same time, Canadians are living much longer than ever before. Canadians can enjoy one of the longest life expectancies in the world at close to 81 years old. Taken together, these phenomena are profoundly affecting our country. The result is that the age structure of the population is changing so that there is a higher proportion of senior citizens.

There is a demographic projection we will hear quoted many times today that in less than two decades, close to one in four Canadians will be over age 65. To put it into some context, the proportion of seniors in Canada currently stands at one in seven.

There are obvious financial implications to living longer, as more seniors begin to rely on retirement income for longer periods. As a government we have done a great deal to ensure that Canadians have financial security in their later years. As I stated before, it is one of our key priorities.

The most important financial support we provide to seniors is through the public pension system. This system is highly regarded internationally, and for good reason. It has played a very significant role in reducing lower income rates among seniors. In fact, the incidence of poverty among seniors in Canada has dropped from a rate of 21% in 1980 to 5.2% in 2009. This is one of the lowest rates in the world.

We describe Canada's retirement income system as being made up of three pillars. The first pillar is one that dominates our discussion today, the OAS. The Canada pension plan, CPP, is the second pillar. The third pillar consists of personal savings, including employee pensions, registered retirement savings plans, tax-free savings accounts, as well as other savings and investments.

As members are likely aware, the government is seeking to build on the third pillar. To do this we recently introduced Bill C-25 to create the legislative framework for the establishment of pooled registered pension plans, PRPPs. PRPPs would provide the majority of Canadians who do not have workplace pensions with access to well-registered, low-cost, private sector pension coverage.

Let me revisit the first two pillars, OAS and CPP. Together these two public pillars are designed to provide a modest base upon which to build additional retirement income. This year Canadians will receive close to \$72 billion in benefits through the Canada pension plan, old age security and the guaranteed income supplement, GIS.

Business of Supply

It is true that these benefits do not come automatically. All Canadians have to apply for them. That is why we have taken steps to inform Canadians about their eligibility for these benefits and to help them through the application process.

Through HRSDC and Service Canada, our government is using direct mail, information campaigns, partnerships and community organizations to reach seniors who may be eligible for OAS and GIS.

• (1305)

Some of these efforts are aimed at seniors who are particularly hard to reach, such as those who are homeless, those who live in remote communities, immigrant seniors, aboriginal seniors, seniors with disabilities and those who do not speak either English or French.

We issue more than 600,000 application forms to Canadian seniors who are not yet receiving their CPP or OAS to encourage them to apply. Every year, we mail out thousands of pre-filled applications to people we think may qualify for GIS and the target group changes every year. Most GIS recipients now only need to apply once in their lifetime and have their benefits automatically renewed simply by filling out their annual tax return. As members can see, we are making great efforts to reach out to low-income seniors and to inform them about their benefits.

Speaking of benefits, I will speak a little more on the GIS.

As I said, the GIS provides extra support for seniors with little to no income and has a great success in reducing poverty among seniors. Our efforts to combat senior poverty does not stop there. In our last Speech from the Throne, we pledged that the government's low tax plan would permanently enhance benefits for Canada's most vulnerable seniors. We honoured that pledge last year by providing the largest GIS increase in 25 years. This measure will help Canada's lowest income seniors out of poverty. More than 680,000 low-income seniors are benefiting from this increase. These seniors are now receiving additional GIS of up to \$600 for a single senior and up to \$840 for couples.

In 2008 we increased the GIS exemption from \$500 to \$3,500. The earnings exemption allows low-income working seniors to keep more of their hard-earned money. This year we are providing more tax relief for seniors and pensioners, saving them \$2.3 billion.

The measures I have just outlined demonstrate that the Government of Canada is taking concrete steps for seniors. We are actively helping Canadians prepare for and achieve financial security in their latter years. This is an ongoing effort for us because it is a key priority.

• (1310)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is very difficult to sit in the House and listen to my colleagues across the aisle talk about the amazing things they have done for seniors, while at the same time the Prime Minister goes to another land and at a very fine podium shakes the country by making an announcement that he is going to be transforming our pension systems.

In my community I have seniors living in poverty today. Yes, they were shaken by that announcement. People in my community,

whether in high school, and I have quite a few letters from them, or whether they are in their twenties, thirties or forties, are worried and they have every reason to be. We have seen the actions of the government to undermine our very strong public pensions, throw confusion around the OAS and try to change it at this time.

What answers does my colleague have for seniors who are living below the poverty line in his community right now? What answers does he give them when they say they are living in poverty?

Mr. Joe Daniel: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my colleague acknowledging the great work the government has done to help seniors so far.

As I have mentioned, there have been increases in GIS and the levels of qualification before taxes are paid, et cetera. Great things have been done. As members can tell, the reduction in the number of people who are actually in the low-income bracket has been reduced dramatically. In fact, it is the best among some of these countries.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in Manitoba over 7,000 seniors 65 years of age and older have to go to food banks. Quite often they have to make a difficult decision whether to buy prescription drugs or put food on the table.

At a time when there is this need for seniors to be provided the resources necessary to have a dignified lifestyle, we on this side of the House expect the government to recognize that and improve things such as the GIS. However, the government is bringing in fear in regard to taking away pension and benefits.

As opposed to being able to collect a pension when one is 65, the government is now suggesting it be moved to 67, thereby affecting hundreds of thousands workers today who are in that age group of 55 to 62. Thousands of workers from Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and other provinces will have to put off retirement for at least another two years.

Why has the government made such a low priority of our seniors? It feels that it can have all the resources to spend on increasing the number of politicians inside the House, or spending billions on jails, or billions on a jet that has been grounded by many other countries. What is with the priorities of the government?

• (1315)

Mr. Joe Daniel: Mr. Speaker, our priorities are quite clear. We have done a significant amount for seniors. The level of poverty among seniors is one of the lowest in all of the countries in the west. There are great things that need to be done. We need to secure the future of the OAS system, which needs to be adapted. It cannot just stay as it was in the past. That is what is under review.

Clearly what is happening is the fearmongering is coming from the opposite side, not from our side.

Business of Supply

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the motion tabled by the hon. member for Pierrefonds—Dollard suggests that the government is turning its back on Canadian seniors. This is absolutely false.

This government is doing exactly the opposite. We are standing up for Canadian seniors. This government remains committed to ensuring the retirement security of all Canadians. Indeed, let me assure the member that our government will ensure that seniors maintain all the benefits they currently receive.

Achieving this goal, however, will not happen through wishful thinking. Our aging population will have profound implications on all aspects of Canadian life, including our retirement income system. That is why this government is determined to ensure the long-term strength of our economy. Only in this way can we protect the well-being of both current and future generations.

For the benefit of the House, I would like to elaborate on how the government is responding to the challenge of a demographic shift. In particular, I would like to set Canada's challenges into an international context. As members know, there are three pillars to Canada's retirement income system. There are the old age security program, the Canada pension plan and, finally, personal savings, which include employer pension plans.

There are no concerns with the viability of the Canada pension plan. In the 1990s, in light of our aging population, the government made major changes to ensure the program's financial sustainability. As a result, the CPP is on a secure and sustainable path.

There are, however, major concerns with the affordability of the old age security program. Just as we once refined the Canada pension plan to protect future generation, the time has come to examine the OAS. To do anything less would betray the hopes and dreams of Canadians for a secure and dignified retirement. The stakes are high and the government will not gamble away the economic security of older Canadians by failing to act.

Let me reflect first on why reviewing measures to protect OAS in the long term are so necessary. Our population is aging. Over the next 20 years the number of Canadians over the age of 65 will jump from 4.7 million to 9.3 million people. That is a staggering increase in a relatively short period of time, and it comes with a high price tag. The annual cost of the OAS program is expected to triple between 2010 and 2030, from \$36 billion to \$108 billion.

At the same time, as our senior population is rising, our working population is falling. This is the crux of the issue. Unlike the Canada pension plan, the OAS is financed primarily through taxes on working people. By 2030, the number of taxpayers for every senior will have dropped in half, from four to two. Fewer people working means less revenues and higher costs.

This is not a recipe for sustainability. Unless we act decisively and responsibly, the old age security program will impose an increasing burden to future generations, which in turn challenges the ability of the government to continue delivering its important benefits to our seniors. That is why our government is determined to take balanced and fair action now to protect the well-being of current and future seniors. This government will take responsible actions in recognition

of the changing demographics so we can have sustainable programs to support all Canadians in the future.

• (1320)

I stress the word "fair". Any changes to the OAS program would not affect current retirees or those close to retirement. They would also give others sufficient time to adjust and plan for their retirement. Let me be absolutely clear. People receiving OAS and GIS right now will not lose one cent.

Canada is not the only country with an aging population. It would be useful to examine how other industrialized nations are responding to economic stresses on their retirement income systems and what we can learn from them.

Take the case of the United Kingdom. In 2011 the U.K. proposed to accelerate changes to pension reforms that were approved a few years ago, as events around the world made it clear that governments needed to make responsible decisions to ensure social programs remain sustainable. For Canada, this reaffirms our belief in a balanced, fair and responsible action. Any changes to our old age security program will be well planned and gradual. We will work hard to get it right the first time.

I will use Australia as an example. You may know, Mr. Speaker, a review panel recommended increasing the age of eligibility for the old age pension from 65 to 67. Naturally the proposals provoked much debate. What is interesting, however, is that seniors groups actually supported an increase in the retirement age. They understood, given the country's aging population, that changes were inevitable. Canada can learn a lot from the Australian experience. The government is convinced that Canadians will understand what is at stake and therefore support reforms to our old age security program. No doubt today's debate will be the first of many. Canadians appreciate our country's fiscal realities, unlike the opposition parties that continue their campaign of fear, with half truths and disingenuous comments.

Japan's experience also shows why public awareness is so important. Back in the 1990s, a major study reached a significant conclusion. Many Japanese in their 50s believed that public pensions would not be around for their retirement. Given this clear understanding of what was at stake, there were major concerns after Japan raised the age requirement for a basic public pension.

Closer to home, the United States passed pension reforms back in 1983 and is considering new increases in the retirement age. A recent proposal is being supported by reform advocates and actuaries for one simple reason. Since Americans are living longer, they need to work longer. This, too, is a lesson that Canada should take to heart.

Business of Supply

The opposition falsely accuses the government of fighting the deficit on the backs of our country's seniors. Unlike the Liberal Party before us, we will not cut transfers to individuals or provinces to balance our budget. This is not about deficit reduction. This is about securing the pensions of Canadians for today and tomorrow. We cannot put our heads in the sand and ignore the demographic realities facing us. We must meet the challenge square on and protect our old age security program as other countries around the world have protected theirs.

As we move forward, our government will work to protect the financial security of all Canadians, while ensuring that the social programs remain sustainable for the long term. That is why I will not support this motion and I recommend that all members of the House do likewise.

•(1325)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to the speeches all day and we hear the government side talking about fairness. If it is about fairness, what is so fair about giving \$6 billion of corporate tax cuts to the biggest corporations, like banks and big oil companies? We know that big corporate tax cuts do not create a single job. What is fair about that? Would it not be fairer to ensure that we lift every senior out of poverty? Seniors are the ones who built our country.

Could my colleague really tell us about the government's plan to change this? Is it really on the side of the big corporate tax cuts to big banks and oil companies or is it on the side of the most vulnerable, which is our seniors?

I would ask him to answer this specific question. Could he guarantee the government will not increase the age from 65 to 67 for accessibility to OAS?

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member started off by talking about tax cuts. Every economist will tell us that tax cuts do create jobs. The private sector creates jobs and jobs are what will secure Canada's economic future. Jobs allow more people to pay into a system through taxes that will, in turn, provide these benefits that Canadians count on. It is economics 101.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to invoke an old-fashioned concept. It is the concept of trust. This is a very important part of the relationship between the government and the governed. Eight months ago in an election campaign, we heard the Prime Minister promise that he would not touch transfers to individuals. Eight months later, on the road to a majority government, he had a conversion. Now he thinks he can do what he wants. What will that do to the trust, if there is any left, between this government and the people of Canada?

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, I think the question of trust was answered on May 2. The Canadian people trusted us with a strong, stable, national majority government to deliver on the priorities for Canadians, and that is exactly what we are doing. We have not cut one red cent of any payment to any Canadian that deserves a payment on any issue. We have not cut one red cent to any province. In fact, we continue to significantly increase transfers to the provinces under the Canada health and social transfer. That is trust, and that is why we have maintained the trust of the Canadian people and why we will continue to maintain their trust.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us look at the track record of the Liberals. When they had an opportunity, and they knew that this issue would arise, they did nothing. It is the same as on the environment, they did nothing. Their solution now is to stop fixing buildings that need repair. Their solution is to let criminals out of prison, not to punish them. That makes no sense. The NDP's solution is to increase taxes on Canadians. That is not the solution.

Would the member share what this government's position is on helping seniors and answer why the opposition is opposed to helping seniors?

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, the proudest moment in my new term as a member of Parliament was the day this Parliament, at least our side of it, voted in favour of the largest increase in the guaranteed income supplement in 25 years. This government put low income seniors first for the first time in 25 years. I am proud to be a member of Parliament for a government that stands up for seniors.

•(1330)

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

I believe we are at a watershed moment in our new 41st Parliament. We have now experienced the first of what I am fearful, and we talk about fear a fair bit, will be one of the many hidden agenda items of the Conservative government.

There was never any discussion in any of the past election campaigns about the need to raise the age at which people receive old age security. If there is a problem, and we do not believe there is, there has never been any discussion among the Canadian people about this problem. Baby boomers, of which I am a member, have been around since I was born in 1952, which, coincidentally, was the year the old age security system actually started.

We all know we will retire and now the Conservatives have created a crisis in order to achieve a different agenda, in order to start rolling back the social safety net of Canada. This is the first step and it is a dangerous first step. We will see more of this in the future I am afraid.

As a wag in Halifax has said, the Prime Minister opened a can of worms with a Swiss army knife and once again the most vulnerable members of society must pay for the excesses of the government. Seniors are just one of a long list of members of our society who, according to the Prime Minister, must accept less from government and should not expect to keep a reasonable standard of living when they reach retirement.

This crisis has been created as a result of a temporary blip caused by baby boomers. It is temporary, so why not find a temporary fix, like perhaps rescinding the corporate tax cuts that have taken so much out of the government treasury?

Business of Supply

The government came to office with an enormous structural surplus and it is gone. Not only is it gone but, in their term in office, the Conservatives have created the biggest deficit ever in Canadian history. Now they are saying that the cupboard is bare and that seniors will need to pay for it. That is not what the NDP believes. We do not believe in going backward. We believe in moving Canada forward, and this is moving backward.

The Prime Minister and the government also tell us not to worry because the Canada pension plan is solvent and that it will not be touched. What they have forgotten to tell us is that Canada pension is inexorably intertwined with the old age security system, as are all the pension plans in this country, private and public. They all have what is called a normal retirement date and they all require that there be some other form of assistance for the poorest of Canadians and the middle class of Canadians, that being old age security at age 65.

Once we step into the 67 world, as the Prime Minister appears willing to do, all of those systems must move to age 67. It will not just be old age security, because that would leave an enormous gap between what all of the other pension, retirement and income systems in Canada already have. All pension plans are based on a normal retirement age and almost, without exception, they are all at age 65, not 66 or 67. Moving away from that would put enormous pressure on other plans to move in lockstep.

Many employees have planned their careers around retirement at age 65. For those whose total pension income pays less than \$16,000, they count on the guaranteed income supplement to top-up their pension to a reasonable amount. For seniors who have only the old age security to count on, most of them women, it is the difference between abject poverty and living at the poverty line. However, the government is telling them to suck it up buttercup, that they should either continue working past retirement age or go on welfare for the next two years.

We do not agree that we should drag this country backward when we have worked so hard to protect the systems and security measures that are in place now.

• (1335)

What if those individuals were not able to work another two years, as the Prime Minister suggests? Both the federal government and the Government of New Brunswick allow forced retirement at age 65. All provinces allow forced retirement in jobs that require large physical or safety requirements, such as firefighters. Employers can fire people for being too old. How would people be able to work past the age of 65 when several levels of government suggest that they can be fired at age 65? Many employers work very hard to discourage people from working past 65.

I am aware of that from my career as a union rep. As soon as the Province of Ontario eliminated forced retirement at age 65, employers went through hoops to make it difficult for people to stay on past the age of 65. They changed benefit plans, income plans and tried to make people work for less, all to try to force them to leave or quit at age 65. Why? Because the kid coming out of school will work for a lot less. That is the kind of Canada the Conservatives are building.

The Prime Minister's proposal largely affects lower and middle income Canadians. This does not bother the famous 1%. They have other income beyond CPP and OAS. Their OAS is clawed back and they never qualify for GIS, so they would not be affected by the Prime Minister's proposals.

As for the guaranteed income supplement, it is not paid to those who already have reasonable pensions. The GIS goes to the 1.7 million seniors today who otherwise would live in abject poverty. That is one in three seniors in Canada. The fastest and easiest way to cut government spending on items like the GIS is to raise the minimum pensions. If Canada pension goes up, the GIS bill goes down. There is no need to raise the retirement age to 67 if the Canada pension plan can pick up the slack and, surprise, surprise, there would be no cost to the treasury.

There are significant impacts on the provinces that no one is talking about. Welfare stops at age 65. What happens between ages 65 and 67? Provincial long-term disability is not paid past age 65. Provincial workers' compensation and WSIB is not paid past age 65. This unilateral proposal by the Prime Minister to raise the retirement age to 67 would create significant holes in provincial social assistance programs, costing millions of dollars.

Further, most private pension plans take into account OAS payments. They are interdependent. Many of them have what they call the level income option where individuals can opt for a different retirement age based on the knowledge that they will get OAS. All of those deals would be gone.

Those holes in the private sector plans would create significant costs for employers and force extra costs on the provinces. All private benefit plans depend on retirement at age 65. Private long-term disability plans all end at age 65. There would be enormous costs to employers to do this.

Has anybody talked about the domino effect of what you are proposing? What you are proposing would actually cause an enormous cascade of costs on employers, on governments and on individuals. It is not just future seniors. I know you are musing, "This is only those younger people who don't really think about retirement right now. Don't worry, we won't touch it for several years yet".

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): If I could just remind the member that he ought to be addressing the Chair as opposed to his colleagues. Secondly, I would remind him that he has one minute remaining.

Business of Supply

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, the other effect of this is that it would discriminate against women. Women make roughly 70% of the earnings of men in this country and, therefore, 70% of their pension. Therefore, women, by far, make up the majority of people who are reliant more so than men on OAS and GIS. What would happen to those women if the age were moved to 67? More women would be in poverty and would need to work another two years.

We like to think that we would want to move Canada forward and moving Canada forward does not mean moving the age to 67. Moving Canada forward means protecting what we have; strengthening the Canada pension system, which would, in turn, cause less of a demand on GIS; making pensions more secure against bankruptcies; and maintaining and improving the GIS, not just the little amount the Conservatives talked about in their budget but enough to take every senior out of poverty. That is what we need and that is what the government ought to be doing.

● (1340)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pensions are a way of transferring income generated by people working today to those who have retired. It is a matter of intergenerational responsibility.

We hear from the government that existing seniors and those nearing retirement would not be affected. Who would be affected? The need to act is explained away by an aging population and, hence, there is a crisis, according to the government, although the experts, even the government's own expert, say there is no crisis.

If an aging population is a problem, why does the government fail to take action to address the health concerns of an aging population, for example, the rising costs of dementia, from \$15 billion today to \$153 billion in just 30 years, not to mention the human costs? Why is there a double standard?

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her very good question because the government does not appear to be focused on real issues. This is a made-up issue in order to throw a monkey wrench into our retirement system. However, there are real issues like health care, whose costs will rise and for which there need to be smarter ways of dealing with it. We need to have better investment in home care. We need to have better investment in systems that will keep people out of hospitals and keep our population healthy.

That is not what the government is about: it is about cutting things, and we are opposed to that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his speech.

We have noticed, since the debates have resumed, that the Conservatives do not listen to anyone, not the opposition members, experts or organizations, and even less so our seniors. I want to point out here that just when seniors need our help the most, this government wants to abdicate its responsibility. Poverty is on the rise among seniors, and among women in particular.

Can my colleague explain the harmful impact that increasing the retirement age will have on our seniors?

[English]

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, the government keeps saying that this will not have any impact on current seniors. Maybe it will, maybe it will not. However, everyone becomes a senior at some point and there will be a definite impact. It will mean, as I said in my speech, that almost every pension system in this country will have to move to keep in lock step with this. I am fearful that this will just be the first step in a series of reductions in our social safety net, and this first one attacks seniors first.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what I find difficult to understand is that in response to all of the great new things we as a government have done for seniors, the increase in the GIS, income splitting, other pension supports, and millions of dollars more for the new horizons for seniors program, the NDP has voted against every one of those measures. How can the NDP members stand up in the House today with any credibility and talk about seniors when they voted against every investment this Parliament has made in seniors?

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, as usual we are faced with the rhetoric of “We voted against this, we voted against that”. What we voted against was \$6 billion in corporate tax cuts, cuts that made the government unable to take seniors out of poverty. We are opposed to the \$19 billion cost of extra prisons because of a crime agenda for crime that is not happening. We are opposed to the direction in which the government is taking us, which is what caused us to vote against the entire budget.

We are of course in favour of raising seniors out of poverty, but the Conservatives have not done that.

● (1345)

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and speak for a few moments in support of the motion. I thank my colleague for bringing it forward and the member for York South—Weston for some of the valid and very interesting points he has made. One thing he talked about persuasively was the cascading effect this potential change will have on benefits that have been negotiated by Canadians based on a retirement age of 65. That is extremely important for the government to consider.

I have been noting the government members' responses to the concerns raised on this side. They have suggested on most occasions that it is the official opposition that is scaring seniors and raising fears about things the government is purportedly going to do. Yet it was the Prime Minister, when he was hobnobbing with that august body in Switzerland, the World Economic Forum, who pontificated about the significant social transformation he would bring about in this country, a transformation in which the retirement income system would play a major part.

Business of Supply

It is interesting that the Prime Minister, the leader of the Conservative Party, and none of the members opposite talked about that just a few short months ago when running in the election. None of them said to Canadians, including Canadian seniors, to vote for them to bring about a major social transformation, including cutting pensions to senior citizens. Whether now or in the future, it is all about cutting resources to seniors. They did not say anything about that. But here we are less than a year later and the government is starting to drop the hammer on seniors. Rightly so, my constituents are calling and asking what is going on. They are concerned about this.

The Prime Minister and members of the government benches are talking about changing the OAS, changing a system that often keeps people from the breadlines because of their insufficient income and who live below or very near the poverty line, seniors who as a result of health concerns and of being downsized or outplaced lost their jobs at age 62 or 63 and are trying to hang tough until age 65 when they will get a bit of a return from the contribution they have made to society. Now they are being told that the government is proposing to change that system, without it providing any details, without it having any discussion and without any consultation. They have a right to be concerned because we do not know for sure what the government is going to do.

My responsibility as the MP for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, and as my colleagues have been doing today and over the last couple of days, is to ask the government pertinent questions about why it is heading in this direction. It does not matter whether the Conservatives say they are not going to touch the system or seniors now but somewhere down the road, because a senior today and a senior tomorrow is still a senior. It is still about a person trying to make ends meet, who has contributed to our society, to our country, and made sacrifices and raised families and made this country into what it is. It is those people who are being asked by the government to carry the burden. Frankly, I do not think that is right and my colleagues agree with me.

• (1350)

I will talk about a couple of things the government mentions. Here, I am shocked at the way some commentators have jumped on the bandwagon to say that the system is not sustainable, that the demographics of our aging population are such that we are just not going to be able to afford it. They say this when talking about OAS, which makes up 2.7% of the gross domestic product now, a mere fraction of total economic activity in this country. The huge increase they are talking about is from 2.7% to 3.1% of GDP by the year 2031. That is the impact it is going to have relative to gross domestic product.

Some commentators have been using dollar figures, without taking into consideration inflation and the overall budget and overall revenues of the government in 2031, when suggesting this is a burden we cannot afford. That is bogus. Economists have said we need to make the comparisons on the basis of the percentage, as it relates to overall expenditures and the ability of the government to pay its bills.

It is the same with the deficit and debt, which are reviewed by rating agencies on a per capita basis and what we are able to handle

on that basis. Are we able, as an economy, to pay our debts? That is the equation, and that should be the equation here. I say shame on those who are suggesting that we cannot afford to pay seniors the princely sum of \$509 a month. Frankly, it is shocking.

The OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, has indicated that total public social expenditures on pensions as a percentage of GDP are estimated to be 4.7% in Canada. The average in other OECD countries is more than 7%. It has been suggested that we should look at what has happened in Europe and in the United States, where the sky is said to be falling. There is no question that some of those countries have been experiencing some significant economic pressures as a result of problems in the financial sector. However, in some of those countries, such as Italy, Germany, and Poland, social expenditures on pensions as a percentage of GDP are more like 11% to 12% or, in some cases, as high as 14%, compared to 4.7% in Canada.

Therefore, let us make relevant comparisons and not scare people. Let us actually recognize what we are facing.

The other fact is that none of these changes were indicated to Canadians on May 2 as coming down the pike. No one talked about there being a democratic crisis and that these changes would need to be made. Anyway, this government did not, back on May 2.

I understand there are things that need to be done to ensure that we pay our bills. I say that we should ensure that profitable corporations in this country start paying their fair share. We recognize that the money we are proposing to spend on F-35s can be better spent on seniors, that the money we are going to spend, the billions of dollars, to lock more Canadians up in prisons can be better spent looking after seniors today, tomorrow and into the future. That is the kind of choice this party, this opposition, is making. It is time the government recognized that it has a commitment to seniors and that it had better start living up to it.

• (1355)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the member's remarks. I think he would agree that the bottom line comes down to the fact that, although we are hearing different stories from a number of ministers, the Prime Minister is gouging seniors' pensions in order to try to cover the deficit that he created.

It is not just a matter of the government having its priorities wrong. I see the minister for ACOA. The government has been featherbedding ACOA, putting in place defeated Conservative candidates, friends of the Minister of National Defence, and paying them big salaries. The Conservatives have the biggest cabinet in Canadian history, all with well-paid staff. There is a bloated Prime Minister's office with 1,500 communications people. There will be an increase in the House of Commons by some 30 members, and both the other parties agreed to that.

Is it not simply a matter of the government having its priorities wrong and gouging seniors' pensions to try to cover the misplaced spending of the Government of Canada?

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, I do not think there is any question that it is always about choices and where we will spend our money.

Statements by Members

We do not need to talk to seniors about what it is like to make choices. There are many seniors whom I speak to in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour who make choices about whether they will be able to put enough food on the table, whether they will be able to afford to pay for their prescription drugs, and whether they will be able to obtain affordable and safe accommodation. Those are the kinds of choices seniors are making.

The government is giving a thumbs up to prisons, a thumbs up to F-35s, a thumbs up to profitable corporations, and a thumbs down to seniors, to people on unemployment, to people who are looking for services from this country. Those are not my priorities, nor are they the priorities of the Canadians I talk to.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in his speech my colleague said that he is getting a lot of phone calls from seniors in his constituency.

I would like to have his opinion on having seniors call the closest Conservative MP to their riding. Would it be effective if more seniors were to call Conservative MPs and tell them how unhappy they are with what the government is doing?

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, that is a good point. I talked to representatives of seniors' groups last week. We had a prebudget discussion in my riding. This was an issue that was raised by many people who are concerned. I told them that they could count on me as their MP to stand up when I have the opportunity, and I will take every opportunity to do this, to speak out about these issues and raise their concerns.

I told them that what we have seen from the government is absolute disrespect and contempt of democracy and Parliament. The government wants to shut down debate at every opportunity. I told them they themselves need to speak to the Conservatives. They need to make sure the government understands just how concerned they are about their future.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think that this debate has gotten a bit out of hand. The motion talks about rejecting calls to balance the budget on the backs of seniors, and especially on the backs of the most financially vulnerable seniors. This motion also talks about taking immediate action to deal with seniors living in poverty. Last summer, if I recall correctly, this government adopted a similar motion, so I do not understand the disconnect here.

What do the seniors in my colleague's riding think about this situation? The opposition is being accused of fearmongering. What I am hearing is that seniors are not afraid of what we are saying. They are afraid of the situation they are currently living in and they fear that it will only get worse with the announced cuts to programs and services.

• (1400)

[English]

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, let me say what a great job the member is doing in bringing such an important resolution to the floor of the House. I thank her for doing that.

I can tell her and all members of the House that seniors in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour are not concerned about what their MP is saying. They are concerned about what the government is doing.

This morning I had long chat with a young man; he sounded young, younger than I am anyway. He was worried about his dad who is 63 and is no longer working. He wanted to know what is going to happen to his dad if the government pushes the age forward to 67. As important, he wanted to know what would happen to him if he is in the same situation as his dad when he is 63.

I told him that I would bring that point to the floor of this House today and that I would continue to raise those issues so that government members recognize the kind of stress and strain they are putting on seniors and their families from one end of the country to the other.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last month I had the opportunity to join with the Governor General, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, the national chief, as well as hundreds of first nations leaders from across the country at the crown-first nations gathering here in Ottawa. The gathering was a historic opportunity for all involved to chart the course forward toward a more prosperous and brighter future for first nations people.

During the day I met with inspirational first nations leaders who had endorsed policies of accountability and transparency that had transformed the governance of their communities. These leaders had helped to develop stronger local economies and opportunities for their residents.

While we often hear news stories of communities facing challenges, we as parliamentarians need to know that there is a generation of first nations leaders who are meeting the challenges of the past and paving the way forward to more hope, opportunity and prosperity.

I am proud to be part of a team that is committed to partnering with first nations people to build a future of economic sustainability, hope and opportunity.

* * *

PENSIONS

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the phone has been ringing off the hook in my riding since the Prime Minister announced in Davos that the Canadian retirement system would undergo significant changes.

Statements by Members

John Wallace, a 90-year-old World War II veteran in my riding, braved the snow last Saturday to come out to my town hall meeting and express his opposition to this proposal. He does not want to see the benefits he fought so hard to secure taken away from his children. Another constituent of mine, Alan, will turn 65 this year. He called my office at 9 a.m. on Monday to ask if he would be eligible to retire in November.

The government should be taking practical, affordable measures to lift every senior out of poverty in this country. This proposal attacks the most vulnerable. People who have paid their taxes and built this country are worried about their retirement security.

On behalf of my constituents, I call on the government to stop misleading Canadians and stop these reckless cuts.

* * *

CANADA-CHINA RELATIONS

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister's upcoming work in China illustrates our government's success in diversifying our economic markets. His trip also acknowledges the significance to Canada of our Asian Canadian heritage.

That heritage was showcased last weekend in the riding I represent, where almost 100 volunteers hosted over 1,000 people in a joyous celebration of the year of the dragon. The event held in West Vancouver featured traditional Chinese and Korean arts and foods. The Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism was on hand, along with members of the diplomatic community. I thank the volunteer leaders who, with me, worked for months to stage the event. They include Jessica Li, Nellie Cheng, Audra Chuang, Esther Chu and Yun Kang.

The great success of this event is just one of many reasons that Canadians of all backgrounds watch with interest as our Prime Minister heads back to China where he will repeat the message that Canada is open for business, investment, tourism, and students who want to enrol in our schools and universities.

Happy Asian new year. *Gong Xi Fa Cai.*

* * *

SEALING INDUSTRY

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the sealing industry and challenge the federal government to take on misguided activists whose actions hurt the industry. After thousands of years, the seal hunt remains an important part of our culture and contributes to the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador and all of Atlantic Canada, as well as communities in Quebec and the north.

In addition to jobs and food for Canadians, the world can benefit from seal products. The meat is rich in protein and iron. Growing demand for omega-3 has seen a demand for seal oil. Uniqueness has made seal fur a high-demand material. The seal population has exploded from two million harp seals to nearly 10 million, and from 30,000 grey seals to more than 350,000. Scientists say this could be a factor in the decline of our fish stocks, which threatens our rural communities.

The Liberal Party is committed to a commercial sealing industry. This federal government must do more to promote it and help ensure its sustainability.

It is time for all parties to stand up for the seal hunt and for those who make a living from it.

* * *

● (1405)

BARNRAISER AWARD

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before taking office as Canada's 28th Governor General, His Excellency the Right Hon. David Johnston proposed 10 steps that Waterloo region should take in becoming Canada's knowledge capital. Among those was to better recognize and celebrate our community leaders.

This year my friend, Ron Schlegel, was named the fourth recipient of Waterloo region's Barnraiser award. From sponsorship of sports teams to the building of neighbourhoods, to funding research to improve the lives of seniors, Ron Schlegel's involvement across Waterloo region make him an outstanding choice as Barnraiser of the year. Ron brings together people from government, business, academia and the not-for-profit sector in pursuit of his goal of a better, stronger Canada. He uses his resources to benefit his community and his country.

God bless Ron for his good work. I congratulate him on this well-deserved recognition.

* * *

[Translation]

QUEBEC CITY SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Quebec City Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a well-known organization on both the north and south shores of the greater Quebec City region, has just celebrated its 165th anniversary. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been helping less fortunate individuals and families since before Canada was even a country. In a society like ours, the gap between rich and poor should be smaller by now. None of our fellow citizens, particularly children and the elderly, should live in poverty. Unfortunately, nothing has changed.

In 2010, the Quebec City Society of St. Vincent de Paul helped 80,000 people through its used clothing and furniture shops and its food banks. Frédéric Ozanam, founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, wanted to offer people a network of charity and support. I would like to thank the 800 or so volunteers for their commendable efforts on behalf of an organization that has worked tirelessly for the past 165 years in Quebec City to fulfill its mission: alleviating poverty.

Statements by Members

[English]

GENESIS CENTRE

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, January 14 marked the grand opening of the world-class Genesis Centre in Calgary Northeast. It is a place to share for young people, families and seniors from all backgrounds.

Before being elected to this House, I was honoured to work with incredible people like Greg and Carol Steiner, Jim Stevenson, Kelly Jones, Terry-Lyn Martin, Khalil Karbani, Romi Sidhu, Krishan Murti Goll, members of the Ahmediyya community and many more to move this project forward.

My constituents are very thankful to our Conservative government for investing \$15 million in this centre through the enhancing accessibility fund.

Despite the aggressive Liberal opposition, thousands of people, many organizations and all three levels of government came together and turned the dream into reality for what I like to call the hardest working constituency in Canada, Calgary Northeast.

* * *

FUTURE LEADERS

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can say with confidence that Oshawa's future is in good hands.

Over the past several weeks I witnessed the future leaders of Oshawa and Canada. For example, on January 14, at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, I met many brilliant young students who were passionate about robotics and technology. After spending some time listening to them and seeing their passion for science and technology, I have no doubt that they will be tomorrow's leaders and innovators.

I also met Sarah Bennett from Oshawa's Stephen G. Saywell Public School. After placing a 48 hour pay it forward challenge to her schoolmates, Sarah raised \$1,323.80 for Denise House, a local women's shelter in Oshawa. Sarah's strong sense of community engagement and charity is an inspiration to all of us.

I am proud of these young individuals. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sarah for her passion and desire to make Oshawa a better place and to all the science students I met at UOIT.

Thanks to them, Oshawa's future does indeed look bright.

* * *

● (1410)

DUNCAN

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, March 4 marks the city of Duncan's centennial year. Duncan has a vision to become one of the most livable small towns in Canada by building strong community ties and committing to environmental stewardship.

As a reflection of its vibrant community, Duncan is proud to have more artists and performers per capita than anywhere in Canada. The Cowichan people's influence on our shared cultural heritage contributes to the region's promising future.

Duncan, known as the city of totems, continues to revitalize itself. The dynamic city square is an appealing destination for people from across the island to come and enjoy the city's vibrant farmers' market, shops and restaurants.

I invite Canadians to come and celebrate with us. Everyone can be part of the festivities which include a year-long geocaching event, a seniors' dance, a 100 kilometre motorcycle ride and a marathon.

I look forward to participating in the Guinness World Records challenge for the world's largest fitness circuit workout.

Happy 100th birthday to the city of Duncan.

* * *

CURLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, visiting the parliamentary precinct today is the Yukon junior men's curling team. The team will be competing at the 2012 M&M Meat Shops Canadian Junior Curling Championships, February 4 to 12, in Napanee, Ontario.

The team comprises: Thomas Scoffin, skip; Mitchell Young, third; David Aho, second; Will Mahoney, lead; and Wade Scoffin, coach.

Thomas was also the skip of the bronze medal mixed curling team at the 2012 Youth Olympic Games held in Innsbruck, Austria. The members of that team were Thomas Scoffin from Yukon, Corryn Brown from B.C., Derek Oryniak from Manitoba, Emily Gray from P.E.I. and Helen Radford from Nova Scotia.

I ask all members of this House to join me in congratulating our young Canadian bronze medallists and wishing all the teams competing at the national championships the best of luck. Go Yukon.

* * *

STEPHEN PERRY

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, communities in the region of Nickel Belt and Sudbury are mourning the tragic death of Vale miner, Stephen Perry. Mr. Perry was a development miner working in the main ore body at the 4,200 foot level at Coleman mine when he was killed on Sunday. He has been described as generous, skilled, experienced and highly respected by his colleagues. Mr. Perry was from Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador. He had a large family of 15 siblings and a daughter. He had been in Sudbury for the last 16 years.

As a former employee of Vale and Coleman mine, I know firsthand how dangerous it is to work underground. At the end of the day, all a miner wants to do is earn a good living and go home to his family. My heart goes out to his family and his co-workers.

Today, I am also thinking of Jason Chenier and Jordan Fram, who were killed underground only seven months ago in Sudbury. These are tragedies felt by the entire community.

On behalf of all members here, and my colleagues from Sudbury, St. John's East and St. John's South—Mount Pearl, I offer our prayers, condolences and deepest sympathies to the Perry family.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

SEALING INDUSTRY

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, fishing and seal hunting have been an integral part of the way of life of coastal and aboriginal communities in Canada, including the Magdalen Islands, for hundreds of years. This industry is a symbol of Canadians' work ethic and our rich rural history. It is also a legitimate economic activity that utilizes a very abundant resource and helps fishers and coastal communities support themselves.

The sealing industry clearly deserves our support. However, why the opposition refuses to provide its support is not clear. The member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl said that the sealing industry was destined for failure. At the same time, the very voluble Liberal senator is saying that this industry is dead.

While the Liberals and the NDP plot to destroy the sealing industry, our Conservative government will continue to support the hard-working sealers who are defending a legitimate and sustainable industry.

* * *

[English]

JEAN PIGOTT

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Jean Pigott, one of the grandes dames of Ottawa, died earlier this year. Many already miss her sage advice, me included.

An Officer of the Order of Canada, Jean Pigott paved the way for future generations of Canadian women in business and politics. In the 1970s she served as CEO of Morrison Lamothe Bakery, one of only a handful of female CEOs in Canada at the time. In 1976, she was elected as a federal member of Parliament under the Progressive Conservative banner.

A positive force for change in the nation's capital, she headed the National Capital Commission from 1985 to 1992. In that role she became a highly visible champion of the capital as a place of symbols, history and pride. As a passionate and visionary community leader, she strived to make the nation's capital a second home for all Canadians.

The memory of Jean Pigott and the impact she had live on and will continue to do so for a long time yet. I want to thank her husband Arthur and the rest of her family for loving her, caring for her, and sharing her with Ottawa for so many wonderful years.

Merci, Jean.

* * *

● (1415)

PENSIONS

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the NDP put forward a misleading motion on old age security. NDP members continue to deceive Canadians on the facts.

The NDP members choose to recklessly ignore our aging population and allow old age security to become unsustainable. The fact is that seniors currently receiving benefits will not lose a

cent. Unlike the opposition, we will not put retirement income at risk for Canadians. Our government is acting to ensure that this important and necessary program is available and sustainable today and for future generations.

The director of Rotman International Centre for Pension Management said yesterday, "They have to make changes. You can't put your head in the sand." He added that proposals should include looking at raising the retirement age.

Even the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail* agree.

The NDP is reckless and fear-mongering. It has proved yet again it is not fit to govern.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has said that he does not want to reopen the abortion debate, but that is exactly what the member for Saskatoon—Humboldt is doing. The Prime Minister has also said that he does not want to reopen the debate on the death penalty but, just yesterday, a Conservative senator did exactly the opposite. If the Prime Minister really wants to reopen debates, here are a few suggestions: seniors living in poverty; large corporations that accept indiscriminate tax cuts, lock out their employees and do not even create jobs in Canada; and old age pensions. There is no shortage of topics on which the government could reopen debate, debates that Canadians really want to hear in this House.

Unlike this government, whose policies are completely unrealistic and out of touch, the NDP has Canadians' interests at heart.

* * *

[English]

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Burnaby—New Westminster might now be thinking he is having a Bill Murray-like Groundhog Day. That is because the NDP continues to mislead Canadians. Yesterday he cited false numbers on our crime agenda and the F-35 program.

The cost of fighting crime represents only a fraction of the cost of crime for victims. We have committed \$540 million a year to fight crime, whereas the cost of crime for victims is over \$99 billion a year.

Prison costs are based on a projected prison population that is failing to materialize. As a result, we will not build a single prison cell more than we need to keep Canadians safe.

The member and the hug-a-thug NDP should learn the facts and stop citing incorrect figures. The NDP's willingness to distort the facts to mislead Canadians is further proof that its policies are dangerous for the Canadian economy.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*Translation*]

PENSIONS

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, rumours of cuts to old age security benefits are causing widespread concern. That is to be expected, because the Prime Minister is beating around the bush. His government experts say that the system is viable.

Does the Prime Minister agree? Or will he make people wait until they turn 67 before they can receive their benefits if these cuts are not made?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have said repeatedly that, in our budget, we will protect programs for seniors and those nearing retirement. At the same time, we will ensure that the system remains viable for future generations. That is our commitment not only to today's seniors, but also to future generations.

• (1420)

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if viability is the issue, the Conservatives' own study and report, coming from the government, concludes on the pension, "Long-term projections show that public retirement-income provision is financially sustainable". That is a direct quote from that report. It adds that the "OAS and GIS ensure universal coverage and form a very effective safety-net for the old-age incomes".

The Prime Minister has yet to answer the question. I am giving him the opportunity again today. Will he rise in his seat and say to the country that the age of eligibility for OAS will not be raised to age 67, yes or no?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the challenges of a shrinking workforce over the next generation have been well documented. I could send the hon. member any number of studies in this regard.

That said, we have been very clear that, in balancing our budget, we will ensure we protect the current programs that seniors receive. There will not be a cent cut from pensioners or from those who are approaching retirement. At the same time, we will ensure that our programs are viable for future generations.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development tried to justify spending \$30 billion on jet fighter planes by saying that they were needed against foreign invasions. No foreign powers will invade us to scoop our pension system because there will not be much of it left if the Conservatives have their way.

The Prime Minister refuses to come clean about his plans to cut the retirement income of Canadians. He can come clean today and

Oral Questions

answer the question we have been asking all week. Will he raise OAS eligibility to 67 years, yes or no?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have said here many times, we want to ensure that the OAS system is viable in the long term. To do that, we are going to have to make some changes because of some change in demographics in our country. However, we are assuring Canadians, completely, that those seniors who are receiving OAS now will not lose a penny and those who are nearing retirement will not lose a penny. We are going to take care of them and future generations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this year the Conservatives handed out \$3 billion in tax gifts to profitable large corporations. What could we do with \$3 billion? We could pay old age security benefits for 462,000 Canadians. That is a lot of people.

There is enough money for tax gifts for large corporations, but now seniors will have to wait until the age of 67 to get their \$540 a month? Yes or no?

[*English*]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP says that it wants to help seniors, yet it votes against every thing we have done to help them.

In spite of the NDP, we increased the age credit for seniors, not once but twice. We increased the GIS exemption, allowing poor seniors to keep more of the money they earned. The NDP voted against that too. We brought in pension income splitting to help seniors keep more of their own money and the NDP voted against it. It should stop voting against seniors.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am part of those future generations and let me just say that our social programs and services are important to me.

Future generations of pensioners will be most affected by any changes made to old age security. The provinces will also have to step up and help when seniors need more and more assistance.

Quebec was not even consulted. Not at all. What about consultations with the provinces, with pensioners, with workers? Is the eligibility age going to increase to 67, yes or no?

Oral Questions

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we will protect old age security for our seniors. Those who are currently receiving benefits will not lose a cent. However, we need to ensure the sustainability of the system for future generations. That is exactly what we plan to do.

• (1425)

[*English*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Prime Minister could explain this, now that two spokesmen, the Minister of Finance and parliamentary secretary, have both confirmed today that the budget will in fact contain measures that will deal with the future costs of pensions in Canada.

Could the Prime Minister tell us, in light of his first answer today, if he was aware that there was such a demographic challenge? It did not just arise yesterday. It did not arise last week. It did not even arise just before he went to Davos. People have known about this for years.

Why did the Prime Minister not deal with this question? Why did

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Toronto Centre has the floor.

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, these rabbit tracks do not bother me at all. Really, it is irrelevant.

Why would the Prime Minister not have shared this question with the Canadian people in an election? He had a chance to go in an election, he says that he was looking for a mandate, why did he not have a mandate—

The Speaker: The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Toronto Centre is asking us to table the budget earlier. He will receive that news in due course.

We made very clear commitments to the Canadian people. We are balancing our budget. We are very clear that we will not cut pensions of our seniors. Those will be absolutely protected as we balance the budget.

At the same time, the government is looking well beyond the life of this Parliament and how we can ensure our programs are viable for future generations.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry to tell the Prime Minister directly, but it is not clear to us, on this side of the House, that he will be in power after 2015. It is not clear that this will be the case. Thus, he must acknowledge that he is a politician just like any other. I would even call him the interim Prime Minister, in office only until 2015.

Does he believe that he controls the fate of all pensions until 2030, 2040 or 2050? He is not Louis XVI.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper: Mr. Speaker, in a democracy, we are all interim members, even the interim Liberal leader.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Right Hon. Stephen Harper: In any case we have a responsibility to future generations. The government is studying these important matters in light of the major changes we are anticipating in our society. The government will take action to protect our future generations.

* * *

[*English*]

JUSTICE

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when it came to the Wheat Board, the Prime Minister was the first one to say that we could not bind future Parliaments. That is exactly what he is now saying that he cannot do it.

On another topic, Senator Boisvenu was encouraging suicide as a criminal justice policy. Yesterday, the Minister of Public Works, while testifying in the Senate, suggested that if only the provinces had not closed mental institutions, they would not have had to build more prisons.

What will it take to bring the government's approach to mental health and criminal justice from the 18th century into the 21st century?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I said no such thing. What I in fact indicated was that the issue of mental illness and criminal law was a very complex one, that I would prefer to see mentally ill people dealt with in institutions that had a mental illness focus and a mental health focus rather than a penal focus and that we needed to work together with the provinces.

* * *

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, just last month the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism told Canadians how solemn he thought our citizenship ceremonies were, and they are indeed serious occasions. Now, however, we learn that his office is fine just faking it. It was his office that arranged to have employees pose as fake new citizens in a made-up ceremony for a misleading news conference.

Could the minister explain why he forced government employees to pose as fake new citizens and mislead Canadians?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is completely untrue. The only misleading going on is coming from that member. Every year CIC officials do a good job organizing special citizenship and reaffirmation ceremonies across the country, including sometimes in studio televised ceremonies to raise the profile of citizenship. Today, I became aware that one small reaffirmation ceremony last year had logistical problems and that was poorly dealt with—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Oral Questions

●(1430)

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. minister has the floor.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Mr. Speaker, today I became aware that in a reaffirmation ceremony last year, following logistical problems, the situation was poorly handled. I regret that, but that in no way should undermine the importance and value of special reaffirmation ceremonies, in which we encourage all Canadians to participate.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what the minister's office should have done was tell any news outlet that wanted help faking a story to go jump in a fake lake. Instead it played along, once again putting Conservative photo ops ahead of getting things done for new Canadians. It took an investigative reporter to get the truth out.

Is the minister really that far out of the loop with his department? Could the minister tell the House when his government learned about this stunt and why it kept it a secret?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my office learned about the situation in question yesterday when we had an inquiry from a media outlet. I learned about it this morning when I saw the media coverage.

The department organizes dozens of special citizenship and reaffirmation ceremonies every year, which are a great way of highlighting the value of Canadian citizenship. It turns out that in the ceremony in question for reaffirmation, some of the people invited did not arrive. I think the response to that was poorly handled. I regret that, but we should not allow it to undermine the important value of these special citizenship and reaffirmation ceremonies.

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STATISTICS CANADA

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, by now it is very obvious that everyone knows of the government's obsession with silencing all those who disagree with it. It is hurting Canada and Canadians. Now we learn that another prominent Statistics Canada researcher, no less than the chief economic analyst, is leaving his position after 36 years of service. He says that he can no longer express his views freely. In 2010 the agency's chief statistician resigned because of changes to the census that were imposed by the Conservatives.

The government is depriving families of information that is essential to their well-being and depriving us of brilliant consultants. Why does—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Industry.

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the individual decided to go into the private sector since he could work with free data. We thank him for his service in the public sector.

That being said, I want to remind my colleagues that with regard to the national household survey, the national collection response rate is 69.3%, which is well above the targeted rate of 50%.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government can easily grasp one

statistic: two senior officials at Statistics Canada have resigned because this government muzzled them. In fact, since the arrival of the Conservatives, competent senior officials have been leaving one after the other, or have been fired for daring to contradict this government.

First it was the chief statistician and now, the renowned economic analyst, Philip Cross, is leaving because, as he made very clear, he does not agree with the Conservatives' decision regarding the census and he cannot speak freely.

This government listens to no one. It listens to no one about its megaprisons. It listens to no one about the firearms registry. It listens to no one about any—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Industry.

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, it is my understanding that the person in question decided to leave for a business opportunity now that data are being provided free. We thank him for his work in the public service.

However, with regard to the survey, the national response rate is 69.3%, well above the target rate of 50%. Let us talk about the facts. The household response rate was greater for the 2011 survey than the 2006 survey, resulting in improvement and tangible benefits. In addition, Statistics Canada has confirmed that the survey will provide useful and usable data—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

* * *

[English]

SERVICE CANADA

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Service Canada has received almost 10,000 complaints from Canadians over a period of eight months. Why? Because after rounds of Conservative layoffs, there is no way the staff can keep up with the rising EI claims.

Every day the minister defends damaging Conservative cuts to Service Canada and, as we are finding out, every day Canadians are saying that these Conservative cuts are just a bad idea. When will the government finally fix the problem it created at Service Canada?

●(1435)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our goal is to ensure that Canadians who are entitled to benefits, such as EI, CPP and OAS, receive them in a timely manner.

Oral Questions

That is exactly why, after we had a number of requests for EI just before Christmas, more than we anticipated in fact despite the usual seasonal hike, we hired more people. We brought in 400 more people from other parts of the department to help speed up the process so Canadians could get the benefits that they deserve.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it just gets worse.

By the end of this fiscal year, the Service Canada office is on track to hear 12,000 complaints from Canadians. The minister just keeps sticking to her automated talking points. The numbers will get a lot worse. Maybe that is why staff have been instructed to tell clients not to contact them or that there is no complaints centre.

Canadians pay for their EI. Why will the government not provide basic customer service?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what we are trying to do.

Every year in December and January there is a spike in demand for EI, which is normal. Unfortunately, this year the spike was greater than we anticipated but we reacted immediately. We engaged more people to help process and clear up the backlog and move forward so that Canadians would get the benefits they need and deserve in a timely manner.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I gave the Minister of Natural Resources a break so that he could take some time to think about his answers. We still do not know if the minister is in the same camp as the radicals who deny the existence of climate change, or if he accepts the fact that science explains climate change.

So which is it? Does the minister believe the science of climate change, or does he not?

[English]

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite gave me a break because I was not here.

The science is clear that human beings cause global warming. Our government has shown its support with investments of over \$10 billion to support a cleaner environment and fight climate change through innovation.

What I do not believe in is the NDP's ideologically driven, Luddite battle against hundreds of thousands of jobs in Canada. Does the NDP want to deny Canadian families jobs and a secure future, yes or no?

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the minister back so I can continue to ask him questions.

He says that the science is clear but on Tuesday he said that a number of scientists did not believe in climate change.

Let us assume that the minister has done his research and should know his file because he is the minister, could he enlighten us as to who these scientists are, what exactly they are saying and whether he agrees with them?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite will not take yes for an answer so I will now go on to the subject of jobs.

Maybe the NDP will listen to a Canada building trades union that says "right now the process is being subverted, needlessly delayed at the cost of Canadian jobs".

We need to reform the system to encourage new investment in Canadian infrastructure. This process needs to be expeditious and not stifle investment and job creation.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we almost received an answer there.

I am pleased to hear that the minister might believe in the science but the government's actions or inactions clearly demonstrate that it does not believe it is actually a problem.

From withdrawing from Kyoto, cancelling the eco-energy retrofit program and refusing to regulate emissions in the oil sands, it is clear that the government has no track record on environment.

Instead of associating with fringe climate denier groups, when will the Minister of Natural Resources come forward with a national energy strategy to tackle climate change and bring us forward to the green economy of the future?

[Translation]

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP tunes out when it comes to job creation in the energy sector and turns its back on workers. Maybe the party should listen to Buzz Hargrove, the former CAW president, who said that we should not stop developing the oil sands because we need those jobs.

* * *

● (1440)

[English]

PENSIONS

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Prime Minister announced that he would be slashing OAS benefits for low-income seniors and baby boomers.

Despite campaigning on a platform that included promises not to attack seniors, not one Conservative MP has had the guts to speak out about this.

When will the Conservative backbench grow some backbone and start standing up for the seniors in this country?

Come on, Brad, it's your chance.

The Speaker: Order, please. I would ask the hon. member not to refer to individuals by their name.

*Oral Questions***JUSTICE**

The hon. Minister of Human Resources.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when will the hon. member stop the fear-mongering and stop misleading Canadians because what she just said was blatantly false?

This is not about trying to conserve jobs. This is about ensuring that our old age security system is here for our current retirees and for future generations. The demographics are such that we need to take action now for the long term. We are protecting, as we have said repeatedly, the pensions of current retirees.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Fred Rhymes of Centre Burlington, Nova Scotia, retired early because of his health. However, when the markets crashed, so did Fred's savings. Now, Fred is counting on the OAS to help him make ends meet after he turns 65.

There are a lot of seniors like Fred across rural Canada. They have worked hard and saved some money but they are counting on the OAS to help them once they turn 65.

Given rural Canada's older population, does the Prime Minister not realize that any cut to OAS is a direct attack on rural and small town Canada?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, coming from rural and small town Canada, I can tell members that what the people do not need is an attack on their own intelligence, which is what the hon. member just indicated.

We just said, and we have said it repeatedly, that we are ensuring there will be no cuts. Anyone who is currently receiving OAS or who will receive OAS will not lose a cent. We have ensured that and we will ensure that. We will also ensure that OAS is around for them and for future generations.

* * *

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we can see, the employment insurance situation continues to get worse. More than 30% of claimants do not receive their benefits and approval of their application within a 28-day deadline. My constituency office in Papineau is full of people like Mrs. Dupré-Roussel, who came because her claim still has not been approved after three months. This government is reducing pensions and the public service.

When will the minister stand up and start using her department to serve the public?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is precisely what we are trying to do, but from time to time there are special cases that are very complex. I invite hon. members to share the details of those cases with me so that I can help them come up with solutions to these problems.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the debate on the death penalty has been closed for decades but, yesterday, Senator Boisvenu brought it back to the fore. When he was given the opportunity to explain himself, it is true that he retracted the word "rope" but he repeated that murderers should have the freedom to choose to commit suicide. I would like to remind the members of the House that it is illegal to encourage a person to commit suicide.

Can the Prime Minister tell us whether the Conservatives and his government share this opinion?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have no intention of reopening that debate. However, if the hon. member wants to get involved with this, why does she not get her colleague, the member for Winnipeg Centre, to apologize for the shameful personal attack he launched yesterday?

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the best defence is always the offence with the government.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Gatineau has the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, that is the Prime Minister's opinion but is that opinion shared by his entire party? That is what Canadians want to know.

Speaking of debates that Canadians do not want to reopen, we know that some backbenchers on the other side want to reopen the debate on abortion and oppose the funding of abortions in developing countries.

Can the Prime Minister clarify whether he is losing control of his caucus or whether he is giving in to the pressure exerted by intransigent members of his caucus?

● (1445)

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has been clear that it will not reopen those debates.

However, I would like to get an answer. How about that shameful attack on a victim of crime yesterday? Will the member get up on his feet and apologize and do the right thing for a change?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us speak about victims. Let us speak about victims of crime. The Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime tabled his report this morning. He recommended that victims be treated more fairly because victims still do not have any legal right to attend parole hearings. They are limited to simply reading a statement and are not allowed to add a single word.

This government has been aware of the problem for years. Why has it not done something to help victims instead of sticking provinces with bills that they do not want and simply—

Oral Questions

The Speaker: The Minister of Justice.

[English]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is true that every attempt by this government to stand up and protect victims has been opposed by the NDP. I am proud to be a member of a party that not only stands up for victims but the only party that will do the right thing by victims in this country.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am so sick and tired of that empty tirade because what we voted—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Gatineau.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, we voted against that because the government never gets the job done.

The Conservatives' approach makes no sense. We say it and the ombudsman for victims said it.

We need to ensure that victims have more rights at hearings, that they are financially supported and that they can obtain information on their offender. When will the government finally commit to doing something?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the hon. member is new to this area when it comes to standing up for victims, but this is the government that created the federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime. She supports what we have been doing. We are only too pleased to keep moving in that direction, even though we will never get the support of the NDP.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada remains tremendously concerned with the ongoing reports from Ukraine regarding the deteriorating health of the former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. Ms. Tymoshenko is currently serving a seven year sentence following court proceedings that appear to have fallen far short of internationally recognized norms of fairness, transparency and due process.

In November, the Minister of Foreign Affairs informed this House that Canada would be willing to provide medical assistance to Ms. Tymoshenko. Would the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs update the House on the status of this offer?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is tremendously concerned about Mrs. Tymoshenko's well-being. We have spoken out strongly against the manner in which her prosecution, conviction and appeal were carried out by the Ukrainian authorities.

As the member mentioned, Canada was the first country to offer medical assistance to Mrs. Tymoshenko. While we are pleased that the Ukrainian government is receptive to our offer, it will be important to ensure that the conditions are acceptable both to Mrs. Tymoshenko and to the Canadian and other international doctors who will participate in this initiative.

Canada remains committed to—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord.

* * *

[Translation]

AIRLINE SECURITY

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, when the NDP criticized Transport Canada's new rules, which will prevent transgendered and transsexual Canadians from travelling by plane, the Conservative members did not take the situation seriously. There is nothing funny about denying the rights of Canadians. This government policy is a clear violation of transgendered rights. The reaction of the Conservative members and the minister's responses are an insult to transgendered people across Canada.

Will the minister apologize?

● (1450)

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the safety of the country's airports is important to our government and to our party. Our airline security system is one of the best in the world and we will continue to make it a priority. We have learned a lot since the events of September 11, 2001.

Every safety rule applies to every passenger. Is the NDP asking to make the system weaker? That is not what we want.

[English]

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, once again I call on the minister to apologize for the disrespect shown in the House yesterday to transgender, transsexual and gender variant Canadians, both by his snickering caucus colleagues and his own failure to recognize the importance of this question and the right to freedom to travel for all Canadians.

This has nothing to do with national security. This has to do with the right of people to travel, no matter what their gender presentation might be nor how they are judged by others.

Will the minister immediately rescind this regulation?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, is it the NDP's position that we should be weakening aviation security?

The security of passengers in our aviation system is very important to our government. We have learned many lessons from the events of September 11, 2001, and we will continue to have secure rules to ensure the safety of all passengers, and we will treat all passengers fairly.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

ASBESTOS

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Industry has been handing us the same line for months now. Maybe he should go tell the workers at Thetford Mines, where LAB Chrysotile is in bankruptcy proceedings, and the people of Asbestos who have been out of a job for months that asbestos is an industry of the future. The minister's line shows that he is out of touch with reality and that he does not care about the problems his constituents are facing.

The minister has an opportunity: there will be a budget soon. He should commit to including a transition plan so that industries of the future can take root in his riding.

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, for over 30 years, the Government of Canada has encouraged and promoted the safe use of chrysotile. Recent scientific studies have shown that chrysotile can be used safely in a controlled environment. That is the situation; nothing has changed.

[English]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this country's position on asbestos is morally and ethically reprehensible.

This spring—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Winnipeg Centre.

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, this government's position on asbestos is morally and ethically reprehensible.

This spring, the parties to the Rotterdam Convention will meet once again, and my question is simple. If the government does not have the courage to ban asbestos in all of its forms like other developed nations have, will it at least stop sabotaging the Rotterdam Convention?

All that convention does is to require that asbestos be listed as a product requiring informed prior consent, so that the people we sell it to at least have a fighting chance to protect themselves from this made-in-Canada epidemic.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will tell you what is shameful: when an individual launches a vicious personal attack against an individual who has twice been victimized, who has lost two of his children to crime and accidents. When this individual gets up and launches a vicious personal attack, I want him to do the right thing, to get on his feet and apologize to Senator Boisvenu. Do it now.

* * *

[Translation]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yes, let us talk about apologies. The Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism and his office seriously tainted the sacred and solemn nature of the citizenship oath in Canada by organizing a

bogus ceremony at the Sun News studio. As a former immigration minister, I am embarrassed and appalled by this situation.

[English]

The minister is now using his department like a branch of central casting and forcing his officials to be stunt doubles. This is totally shameful and unacceptable.

I would like the minister to stand up and apologize to Canadians. He has to come clean on that.

● (1455)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, several dozen special citizenship and reaffirmation ceremonies are organized every year by CIC officials. They do a great job. Some are in Citizenship Week, some on Canada Day, and sometimes with lieutenant governors and premiers. We commend them for their good work.

In this particular instance, some of the people invited did not come. The officials managing the ceremony, without any knowledge or involvement of my office in any part, handled the situation inappropriately.

I regret that. It ought not to have happened, but let us not allow it to colour the excellent work that CIC officials do in celebrating Canadian citizenship.

* * *

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, clearly the government is speaking out of both sides of its mouth when it says that it supports the sealing industry. It is moving full steam ahead to close the Maritime Rescue Sub-Centre in St. John's. It is that centre and those employees who ensure the safety of those who make a living at sea, including sealers, who work under very treacherous conditions.

Will the government do the responsible thing, reverse its dangerous decision and show that its support is not just about talk and photo-ops?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House this government is in full support of the sealing industry and the people who earn their livelihood from that industry. That cannot be said by other members in this House.

We are looking forward to an event today. We had an event earlier on with members from the Atlantic provinces, our provincial counterparts, and the sealing industry. We look forward to working with them in the future.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, one would never know it with the Conservatives' work on trade deals.

Oral Questions

The Conservatives are continuing their shameful plan to close down the marine search and rescue coordination centre in St. John's. The government is putting lives at risk by closing a vital search and rescue facility along one of the world's most dangerous coastlines. The expertise of the St. John's search and rescue centre is vital to ensuring the safety of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and all Canadians.

Why do the Conservatives have billions in tax breaks for profitable corporations, but no money left to keep open this vital search and rescue centre?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have answered this question many times. We will not put in jeopardy the lives of our mariners. We will not do that. This has nothing to do with that. We have an opportunity to make consolidations to save money for the taxpayers of this country without putting anyone in jeopardy or at risk.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the body of a 14-year-old boy, missing since Sunday on the coast of Labrador, was found yesterday but search and rescue helicopters did not arrive until Tuesday night.

Why is it that the Conservative government gives such a low priority to search and rescue? With our response times well behind international standards, the government is closing down rescue coordinating centres and helicopters take two days to start searching for a lost boy.

How can a search and rescue helicopter be available to transport the Minister of National Defence but not be ready to search for a lost teenaged boy on the coast of Labrador?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, certainly the death of this young man is a tragedy and our condolences are extended to his family and friends. I have asked the officials to look into the incident. I can inform the House that the Chief of Defence Staff has commenced an investigation.

Search and rescue teams work with federal, provincial and municipal partners to respond as quickly as they possibly can to save the lives of those at risk. Search and rescue crews react as quickly as possible every time.

We will get the answer and it is forthcoming.

* * *

PENSIONS

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the NDP has put forward a flawed and deliberately misleading motion on old age security.

The fear-mongering coming by the NDP and their Liberal friends will not work. The NDP and the Liberals continue to mislead the public about the intentions of our government when it comes to protecting the financial security of seniors now and for future generations.

Will the minister please explain why our government will make the changes necessary to ensure the sustainability of OAS for the next generation while not affecting current recipients?

• (1500)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me be crystal clear: any changes that our government makes to the OAS system will not affect today's retirees or Canadians who are near retirement.

Let us take a look at reality. The aging—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development has the floor.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, with the aging demographics that we have, right now there are four workers for every senior in this country. By 2030, there will only be two workers for every senior. That is a system that is just not sustainable. That is why I asked the opposition to pull its head out of the sand and work with us to make sure that OAS is available for future generations.

* * *

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, off the shores of Cape Breton there is a healthy and vibrant halibut fishery. However, the tragedy is this: Cape Breton fishers do not have a fair share of this catch.

My question for the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is this. Will he sit down, along with his officials, with the Cape Breton fisherman and come up with a fair allocation of this halibut quota?

If he cannot come down to Cape Breton, we are willing to meet him in his home town of Fredericton.

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the sharing arrangement for Atlantic halibut has been in place since the 1990s. It is considered stable and revisions are not being considered. Stable shares are essential to providing certainty and predictability to the industry.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in a new report today we learned Canada has fallen far behind on protecting marine biodiversity. Just as with Kyoto, Conservatives are failing to live up to our international obligations. They cannot just pick and choose which commitments they will meet and which ones they will ignore.

Canadian families rely on our fisheries for their livelihoods but Conservatives are just not getting the job done. Has the government fallen overboard when it comes to fisheries and oceans management?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, hopefully I will not fall overboard at any given moment in the near future. However, I can assure the member that we have a sustainable fishery in this country. We manage it very carefully with the best science advice provided to us and we will continue to make our decisions based on science.

SEALING INDUSTRY

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's culture is built on a rich mix of people, traditions and beliefs. Our culture and history stem from our ability to live off the land while making careful and responsible use of resources. Canada's northern and coastal regions, with their reliance on hunting, fishing and sealing, are an example of this.

Could the minister responsible for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency share with the House why our government feels a unified Canadian stance is so important in defending the legitimacy of Canada's seal hunt?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the people in Canada's north have harvested fish, whales and seals for hundreds of years. Our government respects our heritage and way of life. The seal hunt also provides economic and food security for many Canadians. As Conservatives, we are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with Canadian sealers, unlike the NDP.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADIAN FOOD INSPECTION AGENCY

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Quebec ice wines are among the best in the world, but they are being neglected by this government. In drafting new regulations on ice wine, the Conservative government missed an excellent opportunity to support our small businesses and defend Quebec vintners. We need to protect their ability to sell this high-quality product here and around the globe.

Will the minister commit to finding a long-term solution to support and promote Quebec ice wines?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our vintners make one of the best ice wines in the world. Canada signed the World Wine Trade Group Agreement on labelling rules in order to facilitate international trade and to prevent fraudulent sales to protect our producers. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been consulting the industry and all other stakeholders since 2009. We therefore encourage the industry to continue taking part in those consultations. No decisions have been made to date. Once again, we encourage producers to take part in the consultations that are under way.

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NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Natural Resources is upset that the Americans have rejected the Keystone XL pipeline project and is now trying to promote the Portland-Montreal pipeline project, calling it fantastic and confirming his government's intention to shorten the assessment process as much as possible. Reversing the flow in this old pipeline could have serious consequences for the environment and people's health.

Rather than promoting a project that will export oil from the oil sands, why does the minister not respect the wishes of the elected

Business of the House

officials and the people of the Eastern Townships and Montérégie, who oppose the project?

• (1505)

[English]

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these matters of new pipelines and pipeline reversals are within the jurisdiction of the regulatory authority, the National Energy Board, and in some cases with provincial regulators. We respect the independence of the regulatory authority.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Alan McIsaac, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development for Prince Edward Island, the Hon. Darin King, Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture for Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Hon. James Arreak, Minister of Environment, Culture, Language, Elders and Youth for Nunavut.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is February 2. It is fitting that it is Groundhog Day, as I rise again to ask when the government will once again bring in measures to shut down debate in the House.

Just this past Monday we witnessed the deplorable spectacle of the Conservative government for the 13th time using the guillotine to shut down democratic debate in the House. It is like a nightmare: it happens again and again and again. That is right; this week, after less than one single day of debate on a brand new bill the government had just introduced, the government House leader moved tyranny of their majority on Canada's elected representatives by moving to shut down debate.

[Translation]

It has become routine for this government, which apparently knows no limits, to shut down debate. This is a blatant attack on House of Commons tradition and an attempt to gag Canada's elected representatives, and it is unacceptable. I am not just talking about opposition members. Conservative backbenchers, too, should insist that their political boss give them the right to speak on behalf of the citizens they represent.

[English]

On the schedule for this place going forward, I note that the government seems to be wrapping up what I would call attacking seniors and their retirement security week after passing second reading of Bill C-25, a bill that will clearly undermine the public pension regime on which all Canadians rely in order to retire with dignity.

Points of Order

Next week I wonder, will it be failing artists and users in favour of corporate rights holders week with Bill C-11, the wrong-headed copyright bill, or will the government perhaps be tabling the 2012 version of its undermining Canadians to further enrich banks and oil companies executive budget plan? Which one will it be? I ask the government House leader to let us know.

[Translation]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): First, let me wish you, and all honourable members, a happy new year. I am looking forward to working with all members of Parliament of all parties to address Canadians' priorities to the benefit of all Canadians.

[English]

In response to the first question from my friend with regard to management of House business and ensuring things actually do make it to votes in the House, I understand that the opposition has adopted a posture where it intends to run up the score. We have had now 13 or 14 occasions where it has refused to come to any reasonable agreement on any length of debate, or on any limitation on the number of speakers. Every time we run up to the point where we are looking at over 50, 60, 75 or 80 speakers, it becomes apparent that its intention is simply to bring paralysis and gridlock to the House.

It is not surprising. The opposition looks to its friends in Europe and in the United States and that is what it sees. That is not our approach. Our approach is to ensure that we have an orderly, productive and hard-working House that actually delivers results, and we will continue to do that.

Of course, our government's top priority is, and remains, jobs and economic growth.

● (1510)

[Translation]

Of course, our government's top priority remains jobs and economic growth. Tomorrow, we will start debating second reading of Bill S-5, the Financial System Review Act. This bill will maintain and improve the stability of Canada's banking system, a system that has been named the world's soundest banking system four years in a row by the World Economic Forum. This bill needs to be law by April, so it is important to have timely passage.

Bill C-11, the Copyright Modernization Act, will provide a boost to the digital and creative sectors, which employ Canadians in high-quality jobs. This is another bill that the opposition has opposed and has tried to delay. There have already been 75 speeches debating this bill.

[English]

In context, this has been the subject of 75 speeches already in the House and a vote on a motion that it never go to second reading. It is clear what the strategy is. The identical bill in the previous House went to committee after just a few hours. Obviously, the opposition is implementing its strategy of simply running up the score and forcing the government to impose time allocation in order to get anything through the House. That being said, we want to see it go through the House.

[Translation]

I will be calling Bill C-11 for further second reading debate on Wednesday and next Friday. I look forward to concluding the debate and moving the bill to committee, where bills are traditionally studied in detail.

[English]

I would be pleased and delighted if they would come to an agreement to limit debate. I have invited them to do that many times. They have never come forward with any proposal on the number of speakers they would like. I invite them once again to present that to us and to do it here in the House.

I am also pleased to advise the House that next week we will start the final stages of scrapping the ineffective and wasteful long gun registry once and for all. I will be calling report stage debate on Bill C-19, Ending the Long-Gun Registry Act, on Monday and Tuesday.

Finally, I wish to designate Thursday, February 9, as the second allotted day.

* * *

[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, your predecessor, the hon. Peter Milliken, indicated to this House that statements by members could not be used to directly attack a fellow member of this House. You were the Deputy Speaker at the time.

Do you intend to enforce that rule? If so, I would ask you to verify today's statement by the hon. member for North Vancouver.

[English]

The Speaker: I will certainly take a look at what was said in the statement by the member for North Vancouver. I did not hear something that would qualify as that, but I will look at the blues and get back to the House.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons said that he wants the NDP to make a deal to limit the time to speak in the House. This is totally wrong. I was not elected to have the Conservative government tell me that I am not allowed to speak in the House. That is what I was elected for. When a bill comes to the House, all members have the right to speak and the Conservatives should not take that right away from us. If they want to do it on their side, they can, but not on this side. We were democratically elected by our constituents. We have that right and we will not have it taken away.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, very briefly, I thank the hon. member for having clearly articulated the position of the NDP. On every bill, New Democrats think every member of the House should speak. That would be over 300 speeches on every bill. We can calculate how much would get through the House with that posture.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—OLD AGE SECURITY

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

I am pleased to join in the debate on old age security and Canadian seniors.

Our government is committed to ensuring retirement security for all Canadians. Canada does not live in a glass house. Canada's demographic state is part of a worldwide phenomenon in the developed world where families are having fewer babies. We cannot afford to put our heads in the sand and hope the challenge of financial sustainability will go away. As a *Globe and Mail* editorialist said yesterday, "The challenge of ensuring that the retirement income system and other supports are on a secure footing for the next generation is one that no government can avoid."

There is no doubt that Canadians are living longer, healthier lives than in past generations. The average Canadian can now expect to live to age 81. By 2025 our life expectancy will probably increase by another two years. The bottom line is this: Canadians will be relying on retirement income for longer periods of time. Therefore, helping Canadians prepare for and achieve financial security in their later years is an absolute priority for our government.

Let me outline to members of the House the basic three pillar structure of Canada's retirement income system. The first two pillars are the old age security program and the Canada pension plan. These public pension plans provide a modest base with which Canadians can build additional income for retirement. The third pillar consists of personal savings and RRSPs, as well as employer pension plans. Ideally the combination helps provide a standard of living similar to pre-retirement levels.

Canadians will receive close to \$72 billion from Canada's public pension system this year.

The first pillar, the old age security program, OAS, provides a basic level of income to seniors. It recognizes the contributions they have made to Canadian society and the economy. It is also intended to alleviate poverty. The old age security program is funded from general tax revenues on a pay-as-you-go basis. There is no reserve fund. By 2030 the number of OAS beneficiaries will nearly double from 4.7 million in 2010 to 9.3 million in 2030. Program costs could rise from \$36.5 billion in 2010 to \$108 billion in 2030.

Right now there are four working age Canadians for every senior. By 2030 this will shrink to two. Can two working age Canadians support the pension requirements of one senior? This is the issue. Let us be serious. Can we expect to saddle future generations with that burden? Should we not build an adjustment period so people can benefit from their retirement benefits later in life?

To be eligible for the basic OAS pension, a senior must have lived in Canada for at least 10 years after the age of 18. A person who has

Business of Supply

lived 40 years in Canada since the age of 18 is eligible for a full pension.

Finally, the guaranteed income supplement, GIS, is an income-tested monthly benefit paid to OAS pensioners with little or no income. Along with the OAS pension benefit, the guaranteed income supplement ensures that seniors' overall income does not fall below a specified threshold.

Under budget 2011 our government introduced a new GIS top-up of up to \$600 for single seniors and \$840 for couples. This measure is improving the financial security of more than 680,000 seniors across Canada. The GIS top-up, like other OAS benefits, is indexed quarterly to reflect increases in the consumer price index. We have also enabled GIS recipients to earn up to \$3,500 without it affecting their benefit amount. This allows seniors to work a bit if they wish to supplement their pension benefit.

• (1515)

The numbers speak for themselves. The rate of poverty among seniors has decreased from 21.4% in 1980 to a rate of 5.2% in 2009. Canada has one of the lowest rates of senior poverty among the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is lower than that of Denmark, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Poverty among seniors in Canada is lower than poverty among the general population.

The second pillar of the Canadian retirement income system is the Canada pension plan, which is a contribution-based earning-related social insurance program. It ensures a measure of protection to a contributor and his or her family against the loss of income due to retirement, disability or death.

There are three kinds of Canada pension benefits: first, retirement benefits, which include the retirement pension and the post-retirement benefit; second, disability benefits, which include benefits for contributors with disabilities and for their dependent children; and third, survivor benefits, which include the death benefit, the survivor pension and the children's benefit. The death benefit is a lump sum payment to the person's estate that may help with the cost of a funeral.

The Canada pension plan operates throughout Canada, although Quebec has its own similar program called the Quebec pension plan. The administrators of both plans work closely together to ensure all contributors are protected. Outside of Quebec, the majority of working people in Canada over the age of 18 pay into the Canada pension plan. The employee pays half the required contribution and the employer pays the other half. People who are self-employed pay both portions. No tax dollars are involved and the amount paid is based on a person's salary. In the case of the self-employed, it is based on net income. Contributions are important because they determine if workers and their families are eligible for benefits and in calculating the amount of that benefit.

Business of Supply

Canada also has reciprocal pension agreements with certain other countries, so if a Canadian has worked in another country, they may receive pension or benefits from either country and Canadians who live outside of Canada can receive their CPP benefits while outside of Canada. All CPP benefits, except for the death benefit, are adjusted in January of each year and there is an increase in the cost of living as measured by the consumer price index.

The CPP is a secure plan. It is internationally regarded as a model for its sound structure, governance and long-term stability.

The 2009 report of the chief actuary projected that the CPP will be sustainable for the next 75 years. This calculation factors in the demographic changes that we are likely to experience in the foreseeable future such as an increase in life expectancy, the retirement of the baby boomers and so on.

We can be proud of what we are doing to ensure financial security for our senior citizens. However, what is necessary at this point is also to reinforce the sustainability of the first pillar of our pension retirement system, namely the old age security program. We owe future Canadians this element of security. That is why I call on all Canadians and all members of the House to support measures that would reinforce the financial sustainability of the old age security program.

Let us not leave the burden of financing to future generations of Canadians. Let us ensure that any changes are done with substantial notice and adjustment so current retirees or those close to retirement are not affected. Let us give Canadians time to adjust and plan for their retirement. More important, let us not bury our heads in the sand by supporting the motion today.

Finally, let us help shore up the first pillar of Canada's retirement system, the old age security system, so Canadians can build toward a secure future. This is why I cannot support the opposition's motion.

• (1520)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the hon. member's speech. I want to thank him for reviewing every aspect of the public retirement plans, but I am shocked to hear him say how good the plan is and that a potential deterioration might be justified. I absolutely do not understand.

Nonetheless, more importantly, at no time does my colleague assure Canadians, seniors and our future retirees that the government is going to maintain full indexing of the old age security and guaranteed income supplement plans or that it will maintain the eligibility age at 65. Members talk about adjustments or trying to protect the system. If we change the system, it will cost our seniors.

Can the hon. member assure us that indexing and the eligibility age will not be touched?

• (1525)

[*English*]

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Speaker, it always amazes me how the NDP opposition wants to stick its head in the sand about the demographics and the fact that we are attempting to look forward as prudently as we, as a government, can to say that we need to be sure this system is viable and can be indexed, not only currently, but also

for the future generations that will be eligible and will need this system. We are shoring up the system by taking these actions.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the arguments of my friend from Brant, but demographics is a false argument. I am surprised at the Conservative members who try to use it because OAS comes out of general revenue.

In yesterday's *Globe and Mail* a story by Bill Curry started off by saying:

Expert advice commissioned by the federal government contradicts [the Prime Minister's] warnings that Canada can't afford the looming bill for Old Age Security payments.

The study was done by Edward Whitehouse, who is well-known at the World Bank and OECD, and his conclusion was this:

The analysis suggests that Canada does not face major challenges of financial sustainability with its public pension schemes, and there is no pressing financial or fiscal need to increase pension ages in the foreseeable future.

The fact is it is not because of demographics that OAS could be in trouble. It is because of the ridiculous spending by the current government in terms of lowering the revenue base by corporate tax cuts, jets, jails, a bloated cabinet and the list goes on immensely.

Will the member not admit that the real reason the OAS could be in trouble is because of the spending by the government out of general revenue, not demographics?

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Speaker, I know the member has been here a lot longer than I have. However, as part of the answer to his question, in question period today the temporary leader of the Liberal Party acknowledged that the demographics were the issue in his question for the Prime Minister. However, the member has decided they are not because of an article in the paper. Everybody has known this for the longest time.

The other part of the answer I would like to give has to do with the fact that the Liberal Party would increase taxes no matter what, to raise the tax level to whatever is required at whatever point in time, regardless of the economic consequences and what that would mean to the loss of jobs or the economy at the time. Therefore, it does not surprise me that this is the ideology of the Liberal Party.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I feel that the member for Pierrefonds—Dollard has moved a fantastic motion.

I do not understand why the Conservatives would cause such anxiety for Canadian seniors when, on January 1, they gave a \$3 billion gift to big business, banks and oil companies.

They are telling our seniors that there are too many of them and that they will have to work longer. They are directly attacking the poorest seniors in our society. That is unacceptable.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Speaker, that is the fearmongering going on across the aisle. That is what is happening on both the NDP and the Liberal benches as far as creating fear in seniors. We have said, unequivocally, that for seniors who are eligible for the OAS right now not a nickel will change. Also, for those who are close to being eligible for OAS nothing will change. However, we must deal with the reality—

The Speaker: Order, please. We will have to move on.

Resuming debate, the Hon. Minister of Veterans Affairs.

• (1530)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, I congratulate my colleague from Brant for his commitment, as this Conservative government has, to our seniors. I also thank him for his ongoing support of our veterans and their families.

[Translation]

I am pleased to rise today in this House to reaffirm the Conservative government's commitment to our seniors and retirees. Since the election on May 2, members from Quebec have had an opportunity to rise in this House to preserve the old age security program, index it and enhance it with the guaranteed income supplement. The Conservative members from Quebec and the ministers rose in this House to support these measures, maintain old age security and improve it.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the NDP and Liberal members, who not only remained seated, but also opposed any increase in income for our seniors. The guaranteed income supplement is \$600 per single senior and \$840 per couple. These are measures that the Conservative members from Quebec supported because we want to be able to provide the best for our seniors, especially the most vulnerable among them. It must be said that as Quebec members, we are here to support our seniors. We are going to continue to do so on this side of the House with our Conservative government.

There are changes on the horizon. Things evolve, just as they do in every sphere of life. These changes will affect everyone, the young and not so young, governments, businesses, organizations and associations. It is therefore our duty as elected representatives to anticipate these changes and act now in a responsible manner to ensure a bright future, and not put our heads in the sand as the opposition is doing and engage in fear mongering.

Canadians are having fewer children—that is a fact—but they are living longer and in better health than previous generations. This is a good thing. It is a fact and the data support it. Over the next five years, for the first time in our country's history, there will be more over 65-year-olds than under 14-year-olds, according to Statistics Canada. Over the longer term, it is estimated that by 2030, one out of every four Canadians will be over 65, compared to one out of seven today. A quarter of the population will therefore be 65 or over in 20 years, and I will be among them.

Aging populations are a global phenomenon. They can be observed in the big western democracies; Canada is by no means

alone. If we compare ourselves to other countries, Canada's population is among those that are aging the fastest.

Last year, the first baby boomer celebrated his 65th anniversary. While baby boomers head towards retirement and the fertility rate remains relatively low, the consequences of an aging population are, and will be, increasingly felt. The stakes are clear: there will be fewer and fewer young people, and there will be more and more seniors who will want to take advantage of services. As a result, there will be fewer young people to take over from their parents and grandparents, especially in the labour market. With fewer people in the labour force, the percentage of the total population that is working and able to finance public services and programs will drop. That is a fact, and it is important to be well prepared in order to address it.

Once again, it is worth quoting the figures. Today, in Canada, there are four workers for every person over 65. In 2030, it will no longer be four workers, but two. From that point on, the question will be how to provide a much larger cohort of retired Canadians with financial security without placing an excessive burden on a dwindling number of workers. In other words, how will the welfare of today's generations be assured without compromising that of future generations?

• (1535)

Many countries around the world are asking themselves exactly the same question. Some have already taken steps to mitigate and manage the repercussions of demographic changes on present and future generations as fairly as possible.

We know that the portion of revenue we invest in programs funded by the state to provide Canadians with financial security when they retire will be growing.

I am not talking about the Canada pension plan and the Quebec pension plan, which are funded by employers and employees. The Canada pension plan is on solid footing, according to Canada's chief actuary, but this did not happen all on its own. Major changes were made to the Canada pension plan in the late 1990s to ensure that it would remain sound as the population ages and to ensure that it would be sustainable in the long term.

However, there have never been reforms to old age security, and it is paid for entirely out of taxes. What did previous governments do?

This is an important nuance. The Canada pension plan, which is well funded, was reformed. Old age security, which is funded by taxpayers, has never been reformed. It is therefore funded 100% out of income taxes, and all Canadians receive it at age 65. That means that the taxpayers of today are paying for the retirees of today, and the taxpayers of tomorrow, who will be less numerous, will be paying for the retirees of tomorrow, who will be more numerous.

It must also be pointed out that when old age security was created in the 1950s, life expectancy was 66 years for a man and 71 years for a woman. Half of Canadians received it at age 70.

Business of Supply

Today, Canadians receive it at age 65; men are living 10 years longer, on average, and women are living 12 years longer, on average, than in the 1950s. This is good news. Fortunately, life expectancy is still increasing, and people's quality of life, in particular their health, has continued to improve in recent decades. However, the old age security program has not adapted to these new facts of life.

As well, and again according to the chief actuary, who provides us with reliable, sound data, it is anticipated that old age security program spending will increase from \$36 billion in 2010 to \$108 billion in 2030, the year when the number of baby boomers who have reached the age of 65 will peak.

That said, we have been clear and we will be clear again tomorrow regarding pension programs like old age security: yes, seniors will continue receiving their benefits.

We are going to preserve old age security and index it. We, the Conservatives, have increased it, with the guaranteed income supplement. Nearly 1.9 million Canadians benefit from the increase in the guaranteed income supplement, thanks to our government. The same is true for those who are about to retire: they will not be affected.

People who are receiving old age security benefits will not lose a cent. In the long term, future generations expect that we will ensure the viability of the system so that they too can benefit from the plan, which is reasonable, and so that the most vulnerable Canadians are able to benefit from it.

It is time to make informed choices, because we still have several decades ahead of us. Inertia and the status quo, as the opposition parties are proposing, will take us to a harsh reality that taxpayers will have to face. That is irresponsible. That is why we have to address this issue with fairness and justice, with intergenerational equity, to ensure that our social system and social safety net are sustainable.

Canadians will not allow themselves to be duped by the opposition. They know our government is acting responsibly for the retirees of today and for retirees of future generations.

• (1540)

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague opposite on what was, frankly, a very courageous speech. Indeed, I imagine it must have been very difficult to make such remarks, since his Prime Minister announced without warning, from Davos, that the Conservatives were going to plough ahead with this.

What does my colleague think about the Prime Minister's great qualities as a reassuring communicator?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for his question. Setting aside the rhetoric, there are facts. The fact is that since the last election on May 2, I have risen in this House, as a member from Quebec, to improve the quality of life of our most vulnerable retirees. I rose to support an increase in the guaranteed income supplement of \$50 per month, which means \$600 more per year in the pockets of our most disadvantaged retirees, those who need it the most. I would have liked the Liberal and NDP members from Quebec to support us, but that did not happen.

Fortunately, thanks to the willingness of our Conservative government, we are able today to improve the quality of life of our retirees. At the same time, we can ensure that future generations will also enjoy a stable income thanks to an old age security program that takes into account the demographic reality with which we are faced.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I always like to listen to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. His headquarters is in P.E.I. and he is there a fair bit. I congratulate him for coming down to work out of that office sometimes.

He would know that Prince Edward Island would be seriously affected by these proposed changes to increase the age. There are roughly 42,000 baby boomers in Prince Edward Island. It is a retirement haven. People are coming back to retire. Therefore, this is a very serious issue.

I was surprised that the Minister of Veterans Affairs talked about a quarter of the population reaching the age of 65 in 20 years, again trying to create the false argument that it is strictly a taxpayer-funded base. As he admitted, it is funded out of general revenue, out of the general tax base. What is important is the total taxation system. Lowering corporate taxes will certainly hurt the ability to pay in the future.

Is the government trying to manufacture a crisis to cover up its fiscal management in this country and, in the process, trying to gouge seniors' pensions?

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Malpeque for referring to the important role played by the Veterans Affairs headquarters in Charlottetown, which is the flagship of the services provided to our veterans and their families.

That said, the same is true for retirees. They expect that we, as a government, will act responsibly, by ensuring that today's retirees receive all the benefits of old age security, benefits that we improved through income splitting and other measures that we put in place and for which, unfortunately, we did not have the support of the opposition.

I can assure the member for Malpeque that we are going to continue to ensure that our retirees keep getting the old age security to which they are entitled and that we will make sure that future generations also have access to a reliable and safe system.

[English]

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to listen to my colleague from Malpeque. I know he was in business and I understand he knows business but I think he has had a lapse in terms of taxes.

Simply put, we will have twice as many people coming on in 20 years, it will cost us three times as much and we will have half as many people paying.

Business of Supply

In the minister's mind, with any type of inversion that we have with these numbers, does that not mean that we are heading for a collision course in terms of sustainability of a program that we need for my kids, my grandchildren and for all of those in the future across Canada, whether it is in Lambton—Kent—Middlesex or anywhere else?

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Lambton—Kent—Middlesex for her excellent question. I would like her to know that I am proud to be part of a government that is focusing on the economy as a way of ensuring that our retirees enjoy a comfortable retirement, both now and in the future. We are focusing on creating wealth in this country as a way of creating jobs. It is our workers, from all walks of life—factories, businesses and farming—who create wealth. It is our role to redistribute this wealth to our seniors, among others.

That is why, this fall, we are going to focus on the economy, which is also why we need the major green energy projects that will help us to create wealth and maintain our social safety net for our seniors.

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to note that I intend to share my time with the hon. member for Winnipeg Centre.

Today, I have the unfortunate duty of rising in this House to denounce the government's actions in an area that is of great concern to the NDP: the rise in poverty among our seniors. When I was elected, I was glad I would be working together with all members of this House, regardless of their political affiliation, with the goal of imagining a Canada where every individual would have the guarantee of a minimum quality of life, and where people can live with respect and dignity.

Our seniors, the people who built this country, who fought tooth and nail to provide us with a secure future and create a social safety net, where individuals care about one another, are disillusioned today. My constituents are unhappy with the proposals made by the government last week. I am outraged at the unspeakable lack of respect and courtesy the government has shown for the public. I think the decision to tell us about things that are to be done in our country in a speech given in a foreign country, to strangers, with no prior consultation with the Canadian public, is despicable. It shows a lack of courage.

Our seniors, people who have lived through economic hard times and through disastrous conflicts, chose to help one another, to work together and to take responsibility for one another. They chose to invest in people so that together, they could meet the challenges ahead of them. That decision meant that more people had access to education, better health and better living conditions. The old age security and guaranteed income supplement programs were developed to ensure that no senior would be in need, regardless of how vulnerable their finances and their health might be.

These programs were not developed for just one generation; they were to become a cornerstone of Canadian values. Growing numbers of seniors are now living below the poverty line, and their families cannot bear the economic burden of looking after their parents

because they are having trouble making ends meet themselves. Rather than ensuring that we care for one another and bringing people together, the government is dividing us. I think this is very sad, when we look at the dreams our seniors had for us and how much they invested in those dreams. The government is not consulting and is driving blind, without guideposts and without an accurate knowledge of the opinions of the other citizens of this country who deserve to be heard. I see no indication of any such respect in what the government is doing.

The figures are blatantly clear: disadvantaged seniors who are currently receiving old age security and the guaranteed income supplement have less than \$15,000 a year to live on. The poverty line in urban communities is \$18,000. I think we can make the connection. At present, disadvantaged seniors are living in unacceptable conditions, and that situation is not going to improve, because the cost of living is going up every month. I regularly hear the horror stories that my senior constituents witness or experience. Every month, they have to make impossible choices between paying the rent, buying food, paying for their prescription drugs and investing in a means of transportation.

There are simple solutions to relieve this burden, such as investing in social housing and public transit infrastructure. In Quebec, there is already a shortfall of 50,000 affordable housing units, and the situation is not getting any better.

Cuts to old age security and the guaranteed income supplement are also a concerted attack against gender equality. The median income of senior women is only two-thirds that of senior men. Given that Canadian women do not always benefit from pay equity, this discrepancy will continue to exist for a number of years. These women are our mothers and grandmothers. They made sacrifices to give us a better future.

I find this government's lack of respect for them revolting and intolerable. I am asking the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance directly what measures they have planned to combat these inequalities and why they think that cutting services will help senior women living in poverty. The role of each government is to make choices that reflect its vision for our country. The current government is offering us a disastrous vision.

• (1550)

The government decided to invest billions of dollars in jets.

With the omnibus bill, huge costs will be downloaded onto the provinces—costs that will endanger their financial health—for an unproven program. The government gave large corporations billions of dollars in tax breaks without any guarantee of job creation. It is giving billions of dollars in subsidies to oil companies, which are part of the richest industry in Canada.

Our seniors are a good investment. They deserve subsidies as large as the ones given to big business. Seniors are active members of our community who have already given so much and who still have a lot to give if we help ensure that they have acceptable living conditions.

Business of Supply

The NDP has a more positive vision of our future. In fact, we want to double the pension plan in order to guarantee that no senior has to live in poverty. That is why we tabled a motion on this subject in June. I find the fact that the Conservatives are now backtracking to be hypocritical, given that they originally supported this motion. It is a complete betrayal.

Organizations in my riding are very upset about this step backward. Gilles Tremblay, president of the Blainville 50+ centre, said:

Seniors are having to downsize their living quarters to make ends meet. People cannot live comfortably or for long like that. We have contributed to our communities, and we can continue to contribute our experience. We have to be given the means to do that.

Josée Collard, who is in charge of La Popote à Roland in Blainville, which has been helping seniors in need for over 35 years, said:

As the leader of a group of Blainville seniors whose average age is 77, I see how hard it is for people in their golden years to find the resources that meet their needs. They have trouble getting to appointments with their family doctors, they need accessible, specialized transportation to get to their health care appointments, they need personalized after-care following hospitalization or surgery. They often have to spend so much energy and money on these things that they get discouraged and gradually become more isolated.

In closing, I would like to remind the House that we, too, will be seniors one day.

Let us show today's seniors the respect that we hope our children will show us.

[English]

Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member who just spoke, not necessarily for her speech per se, but for the commitment she demonstrates to all the baby boomer generation, because it is the generation that she represents that will carry the costs of the OAS and pension schemes for people in the next 20 to 30 years. She will still be working to pay, as a person who represents a much smaller demographic, for the people who are on pensions at the time. If she looks around this House, she will see that the number of people who are in the baby boomer generation outnumber the people who are of a younger generation.

Every government has the responsibility look at the long run. Any student of economics would know that policies that are put in place need to impact the long-run vision for the country.

Why is it that when this government has put in place so many things that are looking to the long run to help our seniors, for example, pension income splitting that allows more seniors to access OAS because each of them has a lower income level, an increase to the GIS and lowering the age for people to take money in order to have more of their own money before they start paying income tax, the member votes against those things?

• (1555)

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I am proud to have voted against the Conservative budget because it included big gifts for the Conservatives' friends, billions of dollars for people who do not need

money, such as oil companies and big business. I would rather have seen that money go to programs like the Canada pension plan.

[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with the vast majority of the member's comments.

Governments do need to make decisions. We know that an extremely large amount of capital will be expended on the renovations to the West Block here on the Hill in the next number of years. Another significant amount of capital will be invested within this chamber to accommodate an additional 30 MPs, which will have ongoing costs going forward to Canadians. Could that money go to seniors?

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question. I know one way to save money: get rid of the Senate.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the hon. member on her speech, which was not only on point, but also moving. It showed a great deal of solidarity and compassion.

I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight with regard to what the Minister of Veterans Affairs said earlier. He spouted rhetoric and bragged about how they improved the guaranteed income supplement for seniors and how they are taking care of seniors. We should remind him that in order to get the extra \$50 a month, a person needs to earn less than \$4,000 a year. It exists in theory, but in practice, no one gets it. This measure does not help anyone. That is the first thing I wanted to say.

Secondly, according to reports by this government's own institutions, there is no crisis and we are equipped to cope with the demographic shift. On the contrary, those reports indicate that after 2060, the cost to our overall economy will start to go down again roughly to current levels. Can the hon. member tell me why the Conservatives are crying wolf and causing everyone to worry?

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for the question. They are crying wolf because they prefer to spend money on other things. To govern is to make choices. The government can choose to spend money on jets or to spend money on our seniors.

I will speak on behalf of my generation. As the member opposite said, we have to protect this system. I want my children, my peers and myself to benefit from this system so that we too can retire with dignity in 50 years.

[English]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Terrebonne—Blainville for sharing her time with me and for an excellent speech. There were good points, it was well argued and it was an important message from our new generation of NDP MPs.

Business of Supply

It is useful, as we enter into a debate on the old age security regime in this country, to pause and reflect on some of the steps that got us to the position we are in. I am very proud, as an NDP member of Parliament, to take up the cause of defending the integrity of our old age security system, as has been our function and role throughout much of the last century.

I represent the riding of Winnipeg Centre, which is home to two of the greatest champions of social justice, I might say, that this country has ever known. In 1921, the Government of Canada wanted to send J.S. Woodsworth to prison for his role as the leader of the 1919 general strike but the good people of Winnipeg Centre sent him to Parliament in Ottawa instead and he stayed there until his untimely death in 1942.

I raise that subject because, only three years after J.S. Woodsworth arrived in Parliament, the prime minister of the day, William Lyon Mackenzie King, was in trouble. He was going to lose his government and needed the coalition support of what J.S. Woodsworth called the ginger group at the time, the Independent Labour Party. Woodsworth negotiated with Mackenzie King a deal, a condition, a compact, a coalition so to speak. The very art of politics is forming compacts, coalitions and agreements. Woodsworth went to Mackenzie King and said, "If you agree to introduce an old age security regime, I will support your government". That was the birth of the Canadian old age security system. We have that letter on file at NDP headquarters. It took Mackenzie King a long time to live up to his promise but he indeed did introduce old age security.

When J.S. Woodsworth passed away, he was replaced by the man who is known as the father of the Canadian pension plan, Stanley Knowles. Stanley Knowles represented my riding from 1942 until his stroke in 1984 made it impossible for him to continue. He served continuously, except for the Diefenbaker sweep of 1957. During that time, he was not only the undisputed champion of the Canadian pension plan but he fought and fought to introduce it and the old age security system. There are famous speeches on record that people published in their entirety and circulated across the country as this movement gained momentum. He did not stop fighting until he managed to have the old age security pension indexed to inflation as a secondary objective. This took his entire career but it was his proudest achievement and perhaps one of the most proud achievements of the NDP.

It always seems to fall to us to defend the integrity of the pension system, which has been under continuous assault by successive Conservative governments that do not fundamentally believe in this type of universality of old age security systems.

We can trace what is going on today with the terrible notion that the Prime Minister of Canada would announce fundamental social policy changes in a speech in a foreign country. We can trace it back, or I do at least, to the musings of the unofficial prime minister of Canada at the time, Thomas d'Aquino, the chief executive officer of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. Mr. d'Aquino had a checklist of things he thought Canada needed to do that consisted of 10 or 15 items. One by one he was checking them all off and one of them was, which he announced quite publicly, that Canada had to get out from under the crippling legacy costs.

Nobody really paid too much attention because the term "legacy costs" did not ring any bells. What he meant was pensions. Sure enough, the right wing think tanks started to fall in line and also blame pensions for all of our economic woes. There was no mention of the fact that corporate tax cuts had taken over \$100 billion worth of fiscal capacity in the two last governments, the Martin regime and this one.

● (1600)

Even when General Motors and the big auto companies ran into trouble, nobody said that maybe people were not buying their cars because they were making models nobody wanted. Immediately they said that the reason they could not function was because their legacy costs were too great, that they had to get out from under their pensions.

With this notion of never let a good crisis go to waste, they started to segue from the real root cause of their industrial woes and blamed it on this notion that we deserved to retire in some dignity and that we could take seniors out of poverty.

We have three pillars to our old age security system. One is personal savings, whatever one can save and invest during one's working life. Second, hopefully one has a pension through one's workplace, although that is becoming a rarity because of this full frontal assault by the right on the very notion that workplace pensions are possible. Third, is a robust universal government-sponsored pension plan.

The government would have us believe that there is something luxurious and comfortable about the pension system as we know it, the OAS and GIS. In actual fact, when compared with other countries, the replacement of earnings in retirement does not come anywhere close to a lot of western developed nations. It is really quite a modest system.

We have seen this assault on pensions and on the notion of pensions gaining validators and momentum, or currency. In fact, some experts in the field challenge whether it is an emergency at all. Yes, there is a demographic blip, but we would have had the fiscal capacity to provide were it not for the choices made by successive Liberal and Conservative governments to hollow out that fiscal capacity. However, we seem to be able to find money to spend in corporate tax cuts. Let us not kid ourselves. When \$6 billion in corporate tax cuts is granted, that is spending money. We argue that is wasteful spending of money, and we believe that has been validated.

The logic was that if we gave those tax cuts to corporations, they would spend that money in the economy, create more jobs and a virtuous cycle would begin. In actual fact, they have been hoarding that money away. Our worst fears are realized. They are stacking it up and stockpiling it like Scrooge McDuck in the comic books, rolling around in their piles of dough but they are not reinvesting. There is no empirical evidence to prove it.

Business of Supply

Not a single study in the world has ever proven that a tax cut equals more jobs. The only predictable and verifiable outcome of a tax cut given to companies is that they will have more money and greater profits. That is what was done. It was a transfer of wealth.

In the richest and most powerful civilization in the history of the world, the government cannot tell me that we cannot afford to lift every senior citizen out of poverty.

Our former leader, Jack Layton, costed this out and we ran on that as a platform. Instead of the \$6 billion for corporate tax cuts, we could spend \$1 billion of that and all 250,000 seniors, who are currently below the poverty line, would at least get to the poverty line. They would not be wealthy, rich or even comfortable. They would still be poor, but out of the depths of abject poverty. That is the cost and it is achievable, yet we go in the opposite direction.

Again, in the spirit of never let a good crisis go to waste, the Conservatives are cutting, hacking and slashing upon ideological lines just as we predicted they would. They are coming up with these dummy saving accounts to offset it. Bill C-25, the bill we were forced to vote on yesterday, is nothing but a 401(k). The only ones who will get rich on that are the stock brokers who will charge a commission every time that money is moved around. It is a 401(k), the Americanization of our pension regime.

We are here to defend the integrity of the old age security in the spirit of Woodsworth and Stanley Knowles. The NDP is proud to present this motion today to flush out the enemies of the public pension system, to denounce them and hold them to account so they will not get away with this. There will be a blue rinse revolution in this land if they proceed in this way.

• (1605)

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member across the way talked about the history of his riding, and his riding does have a proud history with a great parliamentarian like Stanley Knowles.

Looking back, Stanley Knowles was a member of Parliament who sat here for a generation. He suffered from multiple sclerosis. Later on he was the chancellor of Brandon University. He was viewed across the country as a man of honour and integrity.

I wonder what Stanley Knowles would think today of his successor and the type of language he used to describe a member of the other place, Senator Boisvenu, and the damage his family has suffered. I do not think Stanley Knowles would have appreciated the type of language or that type of criticism.

• (1610)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I know in the past you have admonished members about relevance. I wonder what the relevance of those comments were. We are talking about old age security.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan is correct. From time to time the Chair does remind members that what they say ought to be relevant to the subject at hand and the speech given. In this case, I will leave it to the hon. member for Winnipeg Centre to respond as he wishes to this matter.

The hon. member for Winnipeg Centre.

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, I am very proud of the connection my family has to Stanley Knowles. My grandfather was a dean of theology who taught Stanley Knowles at what was then called Manitoba College, where he received his divinity degree. My grandfather married Stanley Knowles and his wife Vida Cruikshank. Stanley was a pallbearer at my grandfather's funeral. He was a regular and frequent visitor at the dinner table of my grandfather's home.

Stanley Knowles, and his long-standing belief that the Senate should be abolished, would understand completely when someone denounces the irresponsible, reckless, destructive, outrageous comments of a Tory hack who has no business being over there to begin with and has no business commenting on criminal justice issues when he is supposed to be a public servant. It is irresponsible to counsel people to commit suicide on the week before National Suicide Prevention Week.

I used a great deal of restraint in my reaction to his comments.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I always appreciate the member's colleagues in the House.

The member only had 10 minutes. I know that if he had 12 minutes, he would have wanted to go on and remind Canadians that the three pillars we have talked about, old age security, CPP and guaranteed income supplement, although supported by many in the New Democratic Party and some who were seated in the New Democratic Party, were brought in by Liberal governments. If he had 12 minutes, I know he would have wanted to mention that.

I want to ask him about what was said in a scrum yesterday, and that was why the opposition was being so exercised when there was no legislation for the change from age of 65 to 67. It is not out there yet.

I would also ask my colleague to comment on this. We have seen closure executed so many times in the House under the government. Where there is smoke, there is fire. When the comments were made in Davos, we can certainly expect to see legislation coming forward. Therefore, our responsibility as opposition is to ensure that Canadians know what is coming down the pike.

Does my colleague share that nervousness, that concern of what may be coming from the government next?

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, I can tell my colleague that the phone in my office is ringing off the hook with concerned senior citizens. In the absence of any concrete details from the Prime Minister, just this law, this scattergun comment that leaves all possibilities open, there is serious concern throughout the land. It is a reckless and irresponsible way to introduce a subject regarding social policy.

We have a right to know what is in the mind of the Prime Minister. First, we have a right to know the scale and the scope of the problem as the government sees it and if there is any evidence that there is in fact an actuarial emergency, as it would have us believe. Second, we have a right to know what measures and what concrete steps it is proposing so we can do our due diligence and represent the people who elected us to ensure this is done in such a way that it does not impact people negatively.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): 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 Chambly—Borduas, Post-secondary Education; the hon. member for Montcalm, Persons with Disabilities; the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, The Environment.

● (1615)

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise, like always, out of a sense of pride to address important issues in the House, but also with a great sense of frustration on behalf of a lot of Canadians who are very worried about their retirement futures.

They have watched the Prime Minister trial balloon this notion, this idea, that there is a crisis in the Canadian pension system. They understand the issue of the aging demographic. Canadians are serious people who understand these issues. They want government to be honest with them and to provide real solutions.

When the Prime Minister trial ballooned increasing the age of qualification for the OAS from 65 to 67 years of age in Davos, he frightened a lot of Canadians, a lot of people who look toward their retirement age of 65, people who have, in many cases, worked their entire lives in labour or in a trade, who have saved enough so they can take care of themselves with some level of dignity post-65, providing that they also receive the OAS. They are shocked, surprised and are very fearful of what their future looks like.

They are people who have done all the right things. They have worked hard. They have saved money. They have planned for the future and they fear that just as they are within reach of that future, the Conservative government is threatening to pull the rug out from under them and to, in a very callous way, destroy their future retirement.

Today, the Minister of Finance confirmed that the upcoming federal budget would include cuts to old age security. This, despite the fact that the Conservatives promised in the last election not to cut transfers to individuals or pensions. This, despite the fact that the old age security program, as it is set up currently, is in fact sustainable. *The Globe and Mail* wrote this week:

Expert advice commissioned by the federal government contradicts [the Prime Minister's] warnings that Canada can't afford the looming bill for Old Age Security payments....research prepared at Ottawa's request argues Canada's pension system is in far better shape than the Europeans', and there's no need to raise the retirement age.

As we have heard, the federal government currently spends about 2.4% of GDP on OAS payments. In 2030, we are told spending on OAS payments will rise to about 3.14% of GDP.

Business of Supply

The amount we spend on OAS clearly fluctuates with demographics. For example, in 1992, federal spending on OAS represented 2.72% of GDP.

The expected rise in old age security between now and 2030 can be manageable. It is simply a matter of priorities. After 2030, spending on OAS as a percentage of the economy is expected to fall once again until it is even below today's levels.

The Conservatives do not like it when we talk about future government spending as a percentage of the economy or a percentage of the GDP. The Conservatives want to scare us with nominal numbers without considering what our ability would be to actually pay.

This is not surprising, because the Conservatives do not like evidence. They prefer making decisions based on ideology, not evidence, and they often ignore the facts when they make decisions.

For examples, yesterday the Minister of Public Safety told parliamentarians to ignore the statistics that showed that crime rates in Canada continue to fall.

Yesterday the chief economist at Statistics Canada quit because of the Conservatives' habit of placing ideology ahead of facts, evidence and statistics.

Yesterday the Conservatives quietly made data from Statistics Canada available for free on line, but since the Conservatives got rid of the mandatory long form census, the data is really quite worthless, so they would not be able to continue selling it anyway. Nobody wants to buy data that is not statistically credible or pertinent.

Now the Conservatives are trying to scare Canadians into believing that the OAS system is somehow about to crumble.

● (1620)

I would like to share with members what the experts are saying on this issue.

Thomas Klassen, a political scientist who recently published research on Canada's OAS, has said:

I haven't heard any academic argue that there's a crisis with OAS, which is why I was surprised a few days ago when the Prime Minister seemed to say there was a crisis... because I don't know where that came from.

From a column in *The Globe and Mail* earlier this week:

Kevin Milligan, a University of British Columbia economics professor who co-authored another of the supporting research papers prepared for Ottawa, is also of the view that there's no OAS crisis. He says the government's use of statistics showing the cost of OAS will climb from \$36.5 billion in 2010 to \$108 billion in 2030 is not meaningful because of the impact of inflation.

He says that we should be using percentage of GDP numbers instead. He says:

As an economist, I would never characterize things in terms of nominal dollars in the future because it's hard to put those in context. I don't know what we'll be paying for a litre of milk then.

Business of Supply

Meanwhile the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance said measuring OAS payment as a percentage of the economy is misleading Canadians. Somehow, looking ahead to 2030 and, instead of putting it at a nominal value, putting it into real terms as a percentage of GDP was somehow misleading Canadians. To the contrary.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance is misleading Canadians when she speaks in nominal numbers for 2030. Everybody else who is obviously taking the cost of the OAS as a percentage of GDP is then providing Canadians with important information. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance actually said "We're talking in dollars. Talking in terms of percentages is misleading". Sadly, it is not the first time that the parliamentary secretary for finance has been confused by the expression of government expense as a percentage of GDP, but I digress.

Further, in terms of the fact that there is no evidence of a real crisis, the government's own report concludes that our pension system, including OAS and GIS, is sustainable. I will quote from this report called "Canada's retirement-income provision: An international perspective". Edward Whitehouse states:

The analysis suggests that Canada does not face major challenges of financial sustainability with its public pension schemes... There is no pressing financial or fiscal need to increase pension ages in the foreseeable future.

Again, this is from a report commissioned by the government. It commissioned experts to provide it with expert advice based on evidence.

According to this report, the current system is working well:

Canada's public retirement income system provides strong protection for interrupted work histories without unduly affecting incentives for people to work and to save.

Even if there were a crisis in the sustainability of the OAS or our pension systems, one would think that if the government were going to try to strengthen the pension plan to ensure it was sustainable, it would do it in a way that was progressive and fair. This is what the Liberal government did in the 1990s with the CPP, for example, to ensure that it was sustainable for generations in decades ahead.

We have established that there is not a crisis. The Conservatives are doing this for ideological reasons. Even if they felt there were a crisis one would think they would want to be progressive and fair and ensure that the most vulnerable would not be affected most severely by those changes. In fact, to the contrary.

The Conservative government was able to find billions of dollars to enable income splitting which, if affordable, is fine. Yet income splitting disproportionately benefits middle and upper income Canadians. The Conservatives found billions to help with that.

• (1625)

This move, raising the age of qualification for the OAS, would disproportionately hurt low-income Canadians. Forty per cent of OAS recipients get by. They struggle to survive on less than \$20,000 per year. More than 50% of OAS recipients make less than \$25,000 per year. What kind of government, if it were in fact faced with a crisis of sustainability in our pension system, would solve it by hurting the poorest of the poor?

It is also anti-rural, anti-small town and anti-Atlantic Canada. Rural Canada, small-town Canada and Atlantic Canada have more seniors than urban Canada. That is the reality. Parts of Canada, such as Alberta and Saskatchewan, are doing very well. They had the vision, foresight and wisdom to put oil and gas and potash under the ground. However, large parts of Canada are struggling. The Maritimes, large parts of Ontario and Quebec, and a lot of rural communities are struggling. We are struggling to keep rural communities alive. In the three counties of Hants county, Kings county and Annapolis county, we have lost almost 7,000 full-time jobs since August 2008. We have seen unemployment rates go from about 5.5% to over 8% in the last three years. We have seen families struggling just to make ends meet. Small businesses are going broke. They cannot survive if people cannot afford to go to their little restaurant or to shop at their little store. Do not be fooled when the government talks about how well the economy is doing. If we break it down by region, if we break it down between urban and rural, there is a lot of hardship in Canada right now.

This threat to increase the age of qualification for the OAS would make things worse in rural Canada, small-town Canada and Atlantic Canada.

For example, in Nova Scotia, we have the highest percentage of seniors in the country as a percentage of our population. Seniors comprise 16% of the population in our province. The median income for seniors in Nova Scotia is \$21,290 per year. That is almost \$2,000 less than the Canadian median income of \$23,110 for seniors.

In Nova Scotia, OAS represents 24.6% of seniors' income. That is much higher than the Canadian average of 21.1%.

We have established that this is a regressive step. It is bad for low-income Canadians, Atlantic Canadians, Nova Scotians and rural Canadians. It also bad for single women. For women, the OAS and the GIS are more important, in many ways, than the CPP or the QPP. Unlike the CPP, the OAS and the guaranteed income supplement cover Canadians who have taken time away from the workforce. For example, people who have stayed at home to take care of their children or who have persistently had lower paying jobs or long-term unemployment. I mention the GIS because, the way our system works, we cannot qualify for GIS unless we qualify for OAS. Raising the qualification age for OAS would be doubly regressive. Not only is OAS there to help low-income Canadians, but the GIS is absolutely essential for the lowest income retirees.

According to the 2009 report, “Government and Retirement Incomes in Canada”, by Michael Baker and Kevin Milligan, again a government-commissioned report, by the ages of 60 to 64, employment income represents 40% of income, on average, for men but just 28% of income for women. We know that generationally, particularly in the past, a lot more women were doing work that was not compensated in a monetary sense, important work, but work that was not part of the financial system or part of the formal economy. Meanwhile, 23.9% of women aged 65 received GIS, compared with only 19.6% of men. We know that the GIS and the OAS are even more important to women than they are to men.

• (1630)

The Conservatives' policy on income splitting, which I mentioned earlier, predominantly helps well off, single income couples. Now the Conservatives are getting ready to attack low-income families and single women who rely on OAS and GIS when they turn 65.

It is unfair to women. It is unfair to low-income Canadians. It is unfair to rural Canada. It is unfair to Atlantic Canada. It represents an off-loading to the provinces, without any discussion or consultation. The cutting of OAS, raising the age of qualification from 65 to 67, will force thousands of low-income seniors onto provincial welfare rolls.

The feds are downloading these costs, similar to how they are downloading prison costs. We know that the prisons will cost the federal government billions of dollars. We are also finding out that there will be billions of dollars imposed on provincial governments.

I am hearing from constituents in my riding of Kings—Hants, which is of course a rural Nova Scotian riding, a riding that would be hit hard by this kind of regressive step. Fred Rhymes from Centre Burlington has contacted us. He retired early because of his health. This is a guy who worked hard. He saved carefully all his life. His savings were hit badly during the financial crisis. He is now counting on OAS to fill in the gaps when he turns 65. He is very concerned about what the government intends to do. It has been trial ballooned in a callous way. Now we understand there will be some clarity in the budget.

Another fellow who called us was Bryan Draper from Port Williams. Bryan has said that OAS and the social safety net must be there for the Canadians who need it. He referred to the gap between rich and poor and the fact that it is widening. This is not just a Canadian phenomenon. The reality is the gap between rich and poor is growing around the world.

In fact, it is ironic. The Prime Minister was at the Davos conference of the World Economic Forum. Global leaders from countries around the world actually said that the gap between rich and poor is growing and needs to be addressed. Klaus Schwab said in the opening remarks that it is critically important that we address the gap between rich and poor.

I talked to somebody about this a couple of years ago. A business person with a lot of money said that Marx may have been wrong about communism, but he may yet prove correct on capitalism if we are not careful.

People like Warren Buffett, who is no slouch when it comes to business, is saying the gap between rich and poor is wrong. He

Business of Supply

actually asked the people working in his office to tell him what percentage of their income they were paying in income tax, on a voluntary basis. He found out that his cleaning lady was paying a higher percentage of her income in taxes than he does. This is Warren Buffett, hardly an anti-capitalist.

This is not a question of ideology. This is a question of civility, of doing what is right and changing our tax system and our social system to be fair. It is not just a question of the economy. It is a question of the sustainability of our society. To have the Government of Canada, this Conservative government, threatening to make it worse makes me very frustrated.

I had another note from a constituent who said:

My wife and I are two of the many Canadians who have made financial plans for retirement on the assumption the OAS would be there for us at the age of 65.

Thousands of us who have worked hard and done the right thing will be badly hurt by any wait required for OAS.

Finally, on the politics of deception, the Prime Minister knew that this demographic shift was upon us. The world has known this. Everybody who has been looking at public policy knew this. Why did he not talk about it during the election? Why did he not give Canadians the straight goods that this was a problem? Why did he tell Canadians that he would not, and he was absolutely unequivocal, cut transfers to seniors during the election? Canadians deserve to know the truth. They can handle the truth. They deserve honesty from their government.

• (1635)

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my question is this: Is there a demographic shift or not?

At the end of the member's speech he mentioned there is. At the beginning of his speech he mentioned that there is no long form census and then questioned all kinds of things about long-term planning. I wonder what kind of long-term planning the member is talking about. Is he talking about the long-term planning the Liberal party used before it drained \$50 billion out of the employment insurance fund and then left it empty? By the way, those were contributions by employers and employees.

Is this the kind of wisdom the members opposite are talking about?

I guess my question for the member is whether Canadians should take his assertion about there being no long form census right now, which in fact there is, as many of them were filled out and returned to Statistics Canada, as an example of the validity and truthfulness of his speech?

Hon. Scott Brison: Respectfully, Mr. Speaker, I do not think anyone in the House understands what the hon. member just asked, except perhaps the hon. member. I will give him the benefit of the doubt and try to pick some scintilla of logic out of that.

Business of Supply

I will start off with the long-term planning issue he raised. I am very proud that it was a Liberal government that not only inherited a \$43 billion deficit, a record high deficit at that time, until recently when this Conservative government was able to beat that record, but also paid down that deficit and over \$100 billion of the national debt, giving the current government the best incoming fiscal situation of any incoming government in the history of the country.

Beyond that, the Liberal government in the late 1990s strengthened CPP and made it sustainable for generations. While it was doing that it was criticized by the Reform party and the Canadian Alliance Party for taking steps to make the pension plan sustainable.

Mr. David Sweet: Where were you then, Scotty?

Hon. Scott Brison: I was certainly not a member of the Reform party, I can say that much.

Mr. David Sweet: You certainly weren't a member of Liberal party, either.

Hon. Scott Brison: Beyond that, it was the Reform party that was opposed to that. It is ironic that the Prime Minister took credit at Davos for having a great pension plan when in fact he was against the measures taken to give Canada a great pension plan.

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government is asking Canadians to once again trust bankers, trust stock markets, and to pad the wallets of stock brokers. It is asking Canadians to gamble their futures once again.

The Conservatives are peddling the PRPP pension dog food, and maybe they would like to sample some themselves. Therefore, I would like to ask the member for Kings—Hants if he would join me in suggesting that the Conservative MPs give up their guaranteed MP pension and trade it in for a pension traded on the open market. I will, if they will.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' plan with the PRPP can help some of the people who can afford to pay into a PRPP, but it is not as big a step forward as I think the Conservatives are representing.

My biggest concern with the PRPP is that the fees are going to continue to be higher than they ought to be. The fees for the industry in Canada are way too high and the reality is that a better alternative is to have a voluntary supplemental CPP.

The NDP would like to make it compulsory. My concern about that in the short term is that with high unemployment, we should be very careful not to increase payroll taxes or premiums at this time. However, I think its intention of having a strong, long-term public pension alternative for Canadians is well founded.

The reality is that having a voluntary supplemental CPP, with its very low fee structure, would actually help keep the PRPP fees lower because it would provide some competition. Therefore, we could actually make the PRPPs more cost effective by offering another alternative, and that is a voluntary supplemental CPP.

• (1640)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for Kings—Hants spoke at length about the Prime Minister's strategy to manufacture a pension crisis to find a way to pay for how the Prime Minister has deteriorated the tax revenue base of the country.

What is the Prime Minister's long-term game plan? In a letter to Premier Ralph Klein in 2001 he mentioned that the province should do the following:

Withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan to create an Alberta Pension Plan offering the same benefits at lower cost while giving Alberta control over the investment fund.

That was the Prime Minister's view at the time. He added:

Pensions are a provincial responsibility under section 94A of the Constitution Act, 1867; and the legislation setting up the Canada Pension Plan permits a province to run its own plan—

What does the member for Kings—Hants really think the long-term of the Prime Minister is? We know what he is doing on health care where he has frozen the funding. He sent his Minister of Finance to do that.

Is there another game plan of the Prime Minister that we have not yet seen?

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Malpeque is quite right that the Prime Minister's agenda is a *laissez-faire*, hands-off one, with a smaller, meaner, leaner federal government that lets the provinces fend for themselves. That is fine if one is in a rich province, but if we look at the way the Canadian economy is working right now, the gap between have provinces and have-not provinces has never been greater. We are seeing that on an ongoing basis.

Our current recovery, whatever recovery there is, is being driven by natural resources, by oil, gas, minerals. If provinces have those it is fine. If they do not and the dollar goes up, it crowds out other value-added stuff that could fill the gap. Never before has it been as important that we have a federal government that recognizes the importance of standing shoulder to shoulder with all Canadians regardless of the region they live in.

This is the most dangerous time to have a government led by a prime minister who believes in that winner takes all, and to heck with the rest of them, approach. We have to watch this every step of the way, in representing a province like Nova Scotia or Atlantic Canada. We are going to defend our people.

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am always shocked to hear the Liberals and the Conservatives alike defend pension plans that are administered by the private sector. At the beginning of the week, I read the comments of one analyst who said that, at this time, private pension funds are being suffocated by current conditions and the low interest rate, and by the fact that it is very difficult to get decent returns from the stock market.

So, how can my colleague support a solution that would exacerbate the problem, rather than advocating, as we do, a solution that relies on a safe, public, proven and strong system, as even the government recognizes?

Business of Supply

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, I partially agree with my colleague, because the public pension system does have a role to play and we support that system.

When the Liberals were in power, we brought in some changes to guarantee public pensions in the long term. That was a priority for our government. At the same time, however, we recognize the role of the private sector. We have no problem with people investing in the stock market, since this is a market economy.

I think my colleague is looking for a reason to disagree with me when, in fact, we agree to some extent, because we fully support the need to strengthen our public pension system, particularly for people with low incomes, more vulnerable people, women, people who live in rural areas and in the Atlantic provinces. We must work together.

• (1645)

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise to speak to this important motion. I will be splitting my time with the member for Timmins—James Bay.

I want to acknowledge in particular the member for Pierrefonds—Dollard for her very good work in bringing this motion forward. I also want to mention two other colleagues, the member for London—Fanshawe, the NDP seniors critic, and the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, the NDP critic for pensions. New Democrats have been raising the issues around pensions and seniors for the many years I have been in the House and we will continue to do so.

For the interest of people who may be just tuning in, I want to read the motion that we are debating. It states:

That this House reject calls by the Prime Minister to balance the Conservative deficit on the backs of Canada's seniors by means such as raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security and call on the government to make the reduction and eventual elimination of seniors' poverty a cornerstone of the next budget.

I am going to focus on a couple of aspects of this motion. As the NDP critic for poverty in the House, I have a number of things I want to include in my speech today.

One of the things we have heard from the members opposite is that the country simply cannot afford to look after seniors as they age. The Canadian Labour Congress has done some analysis of the projected figures, which I quote:

As a share of GDP, the program cost is forecast to increase from 2.36% in 2011, to a peak of 3.14% in 2030, after which year the cost will fall. In other words, the cost of the program as a share of national income will increase by 33% from 2011 to 2030, even though the number of seniors will increase by 90%.

Many other analyses have been done on the affordability of the program as it currently exists, and the numbers simply fly in the face of the Conservatives telling us that we cannot afford to look after seniors.

Why should we be concerned? I mentioned at the outset that I wanted to talk about poverty. There is a direct link between poverty and the state of health of Canadians, whether they are seniors, young people or middle-aged people, and there is a tremendous amount of work being done on the social determinants of health. Although I do not have time to go into all of the determinants, I want to quote from an article on this:

The primary factors that shape the health of Canadians are not medical treatments or lifestyle choices but rather the living conditions they experience. These conditions have come to be known as the social determinants of health....

Canadians are largely unaware that our health is shaped by how income and wealth is distributed, whether or not we are employed and if so, the working conditions we experience. Our health is also determined by the health and social services we receive, and our ability to obtain quality education, food and housing, among other factors.

And contrary to the assumption that Canadians have personal control over these factors, in most cases these living conditions are—for better or worse—imposed upon us by the quality of the communities, housing situations, work settings, health and social service agencies, and educational institutions with which we interact.

This article talks about 14 different social determinants of health, and they include the following, which are a direct link to seniors as well: income and income distribution; unemployment and job security; early childhood development, which I will discuss later; food insecurity; housing and the social safety network.

Therefore, when we talk about the income that seniors receive, we are also talking about their health and well-being. That is why it is really important that we not delay income for seniors by two years, as the trial balloon that was floated by the Prime Minister would.

When it comes to income, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has also prepared a brief. It talks about the adequacy of benefits as they currently exist without any tinkering by the Conservatives. It indicates:

—the maximum annual income a single individual could receive from OAS and GIS combined in the July-September 2009 quarter is about \$14,000. However, Statistics Canada's 2008 after-tax low-income cut-off for a single individual in a major urban area with a population of 500,000 or over was \$18,373. Even for smaller urban areas in 2008, the after-tax LICO [low-income cut-off] was above \$14,000—

Just based on those figures alone, we can see that seniors who are just getting old age security and GIS are already living below the low-income cutoff.

• (1650)

If they start pushing those numbers up, what are those seniors between the ages of 65 and 67 going to do? These are seniors who qualify and many of them are at the low end.

If the Conservatives are serious about supporting seniors and future generations, what is needed is a real plan to address poverty reduction. I call on the government to support the NDP Bill C-233, the poverty elimination act, which would directly take on some of these issues.

The Canadian Labour Congress has done an analysis on poverty and ill health. In its paper, "Implications of Raising the Age of Eligibility for Old Age Security", it states:

Raising the age of eligibility for OAS/GIS from 65 to 67 would likely result in a very significant increase in poverty for persons aged 65 to 67, unless they were able to find an alternative source of income. That is possible for some, but many older workers in their 60s are in ill health or are engaged in providing care for others.

I know many members in their sixties have parents who are in their eighties. We often talk about the sandwich generation, people who are caring for children or perhaps grandchildren. Many seniors are caring for their grandchildren. They could also be caring for their elderly and aging parents who often are in ill health by the time they are in their nineties.

Business of Supply

It continues:

Raising the age of eligibility for OAS/GIS would mean that non-working, low income seniors on provincial social assistance and disability programs would have to wait to transition to OAS/GIS, raising social assistance costs for provincial governments. Costs of providing drugs and essential services to low income seniors unable to pay on their own would also increase.

We have seen the government's track record of downloading to the provincial governments. This is another way it would download to the provincial governments that are already struggling to meet some of their demands, whether it has to do with infrastructure, housing or drug costs.

The paper goes on to say that not everyone can work longer. Part of the argument we hear is that we have a labour shortage and we need to push the retirement age up to 67 so we can address that labour shortage. If the government is talking about addressing the labour shortage, it should invest in training and apprenticeships. It should look at immigration if it wants to deal with some of those labour shortages. The labour shortages are no surprise. We have known for 15 or 20 years that we were going to have critical skill shortages in some of the apprenticed trades. Where is the government's plan to address that? It is absent, missing in action. We are hearing that from all kinds of people. Whether it is pulp mills, other parts of the forestry sector or mining companies, there were all kinds of predictions of skill shortages.

Why are we not training, for example, first nations, Métis and Inuit to address some of those skill shortages? The money simply is not there.

The paper further states:

It is argued that eligibility for OAS/GIS discourages older Canadians from remaining in the workforce, and that we need to keep them working to avoid labour shortages.

In point of fact, the reality is that Canadians are already staying in the workforce much longer than was the case even a decade ago... [O]ne in four (24%) persons, aged 65 to 70, is already still working, up from 11% in 2000. That rate has been trending sharply upward for a number of reasons. Some are working longer because they want to, and they find work interesting. This is most often the case for higher income workers. Others are working longer due to inadequate retirement savings. The trend to working well past age 65 will likely continue.

There is sufficient information to counter the government's argument that we cannot maintain the current old age security and GIS system to ensure that seniors can retire with dignity, and with an income that is already inadequate, we do not want to make it worse for them.

I would encourage all members to support this very important motion that was brought forward by the member for Pierrefonds—Dollard and to actually support seniors in their retirement.

• (1655)

Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to correct the record in this House that it is the Conservative government that has increased extraordinary amounts of transfers to our provinces to ensure that they have the money they need to work. I would like to read some quotes into the record. This one is from May 4, 2000:

I do not need to remind anyone in the House that the Liberal government devastated health care in Canada by making draconian slashes to health care, by reducing health care funding and by putting health care in a crisis in every province....

Who said that? It was the member for Kings—Hants.

As well, there is this statement:

Shifting the burden to provinces for these services was the easy but cowardly way to accelerate deficit reduction....The Chrétien—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I do not think it is relevant or fair to this debate that the member is trying to read in comments about what someone said earlier today. If she has a problem with what was said earlier today, she should have asked a question then. Her question should be on this speech. She should focus her issues on what she heard in this debate.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The Chair would encourage all members to keep their comments related to the matter before the House and to proceed in that fashion.

The hon. member for Newmarket—Aurora.

Ms. Lois Brown: Mr. Speaker, it absolutely is relevant because the opposition is fear-mongering to Canadian seniors today that this government is going to be taking money out of their pockets. That is absolutely not going to happen. We have been very clear about that.

However, it is the member for Kings—Hants in 2002 who said that they did cut the transfers to—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The time for the member for Newmarket—Aurora has expired.

The hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of points.

Whether the government has increased provincial transfers or not, the fact is that the government is continuing to download other services and programs to the provinces. The government is simply not coming clean about how much it will cost the provinces for prisons and how much it will cost if the government changes the retirement age. The provinces need to be at the table on those things and negotiating with the federal government.

The members opposite keep talking about fear-mongering. I need to remind them that it was the Prime Minister who raised the issue about contemplating changing the age of retirement from 65 to 67. We did not come up with that number; the Prime Minister came up with it.

The Conservatives need to come clean on if they are going to do it, when they are going to do it, and which people who are approaching retirement are going to be affected. Will it be people who are currently 50, 55, 60, or 63? Who is going to be affected? Just tell us.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the opposition parties are being accused of fear-mongering because of this discussion around pensions. For anybody who has watched this Parliament and paid attention since there has been a majority Conservative government, I think they would have seen time and again that when the Conservatives want to do something, they just go ahead and do it. They have invoked closure a record number of times. They say there is nothing on the books yet about increasing the age to 67, but we know that when they decide to do it, it will be rammed through.

Business of Supply

The important aspect of this debate today is to make Canadians aware of what is going on here. We need to make Canadians aware of the Prime Minister's long-standing agenda.

Does the member concur with the train of thought that we have to ready the Canadian public for what is coming down the pike from the Prime Minister?

• (1700)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, we have seen closure on debate 13 times in this House and we are barely into a sitting. We only had an election in May, but closure has been invoked 13 times already.

In committees, matters that have been traditionally spoken about in public are being done behind closed doors, in camera. The public cannot hear what members are saying. They cannot see how members are voting. They cannot see the outcome of a debate that all Canadians should be concerned with. Canadians should be very concerned.

The Prime Minister floated this number in Switzerland with no consultation with the provinces, with no discussion with members of this House, with no consideration for the kind of impact it would have on seniors who are looking at retiring and not knowing now what the future holds.

The Prime Minister has a responsibility to let Canadians know very clearly and unequivocally what the government is planning to do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I will recognize the member for Newmarket—Aurora, but I would caution all members that if they are raising a point of order, it needs to be an appropriate point of order dealing with process and not a matter of debate.

Is the hon. member's point of order such?

Ms. Lois Brown: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to remind the member that there was no number floated by the Prime Minister.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): That is a point of debate or possibly a point of fact, but it is not a point of order.

The hon. member for St. John's East quickly on the same point of order.

Mr. Jack Harris: It is not a point of order, Mr. Speaker, but on questions and comments.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for questions and comments has expired. We will ever be wondering what that question was.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to rise in the House, as I always am, to represent the people of Timmins—James Bay on an issue that I think is fundamentally at the heart of what we are about as parliamentarians.

The fact is that we are here to debate a motion that had to be brought forward because of the Prime Minister's cavalier attitude toward the working people of this country, the senior citizens in this country.

We have almost grown used to the attitude of the Prime Minister, who shows regular contempt for the House of Commons, shutting

down debate, ordering secret meetings, but I think people across Canada were somewhat shocked that the Prime Minister would talk to the millionaires in Davos and tell them that our senior citizens are living high off the hog and that we had to get this thing in order.

This is a government that had a \$13 billion surplus and ran it into the ground before the deficit even started. Under the Prime Minister, government spending on ministerial offices has gone through the roof. The Conservatives have made the poor old Liberals look like they were wearing sackcloth and ashes and were so careful after the way the Conservatives spend. That is some piece to get away with, and that was done under the Prime Minister. Blowing money is not a problem with the Conservatives when it comes to blowing it on boats, fighter jets and prisons.

The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development yesterday told us she was worried about a foreign invasion. The Fenians have not come across the border out of Buffalo since 1863 or 1864. A few times the Boston Bruins have come over and caused some fights in Toronto, but there is no need for us to take that off the backs of senior citizens.

The Prime Minister decided to open this debate. I see my colleagues in the Conservative Party are feeling a little ruffled, and damn well they should be, because for the last week my phone has been ringing. Not just senior citizens have been phoning me, but people who are working, younger people, and people who know that what they are seeing from the government is an absolute sham and an absolute scam. They know there is no such thing for most working people as a private pension any more. Most of the people I know are working on contracts, going from contract to contract.

We hear the Conservatives wax on about the underutilized capacity of RRSPs as though if people were just a little sharper, a little smarter, they actually might save for their future, as opposed to the reality, which is that when people are raising a family, going from job to job while trying to put something away, when they fall in between contracts, that is their savings gone. It might be three months, four months, five months or a year. That is their savings gone. People need some form of security.

We have a few setups that were put in place and the most effective was the CPP. Some of the ideologues on the Conservative backbench have a real problem because it was a public system that was set up, but it works. It is low cost. It gives people something. It is effective. The problem is that the CPP has not kept up.

As the New Democrats have been saying, this is a system that works. Allow people to save more and then people will not have to rely on the guaranteed income supplement or the old age security if they have something to fall back on.

Business of Supply

We see many people who tried to save RRSPs, and some of them have done very well. If a person is doing very well financially, RRSPs might be okay. However, I know many people in my riding who have lost 30% or 40% of the value of their savings since the 2008 crash. They are trying to find out from us what is happening with old age security.

It is not just that the Prime Minister decided to create a crisis for all the working people who are now in their thirties and forties wondering about what is coming, but it is the lack of vision for what is actually happening on the ground with senior citizens.

In Timmins—James Bay there are large regions of rural populations of senior citizens who are in old farmhouses whose kids have gone down south. They come into my office. They cannot afford to heat their places any more. They do not have enough money. I cannot tell them to move into town because there is no such thing as seniors' housing or long-term care. It is not available. Costs are being put on these families just to heat their houses, so whatever savings they have are eaten up.

This idea is right out of Charles Dickens: "They can work longer. Are there no workhouses? We can make them work until they are 67."

• (1705)

There are people who can retire. They might not have everything they need to retire but at age 65 or 66 they can continue working doing some work. I know some senior citizens who like to work and it is good because they have incredible experience. However, there is a difference between choosing to work and being forced to work. When we are forced to work because we cannot make ends meet and we are 66 years old, then there is a whole other set of related issues that start to come in. We see larger health care costs. We see all kinds of stress on the family unit. Sometimes family members who have moved away need to move back to deal with their aging parents.

This is not a debate that one starts in Davos by launching a trial balloon or by saying something off the top of one's head. That is not what a responsible Prime Minister does. The Prime Minister had the whole election to talk about what the Conservatives' strategy was for pensions and we heard zip.

The Conservatives have come back and have created this unnecessary crisis. They are feeling very defensive today, we can sense it, because they do not want people paying attention to this. Just like yesterday, when they shut down the debate on the pooled registered pension plan, they do not really want this getting out because when they get back home, sit down with people and tell them that it is their future that is on the line, they will get a whole different response. I think this is something the government knows very well and is feeling a little touchy about.

I would say that if the Conservatives want to go on a tour, we can go on a tour together and visit some of these communities. Let us put their plans on the table and hear what people think, especially those who are 45 years old and who are getting by on a little bit RRSP here and a little RRSP there but who are unable to actually have savings. Let us hear what they have to say when they are told that they will be the sacrificial generation, that they will take it on so that the Prime Minister can tell his buddies in Davos, "You know that \$6 billion we

blew on Caterpillar in London, that was a good investment. But those seniors, we're getting them in line. Don't you worry".

When I was a kid, my grandmother always told me that Tory times were hard times, and that is a fact. We have a government that comes from a miserly stock. The Conservatives are as miserly now as they were in my grandmother's day. When Canadians hear that the Conservatives decided to go to Davos and blame our senior citizens for the financial mess they are creating, I think they will have a fight on their hands. I think this is a fight that Canadians know that those guys will lose.

For those folks back home who are maybe a bit younger and have not been involved in pensions, this is about a very small amount of money. We are talking about \$491 a month, which is the average monthly guaranteed income supplement. For the OAS, we are talking about \$500 a month. My God, those ministers blow more on a lunch than what they are giving to a senior citizen, at \$500 a month. Our famous minister from Durham spent \$1,300 a day on taxi rides. She hired these limos and drove around Toronto at \$1,300 a day. Boy, oh, boy. If she did that five times around the city of Toronto, that would be the OAS for a senior citizen for a year. However, the Prime Minister never said that he would make the member for Durham responsible. No. He decided that it would need to be a senior citizen who had to pay.

This is about priorities and the government has established that its priorities are for its friends, for its buddies and for its ministers who drive around in limousines and that the people who get \$500 a month on OAS are just going to have to suck it up. That is not good enough.

• (1710)

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when people talk about the old age security system and the incomes of people, I just want to put on the record and ask the member to comment on the fact that a study done recently on the Atlantic provinces showed that in Newfoundland and Labrador 65% of the seniors relied on old age security or the GIS as their sole source of income.

Now the Conservatives are claiming that they will not hurt them. However, even if they do not hurt them, they will hurt their families, their children and their grandchildren, the young people in this country who may need to rely on this. So, they are invoking fear in the minds of people.

We were wondering whether the Conservatives were going to come clean but they kind of let the cat out of the bag today. They were given six or seven opportunities to tell us whether they would raise the age to 66 or 67 and they said that they would not touch existing seniors. So, the answer is clear and obvious that they will in fact raise the age for OAS to 66, 67 or 68, we do not even know. That is the unknown. However, we do have an answer. They are going to do it. We just do not know who they will do it to, which does invoke fear in the minds of the people in this country.

Private Members' Business

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, this is another part of the demographic that we see across our country because we have different labour patterns. Northern Ontario and northeastern Ontario have boom-bust economies. I have seen that in many of my communities.

I remember when the Sherman mine, the Adams mine, all of the Agnico mines and the iron ore mines went down. A working population of men, who, on average, were about 48 or 49 years old, suddenly found there was no work for them. The mines offered them retraining. However, in a single mining town they did not have enough for their pensions. By the time the next boom came around, these men were a little too old to get hired. These men, who would normally have paid into pensions, ended up with their wives on old age security and GIS.

That is what happens because there is no such thing as absolute security in income. We see gaps where suddenly savings that are made one year are lost. When people lose their savings they start to look to age 65 as something to reach out to and hold on to because when they hit 65 they will be okay. The government is now saying that it will put that bar just a bit further.

If someone is a friend of the government or the type who can afford a \$1,300 limo ride, like my good friend the minister from Durham, then he or she will be okay and will get through. However, for everybody else it is “too bad, Jack”.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:15 p.m. it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply. 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.

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 nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Call in the members.

[Translation]

During the ringing of the bells:

• (1715)

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I ask that the vote on our motion be deferred until Monday, February 6, at the end of government orders.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. opposition acting whip has asked that the vote be deferred until Monday, February 6 at the end of government orders.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, I would ask that you see the clock at 5:30.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is there unanimous consent to see the clock at 5:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

CRIMINAL CODE

The House resumed from November 3, 2011, consideration of the motion that Bill C-217, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (mischief relating to war memorials), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): When this matter was last before the House the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice had four minutes remaining in her speech. The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Ms. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when I last rose on Bill C-217, I stated that my colleagues opposite suggested imprisonment would be automatic, and that is not correct.

The proposed mandatory minimum penalties are graduated and, in my view, appropriate. People convicted of this offence should have no illusions as to the minimum punishment that will be meted out to them. One can only hope that these mandatory minimum sentences will be a further deterrent to the senseless acts of vandalism that are so difficult to comprehend.

I would like, however, to echo the hon. member for Dufferin—Caledon with regard to a possible amendment to the bill. I am concerned that as drafted this legislation would provide for a lesser maximum sentence where prosecuted by indictment than for other mischief offences.

I for one would certainly support an amendment, were it brought forward, that would increase the maximum penalty from five years to ten years in order to ensure consistency in terms of the maximum sentence that could be imposed where the Crown proceeds by way of indictment.

I support the objectives of the bill, denouncing conduct which shows disrespect to fallen Canadian servicemen and women. One only need think of the repatriation ceremonies we have witnessed to condemn this criminal behaviour as requiring special review.

I invite all members of the House to support our veterans and support this legislation.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to add a few words in regard to Bill C-217.

Private Members' Business

It is a bill that we can support in principle in terms of having it go to committee. The Liberal Party critic did get the opportunity to address the bill and we do have some concerns. The member made reference to some of the concerns that would be there. At the end of the day we want to ensure that, if something does happen to one of these war memorial sites, we do not end up sentencing someone to 25 years behind bars. I think it needs to be reasonable. I am not implying that is what this bill is suggesting, but I am sure members can appreciate that sometimes the Conservatives do tend to overreact on some of these minimum sentences.

I will now spend a few minutes talking about the principle of the bill. It is something worthy of supporting. I had the opportunity to serve in the Canadian Forces and met with a good number of individuals who actually fought or participated in war. Especially around the month of November, when I was in the forces, we would participate in parades, go to the legions and hear all sorts of interesting and some very scary stories that were being raised at the time. This gave me a better appreciation of the situation.

For me, that is the reason I believe it is so important that we not only have debate inside the House but that there is an educational component going out to other parts of our communities, such as schools and community centres, educating people in terms of exactly why it is that we have war memorials and the sacrifices made.

I can recall having a discussion a number of years ago with one individual who had been captured and held as a prisoner of war. As a POW, he talked about the starvation that was endured and the types of inhuman treatments that were there would surprise most. To have been able to have someone share that directly, not through a third party, with myself was fairly compelling. It gave me a very real impression.

I have had people talk to me about others not far from them falling in their place after being shot. Again, being able to hear those types of stories expressed on a one-on-one, not through a third party, has a fairly compelling impact on individuals as they try to get a better understanding of what it means to serve one's country.

I served for just over three years, which was not a great length of time, but I can say that it was a memorable time. I appreciate both those who have served in the past and those who are serving today in our forces. Afghanistan and other places throughout the world have had our military forces provide security and support in different ways. Members of our forces have sadly lost their lives providing that service.

That is why when I had the opportunity to be able to share a few words on this, I thought it would be nice just to be able to highlight that.

One incident that was quite touching for myself was inside the Manitoba legislature. We had an opportunity to have some of the war vets on the floor of the chamber and around the back. For me, I had a back row seat. From where I stood and spoke, I could reach out and touch the knee of a WW II vet.

•(1720)

It is because of those efforts that we are in these places today, whether it is in our national institution of the House of Commons, or

in the provincial legislatures across Canada. It was a very important symbolic message and it generated a lot of attention in our province.

There are many different ways in which that is done. Sergeant Prince is a wonderful mentor for many people who live in Winnipeg's north end. There is a beautiful mural that has been put in place to honour the sergeant because of his efforts in the war. It is great to see. I especially like the murals for the simple reason they send a very strong message to people walking or driving by. This mural is in the heart of Winnipeg North. A great number of young people are influenced when they see the mural of Sergeant Prince and the efforts he made. It gives a sense of pride.

Whether it is a wall mural or the many decorations in legions, these all send very strong, positive messages. The National War Memorial, which hundreds of thousands of people visit every year, and on special days, gets a great deal of attention. The unnamed soldier is buried there. We take a great deal of pride in these memorials, as we should. A vast majority of Canadians appreciate the efforts that our forces have played in the past and in the modern era. We have all attended legion events or marches.

Last November, I was at the McGregor Armoury, where I witnessed first-hand tributes to those who had fallen in war. It is through this that we never forget. It is important that we go through these times of reflection and we would like to encourage citizens as a whole to participate.

When we look at this bill, it is hard to imagine and why some individuals would think about defacing or causing any form of damage to murals or monuments. It is hard to understand why someone would do such a thing.

I was a chair of a youth justice committee for a while. Sometimes young people do things which are silly and stupid and they do not really realize the consequences. I am not talking about the 10% who cause a lot of issues in terms of public safety. It could be anyone's son or daughter who does something and then a deal of remorse follows. Those youth did not necessarily mean to be disrespectful.

There has to be a balance. That is what we are looking for in Bill C-217. We want a bill that is balanced, that respects our memorials. At the same time, we want to appreciate the Canadian Forces and all those who have sacrificed their lives and much more.

We do not have a problem with Bill C-217 going to committee.

•(1725)

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to speak to Bill C-217, which deals with the important issue of mischief related to war memorials. I thank the member for Dufferin—Caledon for turning our attention to this important problem.

Private Members' Business

This is a topic with which I am personally familiar, as there are a large number of war memorials in my riding of Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca. The most significant of those is the cenotaph in Memorial Park in Esquimalt. This memorial was unveiled in 1927 to honour the dead from the Great War of 1914-1918. Over time plaques have been added on to this memorial. It now also honours the dead of World War II, Korea and those who died in peacekeeping missions. With its central position in our town, right next to a major bus stop and bus route, it is unfortunately often the target of graffiti. I would argue that has almost always, if not always, been out of ignorance rather than a specific targeting. It is simply a large surface for taggers and is very close to high traffic areas.

As a former city councillor, I am very familiar with the costs of these incidents. The municipality maintains this memorial and pays the cleanup costs for the graffiti that regularly appears there. However, I am also very aware of the cost in terms of the indignity to the veterans and the hurt it causes in Esquimalt, which is very much a military community.

One of the most serious incidents occurred on a Sunday in July of 2008, when a vigilant citizen actually noticed suspicious activity in Memorial Park at about 10:30 p.m. This citizen called the police and a 14 year-old youth was apprehended and released on a promise to appear in court on a charge of mischief. On Monday morning a group of community volunteers, known as ETAG, Esquimalt Together Against Graffiti, was out cleaning the graffiti off that memorial. This volunteer group strives very hard to ensure the prompt removal of graffiti from all public and private property, to take away the thrill that taggers get from seeing their tag in existence in the community. ETAG is very effective. It is a very large group of very hard-working volunteers. Long term chair, Peter Justo, who just retired as chair of that group, and Emmy Labonte and others are out within 24 hours removing graffiti.

They were working on a very large amount of graffiti on this very important war memorial. In fact, not only did the volunteers against graffiti step up, the president of the Esquimalt Legion, Mr. Ken Levine, stepped forward. He called for what he characterized as appropriate punishment for the youth. He did not call for jailing the youth. I think members opposite will be interested in what he thought was the proper solution. He said that the youth ought to have to come to the legion on a regular basis, meet with veterans and hear their stories of sacrifice on his behalf. He felt that when the youth had that re-education, he would then be very much committed to talking to other youth who were taggers to try to avoid tagging the war memorials.

This is the president of my local legion who took a very progressive stance. Again, when we think of a 14 year-old youth, what probably is most awful about that is regularly scheduling his time to meet with old people and listen to them. It would not be as if the youth would feel he was getting off lightly.

Very interestingly, the two police officers involved also publicly called for using this form of restorative justice for this youth rather than see him face a term in some youth custody facility, perhaps putting him in touch with other youth that might lead him further astray, when really the problem was an isolated incident of tagging, with no intention of insulting veterans.

The president of the legion identified the real problem, and that is the failure of youth to understand the great sacrifices that have been made on their behalf by members of the Canadian forces. I believe, in calling for restorative justice, he identified the real solution to this kind of problem.

Some three months after Remembrance Day, it is a good time for all of us to reflect on what more we can do to help build that public education and public consciousness of the sacrifices members of the military have made. I am sure all hon. members attended Remembrance Day events, as I did. One of the most encouraging things I have seen in the past five years is the increasing numbers of youth who show up at those Remembrance Day ceremonies, and not just those who are in cadets, or scouts, or other programs, but simply youth in the crowd paying respect for what has happened in the past.

• (1730)

We are making progress in raising that consciousness of the great contribution the Canadian military makes, but we can do more to try to make it part of our common culture as Canadians to have this respect on an everyday basis and not just on Remembrance Day.

There are many other ways this could be done and I want to single out a grant by Heritage Canada to the Museum of Strathroy-Caradoc. Why would I know about a grant to a museum in Ontario? It created a travelling exhibition on the life Sir Arthur Currie, one of our great generals, who was born in Strathroy but started his military career with the militia in Victoria. This exhibition has been travelling around Canada, with the support of Heritage Canada, trying to make Canadians aware of one of our great heroes, a person not without controversy but a person who made an enormous contribution during the Great War.

We can also promote the work of authors like Tim Cook, a prominent military historian, whose book called *The Madman and the Butcher*, which I just finished reading, chronicles the unfortunate conflict between the war minister Sam Hughes and the brilliant general Sir Arthur Currie. The more Canadians know our history and the great things that have happened in the past, the fewer problems we will have with the kinds of things addressed in the bill.

We can also go beyond symbolism and support policies that really show respect for our 728,000 or more veterans. We can support policies that would help end the shame of veterans at food banks, in particular the food bank in Calgary which had to be set up to address the needs of 200 veterans and their families. We can support the efforts to end the shame of homeless veterans in our country. It is very difficult to get a number since most veterans do not wish for people to know that they are homeless. They do not wish their families or friends to know. We can support programs that address the suicide rate for veterans, which is quite shockingly high in our country, some 46% higher than other Canadians.

Private Members' Business

One very important action the government could take is to fully implement the NDP's veterans first motion, which passed in the House in 2006. This would mean doing several things.

It would mean eliminating the unfair reduction in long-term disability payments for injured Canadian Forces personnel and eliminating the clawback of retirement pensions for Canadian Forces and RCMP members who happen to also receive CPP benefits. It would mean eliminating the marriage after 60 rule that prevents spouses from receiving pension and health benefits after the deaths of their veteran spouses if they happen to marry after the age of 60. It would also mean extending the veterans independence program to all widows and veterans so veterans could stay in their homes, take care of themselves and not become a burden on the public, which is something I know all veterans wish to avoid.

Once again, I want to thank the member for bringing our attention to this problem. I know all members share a concern about mischief related to war memorials. However, I am not sure that the government penchant for thinking everything can be solved with a jail term is the right solution to the problem, and that is the solution proposed in the bill.

The solutions lie in restorative justice. They lie in making the perpetrators of these acts of vandalism aware of the harm they cause both the specific people honoured in those memorials and their families and to the larger community. They lie in public education about our military history and the important contribution the Canadian Forces have made, not just in defending Canada but as a part of international peacekeeping missions around the world.

In my career I happened to have the distinct privilege of being in East Timor when the Canadian Forces were there and saw the great work they were doing in rebuilding houses in a country that had been destroyed through civil conflict. I also had the privilege of serving in Afghanistan as an international human rights observer and again was able to see the Canadian Forces in the field attempting to do very positive, difficult and dangerous work there. The more the public and young people know about these kinds of contributions, the fewer problems we will have.

I also think, as I said, that the solution lies in demonstrating respect for veterans in a concrete way by governments all across the country to ensure we do not end up with veterans, who have served their country well, living in poverty, having to go to food banks and ending up homeless on our streets.

I call on the members on the other side to think very seriously about the solutions they propose when the bill gets to committee and to think about changing the solution that is in this bill to something that reflects the need for restorative justice, public education, fairness and fair treatment of our veterans rather than seeking jail sentences as a solution to this problem. I look forward to further discussion of the bill.

• (1735)

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am rising today to speak in opposition to Bill C-217. I do so somewhat reluctantly. I have come to know the member who sponsored this bill in his capacity as chair of the citizenship and immigration committee on which I sit. I can say half jokingly that he treats us all with a kind of even-handed impatience. I know that his

intentions in putting forward this bill are no doubt noble and stem from a profound respect for the veterans of this country. I also say "reluctantly" because I share that profound respect for our veterans.

I have had the opportunity and privilege to tell the House before that I am the son of a World War II veteran, and the grandson of a veteran who was very seriously injured in the First World War but survived and went on to have a career as a diplomat on behalf of his home country, Australia. My father had the privilege of growing up the son of a diplomat in New York City. When he turned 18, he had a choice to make. He was free to join the forces and fight in the Second World War. That was a choice that he made. I realize it is a choice that hundreds of thousands of young men and women make and I want to be clear how much respect I have for the choice that all of those folks make.

Lastly, in terms of my reluctance to oppose this bill, I want to talk about the importance of war memorials. There is no question that they serve and should serve as important symbols in our public life. They are not symbols that celebrate war but in fact mark the terrible tragedies which occur in war. One hopes that in building war memorials as well as assembling before them that the tragedy of war is felt deeply by so many. I think that in our society war memorials can really serve as markers on the road to peace. I hope that is the service they provide to society. For that reason, I feel they need to be protected.

However, running through this private member's bill and frankly so much of the government's legislation is a common thread. There is a tendency to respond with intolerance, never with the humility that recognizes the very human tendency for all of us to err, and never in a fashion that recognizes the real human capacity that most of us have to redeem ourselves if given the opportunity.

It seems that all transgressions under government and private members' bills coming from the other side seem to end with someone getting incarcerated, as if incarceration is a redeeming and ennobling exercise.

I want to tell a story that demonstrates why this approach to the bill is wrong-headed. It is a story that spans a great many years, but I will shorten it for the House. It is centred in my riding of Beaches—East York. At the centre of the story is the Malvern Collegiate War Memorial, a war memorial I have spoken about here before. It was built in 1922 to honour the sacrifice of the 25 "Boys of Malvern", all graduates of that high school who fought and died in World War I.

Private Members' Business

About 25 years ago, the memorial was moved to accommodate some renovations to the school and in that process it lost an arm. It stayed that way for a long time. In its centennial year, the school's alumni association decided to restore the monument to its former glory. It took about seven years of hard work and considerable fundraising and the memorial was beautifully restored November 4 of last year. I attended the rededication of the memorial and spoke on behalf of the Minister of Veterans Affairs because that ministry had provided some funds for the restoration. There were about 400 people in attendance at that rededication. It was very much a well-attended event in my riding. The war memorial itself had a lot of national media coverage. It was something of a celebrated war memorial.

It was at that event that I met a woman, Dr. Vandra Masemann. She was there to speak at the rededication as both the president of the school's alumni association and also as the chair of the war memorial restoration committee. It was a very proud day for a large number of people involved in this restoration process. The national media turned out, as did many local and regional media outlets as well.

• (1740)

It was a wonderful day, a very proud day for so many people. However, within 36 hours the memorial had been vandalized. The video evidence showed four young men getting out of a car in the dark of night, climbing the monument and wrapping it in blue duct tape. In the process they caused a couple thousand dollars' worth of damage to the memorial. The national media returned to the scene to cover the event and the outrage of so many people who lived in the neighbourhood and contributed financially and with their hard work to the restoration project.

I met Vandra a couple of weeks later. We were sitting on the stage beside each other at the high school's graduation ceremony. During the ceremony she leaned over to me and said, "I want you to know that I oppose that bill." She was referring to Bill C-217. I followed up with her after the ceremony. She asked me for a bit of time to put her thoughts into writing for me about why she opposed the bill, having put so much work into the restoration and being so proud of what she had accomplished.

Vandra's characterization of the vandalism was very clear and concise. She said that this was indeed a desecration of the war memorial. In spite of this, she had a very firm opinion in opposition to this bill. I want to quote her at length. She wrote to me:

I ponder on who are going to be the ones that do these things—young males around 18-24. These boys are the same as the Boys of Malvern who died and who are remembered on that monument. We cannot rescue those boys who died, but we can rescue the ones who have done such a foolish and stupid thing as to vandalize a war memorial.

We need to be much more creative about the kind of consequence that will teach them the awful significance of what they have done. Giving them a criminal record and letting them learn nothing from the experience is of no redemptive significance whatsoever. It is imperative that they understand the nature of the act they have committed, and surely their cell-mates will not be able to do this. I am in favour of a fine proportional to the cost of repairs as well as an educational experience that ensures they will never even dream of committing such an act again. It could be community service with a veterans' group or hospital, with the War Amps program or with projects that aim to gather the memories of the soldiers that are still living. It needs to be concluded with a public apology and an expression of atonement for having committed such a crime. Surely our lawmakers can come up with more imaginative solutions than 2-4 weeks in jail. Lastly, several of those who have commented have noted that this act could also be construed as a "prank". Many may

disagree with this assessment, but a jail term will not convince the perpetrators that it wasn't. Only a serious attempt at re-education will show them the error of their ways.

If members tend to think that this is all wrong-minded, let me bring Reverend Jim McKnight into this story. Reverend Jim saw the news about the desecration of the Malvern War Memorial. He is an alumnus of Malvern and came forward to admit publicly that 43 years earlier he, along with a couple of other buddies who have remained nameless, desecrated the very same monument with a can of white paint.

In 1968 Reverend Jim was a top student, editor of the school newspaper and president of the United Way committee. That night he was, in his words, as quoted in the *Toronto Star*, "giving society the finger." The school's principal caught him but the police were never called in. Reverend Jim's punishment was a lifetime of regret. As he put it:

I didn't think it was a big deal; I thought it was just some statue till I saw the newspaper....I remember the words, 'Memorial desecrated'. Something about 'desecrated' threw me for a loop. Then, an older math teacher pulled me aside. He was visibly shaken. His big brother had been killed;...his name was on the memorial. That really got my attention.

Reverend Jim never spent time in jail, never even paid a fine. It was the math teacher, who was a fellow Malvern alumnus who spoke of being in Malvern in the 1940s, of empty desks, of friends being killed overseas. These are the experiences that helped a kid who gave society the finger one night appreciate the courage and sacrifice of our veterans. That is all it takes, a little life experience, a little education, a couple of conversations, to accomplish what this bill seeks to accomplish with fines and incarceration.

• (1745)

The Deputy Speaker: Seeing no one rise, I will ask the hon. member for Dufferin—Caledon for his right of reply.

• (1750)

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would first like to thank all members who participated in the debate on this bill, which recognizes the importance of honouring and respecting the memory of our country's brave men and women of the Canadian Forces.

Bill C-217 seeks to amend the Criminal Code by adding significant penalties for any person convicted of mischief against a war memorial, cenotaph or other structure honouring or remembering those who have served in our Canadian Forces and those who have died as a consequence of war. The bill seeks to impose a minimum penalty of a fine not less than \$1,000 for a first offence, prison not less than 14 days for a second offence and prison not less than 30 days for all subsequent offences. These minimum sentences are not overly harsh. Instead, they are necessary to put an end to such disrespectful acts against those who died for our country.

A great number of examples of such heinous acts have already been presented to the House, bringing light to a growing yet hidden problem. Such examples of insolence cannot go unpunished. An apology or a small donation is not enough. These vandals must know what they have done is completely unacceptable and Canadians will not tolerate this disrespectful attitude.

Adjournment Proceedings

When I first addressed the House on the bill on November 3, 2011, I cited many examples of desecrated war memorials and cenotaphs. Therefore, it saddens me to bring forward new examples today, one of which was just referred to by my colleague. However, it underscores the seriousness of the problem and the need for concrete action by the House.

Days before this past Remembrance Day, a war memorial in Calgary had graffiti painted on it. Concerned citizens and veterans alike expressed their outrage and disgust, voicing feelings of disrespect and lack of acknowledgement for the sacrifice of Canada's fallen.

Then, as my colleague has just said, in November of 2011, just hours after Malvern Collegiate in Toronto rededicated its war memorial to soldiers who had attended the school and following a \$44,000 restoration, the monument was vandalized. The monument was wrapped in blue duct tape and three letters were knocked off it in what the school described as a planned and deliberate act of vandalism. The vandals then remained at the site and they chatted and took pictures before they left the site. All of this was caught on tape and, as expected, they failed to display any signs of remorse or regret. The damage will now cost the school nearly \$2,000, all of which will have to be community funded. The school principal explained that in her eight years at the school, the memorial has been defaced, painted, dressed in rival school clothing, all acts of vandalism and disrespect.

The 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 is quickly approaching, as well as the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I. With the upcoming anniversaries of two historical events, it is of utmost importance that such amendments be put in place to protect the dignity and respect of those being honoured and remembered.

Bill C-217 would remind Canadians that the sacrifices of soldiers will never be forgotten or unappreciated. Canada will continue to honour its fallen through the protection of such important structures and will punish those who disrespect them.

The opposition has provided examples where vandals have expressed regret and disgust with their own acts of dishonour and now devote their time to protecting these sacred memorials. The opposition unfortunately sees this as an example of why minimum punishments should not be added to the Criminal Code. However, these vandals, although remorseful, committed a form of disrespect so great that new-found regret does not compensate for the immense and unforgettable damage done to the memorial and the community where it stands. The opposition has suggested rehabilitation as an appropriate response to those who committed these horrific acts.

Bill C-217 is not opposed to such a response, but seeks punishment first for those who displayed such great disrespect for war memorials and cenotaphs to ensure they recognize the gravity of their deplorable acts. Such amendments to the Criminal Code force potential vandals to also think twice before they act, due to the knowledge and fear of the criminal sanctions to come for their actions, rather than responding with rehabilitative efforts after the irreversible damage has been done to a memorial and its community.

●(1755)

Bill C-217 sends a clear message that vandalism and desecration of any Canadian cenotaph or war memorial will not be tolerated. We owe it all to the men and women who have fought and continue to fight in the Canadian Forces of our great country.

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley on a point of order.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Madam Speaker, we ask you to see the clock at 6:30.

The Deputy Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to see the clock at 6:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[*Translation*]

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to be able to return to a question I asked just a few months ago, one that is still just as relevant, especially given the student demonstrations that took place yesterday on Parliament Hill. This question concerning student debt is now more important than ever, because the current government intends to make cutbacks that will endanger the old age security of the upcoming generation, a generation now comprised of students. These students want accessible education.

In response to my question, the minister said that billions of dollars have been invested in various loan and bursary programs since the government came to power. Yet the figures demonstrate that student debt is continuing to rise exponentially. Only yesterday I asked a question on this issue and clearly emphasized that student debt is about to reach its legal limit of \$15 billion. This is an extraordinary sum of money.

In discussions with students, which I engage in frequently given the responsibilities I have held in my caucus since the start of my term, I have observed an openness to different ideas that are not shared by this government and that could greatly assist in reducing tuition fees. These are very concrete and simple measures to reduce student debt.

Adjournment Proceedings

In this particular case, it is clear that education is a provincial area of responsibility. However, in several other areas of provincial jurisdiction, the federal government has fiscal powers that can be useful in assisting provinces with the delivery of their programs, especially in the areas of health care, education and the like. The solution favoured by the New Democratic Party is to increase transfer payments to the provinces while respecting our Sherbrooke declaration, which gives Quebec the right to opt out, thereby respecting Quebec's distinct nature and the particular natures of the other provinces.

Increasing transfers to the provinces helps them to provide programs and reduce tuition fees. This measure is supported 110% by students of various organizations.

I would like to offer an example that, in my opinion, says a lot about this government's failure to listen. It concerns something that happened during the election. The Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec, in the pamphlet, "Student Voice of Quebec", asked all the main parties running in the federal election what they would do to improve access to education and quality of education. Every party chose to respond, except the Conservative Party of Canada, which is currently in government.

When I observe the Conservative Party's failure to respond to these questionnaires, I cannot help but think that they are not listening to students. What students are calling for is very clear: an increase in transfers to the provinces so that they can cut tuition fees and consequently reduce the student debt of a generation that will be the future driving force of our economy.

• (1800)

[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to address the concerns of the member for Chambly—Borduas on the need to reduce student debt.

Post-secondary graduates play a vital role on our road to economic recovery and prosperity. That is why our government made changes to student financial assistance in 2008 and why we are proposing more amendments to the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act.

However, it should be underlined that the policies of post-secondary institutions, including the establishment of tuition levels, fall under provincial and territorial jurisdiction.

We support the provincial and territorial governments through block funding for post-secondary education under the Canada social transfer. This ensures that provinces and territories have the flexibility to invest funding according to their own needs and priorities. This reflects a long history of Canadian governments working together on shared national priorities. It also recognizes that in areas of provincial jurisdiction, provincial and territorial governments are best placed to deliver the services and to be accountable for their outcomes.

We are living in the age of knowledge and information. Therefore, it has never been more important to give the young people of today the means to pursue post-secondary education if we want them to succeed in the world of tomorrow. That is exactly what we are doing.

Our government has made available a number of supports to help Canadians finance and repay their post-secondary education. Our government invests more than \$10 billion annually in direct support for post-secondary education.

As announced on January 1, part-time students no longer have to pay interest on their Canada student loans while enrolled as students, bringing their costs in line with those of full-time students.

In the 2009-10 school year, 400,000 students received loans and grants totalling nearly \$2.7 billion through the Canada student loans program. Of that, \$593 million was for Canada student grants, received by 295,000 Canadian students. That is more than double what it was under the old Liberal system.

Budget 2011 indicated that our government will forgive a portion of student loans for new family physicians and nurses who choose to work in under-served areas, such as remote and rural communities, like my own home areas of Elmvalle and Angus in the riding of Simcoe—Grey. Budget 2011 also increased the amount students can earn while working without their loans being affected. This helps over 100,000 students.

Canadians still believe, correctly I would add, that post-secondary education is a sound investment. This is why more Canadians than ever before are seeking assistance to help them meet their post-secondary education goals.

Our government is aware of the concerns about rising student debt. We remain committed to helping students access affordable post-secondary education with a loan they can reasonably repay.

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Madam Speaker, I have to acknowledge that I agree with part of my colleague's response. The provinces are in the best position to manage education programs.

For that reason we are asking for federal transfers to the provinces to ensure better management. This will guarantee better access and reduce student debt. As is the case with the health care system, the federal government has the power to help the provinces while ensuring that the division of powers is respected. I believe this is what the NDP and students are asking for and that they are aware of the different jurisdictions involved.

• (1805)

[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Madam Speaker, our government is committed to having the most educated skilled work force in the world. It is vital for our economic recovery and success.

Adjournment Proceedings

To help borrowers who face repayment difficulties, our government introduced important measures in budget 2008. We changed the repayment assistance plan of the Canada student loan program. Now borrowers are only required to pay back what they can reasonably afford, and based on their family income and size. In 2009-10, approximately 160,000 individuals who were issued a Canada student loan benefited from the repayment assistance plan.

As a result of this and many other measures at HRSDC, we have been able to help students not default on their loans, and an historic low in default rates has been achieved, at just under 15%.

To help borrowers manage their debt, we contact them before their repayments and provide them individual counselling so they are able to be responsible borrowers.

Our government wants students to realize their post-secondary education goals. We are helping them do that.

[Translation]

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Madam Speaker, at the end of November 2010, a report published by Campaign 2000 disclosed some shocking numbers. In 2009, there were 639,000 children living in poverty. That number represents about one child in 10. Twenty years ago, the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion to end child poverty in Canada before the year 2000. Two years ago, we committed ourselves to implementing an immediate plan for everyone, to eradicate poverty in Canada. But here we are today with a child poverty rate of 9.5%.

In the riding of Montcalm, food banks have never been so busy. With the cost of living rising and households carrying more debt than ever before, we have to find ways of helping Canadian families who are having trouble making ends meet.

The Campaign 2000 report lays the problem out very clearly. In a time of economic uncertainty, adopting a plan to eliminate poverty not only serves to restore social justice, but also makes excellent economic sense. As a society, either we pay now or we pay later. Some children are more at risk than others, especially children of immigrants, aboriginal children and children with disabilities. In fact, 40% of parents who have a child with a disability work fewer hours so they can care for their child, and that affects the family's income. As well, 25% of parents are unable to work for pay. Clearly there is a lack of support for families who are caring for their own disabled child.

Last fall, a constituent came to see me; she was truly discouraged. She had exhausted the resources available to her to help keep her severely disabled son at home. Together, we went through all the federal and provincial programs, but we could not find anything that met her son's particular needs. Finally, she had to approach non-profit community organizations in the region to get the support she needed. That seems unacceptable to me.

Canada is still failing to meet its obligations to children. We have to do more to provide basic services for families. The NDP has proposed that certain existing measures be combined, like the Canada child tax benefit, to create a non-taxable child benefit and, over the next four years, gradually increase the support provided by

up to \$700 per child, while maintaining the current level of the universal child care benefit.

The New Democratic team is committed to working in partnership with the provinces and territories to establish and fund a Canada-wide child care and early learning and education program. That program would create 25,000 new child care spaces per year for the next four years and would provide for improvements to community infrastructure, in addition to creating integrated, community-based, child-centred early learning and education centres. The NDP has proposed practical solutions. It is high time for the government to listen and help Canadian families.

The numbers in the Campaign 2000 report are clear. Canada is still failing to meet its obligations to disadvantaged children and families. The report also shows, once again, how badly this government is neglecting Canadian families who are caring for children with disabilities.

When is this government going to decide to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognizes everyone's right to a decent standard of living?

• (1810)

[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, standing here today as the parliamentary secretary for HRSDC, I thank the hon. member for Montcalm. She asked what we are doing to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and I am pleased to respond.

Our government is committed to building a inclusive society in which all Canadians can participate. To that end, we are doing our best to remove obstacles and create opportunities for people with disabilities. Let me mention just some of the things that we are doing.

When Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010, we took our commitment to build a inclusive society to the international level. Our ratification of the convention was the culmination of seven years of collaboration with international bodies and the disabilities community across Canada.

The Office for Disabilities Issues at HRSDC is promoting coordination across the government on disabilities policy and is working toward compliance with the convention. I am sure my hon. colleague will be glad to know that the government is currently preparing Canada's initial report on compliance with the convention which is due in April 2012. In addition to the disability tax credit, we offer a non-refundable tax credit that reduces income tax payable for eligible taxpayers.

Adjournment Proceedings

In addition, we have the child disability benefit, a tax free benefit for families who care for a child under the age of 18 who is eligible for the disability tax credit and who has a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions. As well, we help people with disabilities by enhancing their income security through the disabilities component of the Canada pension plan.

People with disabilities and their families are often worried about their financial future. In response, we have helped them save through the registered disability savings plan, the Canada disability savings grant and the Canada disabilities savings bond.

Between December 2008, when the RDSP first became available to Canadians, and October 2011, a total of 49,857 RDSPs have been registered. During this same time, the Government of Canada contributed a total of \$200 million in grants and close to \$85 million in bonds.

We help students with disabilities finance their post-secondary education through special grants and loans. We have employment programs that make it easier for Canadians with disabilities to get into the job market, including the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities and the labour market agreements with the provinces and territories for persons with disabilities.

A disability should not keep anyone from participating in their community or the economy. That is why we created the enabling accessibility fund, which funds community-based projects that increase access to facilities, activities and services. The fund has made more than 600 accessibility projects possible in communities across Canada. As a matter of fact, the fund has been so successful that a year ago we extended it with an investment of an additional \$45 million over the next three years.

In addition, we expanded the range of eligible projects by creating a mid-sized component, allowing communities to undertake larger retrofit projects and to foster partnerships for creating new facilities. Because of this, even more individuals will benefit.

Our government is removing barriers to participation in the economy and in local communities because the participation of Canadians with disabilities is vital to our economic success.

No government has done more for Canadians with disabilities than our Conservative government. As a pediatric surgeon who has worked and cared for children who have severe disabilities, I am extremely proud to be a part of it.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Montcalm has one minute to reply.

Ms. Manon Perreault: Madam Speaker, unfortunately, I do not quite agree with my colleague opposite. The enabling accessibility fund is no longer truly available to organizations.

We are currently discussing child poverty. According to my colleague opposite, it is somewhat difficult to acknowledge that 52% of single mothers with children under the age of six live in poverty. We also know that children belonging to minority groups and disabled children are more likely to be living in poverty. I said earlier that two out of five parents with a disabled child work fewer hours and therefore have less income.

I am having trouble following everything my colleague said because what I am presently hearing is not at all what she just said.

• (1815)

[*English*]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Madam Speaker, those who have read the actual text of the convention know that its main emphasis stresses the right to equal treatment and equal opportunity. The convention acknowledges that people with disabilities may need a measure of assistance but not if it conflicts with their personal autonomy and their ability to participate in the community.

In regard to the independence and inclusion of people with disabilities, we have made considerable progress in Canada over the past several years. We should celebrate that progress rather than decry the fact that inequities still exist.

All of the accomplishments that I outlined in my previous speech really speak to our commitment to the inclusiveness of all Canadian society, to include children and adults with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Madam Speaker, I continue to deplore the fact that the government does not have a balanced approach to economic development. During question period on November 29, 2011, I pointed out that it is completely possible to create good-quality jobs while investing in clean energies. I also asked the government why it stubbornly refused to follow in the footsteps of a number of our trading partners that have created jobs by investing in the green economy.

Since 2006, the Conservatives have invested heavily in supporting the oil industry. For instance, there was an accelerated capital cost allowance for oil sands investment that will last until 2015 and, as another example, the preferential tax treatment in Bill C-48 that gives oil companies \$1.7 billion in tax gifts each year.

The reality is that the government listens only to the oil companies. The Minister of Natural Resources showed which side he was on when he described the aboriginal people, ecologists and other Canadians who are concerned about the future of their environment as radical opponents of the authorities.

The statutory review of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act is another example of this government missing an opportunity to better reconcile economic development and environmental protection. The Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development is currently reviewing the federal environmental assessment process. The purpose of the review is to determine whether these assessments make it possible to reconcile economic development and sustainable development. It is, therefore, a crucial study. Yet, the Conservatives have done everything in their power to undermine this study by limiting the duration of committee business. Only 11 committee meetings have been dedicated to hearing witnesses. One single environmental group appeared: the Sierra Club. One single aboriginal group appeared: the James Bay Advisory Committee on the Environment.

Adjournment Proceedings

We are currently drafting a report on the environmental assessment system, despite the fact that the Environment Commissioner and several ministers and federal organizations heavily involved in these assessments have not yet been heard. Nevertheless, over the course of the committee meetings, most of the witnesses from industry have said that they want an environmental assessment process that is more credible in the eyes of local communities. A solid environmental assessment process makes projects socially acceptable. On the other hand, an environmental assessment process that is not credible undermines public confidence, which can hamper the development of the project.

The government's hastiness is all the more worrisome given that the Minister of Natural Resources and the Prime Minister are talking about amending the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act right in the middle of consultations regarding Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline project, which would cut through an ecologically fragile area. Moreover, by calling Canadians who are concerned about the environment radicals, the Minister of Natural Resources has further discredited himself. In my opinion, given the wealth of scientific knowledge about climate change, it is those who deny the existence of climate change who are the radicals.

The NDP's vision is simple: we must reduce our reliance on the carbon economy. We are convinced that, by redirecting the earth's resources towards a green economy, we will protect our environment and create thousands of good, sustainable jobs here in Canada. Will the government be inspired by this vision as it prepares the upcoming budget?

• (1820)

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will begin by correcting my colleague opposite. We refer to the abundant natural resources in our country, to which she is referring, as the oil sands, not the tar sands. I encourage her to talk to the hundreds of thousands of people who are employed in this energy sector and do not believe in denigrating our country and our energy sector. I also encourage her to speak to her constituents, who are the beneficiaries of social programs and supported by Canada's energy sector. Those are two points for her to follow up on.

I am most interested in the core of her question that she originally posed in the House when she referred to a strategy that hurts everyone. I am here tonight with a small glimmer of hope that she just might think about when she continues to denigrate our energy sector and our country and not recognize that we are world leaders in environmental protection and clean energy production in Canada.

Let us talk about that. The NDP has been advocating that our country stay part of the Kyoto protocol. When our country signed onto the Kyoto protocol, it only included 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions. It did not include large global emitters. Now it only includes less than 13%. Clearly, this is not an agreement that will see real action in global greenhouse gas reductions. I find it quite disappointing that my colleague opposite continues to support an agreement without looking at what our government is saying. We are saying that we want to see real action in greenhouse gas reductions and that is why we need to continue on the good work that is

happening in Copenhagen and Cancun and have a global agreement where all major emitters come to the table.

It kind of shocked me. I was speaking with my colleague opposite on a television program in late December and she suggested that China was a benchmark to be held up with regard to some of its comments at Durban about staying on in the Kyoto protocol. We believe we need to enter into a new agreement that has all major emitting countries committing to binding targets. The Kyoto protocol's second commitment period would not see that happen. I am quite proud of our government's stance in saying that we need an agreement where emissions are managed and monitored, as our country does right now.

The other thing that alarms me is I continually hear rhetoric from my colleague opposite, the environment critic and the NDP party in general about our country not being a world leader in our energy sector and in our environmental protection programs. With regard to domestic action at home, we have entered into a very bold sector-by-sector regulatory approach that will see real reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to meet a target of 17% reductions from 2005 levels by 2020. This is real action. New Democrats continually oppose this. What is even worse, is that they have no plan. All we hear is rhetoric. We never hear a plan from them. We hear some vague things about a green economy, et cetera, but they do not have plans. They talk about jobs in a green economy and yet they vote against our budgetary measures that support investment in the development of clean energy technology and climate change adaptation.

I am very tired, as a proud Canadian, hearing our energy sector denigrated and hearing the opposition parties talk about awards that would denigrate our country's name.

Tonight I would ask my colleague opposite to stop spouting her party's talking points over and over again. Her environment critic lobbied against 500,000 Canadian jobs in the U.S. I would encourage her, for once, to support our government's action-focused plan with regard to environmental protection so that we can move forward and see some action done.

Ms. Laurin Liu: Madam Speaker, it is obvious that the hon. member opposite has not done her homework because she still does not realize that the Conservative policy concerning the oil sands is bad for Canadian jobs. The Conservatives are missing an incredible opportunity to invest in a green economy, which would create jobs within Canadian borders, local jobs that tend to be well-paying.

We only need to look at the case of the northern gateway to see how Conservative policy is flawed. The former Insurance Corporation of British Columbia CEO, Robyn Allan, noted that although the northern gateway Pipeline has been touted by proponents, like the member opposite, as a nation-building enterprise, it really represents a "serious economic risk" to the Canadian economy. Allan's study of the effects of the project show that it would result in an oil price shock to the economy, resulting in businesses being downsized, jobs being lost and inflation and, moreover, that it would boost crude oil prices to \$2 to \$3 per barrel annually over the next 30 years. This is something that has been confirmed in fact by the proponent Enbridge.

When will the government learn to take Canadian jobs seriously and invest in green jobs in the green economy?

• (1825)

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Madam Speaker, let us talk about the green economy, because again I have heard nothing from my colleague on her plan for the green economy. I would ask her to look at the auditor general's report in Ontario that just reported how private sector jobs were lost at the expense of green energy jobs that were created by an ill-fated government program, whereas our government is saying we are making real investment, in lockstep with industry, into sustainable development technology. We are seeing the emergence of a clean energy sector in our country. These are real investments. These are real green jobs.

Adjournment Proceedings

I beg her to look at the evidence and say that we are world leaders in environmental protection. We have a green economy emerging. I refuse to believe that we cannot balance economic growth with environmental sustainability. That is what we are doing in our country with our policy.

She talked about a nation building enterprise. What is not a nation building enterprise is continuing to denigrate our energy sector and our country's environmental track record.

The Deputy Speaker: The motion that the House do now adjourn is 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 6:27 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Thursday, February 2, 2012

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Interparliamentary Delegations

Ms. Brown (Newmarket—Aurora) 4745

National Vitamin D Day Act

Mr. Lunney 4745
Bill C-388. Introduction and first reading 4745
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed) 4745

Petitions

Electro-Motive Diesel

Ms. Mathysen 4745

The Environment

Mr. Tilson 4745
Ms. Foote 4745

Immigration

Mr. Lamoureux 4746

Questions on the Order Paper

Mr. Lukiwski 4746

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Business of Supply

Opposition Motion—Old Age Security

Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe 4746
Motion 4746
Mr. Marston 4747
Mr. Jean 4749
Mr. Lamoureux 4749
Mr. Choquette 4749
Ms. Finley 4749
Ms. Doré Lefebvre 4751
Mr. Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte) 4751
Mr. Cannan 4751
Mr. Komarnicki 4752
Mrs. Hassainia 4753
Mr. Coderre 4753
Ms. Leitch 4754
Ms. Sgro 4754
Ms. Sims 4756
Mr. Payne 4756
Mr. Coderre 4757
Mr. Marston 4757
Mr. Kamp 4757
Ms. Freeman 4757
Mrs. Hassainia 4759
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North) 4759
Mrs. Groguhé 4759
Ms. Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona) 4760
Mr. Adler 4761
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North) 4761
Mr. Sandhu 4761
Mrs. Wong 4762

Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe 4763
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North) 4763
Ms. May 4763
Mrs. Block 4763
Ms. Leitch 4764
Mr. Rousseau 4765
Mr. Lamoureux 4765
Mrs. Truppe 4766
Ms. Mathysen 4766
Mr. Leung 4767
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North) 4768
Ms. Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine) 4768
Mr. Gourde 4769
Mr. Valeriote 4769
Mr. Tremblay 4770
Mr. Daniel 4770
Ms. Sims 4771
Mr. Lamoureux 4771
Mr. Butt 4772
Mrs. Hughes 4773
Mr. Scarpaleggia 4773
Mr. Warawa 4773
Mr. Sullivan 4773
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North) 4775
Mrs. Groguhé 4775
Mr. Butt 4775
Mr. Chisholm 4775
Mr. Easter 4776
Mr. Gravelle 4777
Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe 4777

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Aboriginal Affairs

Mr. Warkentin 4777

Pensions

Mr. Donnelly 4777

Canada-China Relations

Mr. Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country) 4778

Sealing Industry

Ms. Foote 4778

Barnraiser Award

Mr. Albrecht 4778

Quebec City Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Mr. Blanchette 4778

Genesis Centre

Mr. Shory 4779

Future Leaders

Mr. Carrie 4779

Duncan	
Ms. Crowder	4779
Curling Championships	
Mr. Leef	4779
Stephen Perry	
Mr. Gravelle	4779
Sealing Industry	
Mr. Gourde	4780
Jean Pigott	
Mr. Bélanger	4780
Pensions	
Mr. Jean	4780
Government Priorities	
Ms. Péclet	4780
New Democratic Party of Canada	
Mr. Saxton	4780

ORAL QUESTIONS

Pensions	
Mr. Comartin	4781
Mr. Harper	4781
Mr. Comartin	4781
Mr. Harper	4781
Mr. Julian	4781
Ms. Finley	4781
Mr. Julian	4781
Ms. Finley	4781
Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe	4781
Ms. Finley	4782
Mr. Rae	4782
Mr. Harper	4782
Mr. Rae	4782
Justice	
Mr. Rae	4782
Mr. Toews	4782
Citizenship and Immigration	
Mr. Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	4782
Mr. Kenney	4782
Mr. Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	4783
Mr. Kenney	4783
Statistics Canada	
Mr. Caron	4783
Mr. Paradis	4783
Mr. Caron	4783
Mr. Paradis	4783
Service Canada	
Ms. Crowder	4783
Ms. Finley	4783
Ms. Crowder	4784
Ms. Finley	4784
The Environment	
Ms. Leslie	4784
Mr. Oliver	4784

Ms. Leslie	4784
Mr. Oliver	4784
Ms. Leslie	4784
Mr. Oliver	4784
Pensions	
Ms. Sgro	4784
Ms. Finley	4785
Mr. Brison	4785
Ms. Finley	4785
Employment Insurance	
Mr. Trudeau	4785
Ms. Finley	4785
Justice	
Ms. Boivin	4785
Mr. Nicholson	4785
Ms. Boivin	4785
Mr. Nicholson	4785
Ms. Boivin	4785
Mr. Nicholson	4786
Ms. Boivin	4786
Mr. Nicholson	4786
Foreign Affairs	
Mr. Opitz	4786
Mr. Obhrai	4786
Airline Security	
Mr. Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)	4786
Mr. Lebel	4786
Mr. Garrison	4786
Mr. Lebel	4786
Asbestos	
Mr. Lapointe	4787
Mr. Paradis	4787
Mr. Martin	4787
Mr. Nicholson	4787
Citizenship and Immigration	
Mr. Coderre	4787
Mr. Kenney	4787
Search and Rescue	
Ms. Foote	4787
Mr. Ashfield	4787
Mr. Harris (St. John's East)	4787
Mr. Ashfield	4788
Mr. Harris (St. John's East)	4788
Mr. Fantino	4788
Pensions	
Mr. McColeman	4788
Ms. Finley	4788
Fisheries and Oceans	
Mr. Eyking	4788
Mr. Ashfield	4788
Mr. Donnelly	4788
Mr. Ashfield	4788

Sealing Industry	
Mr. Williamson	4789
Mrs. Aglukkaq	4789

Canadian Food Inspection Agency	
Mr. Jacob	4789
Mr. Paradis	4789

Natural Resources	
Mr. Bellavance	4789
Mr. Oliver	4789

Presence in Gallery	
The Speaker	4789

Business of the House	
Mr. Comartin	4789
Mr. Van Loan	4790

Points of Order	
Statements by Members	
Mr. Bélanger	4790
Business of the House	
Mr. Godin	4790
Mr. Van Loan	4790

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Business of Supply	
Opposition Motion—Old Age Security	
Motion	4791
Mr. McColeman	4791
Mr. Côté	4792
Mr. Easter	4792
Mr. Boulerice	4792
Mr. Blaney	4793
Mr. Nantel	4794
Mr. Easter	4794
Mr. Shipley	4794
Ms. Borg	4795
Ms. Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	4796
Mr. Cuzner	4796

Mr. Boulerice	4796
Mr. Martin	4796
Mr. Armstrong	4798
Mr. Cuzner	4798
Mr. Brison	4799
Mr. Sweet	4801
Mr. Hyer	4802
Mr. Easter	4802
Mr. Côté	4802
Ms. Crowder	4803
Ms. Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	4804
Mr. Cuzner	4804
Mr. Angus	4805
Mr. Harris (St. John's East)	4806
Mr. Toone	4807
Division on Motion Deferred	4807

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Criminal Code	
Bill C-217. Second reading	4807
Ms. Findlay	4807
Mr. Lamoureux	4807
Mr. Garrison	4808
Mr. Kellway	4810
Mr. Tilson	4811
(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee)	4812

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Post-Secondary Education	
Mr. Dubé	4812
Ms. Leitch	4813
Persons with Disabilities	
Ms. Perreault	4814
Ms. Leitch	4814
The Environment	
Ms. Liu	4815
Ms. Rempel	4816

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