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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, November 6, 2012

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, November 6, 2012

The House met at 10 a.m.

[*Translation*]

Prayers

DISCOVER YOUR CANADA ACT

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-463, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (travel expenses).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise here today to introduce my private member's bill, the discover your Canada act. The bill seeks to amend the Income Tax Act in order to make travel within Canada more affordable for Canadians by providing income tax deductions on the expense of purchasing tickets for the taxpayer or a dependent child of the taxpayer for non-business travel by airplane, train or bus, if the travel involves crossing at least three different provincial boundaries.

Travellers would receive a 100% deduction for the cost of bus tickets, a 75% deduction for train tickets and a 40% deduction for plane tickets up to a maximum of \$1,000 per year, per person.

[*English*]

At almost 10 million square kilometres, Canada is the second largest country in the world. As such, we face challenges trying to foster a sense of connection between our people, since some Canadians live more than 9,000 kilometres apart. The costs of travelling such long distances are often prohibitive, especially due to the fact that travelling a similar distance to either the U.S., Europe or the Caribbean can often be significantly less expensive.

I believe that facilitating travel within Canada is an ideal way to promote Canada's rich cultural diversity and that if it were easier for Canadians to visit distant provinces, it would not only foster a stronger knowledge of our shared history but would also promote a sense of unity and understanding among Canadians who would otherwise seldom interact.

Being a member of Parliament has allowed me to discover my country as I have travelled across Canada by road, sea and rail for various reasons. This has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my job. I would like to make it easier for Canadians to go where I have gone, see what I have seen and meet who I have met. I am sure that if more Canadians have a chance to discover Canada, as I have been fortunate enough to do, our country would be more united than ever.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's responses to 74 petitions.

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NORTHERN JOBS AND GROWTH ACT

Hon. John Duncan (Vancouver Island North, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-47, An Act to enact the Nunavut Planning and Project Assessment Act and the Northwest Territories Surface Rights Board Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts.

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

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 31st report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee advises that, pursuant to Standing Order 91.1(2), the Subcommittee on Private Members' Business met to consider the order for the second reading of a private member's bill originating in the Senate and recommends that the item listed herein, which has been determined should not be designated non-votable, be considered by the House.

The Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 91.1(2) the report is deemed adopted.

Routine Proceedings

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

* * *

[Translation]

PETITIONS**HOUSING**

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition in support of Bill C-400, introduced by my hon. colleague from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. Like my colleague, as a member from Montérégie, I know that the housing problem extends beyond large urban centres. Furthermore, it is a problem that very few people are aware of. I am therefore very pleased to support my colleague's bill and to present a petition that also supports it.

I hope that this House will one day adopt a national housing strategy. This is a pressing problem that affects the well-being and dignity of all Quebeckers and Canadians.

[English]

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this petition regarding CCSVI.

Conservative senators are refusing to hear from those who have MS. Can anyone imagine a committee silencing a cancer patient, a heart patient or someone living in poverty? Why, then, are MS patients being silenced, such as well-known Canadian CCSVI expert, Dr. Sandy McDonald. Why is the government shutting down these important voices? Petitioners call for the Minister of Health to undertake phase 3 clinical trials on an urgent basis at multiple sites across Canada and to require follow-up care.

• (1010)

[Translation]

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition calling on the government to restore funding to the Development and Peace organization at 2011 levels.

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present two petitions today.

The first petition is from residents across Toronto who are petitioning the government because the Oshawa Port Authority has given permission to FarmTech Energy to build an ethanol-producing facility at the Oshawa harbourfront on Crown land, adjacent to a sensitive wetland, which is home to species at risk, a wildlife preserve and a provincial park. No public consultation was undertaken with the residents, elected council members of Oshawa or the regional municipality of Durham, and a complete environmental assessment was not undertaken.

The petitioners are calling upon the Government of Canada to divest the federal port authority to the City of Oshawa, to halt the construction of the ethanol facility and to instruct that public

hearings be held and a complete environmental assessment be conducted at the site and surrounding areas.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also have another petition signed by hundreds of people who live in my riding of Scarborough—Rouge River and who are calling for the repeal of Bill C-31, which they are calling “the punishing refugees act”.

Because Bill C-31 concentrates more power in the hands of the minister by allowing him or her to name safe countries for refugees around the world and restricts access to humanitarian and compassionate consideration, the undersigned petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to repeal Bill C-31, the punishing refugees act, and to return to the framework of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act, passed with the support of all parties in the previous Parliament.

ACCESS TO MEDICINES

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I table a petition today from constituents in my riding, calling on the House to pass Bill C-398 without significant amendment and to facilitate the immediate and substantial flow of life-saving generic medicines to developing countries.

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions today. The first petition I present concerns the ELA.

Residents of Vancouver, Burnaby and New Westminster, B.C., are unhappy with the government's decision to close the Experimental Lakes Area in northwestern Ontario. These petitioners note that closing that world-renowned facility will jeopardize unique research and our understanding of human impact on lakes, rivers and fish.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is with regard to suicide.

It gives me pleasure today to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Thunder Bay and Ottawa on the topic of suicide in Canada. Suicide kills ten Canadians every single day. It is the second biggest killer of Canadian youth. Canada is the only industrialized country in the world without a national suicide prevention strategy, and therefore these petitioners urge Parliament to act on Bill C-297 and Bill C-300, dealing with suicide.

Routine Proceedings

[Translation]

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am presenting a petition signed by many people from Ontario who are asking the Government of Canada to urge the United Nations to establish an independent, international mechanism to ensure accountability and justice in Sri Lanka. According to a UN report on accountability in that country, many serious human rights violations have been committed by the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, including war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Therefore, I am very pleased to present this petition in the House today.

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition today from petitioners who are asking for a royal commission on the environment and health.

The commission's mandate would be to examine and make recommendations regarding all aspects of the environmental and health impacts of industrial activity in Canada and the application of the precautionary principle, which protects public health and the environment from uncertain risks, to the regulation of both industrial processes and the production, distribution and availability of consumer goods in Canada.

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada's Experimental Lakes Area is known throughout the world as a facility that protects and researches important information in regard to preserving our aquatic system. The petition calls upon the government to reverse its decision to close the ELA research station.

•(1015)

[Translation]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition on behalf of voters to rescind Bill C-31, which, as we know, will restrict immigrants' rights and refugee claims and will give more and more arbitrary powers to the minister responsible.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 896 and 897.

[Text]

Question No. 896—**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux:**

With regard to the lawsuit by Suaad Hagi Mohamud against the Government of Canada: (a) what were the costs of the legal fees, broken down by category, incurred by the government to defend itself in the lawsuit and to reach a settlement; (b) what were the terms of the settlement; (c) was there a financial sum awarded to Suaad Hagi

Mohamud; and (d) was a non-disclosure agreement signed with regard to the settlement and, if so, why?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to the extent that the information that has been requested is protected by solicitor-client privilege, the federal Crown asserts that privilege and, in this case, has waived that privilege only to the extent of revealing the total legal cost.

The total legal cost is approximately \$1,544,450.09.

Question No. 897—**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux:**

With regard to the April 25, 2012, announcement by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to end the coverage of supplemental health care benefits under the Interim Federal Health Program to protected persons and refugee claimants: (a) what consultations took place before the policy decision was made; (b) who was consulted; (c) when did the consultations take place; (d) what provincial and territorial governments took part in the consultations; (e) which medical and health care associations were consulted; (f) what are the details of the documents, briefing notes or departmental recommendations that were given to the Minister before the policy decision was taken and will these be tabled in Parliament; (g) how many provincial and territorial governments have written to the Minister requesting that the policy decision be reversed; and (h) has a monitoring process been put in place to monitor the effects of the cuts on protected persons or refugee claimants and to public health?

Mr. Rick Dykstra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, insofar as Citizenship and Immigration Canada, CIC, is concerned, in response to (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e), the interim federal health program, IFHP, is a federally funded discretionary program, under the authority of the order-in-council respecting the interim federal health program, 2012. The current reform of the IFHP was part of the economic action plan, budget 2012, and was under budget secrecy; therefore, no consultation took place with provincial and territorial governments or medical and health care associations prior to the policy decision being made. The health branch within CIC is composed of health care professionals with various backgrounds, including doctors and nurses. CIC's health branch has the necessary expertise and is responsible for the management of the immigration medical examination worldwide as well as the interim federal health program. The changes to the IFHP were announced publicly in April 2012, before the policy came into effect on June 30, 2012. A news release announcing the reforms to the IFHP was posted on the CIC website and distributed to media in April 2012. All provincial and territorial governments, major medical and health care associations, other stakeholders and recipients of IFH at the time, were directly informed of the changes around the same time, in advance of them coming into effect. Over the last several years, CIC has received a significant amount of correspondence from Canadians who have asked that asylum seekers and protected persons no longer receive taxpayer funded benefits that are more generous than those received by the Canadian taxpayers who fund those benefits.

In response to (f), the documents developed and presented to the minister before the policy decision was taken are under cabinet confidence and will not be tabled in Parliament.

Government Orders

Regarding (g), the response is the provincial governments of Ontario and Québec.

In response to (h), the federal government has been monitoring the levels of health care services and products that are provided by medical professionals through the IFHP. The IFHP is not a service provider. It is not responsible for access to and delivery of health care products or services. Like any health insurance plan, it provides coverage for certain services and products.

If provinces and territories or health care professionals intend to study health outcomes associated with the changes to the IFHP, they are welcome to share those results with the department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. CIC is always interested in looking at studies related to the health of refugees and refugee claimants, as long as the methodology is sound and the results are evidence-based.

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*Translation*]

CANADA-PANAMA ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PROSPERITY ACT

BILL C-24—TIME ALLOCATION MOTION

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC) moved:

That, in relation to Bill C-24, An Act to implement the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Panama, the Agreement on the Environment between Canada and the Republic of Panama and the Agreement on Labour Cooperation between Canada and the Republic of Panama, not more than two further sitting days shall be allotted to the consideration at third reading stage of the said bill; and

That, 15 minutes before the expiry of the time provided for government orders on the second day allotted to the consideration at third reading stage of the said bill, any proceedings before the House shall be interrupted, if required for the purpose of this order, and in turn every question necessary for the disposal of the stage of the bill then under consideration shall be put forthwith and successively without further debate or amendment.

[*English*]

The Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 67.1, there will now be a 30-minute question period. We will try to keep questions and comments to around one minute and the responses to a similar length. As we have done in the past, preference will be given to MPs from the opposition. However, government members will be recognized from time to time as well.

The hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is the 29th time that the Conservative government has moved closure on a piece of legislation since the last election. It is seeking to break a record that no government should seek to break.

Let us find out what the justification is for shutting down debate in Parliament on this particular piece of legislation. This is a free trade deal with Panama, which in 2011 represented a staggering 0.03% of our overall global trade. However, the House leader claims that this is a critical piece of trade negotiation and without it the Canadian economy would certainly falter and fail.

This is the Conservatives' excuse. This is their reason for once again limiting debate in the House of Commons, which is something they used to deride when, as members of the opposition, they fought for MPs to be able to their jobs.

The central piece in this particular trade deal that is causing Canadians much concern is not about the amount of trade going back and forth between our two countries, but the fact that Panama remains a serious tax haven for corporations and individuals to hide their money and not pay their fair share of taxes. The NDP is trying to convince the government that this needs to change in the bill.

The response from the Conservatives is not to make those changes but instead to shut down debate. They shut Canadians out of the process and say that if we do not move 0.03% of our trade up to say 0.05% of our trade, clearly millions of Canadians would be thrown out of work. This does not make sense. What makes sense is to actually improve legislation. Let the House of Commons do its work. Allow MPs to actually earn their pay, which we do on this side. However, on the Conservative side, they seek time allocation, almost 30 times now since the last election. These guys are breaking records no government should ever seek to break.

Will the government House leader realize that improving legislation is something that the House ought to be engaged with and not with these draconian shut-downs of Parliament's work?

• (1020)

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, trade is critically important for Canadian workers and Canadian jobs. Canadian exports to Panama have been increasing at a dramatic rate. Last year our exports to Panama were over \$110 million just in goods alone, and that was an increase of 20% over two years earlier. This agreement with Panama was entered into two and a half years ago, and relations have been going well.

We also have to realize that, when our workers compete in the global market, they are competing against others. Our main competitors in Panama, indeed in the entire western hemisphere, are always the Americans, and effective last Wednesday, October 31, the United States' free trade agreement with Panama finally came into force and effect.

As a result of the difficulties we have had with the opposition in not getting this passed through the House, Canadian workers are now being asked by the opposition to compete with the Americans with one hand tied behind their backs. Canadian workers are not going to be able to compete when their labours are taxed by the Panamanian government at a higher rate than those of their American brethren.

Government Orders

For us to compete and create jobs, our workers need to be able to have the exact same advantages, the best advantages we can give them, so that they have the lowest-cost tax structure, not by taking it in lower wages, but by paying less in duties and tariffs on the things they export to Panama. Having trade with Panama is critical for Canadians to compete and create jobs in this country.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not want to say it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to this particular motion, because it is actually a huge disappointment. We have had so many time allocations that even my head spins, and it does not spin that easily.

Once again the question that comes into my mind is: Why is the government so determined to shut down parliamentary oversight over a free trade agreement with Panama? We have the time. There is no urgency on this. Canadians are not sitting at home wondering when we are going to sign this agreement. When we enter free trade agreements, especially bilateral free trade agreements, which we know are not always the best, it is best if we take time to examine them and let parliamentarians do their job.

My question to my esteemed colleague across the way is: What does the government have to hide?

Hon. Peter Van Loan: We are certainly not hiding the facts that she has ignored, Mr. Speaker. The member asserts that Canadian workers are not at home wondering when the Canadian government is going to sign this agreement, and she is quite right. They are not wondering about it because they have been paying attention. They know we signed this agreement two and a half years ago. They know that, but the member may not know that. It is surprising that the member would rise to debate this matter without even realizing that the agreement was signed two and a half years ago. Canadian workers are wondering why that party wants to hold it up, so they have to compete at a disadvantage with Americans, so they have to start losing their market share. Canadian exports being taxed higher than American exports are going to get locked out of the Panamanian market.

I have a question for the member. Why is the NDP so determined to make sure that Canadian workers' labours are taxed at a higher rate than those of their American brethren? Why are their products facing higher tariffs? Why does she want to keep that condition, which has now been in place for six days, in place for the foreseeable future?

The member says that it is not urgent, that it is not important, that it does not matter if Canadians can compete, because she does not believe that Canadian workers can compete. She does not think it matters whether or not we get into the Panamanian market. Canadians who are manufacturing goods to send to Panama do care. They do care about their jobs and they want to keep them. They want to keep manufacturing and exporting, and we are on their side to make sure that keeps happening.

• (1025)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have been a parliamentarian for more than 20 years now, and I have had to deal with closure motions from New Democrat governments and Progressive Conservative governments in Manitoba. However, never before have I ever experienced a government that is so

persistent in using time allocation, a form of closure, using it as frequently as this particular Government House Leader does.

I quickly did up a list. We had the Canadian Wheat Board, the pooled pension program, the copyright bill, the gun registry, back-to-work legislation, the financial system review and budgets. It is virtually endless. At some point the Government House Leader has to reflect on his ability to negotiate in good faith with opposition parties. If we want the House to function more smoothly and pass legislation, he has to be able to sit down at a table in good faith and negotiate with House leaders.

My question to the member is: Why has the Government House Leader not recognized the value of sitting down with opposition House leaders and trying to work through House business in a fashion in which the government would not be so dependent on having to bring in time allocation on virtually every piece of legislation?

The government's excuse is that it is important; it has to get done. What is important is that the Government House Leader needs to recognize that he has negotiating responsibilities with the House leaders to try to push through an agenda that is far more fair and takes into consideration what the opposition would also like to see happen.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I thought up until now that the Liberal Party actually supported a free trade agreement with Panama. The reason I thought it did was that the agreement offers important benefits for Canada. It certainly is important to those workers who are producing over \$100 million in goods. We have not even talked about services. There are significant Canadian services that are exported into that marketplace. Also, of course, there is the prospect of further growth in trade. At the rate it has been growing, 20% over just two years, that is significant growth in trade.

Who has it been benefiting? It has been benefiting workers and machinery, those who are producing precious stones and metals, meat, aerospace products, minerals, fuels and oil, and vegetables. It includes our agriculture sector, those producing pulses and lentils, peas and frozen potato products. I know that is important in Atlantic Canada, for example. It includes electrical and electronic equipment, paper and paperboard, pharmaceuticals and I could go on. There is a significant diverse amount of Canadians who work in those sectors who stand to benefit and who already do benefit and stand to lose.

My understanding always was that the Liberal Party thought this was important, that it thought two and a half years since the signing of the agreement was a reasonable timeframe in which to actually decide to implement it and get the House to pass legislation. That is why I thought the Liberal Party was supportive. Apparently I am mistaken.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons is following the Americans' lead. Well, the Americans waited until a tax information exchange agreement to address tax havens was signed before ratifying their agreement. The hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley mentioned this earlier.

Government Orders

The hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway moved a motion to this effect before the international trade committee, calling for the government to wait until such an agreement was signed before passing this free trade agreement. Last Friday, when the minister was talking about Bill C-24, he said that negotiations were under way. Before ending this debate and passing this free trade agreement, why does the government not want to wait until an agreement is signed that would guarantee the protection of taxpayers and the exchange of financial information to crack down on tax havens?

This is a very important issue for people. All taxpayers must be treated equally, and something must be done about tax havens. That is what the Americans did, and we want to follow their example. Why not follow their example with regard to respect for the public and taxpayers?

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I am always amused at how New Democrats speak against every single trade agreement we have ever proposed in the House. They have spoken against every single one, including the Canada-Jordan trade agreement. They like to pretend they did not, but I can pull out *Hansard*, which shows they spoke against it repeatedly and opposed it.

The reality is that there is a different creative argument every time about why they need to oppose them, which is always outdated, as is their opposition to trade. This time it is complaints about Panama and whether it is sufficiently transparent and represents a tax haven. The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development some time ago placed Panama among the jurisdictions that are now significantly in compliance with its international expectations. We have been significantly advancing our negotiations and expect to have our mutual agreement in place very soon, but that does not stop the NDP from reaching for any new excuse.

I am quite confident that, were that agreement already in place, if the NDP did not want to wait a short period of time for it to be put in place, the NDP would find another reason why we should not have this agreement, because it fundamentally opposes trade. It is a perplexing thing, because people who have been in Canada over the past several decades would know that Canadian jobs and workers depend on our export markets overwhelmingly. Our prosperity and jobs depend on it. That is why this government is delivering on that.

• (1030)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in his earlier remarks, the House leader said he was mistaken on where the Liberal Party is at. No, he is not. Liberals have supported this agreement for a very long time. The need for time allocation on Bill C-24 is absurd.

This is a government—and the House leader acknowledged this in the House—that has failed completely to bring legislation through the House in a timely fashion. I hear him attacking the NDP. There are NDP members who sit on the committee and they have some legitimate concerns, but they also have a legitimate right to timely debate. I do not think they have been obstructionist. I do not see the need for time allocation. The government should allow the debate to go to its full extent.

It is interesting how the numbers work. This is an important deal and we are worried that the Americans have an agreement. This legislation is not law because the government delayed for 38 months,

and the American agreement is coming into effect. He says exports have increased 20% over the last two years. Yes, they have, but how big is that? The Canada-Panama agreement is 3/100 of 1% of Canada's trade around the world. For the Conservatives to blow the numbers out of proportion as if it were the end of the world if we did not debate it properly is ridiculous, and the government itself should accept its responsibility. It cannot even abuse democracy in a way that makes sense. If it is going to abuse democracy, it should have done it 30 months ago and put the legislation through then.

My question to the House leader is this. Would he begin his answer with an apology for the mishandling of this legislation, bearing in mind that the Liberal Party has supported it in this Parliament and the previous Parliament, when the legislation could have been implemented if the government had done its job and allowed Parliament to operate as it should?

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member who posed the question comes from Prince Edward Island. The main agricultural export to Panama from Canada is potatoes, something in which I know his province has a significant stake. Then he asks what the hurry is. The hurry is this. Since about a week ago, P.E.I. farmers are now being asked to compete at a disadvantage with Americans, who are now going to get duty-free access to the market and Canadians are standing by with an agreement not yet in place. That is the urgency. That is farmers' principal competitor.

I ask him to go back to the people of Prince Edward Island who are engaged in the potato industry, both in the principal growing of the product and the manufacturing of frozen potato products, which are the principal export agriculturally to Panama, and tell them, "I rose in the House this week to make sure you have to wait longer to have access to that market, to make sure you are at risk of losing access into the Panamanian market of the products you produce; I am very proud that I stood up against P.E.I. farmers this week". Will he do that, because that is exactly what the member has done in the House today?

• (1035)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what is so urgent? Maybe they want to see the American presidential election results. They probably want to get settled in at home as soon as possible.

Government Orders

There is a lot to say about free trade. In the past, 65% of the Canadian economy depended on the manufacturing sector. Now, that figure is 45%. Our economy fell 20% in the last three decades as a result of free trade agreements that did not benefit the manufacturing sector. This is because we cannot provide a social, economic and moral work environment to adapt to the competitive environment created by globalization in the 1990s.

That is why we want to discuss Bill C-24 more and we will continue to do so as long as possible to protect our small businesses, which drive regional economies. That is what is at stake here and there is no rush to do this today.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for vigorously and openly defending the NDP agenda, which is anti-trade. It is a desire to go back to a better day, when Canadians were poorer and we could not export our products. It is a desire to amputate two-thirds of the Canadian economy, which is trade based.

Members should ask themselves this: If they took an economy and shut down two-thirds of it by cutting off trade, which is the NDP plan, what kind of economy would they have? It would be a much poorer one.

However, the NDP has a plan to deal with that, a plan that will save our economy once they shut down trade. It is a \$21.5 billion carbon tax. If our workers are not already sufficiently handicapped by tariffs in countries with which we do not have trade agreements, while others are getting into those markets, let us handicap them a little further by making the costs of their inputs a little higher and their own personal cost of living a little higher, which will force them to demand wages that are higher just to pay their taxes, again making them less competitive.

Where would that leave our economy? It would leave it in a very sad, depressed state. That is the NDP plan for the economy: Shut down trade and have higher taxes.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find it personally offensive that the minister seems to have something against persons with disabilities, because he keeps using the offensive word “handicap” in this House. I do not understand what he has against persons with disabilities that he is once again, over and over, using that very offensive word in this House of Commons.

I will go on to my question about this motion for closure. The labour co-operation agreement would require both parties to actually respect their commitments under the International Labour Organization's 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. All of Canada's bilateral labour co-operation agreements ratified since 1998, including with Jordan, Colombia, Peru and Costa Rica, have made reference to the obligation under this declaration to protect the right to collectively bargain, to abolish child labour, to eliminate compulsory labour and to prohibit employment discrimination.

Canada and Panama, if we move forward with this, would also agree to minimum employment standards, minimum occupational health and safety standards, and minimum compensation for sick and injured workers.

This is continuing his attack on differently abled Canadians and differently abled people.

Why does the government want to invoke closure yet again? As our House leader mentioned, it is almost the 30th time since the last election.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, first, I will remind the member that this is not a motion for closure. I do not know if she was paying attention. This is actually a motion under a different rubric. It is called time allocation. It is a different part of the Standing Orders. I invite her to familiarize herself with the rules of the House of Commons.

The member did, however, cover the elements that are part of the labour agreement that are very important for the protection of our workers. They ensure that they are on a level playing field and do not work at a disadvantage compared with workers elsewhere. Those are things in the labour agreement such as the elimination of child labour; the elimination of forced labour and discrimination; respect of freedom of association; protection of the right to collective bargaining; protection in regard to occupational health and safety, including compensation in case of injury or illness; employment standards, including minimum wage and overtime pay; and non-discrimination in respect of working conditions for migrant workers.

These are things that are mutually protected in this agreement and that ensure that our workers have fair access to that market for goods and products and are not competing at a disadvantage. That is what we are seeking to do here.

Having enumerated those so well, I would hope that the member would become an enthusiastic supporter of this opportunity to create jobs and opportunities for Canadian workers to sell their goods and services into the Panamanian market, no longer at a disadvantage, and not a disadvantage compared with Americans. They would be on a level playing field, where I know Canadian workers can compete.

• (1040)

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are many rules and regulations in this House and much terminology. One of the terms I have come to know, thanks to the Conservatives, is closure. That is shutting down a rigorous debate on legislation that is being introduced in this House. We debate to look at the laws we are passing in this House to see that they are conforming to Canadian values, to the Constitution and to what we want to do with this country. Yet the Conservatives are shutting that down.

Let me tell members about the trade policy of the Conservatives. When the Conservatives came into power in 2006, we had a \$25-billion trade surplus. Today it is \$50 billion in deficit. That is the Conservative record.

What are the Conservatives trying to hide in shutting down this debate?

Government Orders

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, this agreement has been around for two and a half years. I was there, as the trade minister, for the signing ceremony. It has been there for everyone to see. We have had legislation in this House for some time. The reason it has become so urgent is that we are now in a situation where we are almost a week into a very unlevel playing field. American workers and companies have the benefit of a trade agreement with Panama that is in force. Canada and Canadian workers are now behind them.

When the question of why it is urgent that we take action now is asked, the answer is that when a Canadian company loses a contract to an American company, the Canadian company is no longer the customer. The American company will be the customer going forward. We are at risk of losing those contracts now. What happens every time one of those contracts is lost? Canadian jobs are lost. That is the urgency. We want to see Canadian jobs grow, not guarantee the loss of Canadian jobs through the delay of this agreement.

The New Democrats apparently say, “Don’t worry. Lose those contracts. Let those Canadian jobs be lost. We want more time to debate an agreement that has been around for two and a half years”. We do not agree with that lax attitude. We understand that in the world of global competition, we have to be nimble. We have to compete. We have to give Canadian workers every advantage we can. That is what we would do here on this side.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not look that old—especially lately—but I have been in politics for 40 some years. Yet I have never seen a parliamentary leader blame the opposition for everything. He is harping on the carbon tax and making the same jokes day after day. I would prefer a carbon tax to a neuron tax. I do not know why he is avoiding the crux of the problem.

If Canada is at a disadvantage compared to the United States, it is because the Conservatives dragged their feet and did not get this agreement passed. Furthermore, they did not sign a tax information exchange agreement with Panama, as the Americans did.

If people from Prince Edward Island have to wait longer to sell their potatoes, we are not the ones to blame. The Conservatives are the ones who dragged their feet and did not do their job.

•(1045)

[English]

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member raises the question of the NDP-proposed carbon tax. He does not like it being discussed in this House. It has been said that the New Democrats have never met a tax they did not like. They are always creatively trying to come up with a new one. He has a new one: a tax on ignorance.

I am not going to get into speculating about who might be asked to pay that tax. However, I can tell members that on this side, we are fundamentally opposed not just to the NDP carbon tax but to the tax on ignorance the New Democrats are now proposing.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am also troubled by the fact that the New Democrats continue to try to stifle development and trade opportunities. I come from a riding that has a great deal of agriculture, food processing,

primary agriculture, and grains and oil seeds. This particular trade bill would certainly improve the lot of our agricultural community in terms of the kinds of things we would be able to export, including meat, vegetables and peas, and even paper and paper board products from the forestry industry.

I would like my colleague to comment on the importance of this for the agricultural community in Canada.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member, who indeed represents a community that has a long and proud tradition in Canada’s agricultural sector, particularly in meats and processed meats, where they have been pioneers and have done very well.

There are two segments where we stand to gain a great deal under this agreement for Canadian farmers. I am sure that the member has heard it from his constituents who stand to gain a great deal. Those segments are the pork and beef sectors. Canadian beef and pork producers have become some of the most successful in benefiting from exports to other markets.

It is not surprising. Not too many NDP members represent those kinds of constituencies. If they did, they would know and would hear from their producers that they want access to these markets. The Panamanian market is one of those places where we see a real opportunity, the way this agreement is structured, to see benefits for Canadian beef and pork producers. That is why we want to deliver on this agreement for Canadians and deliver on it soon.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the reason the government members justify their actions today is that they have hit the parliamentary panic button. They have said that we need to shut down discussion and close off debate, because this is of such economic interest.

They also have to go back in time and remember that they killed this legislation. They prorogued Parliaments. They called elections before the actual law said they were allowed to call elections. Yet all that time this was delayed by their own actions, I guess Canadian farmers and businesses were suffering. Now they have hit the panic button. Now they say that Parliament must be curtailed for the 29th time. They cannot justify these things to Canadians anymore. This is a tendency. The government often gives into this tendency to say that Parliament should not matter, that Parliament is an encumbrance a government has to get around rather than a place where we exchange things.

The member still has not answered the question. Does this free trade agreement finally take care of the tax havens that have been so rife in Panama for so long, where Canadian businesses and wealthy Canadians have been hiding their money and not paying their fair share for all the services we so desperately need?

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, the NDP members continue to look in the past, both on the fundamental question of trade, which they consistently oppose, and on following developments in the compliance of countries, such as Panama, with their international obligations. That is why the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development moved them off the grey list and deemed them substantially in compliance with those very tax issues about which he is concerned.

The problem with the NDP members is that they will reach for any excuse to oppose a trade agreement. They have opposed trade agreements with the United States, Mexico, Colombia, Jordan, Peru, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, Honduras and now Panama. They do not miss an opportunity to oppose more jobs and more opportunities for Canadians to export. Why? It is because they believe in an old model where Canada is an island and is not part of a larger world economically. That is the way of the past. That is the way of poverty. That is not the way of this government.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: It is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith the question necessary to dispose of the motion now before the House.

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 Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

• (1130)

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(*Division No. 490*)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	Armstrong
Aspin	Baird
Bateman	Benoit
Bergen	Bernier
Bezan	Blaney

Block
Braid
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calkins
Carmichael
Chisu
Clarke
Daniel
Dechert
Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Fantino
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Galipeau
Glover
Goodyear
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hayes
Hillyer
Holder
Jean
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Lebel
Leitch
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
MacKenzie
McColeman
Menegakis
Merrifield
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Norlock
Oliver
Opitz
Payne
Poillievre
Raït
Rathgeber
Richards
Ritz
Schellenberger
Shiple
Sopuck
Stanton
Sweet
Toet
Trost
Truppe
Valcourt
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Government Orders

Boughen
Breitkreuz
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Carrie
Chong
Clement
Davidson
Del Mastro
Dreeshen
Dykstra
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Fletcher
Gallant
Goguen
Gourde
Hawn
Hiebert
Hoback
James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kenny (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lauzon
Leaf
Lemieux
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacKay (Central Nova)
Mayes
McLeod
Menzies
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Nicholson
O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon
Paradis
Penashue
Preston
Rajotte
Rempel
Rickford
Saxton
Shea
Smith
Sorenson
Strahl
Tilson
Toews
Trottier
Tweed
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Zimmer — 148

NAYS

Members

Allen (Welland)	Andrews
Angus	Ashton
Atamanenko	Aubin
Ayala	Bennett
Benskin	Bevington
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Boivin	Borg
Boulerice	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brison
Brosseau	Caron
Casey	Cash
Charlton	Chicoine
Chisholm	Choquette
Christopherson	Clery
Coderre	Côté

Government Orders

Crowder	Cullen
Cuzner	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day
Dewar	Dion
Dionne Labelle	Donnelly
Doré Lefebvre	Dubé
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dusseauil	Easter
Eyking	Foote
Freeman	Fry
Garneau	Garrison
Genest	Giguère
Godin	Goodale
Grogulé	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (St. John's East)	Hassainia
Hsu	Hughes
Hyer	Jacob
Julian	Karygiannis
Kellway	Lamoureux
Lapointe	Larose
Latendresse	Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leslie	MacAulay
Mai	Marston
Martin	Masse
Mathysen	May
McCallum	McGuinty
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)	Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)	Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)	Mulcair
Murray	Nantel
Nash	Nicholls
Nunez-Melo	Pacetti
Papillon	Patry
Péclet	Perreault
Pilon	Plamondon
Quach	Rae
Rafferty	Ravignat
Raynault	Regan
Rousseau	Sandhu
Scarpaleggia	Scott
Sellah	Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind- sor)
Sims (Newton—North Delta)	Sitsabaiesan
St-Denis	Stoffer
Sullivan	Thibeault
Toone	Turmel
Valeriotte — 125	

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

[English]

I wish to inform the House that because of the proceedings on the time allocation motion, government orders will be extended by 30 minutes.

[Translation]

THIRD READING

The House resumed from November 2 consideration of the motion that Bill C-24, An Act to implement the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Panama, the Agreement on the Environment between Canada and the Republic of Panama and the Agreement on Labour Cooperation between Canada and the Republic of Panama, be read the third time and passed.

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government is accusing us of being ideologically stubborn and against free trade. However, our position is very pragmatic: we oppose the kind of free trade proposed by the members opposite. We oppose free trade when it is negotiated without any economic, industrial or energy strategies.

Free trade agreements do not come out of a Cracker Jack box. They must be taken more seriously. The future of the country is at stake, and we are keenly aware of that.

We are asking these legitimate questions on behalf of Canadians. We are worried about the government's ability to negotiate these kinds of agreements.

I myself am by no means an expert in international trade. However, because of what I do know, I am worried about what this government is doing. One negotiator has said that only the intellectual property issue remains to be settled and that it will not take long, because it is a formality. In my opinion, he does not really understand what is happening.

We now realize just how important intellectual property is. All major conflicts and serious disputes in relation to international trade end up in lawsuits over intellectual property. And that is merely one aspect.

When a dispute arises after a treaty is signed, the problem is often not solved by lawyers but by discussions about semantics. Two words can easily cost billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of jobs.

For example, two English phrases from article 14 of the North American Free Trade Agreement—"in comparison with" and "in relation to"—were challenged. In the end, after debating the meaning of these phrases, the United States levied a preposterous tax that almost destroyed Canada's softwood lumber industry and cost tens of thousands of jobs.

In the long term, we are gambling with the future of our country. I remember that, when I was young, we built locomotives and cargo ships. We manufactured and exported every kind of product. Naturally, things have changed, but soon we may not even be manufacturing hockey sticks or curling brooms anymore. It is time we had an intelligent long-term strategy for international trade.

It used to be that when I travelled abroad, people would tell me that Canada was a great country that had a coherent international policy and did a lot for foreign aid. Now, I am still told that Canada is a great country, but people tell me that it takes one week to travel by car from Montreal Island to Vancouver. That is not exactly the kind of grandeur to which we aspire. That is all about geography. Canada is fading as a great economic and diplomatic power. We must stop tarnishing our image. The members opposite need to think and listen when we ask intelligent questions.

• (1135)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we do see the value of this particular agreement. As my colleague from the Atlantic region indicated earlier, the Liberal Party is quite supportive of the agreement. However, we also want to recognize that we have other trading partners, in particular the United States, which represents well over 70% of our economic trade and is responsible for hundreds of thousands of jobs in Canada.

Government Orders

It is important that we pass this particular agreement, and it will get passed now, but the question is, to what degree does my colleague believe we could be doing more with our trading partner just south of our border?

• (1140)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc-André Morin: Mr. Speaker, we do not live on a Pacific island. We have important neighbours on whom we already depend too much. We must not become a sort of Kazakhstan by taking care of border security for the Americans. Nor should we become a bottomless pit of natural resources and export our jobs south of the border. We must have a comprehensive trade strategy.

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Laurentides—Labelle for his very enlightening speech about the possible negative effects of these agreements.

One very important aspect to consider involves Panama's labour laws. President Ricardo Martinelli announced unilateral changes to labour law in the summer of 2010. These changes prohibited the collection of mandatory union dues, allowed employers to dismiss workers who were on strike and replace them with strikebreakers, allowed roadblocks and criminal acts, and even sheltered the police from legal action. This labour relations regime is completely unbalanced and harms workers.

I would like to my colleague to comment on that.

Mr. Marc-André Morin: Mr. Speaker, one of the issues we discussed in parliamentary committee was protecting human rights and the environment. I think that this aspect was left out of this agreement. There are agreements in principle and a bunch of good intentions, but if someone violates these rules, there are no sanctions, or if there are, they are ridiculous.

If the members opposite were sincere and truly wanted this free trade agreement to benefit all the parties, they would have ensured that there were some legitimate rules. For example, they would have required that the tax information issue be resolved before ratification, as the Americans did. They are showing the same negligence with respect to labour and environment bills. There is all kinds of lip service and plenty of fine promises, but there are no sanctions or oversight mechanisms. It was the same thing with Colombia, and if we allow it to happen, it will be the same thing with China and other countries.

[English]

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House today to share how this government's free trade agreement with Panama complements our government's Americas strategy.

First, I would like to speak about how our government's ambitious pro-trade plan and our global commerce strategy are creating new opportunities around the world for Canadian exporters.

Our government's global commerce strategy, developed in close consultations with the Canadian business community, was our strategy to respond to the changes in the global economy and to position Canada for long-term prosperity. The global commerce strategy identifies 13 priority markets around the world where

Canadian opportunities and interests have the greatest potential for growth. The strategy also sparked the most ambitious pro-trade plan in Canadian history. It has driven Canadian leadership on the world stage in support of trade, job creation, economic growth and prosperity for hard-working Canadians and their families.

The results have been very impressive. Under the global commerce strategy, Canada has concluded a free trade agreement with nine countries, representing combined markets of \$1.5 trillion. We have begun to deepen trade and investment ties with the largest, most dynamic and fastest-growing countries in the world, including Brazil, India, Japan and the European Union. There are also new foreign investment promotions and protection agreements with 14 additional countries.

The Americas are a priority market for our government. In fact, just this past year our government announced plans to strengthen our engagement in the region to ensure our efforts are focused where the impact will be the greatest.

Actually, a lot of members were at a function of ParlAmericas last night, meeting with different ambassadors from the Americas. I had many ambassadors say to me that it is nice to see Canada on their radar, to see that Canadians are travelling into their regions to do business and that the government recognizes the potential in both Central and South America and the Caribbean. They appreciate the work we have been doing in foreign trade, and this Panama trade deal will reinforce that.

I would like to share with the House a bit more about how our free trade agreement with Panama fits in with our Americas strategy. The renewed strategy has three goals. One, is to increase Canadian and hemispheric economic opportunity. Two, is to address security issues and advance freedoms, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, through capacity-building. Three, is to build a stable foundation for Canadian engagement and increased influence in the hemisphere. This agreement definitely helps us do that.

Strengthening economic ties is crucial in today's challenging and uncertain global economic climate. Expanding Canada's trade and investment in the Americas will help protect existing jobs and create new jobs and increased prosperity for all Canadians.

Canada's efforts to increase economic opportunity depend on deepening trade and investment ties by advancing our trade agreement. The Americas is a key region for Canadian bilateral trade initiatives. In fact, seven of Canada's ten concluded free trade agreements have been with countries in the Americas.

Government Orders

However, it is not enough simply to sign a trade agreement. In our government's Americas strategy is the need to make Canadian companies aware of the advantages and opportunities of these trade agreements. Our government understands that through engagement, development, trade and commercial ties, that Canada can be in support of change and growth in the Americas.

Promoting freer trade in the Americas opens new doors and creates new opportunities for Canadian companies, increasing economic benefit for Canadians, including new jobs for hard-working Canadians right across this country, from coast to coast.

Canada's efforts to liberalize trade with the Americas is working. We are removing barriers to trade and facilitating two-way commerce. The Americas offer great potential. Total trade growth between the countries in the Americas and Canada has increased by nearly 40% in the 2005 to the 2010 period.

In order to promote economic opportunity, our government's renewed Americas strategy will focus on intensifying trade promotion and trade relationship building efforts to ensure Canadian businesses and exporters are taking full advantage of these new trade regions. As part of increasing economic opportunity with Panama, Canada is growing economic partnerships that will contribute to the long-term prosperity of both countries.

I have had the pleasure of travelling in Panama on numerous occasions, through the ParIAmericas and on personal trips by myself and with my family. Panama is a dynamic country. This country has the Panama Canal going through it, and three-quarters of the world's trade that goes on oceans goes through that canal.

When we look at Panama's situation in the Americas, with airlines such as Copa, it is becoming the hub for transportation going in and out of Central and South America. That is why I think it is very important to this trade deal to make sure we have the ability to travel in and out of Panama, so we can do more business, not only with Panama, but throughout the region. Panama is a key component in that effort.

• (1145)

This agreement and its parallel labour and environmental agreements will promote trade and investments while creating a winning advantage for Canadian businesses and exporters.

To protect Canadian trade and commerce investments, the security situation in Central America must be taken into consideration. It is a core focus in our renewed Americas strategy.

Panama has recognized its security challenges and has significantly increased spending on security. It has also committed to continued reforms to security institutions. Panama continues to build a strong security co-operation with the United States and with its Central American neighbours, under the Central American Integration System, SICA, regional security strategy.

Our government is pleased with the significant efforts that Panama is making to meet the security challenges and confront the public security threats facing Central America.

International relationships are fundamental. Competition for market share is on the rise. Canada must demonstrate that it is a serious and committed trading partner. Our government has continued to deliver on an ambitious pro-trade plan that is creating new opportunities, not only in the Americas but in dynamic high-growth markets around the world. Furthermore, while sustaining high engagements is essential, Canada will continue to benefit by building relationships more broadly across the private sector, government and academia.

Looking back over the last two years, I have had the privilege of travelling in the region with the Prime Minister, reaching out to our trading partners and helping Canadian businesses secure access to opportunities in those countries. We have also had the Governor General, in countries like Brazil, promoting the educational systems we have here in Canada.

In fact, a country like Brazil is spending a large amount of cash to send students abroad. A lot of our Canadian universities are taking advantage of that situation and are attracting them to be educated here in Canada. When we build relationships like that, we are fostering growth between the two countries. If we look at Brazil and how it is growing, that is not a bad country to be aligned with.

All countries in the Americas have a vested interest in prosperity, security and stability. That is why our government is committed to building sustainable relationships with our like-minded neighbours. Through our strong bilateral relationships, increasing people-to-people ties generated through educational exchanges and increased tourism and business links, our links with Panama are growing stronger every day.

Every day we are seeing more and more opportunities for Canadian businesses and exporters. A good example is that just three weeks ago I had a phone call from a colleague in Panama, whom I had met in one of groups, asking about Canadian beef. He asked me how he could get a hold of Canadian beef, and about the process. That is how to build relationships. We can put him in touch with the appropriate people in the Canadian beef federation, and they can go there to make connections and use those new connections to actually sell more Canadian beef. That is just one example of how farmers are going to benefit from this trade agreement.

With regard to another example, if we look at the wheat industry, we are actually going to have preferential access into Panama over the U.S. The U.S. does not yet have its trade agreement done with Panama, so we are going to have access for Canadian companies long before our competition. We can get in there and build those strong relationships before they do.

The Canada-Panama free trade agreement is a key component to advance the goals of the Americas strategies. When we look at what is going on in the Americas, we see the growth and the growth potential. When we look at the issues they are facing, here is a country that is really reaching out to Canada. This is a country that has been patiently waiting for this agreement.

Government Orders

I know the former ambassador fairly well. He was anxious, as he wanted to see this thing go through the House. Unfortunately, he was recalled, but in the same breath he would always wonder why it took so long, because the people in Panama really want this trade agreement.

During one of my trips to Panama, I had the opportunity to spend some time with one of the diputados in Panama and to visit his riding. I toured some of the needier areas, the poor slum areas, and experienced what he faces in his job as a parliamentarian. It was heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time. It was heartwarming because what he was doing was making a difference in the individual lives of those people. It was heartbreaking to see the situations the kids were growing up in and the implications of not having a strong economy.

Canada does not go around the world preaching; that is not who we are. What we can do is to help people, assist them, give them an economic opportunity, the ability to help themselves, and give them the tools so they can make their own lives better. How do we do that? One of the best ways is to trade with them, to do business with them and help them learn from us.

We will learn a lot from them because they have a lot to teach us about how to handle business in the region. They know a lot of things that we could learn from their business sector also.

• (1150)

That has been one of the advantages of being with ParlAmericas and something that I promote when I talk to my colleagues in the House. It offers a chance for parliamentarians to travel to different countries within the region in a non-partisan manner. A good example is my travel with a colleague from the Liberal Party to Panama this summer for the AGM of ParlAmericas. We had a chance to talk to parliamentarians from all parties and to build some bridges. This is also what trade agreements do: they allow businesses to get together and build bridges, to seek out opportunities of mutual benefit for companies and partners.

That is what we are doing here. We are just laying out the proper rules for doing this as we move forward and making it easier for our business community and investors to go into different parts of the world, in this case to Panama, and do business. That is nothing but positive, not only for Canada but also for the Panamanians.

When we look down the road to the future and where we are going to leave this country for our kids and how we are moving forward, this trade agreement and others are something that we can do for them. We can give them opportunity, give them market access and let them know that the businesses they work for can export not only to the U.S. or Mexico but also to Panama, Chile, Colombia and, hopefully, Honduras in the future. These are the things we can do for our kids by giving them the opportunities. We cannot give them everything but we can give them chances and opportunities. By promoting a good bill like this, that is what we are doing. We should move this forward and pass it.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite just spoke about the agreement with

Japan and how important it is for Canada to show that it is serious about its international commitment.

I was part of a delegation that went to Japan last June. We have never looked more foolish in our lives. During a meeting on the last day of our visit, a former Japanese diplomat told us that the Canadian embassy in Tokyo no longer offers consular services. We learned that from a Japanese colleague.

I do not think they are taking this very seriously, because if Panama is important, Japan is probably 25 to 30 times more important to Canada. It is the best partner we could sign an agreement with. If the government starts fooling around, we will lose our opportunity to do business with this country and that would be much more serious than losing opportunities with Panama.

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Speaker, the member makes a good point and I am glad to hear him talking about the New Democrats supporting a trade agreement with Japan, because that is something we should be considering and doing in the future. As we go across the globe, we should be looking for opportunities like those with Japan.

However, the trade agreement before us today is with Panama. There are some key things that we need to remind ourselves of as to why this agreement is important. First of all, Panama is a strategic hub for the Americas and an important logistical platform. It has the canal. It has airports. It is central in the region as far as transportation or branching out to other countries within the region is concerned. The agreement would generate export and investment opportunities for Canadians by creating preferential and more predictable trade and investments. These are things that Canadian businesses want. Panama is a good environment for investment as an emerging economy. People there are buying their first TV and first microwave. It is a growth economy that we can participate in.

Not only that, but when we provide that growth and see it happen, some of the other things disappear, for example, the drug and human trafficking or smuggling. We would take away the need for people to try to make money by any means. When they can make a dollar fairly and squarely, that is what they will do, thus reducing the amount of crime and violent crime in those regions. That is of benefit to us here in Canada because we are the consumers of some of those drugs coming this way.

This agreement would eliminate tariffs on 89% of non-agricultural imports from Canada. The majority of Panama's remaining non-agricultural tariffs would be eliminated within five and ten years, including certain forest and paper products, certain iron and steel products, paints, soaps and various manufactured goods. I come from a riding with a pulp mill and forestry goods. These can now end up in Panama. That would be great for my riding and all Canadians.

Government Orders

I cannot understand why the New Democrats, the anti-trade group sitting over there, just cannot get it. Can they not understand that Canada is an exporting nation? If we want to seek growth and to give prosperity to our kids, this is what we have to do. We could never consume the resources the gods have enriched us with here in Canada. We have to be willing to trade, to exchange resources for other good of value throughout the world. That is what we would do through a trade agreement like this.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the things my colleague talked about is the increased opportunity for trade with Panama in forestry products, plants and trees. Here, I want to break this down to the lowest common denominator, because some of my colleagues in the opposition who are talking about voting against this agreement still have a chance at third reading to change their minds and support this agreement.

The issue here is simple. Right now, with regard to one commodity alone, the Christmas tree industry in Nova Scotia, there is a tariff in Panama of 18%. That may not sound like a lot of money, but it is. Nova Scotia Christmas tree growers are paying an 18% tariff on their trees going into Panama. They have been shipping Christmas trees to Panama from before the 1960s. There has been over 50 years of business between Nova Scotia and Panama in that industry alone, albeit with a punitive tariff of 18% that will now be wiped out overnight. That is an opportunity for a niche market for a small industry in Nova Scotia, but that small industry is worth about \$30 million to the province.

Items like these often get overlooked in these trade agreements but are significant for farm families and farm gate profits in rural Nova Scotia.

• (1200)

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Speaker, I thank the parliamentary secretary for his hard work and determination in getting this bill through. I think it has been before the committee three times, if I remember correctly. I know he has been doing a lot of the hard work with all committee members in getting this bill to where it is today.

He gives a good example of Christmas trees and the 18% tariff. An 18% tariff for what? It is just a trade restriction. That is all it is. Why the NDP would want a tariff on Canadian companies is beyond me. Why would the NDP say it is okay for farmers to sell their Christmas trees to Panama, but let Panama collect that 18% tariff? That is what New Democrats are doing when they vote against this trade agreement. That is a classic example of the NDP. There is not a tax it does not like, even a tax being collected by another country. That is what is happening in this case.

That is what the Canada-Panama free trade agreement would resolve. It would take away that 18% tariff and give companies stable market access into Panama. It would allow them to fill that niche market and maybe expand it, and not only in Panama. Maybe they could use Panama as a bridge to go to other countries within the region. We do not know what the potential is. That is up to individual investors. All we can do in government is to take away the barriers and allow investors to conduct the business they want to do. That is what this trade agreement would do.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in his speech, the member for Prince Albert said that through its free trade agreements Canada can support change and growth in the Americas.

A few years ago, I signed a petition concerning the free trade area of the Americas (FTAA), which was also signed by people from all across the Americas. Every single country signed the petition. It asked that we put a human face on trade and that human beings be just as important as economics in our trade relations. The petition was effective because we no longer hear about the FTAA today.

However, the Canadian government has started entering into bilateral agreements with countries, agreements that are similar to the FTAA and therefore do not include the human dimension that the people asked for in the petition.

Why enter into agreements that do not fundamentally help promote human rights in another country, such as Panama?

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Speaker, I believe that CAFTA is the trade agreement the member was referring to. There are really good reasons for my answer to her question. Bilateral agreements are very easy to do; we can reach bilateral agreements with countries that want to do business with us. When we get to a multilateral stage or venue, it is very difficult to get all the people to agree on the same topic, suggestions or issues. It is very tough to put together.

We should strive toward multilateral agreements like the TPP and, in a certain way, CETA, but in the same breath we cannot wait for multilateral agreements to come forward like the WTO. We need to be out there, like Chile is. It has something like 60 trade agreements with different partners around the world. Canada needs to be doing the same thing. If we cannot do it through multilateral venues, then we need to be vigilant and do it through the bilateral agreements we are reaching today.

Again, the focus has to be on families, and that is what we are doing by providing Canadian business with access to markets around the globe so that if one country like the U.S. decides not to trade with us, we have 10 more lining up to buy our products. That is what we are doing with our trade policy.

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•(1205)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one could always pose the question in terms of the time it has taken to get this bill through the legislature. The government has had the support of the Liberal Party throughout the process. Would the member comment on why he believes it has taken so long to get the legislation through?

The Prime Minister is currently in India and I believe he is going to Hong Kong and stopping in the Philippines. Could the member provide his perspective on the Philippines, a country with whom I have always argued it would be great to see more freer trade with. Does he believe that the Government of Canada is prepared to make it a higher priority at this time?

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Speaker, I would like to know the answer to that same question, why that has not happened before. I think the NDP is solely responsible for that being delayed at committee and being brought forward the way it has.

In regard to the Prime Minister's trips, it is nice to see a Prime Minister proud of going out on the global stage and actually attracting markets and increasing investment. We can be proud of the fact he is over there right now opening up markets for Canadian families and Canadian businesses.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand today in the House and speak to Bill C-24, the Canada-Panama trade agreement. The full name is an act to implement the free trade agreement between Canada and the Republic of Panama, the agreement on the environment between Canada and the Republic of Panama and the agreement on labour co-operation between Canada and the Republic of Panama.

Before I go too much farther, I will answer the question just raised by my hon. colleague from Winnipeg North. The reason this agreement has taken so long to get through the House is that the Conservative Party and the Prime Minister of this country prorogued Parliament twice and this bill that was before the House was killed and parliamentarians were deprived of their opportunity to deal with it. That is why the bill has been delayed, not because of anything New Democrats have done.

It is always nice to add some factual basis to the House, as opposed to the government's general approach of relying on spin and accusation and oversimplification, as opposed to solid evidence-based approaches to government.

I would like to briefly describe to the House what Bill C-24 is about. By this legislation, Canada would eliminate all non-agricultural tariffs as well as most agricultural tariffs upon ratification of this agreement. Overall the bill, if passed, would eliminate 99% of tariffs for imports from Panama, and a limited number of tariffs would be phased out over the next 15 years. Canada would not, by this agreement, eliminate over-quota tariffs on supply managed goods such as dairy, poultry and eggs. Additionally, Canada would not eliminate its tariffs on certain sugar products. Therefore this deal is not comprehensive and it does not deal with certain sensitive agricultural issues that are often so delicately handled in trade agreements.

This agreement would see Panama immediately eliminate all non-agricultural tariffs for imports from Canada, and upon ratification 90% of Canada's exports to Panama would enter the country duty-free, including many agricultural products. Other agricultural tariffs would be phased out within five to ten years. A limited number of Panamanian tariff lines would be unaffected by the implementation of the proposed free trade agreement.

Currently, Panama's average most favoured nation tariff rate, which is the lowest tariff rate Panama offers to countries with which it does not have a free trade agreement, for non-agricultural products is 6.4%. Its average most favoured nation tariff rate for agricultural products is 13.6%. However, some agricultural imports into Panama face tariff rates as high as 70%.

This agreement deals with services as well. It extends liberalization of trade and services beyond that established by the World Trade Organization's general agreement on trade in services in finance, information and communication technology, environmental services and energy services.

This agreement facilitates border entry for service providers and business people. It would provide a framework for the eventual reciprocal recognition of professional licensing qualifications in both countries.

This deal also has a chapter on government procurement. It allows contractors to bid on government contracts in both Panama and Canada. Moreover, contractors from Canada would be eligible to bid on Panama Canal Authority contracts. This agreement would prohibit government contracts with domestic content requirement rules that may impede potential suppliers or subcontractors from the partner country. Panama and Canada would both be required to post contract opportunities in a transparent manner for contractors from the partner country. In other words, this deal would open up procurement in Canada to Panamanian businesses and vice versa.

There is a labour co-operation agreement appended to this agreement that is referred to as a side deal on labour. It would require both parties to respect commitments under the International Labour Organization's 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. It would protect the right to collective bargaining, obligate the parties to work toward abolishing child labour, eliminate compulsory labour and prohibit employment discrimination. Canada and Panama would also agree to minimum employment standards, occupational health and safety standards and compensation for sick and injured workers.

Moreover, either country could request a consultation with respect to the other country's obligations under the proposed agreement. If the countries could not reach an agreement with respect to a complaint, a review panel would or could be established if a country persistently abrogated its obligations under the proposed agreement and if the matter is so-called "trade related".

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●(1210)

This independent review panel could impose monetary penalties, which would be collected pursuant to a domestic court order. Those penalties would be limited to \$15 million per year for each country and would be spent on programs in the country that violated the labour co-operation agreement.

There is also a side agreement on the environment in this trade deal. Both Canada and Panama would be required not to weaken their environmental regulations, such as they are, in order to attract investment. Both countries would be required to enforce their existing environmental regulations, again such as they are. To this end, mechanisms would be established to ensure that environmental impact assessments occur for proposed projects. In both countries, interested persons could request that the government investigate alleged violations of environmental rules.

Furthermore, the agreement would provide a framework for environmental co-operation between the countries with respect to environmental enforcement capacity, protection of biodiversity, conserving shared migratory or endangered species and developing mechanisms to protect the environment.

Disputes between the countries would be resolved through consultations and exchanges of information only. If those consultations and exchanges were unable to resolve the dispute, the offended party could request that an individual review panel be established to investigate the dispute.

We are opposing this bill for a number of reasons.

First, Panama has an established clear and absolute long-standing reputation as a tax haven for tax evasion and tax avoidance.

Second, Panama has a history of military dictatorship. It has a poor record of labour and human rights. As well, the deal's side agreements for both labour and the environment are very weak, as I will delineate.

Third, we are also concerned that the agreement provides greater rights and powers to foreign investors. This is worrisome given controversies on the environment and human rights records of some Canadian mining firms in Panama.

There are no penalties for environmental violation of this agreement whatsoever. If there was any single violation or multiple violations of the environmental side agreement, not one penny is provided for in this agreement to be levied in terms of fines or penalties; in other words, the environmental side agreement is only suggested.

I will first deal with the tax haven situation. The amount of money invested in tax havens in the world globally at the moment is at an all-time high. In 2011, almost 25% of Canada's investment was invested in the world's top 12 tax havens.

According to a Tax Justice Network report from 2011, Canada loses an estimated \$80 billion per year to all forms of tax evasion. The government does not have a system for estimating and publishing the amount of lost revenues due to offshore non-compliance.

In 2011, there were more than 9,000 CRA employees working on taxpayer compliance. As of May 2012, 510 were assigned to the international audit program. That number has not changed since 2008, even though the use of offshore accounts has skyrocketed.

The CRA's 2010 audit of its own enforcement branch confirms the agency's inability to pursue complex offshore cases worth millions of dollars. Instead, it prefers to chase down the so-called "low-hanging fruit", such as small business and the self-employed.

Panama, as I said, has a long history of serving as a tax haven. Here is some of the testimony we heard at committee in 2010 by Todd Tucker, who is the research director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch. He testified that Panama offers foreign banks and firms a special offshore licence to conduct business there. Not only are those businesses not taxed; they are subject to little or no reporting requirements or regulations.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, the Panamanian government has little to no legal authority to ascertain key information about these offshore corporations, such as their ownership.

Panama's financial secrecy practices also make it a major site for money laundering from places throughout the world. According to the U.S. State Department, major Colombian and Mexican drug cartels, as well as Colombian illegal armed groups, use Panama for drug trafficking and money laundering purposes. The funds generated from illegal activity are susceptible to being laundered through Panamanian banks, real estate developments and more.

●(1215)

A recent Cornell University study analyzed all prosecutions of the Internal Revenue Service in the United States over a 10-year period, and it found that Panama was tied as the number one country in the world as a source of drug-laundered money and as a tax haven.

There was some testimony at committee that this situation was so-called "improving". Recently, Panama was removed from the so-called OECD "grey list" after implementing the standard for exchange of information when it signed a tax information exchange agreement with France. Panama now has 14 such agreements.

In March 2012, Canada and Panama entered into negotiations for a tax information exchange agreement. However, importantly, and critically for the opposition, this agreement has not yet been concluded or signed.

This is very troubling, considering the large amount of money laundering in Panama, which I believe no one in this House disputes, including money from drug trafficking. Panama's lack of taxation transparency has led the OECD to continue to label the nation as a tax haven.

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I should point out that the so-called “greyness” is lifted from a country when it signs tax exchange information agreements with 12 countries. Notably, former president Sarkozy of France said that, notwithstanding that Panama had signed more than 12—in other words 14—such agreements, he still did not consider Panama to have entered the legitimate world of open transparent banking systems in the globe.

At committee, I questioned the government officials who testified about what due diligence Canada had done in determining the role of drug money in Panamanian banks and businesses. Astonishingly, they had done no study.

Cameron MacKay, a DFAIT official, on October 2, 2012, testified thus:

...we don't have figures in that regard, and to my knowledge the Canadian government hasn't done particular studies. But we are well aware, of course, that Central America is a region now that's suffering very seriously from the narco-trafficking trade. It's a serious issue across the region, including in Panama.

The U.S. Congress refused to ratify a free trade agreement with Panama before signing a tax information exchange agreement. According to witnesses, this agreement has “a large loophole...that...allows Panama to sidestep tax transparency provisions if they are 'contrary to the public policy' of Panama”.

Analyses of these tax exchange information agreements indicate they are highly ineffective in preventing legal tax avoidance or legal tax evasion unless they are carefully drafted. These agreements typically do not have an automatic information-sharing provision, but rather individual requests must be made.

Furthermore, these tax exchange information agreements generally do not require a partner country to provide information necessary for determining tax compliance in the other nation if it has not been previously created. In particular, it is typically necessary to know the name of the individual suspected of tax evasion to request the overseas tax information. Governments rarely have this information without a whistleblower.

Prior to the clause-by-clause review of Bill C-24, the NDP official opposition proposed to the committee a motion that would stop the implementation of the Canada-Panama trade agreement until Panama agreed to sign a tax information exchange agreement, as the U.S. Congress did.

My motion was defeated by the Conservatives and the Liberals who argued that progress was being made on this matter with regard to negotiations underway to sign an agreement. However, we do not have a tax exchange information agreement between Canada and Panama today as we sit and vote on this free trade agreement.

In other words, we are dealing with a noted tax haven, one of the most notorious drug laundering centres in the world. The U.S. Congress said it would not be safe or prudent to sign a free trade agreement with such a country until it first had a tax exchange information agreement in place. However, in this House, the government is asking parliamentarians to go ahead and give a most favourable nation status free trade agreement that would allow money and investment to flow with very little barrier between our two countries, when we do not have a tax exchange information

agreement in place, but one might happen in the future. That is imprudent. That is irresponsible.

The U.S. Congress would not ratify its FTA with Panama before a tax exchange information agreement was signed. Why are we?

• (1220)

I want to talk a bit about the labour co-operation agreement. It is not as strong as it could be. It has weak enforcement mechanisms. It invokes international labour organizations' core labour standards. However, according to testimony we received at committee, the agreement does not include specific protection for the right to organize and the right to strike. It provides instead for so-called “effective” recognition of the right to collective bargaining, making this deal weaker than others Canada has signed. Enforcement is weak. Fines are small. There are no countervailing duties and there is no provision for abrogation or any other such remedy.

We heard a lot of testimony that what Canadian business wants is a level playing field. I questioned experts and witnesses at committee and asked what the minimum wage was in Panama. The answer I got was between \$1 and \$2 per hour. How is that a level playing field for Canadian employers who have to pay minimum wages in Canada of at least \$9 or \$10 an hour, as well as workers' compensation, health benefits and Canada pension plan benefits? As well, they have to comply with a whole bunch of regulations that are part and parcel of a modern industrial economy. How are they supposed to compete on a so-called level playing field with Panamanian employers who are paying their workers \$1 to \$2 an hour? That is not a level playing field. It is not fair to Canadian business to sign and enact a trade agreement with a country that has such low standards.

The agreement on the environment is a replication of environmental agreements we have signed before and does not provide for a single penny of penalty. What kind of agreement obligates another country to certain environmental standards, but if it violates them we send it a letter and admonish it? That is irresponsible.

I have a quote from Jennifer Moore from MiningWatch. She states:

Although [this agreement] includes an environmental side chapter, this is a non-binding declaration that relies on political will for its implementation, of which sort we have not seen in Panama. On the contrary, we've seen the undermining of environmental protections at the behest of Canadian companies.

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The agreement has an investor-state dispute settlement, something that we have heard a lot about in the House over the last two weeks because one is contained in the foreign investment protection agreement with Canada and China. This deal would further entrench the ability of companies to sue governments for policies that are seen to hurt investments. They are administered through tribunals that do not live up to Canadian values of justice, where the judges do not have security of tenure and there is no effective appeal mechanism. In fact, there are about 60 international lawyers around the world who sit on these tribunals. One recently said that he could not believe that any country in the world would give over to an unaccountable panel of three lawyers the power to strike down its domestic democratic legislation. That is exactly what was said.

These investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms are very dangerous. We have seen in the FIPA that they could subject Canadian taxpayers to millions, perhaps billions, of dollars of liabilities simply for the government taking measures to protect Canadian businesses or the environment or social programs. That is wrong.

In terms of the environment, there is a Mesoamerican corridor in Panama that is one of the most important biological and biologically diverse areas of the world. Currently there is a worldwide attempt by mining companies to mine in that area. This is something that is very concerning to many environmentalists. Hundreds of different types of species are at risk through unrestricted mining activities. We heard testimony at committee that this is also of major concern.

Panama accounts for less than 1% of our trade. It is actually 0.03% of Canada's trade. The government always brags about the number of agreements that it has signed. It has signed nine agreements. Who were those agreements with? They were with Panama, Jordan, Colombia, Honduras, Liechtenstein. With great respect to these countries, they are not major economic powers.

What the New Democrat opposition wants is a strategic trade policy where we restart the multilateral negotiations, where we sign trade deals with developed countries that have high standards and developing countries that are on progressive trajectories. These are countries like Japan, India, Brazil, South Africa and the BRIC countries. These are the countries that we should be signing trade agreements with, not countries like Panama that are drug laundering centres, tax havens and have low standards that will hurt Canadian business.

• (1225)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I like some of the sentiment in what the member is saying and his concern about the domestic situation in Panama right now. I will make my question very simple because I want to explore how we go about improving the situation.

One of the things I liked about the free trade agreements were the imperatives and standards being set for labour and other issues. However, if every country isolated Panama because of its low wages and other things, how would it better itself?

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, that is a thoughtful question. I would turn it around and argue that if one were to make the argument that the only way to raise standards in another country were to engage in trade with it, then we should sign free trade agreements

with every single country in the world regardless of their domestic situation. That is clearly absurd.

When Canada is determining whether or not we should give most favoured nation status to a country, we should have some strategic policy framework with which to do so. We should be signing agreements with countries that are showing positive movement and development toward modern civilized standards. Obviously we would not want to sign a trade agreement with a country that had a terrible human rights record or that refused to conform to the norms of civilized society. We would not want to do that.

In the case of Panama it has made some progress toward eliminating its longstanding reputation as a tax haven, but it is not there yet. The U.S. Congress said it would not let investment flow from Panama to the United States, when it knows there is drug laundered money there and Panama is a tax haven, until it has an effective tax information exchange in place to ensure drug money is not going into the United States.

Why are the Liberal Party and the Conservatives not taking the same stand here in Canada?

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened fairly closely to my hon. colleague's speech and he raises more questions than he actually answers. One of the issues he talked about at length was levelling the playing field. On the one hand, he wants to level the playing field with Panama bringing what many would say is a third world country into the league of manufacturing nations and into more modern society. On the other hand, he says we cannot do that because Panamanians are working for \$1 or \$2 an hour and we are working for much more than that here. Therefore we cannot somehow compete against them.

The whole point of free trade agreements is to boost the economy in a region, to boost the standard of living of people, to boost their access to education, to boost their access to health care, to improve the overall general climate and ability of those individuals to find work in a modern society. How can we on one hand level the playing field in some areas and not in others?

• (1230)

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, I agree in general that trade policy has a number of aims including, hopefully, to boost the standard of living in each country. It is a fair question as to whether or not that actually happens with certain agreements. It depends on the countries involved and it depends on the terms of the agreement. Unlike the Conservatives who take it as an ideological article of faith that simply signing a trade agreement has some magical power to boost the standard of living in both countries, we in the official opposition prefer to deal in the realm of evidence, where that is not necessarily the case.

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In the case of Panama, all we can do is deal with the situation that we have before us. Again, most favoured nation status is a very special status that Canada accords to certain countries. We do not just give it to any country in the world. We give it to certain countries and we hopefully have some policy rationale for doing so.

On this side of the House we do not think that signing a free trade deal with a drug laundering tax haven is a good idea. The Conservatives say they are tough on crime and a law and order party. I do not know why they are making it easy for drug laundered profits to come into our country. They should explain to Canadians why they are not listening to the official opposition's wise amendment to hold off on this treaty until we have an effective tax information exchange agreement. That is what we have suggested. Conservatives have said no.

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last Friday I asked the Minister of International Trade a question. I asked the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons the same question this morning, when he moved time allocation.

He said that, at present, negotiations are under way to conclude a tax information exchange agreement in order to fight tax havens, which we often hear about in Panama. Although there have been improvements, as my colleague pointed out, the U.S. Congress has adopted this same philosophy and waited for taxpayers to be treated fairly before ratifying the free trade agreement. It is important to point that out. Could my colleague comment on that?

Furthermore, my Liberal colleague said earlier that the situation could improve if we treated workers better. Why should we trust this vague political will? Why not first deal with these injustices and then sign a free trade agreement?

[English]

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question. I have not even heard any attempt by the government to answer the question of why it would not agree with the official opposition and wait to make sure we have the kind of tax transparency legislation in place that we know is necessary. We are not dealing in a vacuum here. We are dealing with a country that is one of the top two tax havens in the world. I think all Canadians remember the Panamanian dictator, Manuel Noriega. They remember that Panama was used as a base for running drugs with the Contras. This was not terribly long ago.

I understand Panama has recently emerged from dictatorship and is making some progress towards becoming a fully functioning democracy, but the testimony we heard in committee is that they are not there yet. Panama does not yet have a fully independent judiciary. It does not have a fully democratic system.

Until Canadians can be sure that we are not signing an agreement that sees drug laundered profits come into our country, I do not think we should be according most favoured nation status to that country. I think most Canadians would agree with that.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with much of what the member for Vancouver Kingsway had to say, but I disagree with holding up the legislation.

What would the cost of waiting be, in terms of those export industries affected? I am thinking of potato exports from my own province. The government did have 38 months in which to deal with the legislation and could have negotiated some of the concerns that the member for Vancouver Kingsway has, but it failed to do that. It blames it on the opposition, but the government had our support and it could have passed the legislation.

The change that has happened is that on October 31 the Panama FTA with the United States kicked into effect. This is the second trade area now where we find ourselves at a disadvantage as Canadians. South Korea being the other one.

Has the member done any economic analysis to see what the impact of waiting might be?

• (1235)

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for his question and for his great service to the committee.

My hon. colleague was sitting in committee with me when we were questioning DFAIT officials to get an idea of the economics involved. He, as well as I, heard that total trade between Panama and Canada amounts to 0.03% of our trade. We are not talking about anything significant at all in terms of trade. I think Panama ranks in the high 80s in terms of countries with which we trade around the world.

Again, the difference between the Americans and Canada in this is that the Americans were prudent and made sure that they had the tax haven issue dealt with prior to according most favoured nation status. I think that was a wise move on the Americans' part.

I am not sure why the Liberal Party did not agree with the New Democrats that it would be prudent to do the same thing in Canada. For our part, we are not saying that we are necessarily opposed to a free trade agreement with Panama, but we are opposed to a free trade agreement before we have the necessary checks and balances in place to make sure that we are not extending tax haven status from Panama to Canada. Right now, that cannot be said.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I start the main part of my speech, I would like to take a bit of time to continue my rebuttal of some of the comments made by my hon. colleague from the NDP. I want to lay it out in pretty general terms.

A number of comments were made that simply do not wash. The comment was made that we can hold off on the treaty until we get a tax information exchange agreement. Yes, we can hold off on the treaty forever. We do not ever have to sign it, but we can also negotiate two different areas at the same time.

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The reality is that Panama is off the OECD grey list. It is on the so-called white list, because it has improved its tax information sharing with other nations. Therefore, that is no longer an issue for OECD countries. Meanwhile, we are trading with Panama today.

The hon. member does a total disservice to Canadian companies that are trading with Panama now. There is \$111 million worth of trade between Canada and Panama, and he shrugs that off as if that is nothing. A good deal of that trade is coming out of Quebec, Atlantic Canada, Ontario, western Canada and British Columbia. It is shared equally among the provinces, and everyone gains. It is an absolute disservice to say that \$111 million worth of trade is not important. I frankly disagree.

When we look at the idea of rules-based trading, having a system in which we understand what the tariffs are, going in, and that they will be eliminated to zero, it is all about building capacity in Panama. We cannot do that overnight. Panama has moved light years in the last 20 years, and it has moved in the right direction on every single thing. When the Panamanians took over the Panama Canal, the naysayers, a group the NDP apparently belongs to, said that they would never be able to operate the Panama Canal. They said that the Americans could operate it, because they can do anything. Do you know what? The Panamanians took over the Panama Canal, and not only did they operate it, they did it well.

What has that done for the Panamanian psyche and Panamanian society? It has put hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue into Panama. That hundreds of millions of dollars builds capacity, the very capacity the NDP wants to thwart in Panama. That is the capacity that builds roads and hospitals and sends kids to school. More importantly, when we sign this free trade agreement with Panama, which will enable it to acquire cheaper food because it will be tariff free, kids will be sent to school with food in their bellies. That is a terrible thought, apparently, for the NDP anti-trade group.

I shake my head. I had great hopes for the New Democratic Party in this Parliament. It said that it was going to support trade and look at the trade deals for what they were. New Democrats found a way not to support trade. Whether they like it, whether they do not like it, there are some good things and some bad things. At the end of the day, when the rubber hits the road, the final verdict is what counts. If New Democrats do not support this trade agreement, they do not support trade. They should not try to have it both ways. They should not try to equivocate. Either they support trade or they do not support trade.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for putting up with that. It was important that I get it off my chest. I would like to get into the main part of my speech now.

I am pleased to be here today to talk about the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. The free trade agreement would generate increased export and investment opportunities for Canadians by creating a preferential and more predictable trade and investment environment, something I talked about in my opening comments.

• (1240)

When the free trade agreement comes into force, Panamanian tariffs on over 90% of Canadian goods exported to that country will be eliminated immediately. That is good news for Canadian

exporters. With \$111 million of merchandise traded between Canada and Panama, that is fantastic news.

For Canadian service providers, the free trade agreement would help expand market access opportunities in areas such as information and communications technology, energy and financial services. For Canadians looking to invest in Panama, the free trade agreement would include a chapter of comprehensive rules governing investment. These rules would provide greater protection and predictability for Canadian investors and their investments in Panama. At the same time, the labour co-operation agreement would ensure that these economic advances would not be made at the expense of workers' rights. Furthermore, the agreement on the environment would commit both countries to pursuing high levels of environmental protection, to improving and enforcing their environmental laws effectively, to maintaining appropriate environmental assessment procedures and to ensuring that they do not relax their environmental laws to encourage trade and investment.

I will speak for a moment on that, because it is absolutely key to protecting the environment. Not every country in the world has the same standard of environmental protection. That is the reality of the world we live in. Many of the G8 countries and more advanced economies can afford to protect the environment. For growing economies, those dollars are taken from somewhere else to protect the environment. The great thing about this chapter of the investment treaty would be that they could not allow their environmental protection rules to become slacker. They could not be less for a Panamanian company than for a Canadian company. At the end of the day, it would mean that both countries would have to ensure that they did not relax their environmental laws to encourage trade or investment. That would be a step in the right direction, and it is those types of basic rules that would make a difference for the future of Panama.

The same agreement on the environment would also include provisions on encouraging the use of voluntary best practices, corporate social responsibility and a commitment to promote public awareness of the parties' environmental laws.

The free trade agreement would also provide Canadian exporters of goods and services with greater market access to Panama's government procurement opportunities, including those related to the Panama Canal expansion and other infrastructure projects.

The Panama Canal project is one of the largest and most ambitious projects in the region. It is expected to cost an estimated \$5.3 billion. This agreement would better enable Canadian suppliers and investors from across the country to participate in this megaproject by ensuring that Canadian goods and services would have access to procurement by the Panama Canal Authority, without discrimination.

Government Orders

However, it is not just about the canal. I will broaden the discussion further to many of the tremendous opportunities this agreement would offer Canadians when it comes to government purchasing. Our government has been at the forefront of efforts to expand and secure access to foreign government procurement markets. According to OECD statistics, government purchasing plays a significant role in the economies of most countries, including Canada. It accounts for approximately 10% to 15% of a country's GDP, amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars annually around the world. These markets present significant opportunities for Canadian suppliers, and our government is working hard to ensure that Canadians have the tools available to take advantage of these opportunities. These obligations would also support the interests of Canadian taxpayers, ensuring increased access, competition and fairness in government procurement in Canada.

• (1245)

What is wrong with the idea of the taxpayer getting the best possible value for his or her hard-earned tax dollars? There is nothing wrong with that principle. These obligations would also support the interests of Canadian taxpayers, ensuring access, competition and fairness in government procurement. I have said that twice, because it is worth repeating. It is worth understanding the basic fairness that can be brought to the procurement market. Ultimately, suppliers, governments and their taxpayers all benefit from these efforts. Our government seeks to accomplish these goals by negotiating agreements such as the World Trade Organization agreement on government procurement and specific chapters in Canada's free trade agreements, such as the one with Panama.

Earlier this year, our government welcomed the successful conclusion of negotiations to modernize the WTO agreement on government procurement. However, our efforts to secure and expand opportunities for Canadian suppliers go beyond the World Trade Organization. Most of Canada's free trade agreements, from the North American Free Trade Agreement to those with Peru and Colombia, have obligations on government purchasing. These obligations are based on core principles, including a commitment to non-discrimination between domestic and foreign suppliers as well as an assurance of transparency and clear procedures.

The Canada-Panama free trade agreement we are debating here today is another step in our effort to create jobs, growth and long-term prosperity for hard-working Canadians.

It has been said many times in the House that Panama has a dynamic and rapidly growing economy. Canada's businesses have long been interested in gaining or expanding access to this emerging market. Despite the global economic downturn since 2008, Panama's economy continues to show strong signs of growth. In fact, its political stability and progressive business environment have helped Panama achieve impressive average growth of 6% to 7% over the past several years.

Panama is also an ideal location for Canadian businesses seeking to expand and build long-term business ventures in the Americas. As a gateway to the region, our trade agreement with Panama will make it easier for Canadians to establish that foothold in the Americas.

Panama's government market, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, transportation and services, represents a significant

opportunity for Canadian suppliers. The ambitious \$5.3 billion expansion of the Panama Canal, which I mentioned earlier, is at the top of the list. The Panama Canal serves as a key hub between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and is a significant driver of Panama's economy. Its expansion would bring about increased container traffic, some of which will access Canadian ports to supply the North American market. This is yet another example of why Canada must act quickly to implement this agreement. Canadian businesses can compete and win against the best in the world, but we must ensure that they have a fair opportunity to do so.

As I said, opportunities exist beyond the canal. In 2010, the Panamanian government announced an infrastructure plan valued at \$13.6 billion over five years. Numerous infrastructure projects are either under consideration or are already in progress to build and improve roads, hospitals, bridges and airports. Among these projects is the Panamanian government's plan to construct a metro system valued at \$1.5 billion.

These projects present many opportunities for Canadian companies and Canadian workers. However, we need this agreement in force, because Canadians can benefit from it. The fact is that despite having signed nearly two and a half years ago and having debated it in this place for nearly 60 hours, the opposition continues to accuse our government of rushing this deal. Two and a half years and 60 hours somehow means that we are rushing the deal. I really beg to differ.

We have seen time and time again that the NDP will use any excuse to oppose a trade agreement. It has been that way ever since NAFTA. Twenty-five years ago, the opposition claimed that the Canada-U.S. and North American free trade agreements would wipe out millions of jobs, compromise Canada's sovereignty over freshwater and cause us to lose our Canadian culture. None of those claims came true. In fact, precisely the opposite happened. Since those agreements were signed, the Canadian economy has boomed. Hard-working Canadians have benefited, and we still have full control over our water. Canadian culture is more alive and well, and I dare say, profitable, than it has ever been in the history of our country.

• (1250)

It is not only the NAFTA that the NDP opposes. The NDP member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, when he was the leader of the Nova Scotian NDP, called trade agreements jobs destroying and vowed to fight all trade agreements. The member for Burnaby—New Westminster and former NDP trade critic went so far as to work against Canadian exporters when he argued that Buy American was a perfectly logical policy.

Protectionism is not logical. There is nothing in protectionism that is logical. We should not be surprised that this is yet another trade agreement that the NDP has failed to support. In fact, the NDP members have stood in the way of our attempts to open up new markets for our exporters at every opportunity.

Government Orders

Now, because of these delays, our competitors are catching up. Panama's free trade agreement with the European Union could enter into force as early as the end of this year. Let us consider that for a moment. Most members in this House would look at the European Union and say it is a market-based economy with very high standards for labour relations and the environment and, certainly, that it has democratically based governments.

The EU has done a tremendous job in putting 27 member states together, and soon to be 28 with Croatia joining. We also need to look at the EU for a moment. It did all of that for its member countries to trade with one another. It broke down the trade barriers. The EU has challenges, and in fact the entire world has challenges, with the economy. However, the EU moved forward because it tore down trade barriers. I ask the NDP members to think about this for a moment, that these nations some 60 years ago were shooting at one another. Where are these nations today? They have the most powerful and richest consumer economy on the planet, with 500 million people. It is amazing, and it is because they dared to tear down trade barriers.

Even more importantly, the Panama-U.S. free trade agreement came into force just last week. Another democratically based government with high respect for the environment and for labour, our closest neighbour and largest trading partner, is trading with Panama. That is okay to the NDP members: they will let the Americans and the European Union trade with Panama, but somehow it is wrong for Canada to do the same thing and let our companies compete on equal footing.

Our companies need this agreement so they can take advantage of these commercial opportunities. It is important that Canadian firms establish an early presence to build solid relationships to capitalize on the future opportunities that will arise in this emerging market.

Canadian companies clearly have the expertise to meet Canada's development plans. The Canada-Panama free trade agreement would guarantee access for Canadian suppliers to these types of procurement opportunities, reducing the risk of doing business in the region. The agreement, moreover, would ensure that Canadian suppliers can compete on the same basis as their main competitors in the United States.

It is our job as members of Parliament to make sure that Canadian companies have secure access to opportunities of this nature.

In summary, the time has come to move forward. I certainly still hold out hope for my NDP colleagues. I certainly believe that they do want to move to the centre of the political spectrum. I think in their heart of hearts they understand that trade is good. They have some challenges maybe with some members, but we all have challenges. We do not all agree on every single item. I understand that.

Intuitively, look at the folks we are trading with around the world, especially the United States and the European Union. They are trading with Panama now. They will have their foot in the door ahead of us. We need to be there on equal footing with our foot in the door at the same time.

● (1255)

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in listening intently to my hon. friend's comments, one of the things that jumped out at me was his statement that he does not believe in protectionism because it is a bad thing for the government and Canada.

I guess that would explain why the government would leave Canadian dairy farmers out to dry when supply management disappears in this country because of trade deals, such as with the EU, which this government calls protectionism.

Would my friend like to comment on that?

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member would like to take a moment, I would be happy to provide a briefing on the comprehensive economic trade agreement with the European Union. Certainly, as he well knows and surely agrees with, our position is that supply management is not on the table in those agreements. There is nothing in that agreement that changes the long-held Canadian position on supply management.

Furthermore, supply management has not prevented our signing any other trade agreements, including NAFTA, our agreement with Colombia, and our ongoing negotiations with Japan and the TPP and others. Our position on protection of supply management has not affected any of them.

Every government reserves the right to protect certain items like social services, health care, water, and some that are trade-restrictive such as supply management. In every single trade agreement that Canada has signed, we protected those areas.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not always agree with the parliamentary secretary, but I would agree with him that we are now in a bind because the United States has reactivated its FTA effective October 31, and we have rapidly come to a disadvantage in that market as a result.

However, I have to ask the parliamentary secretary where the government has been for the last 38 months. It had the ability to get the bill through Parliament and at this late hour, after the fact, it is now introducing closure to try to get it through, but we are already at a disadvantage at this point.

The parliamentary secretary may want to answer that, but I have a different question for him. The government has gone to great lengths to talk about the advantages to us from an FTA and the expansion of the Panama Canal. The following quotation appeared in the United States Congressional Research Service's report to Congress on the proposed U.S.-Panama FTA dated April 21, 2011. It states:

Another unique feature of the FTA negotiations was the treatment of business issues with respect to the Panama Canal Area. Its status as an autonomous legal entity under the Panamanian Constitution required separate negotiations for government procurement, labor, investment, and other areas. The United States is the only country with which Panama has been willing to negotiate issues related to the canal area in an FTA.

Where does Canada now stand on procurement issues with respect to the Panama Canal under that kind of an arrangement?

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• (1300)

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, I would disagree. I believe there are opportunities for procurement in the expansion of the Panama Canal.

The hon. member is well aware that we are getting to the final days of the expansion of the Panama Canal. I think we are about two years from the opening date and a lot of those contracts have been let. However, there are certainly procurement contracts and subcontracts available to Canadian companies.

More importantly, if we think of all the global commerce out there on the oceans, the great advantage to Canada with the advent of the twinning of the Panama Canal is that upon that date over 5% of that commerce will go through the Panama Canal at one point or another. When we put that global commerce up the east and west coasts of Canada, our coastal communities and cities stand to gain, especially our ports, such as the Port of Vancouver; the Port of Prince Rupert; the Port of Saint John, New Brunswick; the Port of Halifax; and the Port of St. John's, Newfoundland. Those gateway ports will bring more trade to both coasts of Canada.

That is where the real opportunity from the Panama Canal will lie on its opening date.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his great intervention on promoting trade around the world.

I come from a riding with a lot of agricultural sectors. We have beef production, pork production, poultry production and horticulture. In my riding we have Conestoga College, which just recently instituted a food processing centre. We have all kinds of food processing in our riding, including Piller's Meats, Schneider Foods and Conestoga Meat Packers. There are all kinds of opportunities for increased exports.

I am wondering if my colleague could comment on the importance not only to the primary producers of our grain and oil seeds, poultry, pork and beef, but also in terms of our food processing technology, which is certainly envied around the world. We could certainly benefit the producers and processors as well.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, I cannot answer the question much better than the member posed it. The reality is absolutely there, and not just for agricultural exports but also for food processing equipment and machinery. There are ample opportunities to export that type of technology to Panama or through Panama as a gateway into the rest of Central and South America.

There are number of areas where we stand to gain, including merchandise exports, agricultural exports and financial services. There is nothing but opportunity with this agreement.

I take great exception to any hon. member who would stand in this place and say that that \$111 million in merchandise trade we do with Panama today is somehow not important. For the companies doing that trade today, it is extremely important. Not only that, but they will be the first people able to take advantage of a future expansion of trade.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoulo, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was a member of the Standing Committee on International Trade for almost a year, and I am always amazed at the answers that the parliamentary secretary gives to justify certain actions.

I will focus on the issue of tax havens. I took the time to do some research, and I found some very important reference sites—sites that promote tax havens to the public. For example, a European site recommends tax havens in fewer than a dozen countries, including Panama, for European business creators or SME managers.

Similarly, CCP Inc. says on its website that it can set up any type of offshore company in five tax havens, including Panama. Panama is part of these tax havens. The company's slogan is "Security and Privacy are Your Rights!" The site is available in English, French and Russian, which gives a very good idea of how serious the company's business is and how much money it is raking in.

I want to ask the parliamentary secretary how he can so easily condone tax evasion and tax havens.

• (1305)

[*English*]

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member would agree with me that no parliamentarians are condoning tax havens. At the same time, I think we need to realize that all countries are moving forward at different rates and not all have the same capacity.

Let us take a look at where the Panamanian government has moved on tax havens. They have signed tax information exchange agreements with 14 countries around the world. That fact alone has taken them off the OECD grey list. They are now not on the grey list but the so-called white list, with most favoured nation status.

The reality is that Panamanians are moving in the right direction. This is not a matter of condoning tax havens; this is a question of whether we are going to trade with a country with a formula that establishes rules-based trading. We are trading with them now. We are not suddenly going to start trading with Panama tomorrow, because we are already doing it. The difference will be that we will have a clearly established set of rules to do so.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure today to rise and make comments on the bill before us, the free trade agreement with Panama. Before I get to the substantive part of my argument, I want to touch on a couple of things.

We have heard a lot about the NDP being against free trade. The NDP has shown that it is for free trade, when those free trade agreements are negotiated in a manner that protects human rights, labour rights, the environment, and that is transparent and sustainable.

Government Orders

We are so serious about free trade that our critic, and it was only the NDP critic, my esteemed friend from Vancouver Kingsway, took 13 substantive amendments to committee. If we were not serious, all we would be interested in saying is that we are opposed to this. We are not. We wanted to make this free trade agreement work. In order to make it work, our critic and our whole team put in a lot of time and took 13 amendments to committee. How many amendments did the other opposition parties make? Zero. However, despite all the hard work, my colleagues across the aisle once again refused to accept any amendment.

One of the key things about being a parliamentarian, and the whole purpose of the committee stage, is for people from all political parties to try to improve the legislation. However, there is arrogance from the other side, and because Conservatives have a majority, they are not open to any amendments. The government has a bizarre idea that anything they propose is so superior that it could not possibly be corrected or amended by anyone else. The Conservatives totally ignored the serious work done by parliamentarians to try to fix their legislation so we could then support it.

If any blame is to end up anywhere, it is on the government side. Once again, Conservatives have failed to allow parliamentarians to do their job. They not only use their parliamentary majority at the committee stage to shut down all the amendments, but today as we saw earlier, they used their majority to shut down debate. What do they have to hide? They just want to read out the same old mantra over and over again.

We also heard from the government that this is all about improving trade and improvements for Canadians. Neither the former government, led by a Liberal, nor my friends across the aisle, can be trusted to negotiate free trade agreements. They did not do and they do not do the necessary oversight that is required. My colleagues across the aisle love to quote dollars and figures, so let me quote some numbers from them. These are the Conservatives' figures.

I was so keen to speak on this that I forgot to say that I will be sharing my time with my esteemed colleague from Surrey North.

As I was saying, we have gone from a \$26 billion trade surplus to a \$50 billion trade deficit. For our manufacturing, which is a value-added job, the trade deficit has gone up six times, to over \$90 billion. Those are decent paying jobs that Canadians no longer hold because they have been given away.

Raw materials are not only Canadians' raw materials, but they are also the inheritance of our children and grandchildren. Once again, the export of raw materials without value-added jobs adds up to \$30 billion, but value-added exports are down to \$35 billion.

• (1310)

If I were an economist or an accountant, I would be looking at these figures and asking the government to go back to the drawing board to do some homework. That is the teacher part of me.

We also hear the Conservatives talk about opening the borders, free enterprise, and all of that. I am reminded that we hear a lot of that when it comes to big tax breaks for international and national corporations. We hear about it when it comes to free trade agreements. However, when it comes to labour market adjustments,

of course, all of that disappears. Then we pass legislation so that employers can pay 15% less to temporary foreign workers who we bring in to ensure the free marketplace analogy is not allowed to work when it comes to Canadians looking for decent paying jobs.

I heard my esteemed colleague from across the way talk about NAFTA and how wonderful it has been. I would remind him of the reality in British Columbia, the beautiful province that I reside in and which is a pleasure to call home. In B.C., we have seen truckload after truckload of raw logs going over the border. Many of our towns in northern B.C. and in the interior have become ghost towns, as they watch those raw logs disappear over the border. Gone with them are the jobs in manufacturing, and, of course, we then buy the manufactured products back.

Let me say that if one mentioned NAFTA in many towns in B.C., one would not get a pleasant reaction. My colleague from British Columbia sitting on the other side knows what a heated topic exporting raw logs from British Columbia is and how it has impacted our communities in a huge way.

The other issue I have to touch on is the environment. One of the key areas for us to address is the environment, and free trade agreements are one of the ways we can do that. However, the Conservative government seems determined to undermine and dismantle environmental protection. Through these free trade agreements, it would also be supporting environmental degradation in other countries as well. I think that is unacceptable. We really have to take a look at where we are going with this.

Members all know that we do not live in isolated cells. Environmental factors and global warming do not recognize borders. They do not stop to show a passport. When pollution occurs in Panama, it impacts us in British Columbia, across Canada and around the globe. We have to be cognizant of that.

Of course, our mining company interests in Panama would be protected and we are happy about that, but there needs to be a balance here. However, it is imbalanced, which makes us not support this particular free trade agreement.

I will quote from Jen Moore's presentation to MiningWatch Canada .

Although [the agreement] includes an environmental side chapter, this is a non-binding declaration that relies on political will for its implementation, of which sort we have not seen in Panama.

Last but not least, I want to mention the money laundering and tax haven in Panama.

Government Orders

The Conservative government talks about security and a halt to drugs. If someone has five marijuana plants, it would give them a six-month minimum sentence. However, it is willing to sign an agreement with a country that even the OECD has recognized as being a tax haven, where money laundering takes place and there is no transparency over those issues.

• (1315)

New Democrats have very serious concerns. We are opposed to this agreement because the Conservatives refuse to accept the very intelligent amendments put forward by our critic.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to my colleague, who implied that a free trade agreement can somehow be unilaterally amended in Parliament once all of the negotiations have occurred. More troubling than that was her comment that her party supports free trade.

I want to give her a lot of time to answer this question. I would like her to list all of the free trade agreements in the past 20 years that the NDP has supported.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, as I have said, we will support free trade agreements. We will support free trade agreements—

Mr. LaVar Payne: How many?

Mr. Harold Albrecht: The past 20 years.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, I would like to be able to finish my response.

New Democrats would like to be able to support free trade agreements. We supported the free trade agreement with Jordan. I was in the House when we voted for it, and I was very proud to do so. I was looking forward to supporting this one. I looked at the 13 amendments that the NDP critic put forward after a great deal of thoughtful deliberation, and if major amendments had been accepted, the NDP would have been rising in a wave. We would have been on our feet voting for this.

We take our parliamentary duties very seriously. We have to do due diligence and protect the environment, labour rights and Canadian jobs.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I share a lot of the members' concerns. However, she said at one point that if she were an economist, she would instruct the government to go back to the drawing board. I was wondering if she could cite an economist who actually said that.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, I have not had too many conversations with economists recently, and I will be very honest about that. However, I have discussed free trade with many working people in British Columbia. I have discussed free trade with some of the logging companies. I have discussed free trade with some of the trucking companies. I have discussed free trade and its impact, especially as we have seen it in B.C., with very diverse communities. All of them can see one thing very clearly: we should not sign a free trade agreement that does not benefit Canadian workers.

• (1320)

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, speaking of Canadian workers, after listening to this debate, I have to think that

the Conservatives' response to a flood would be to provide a thimble and say it is going to help. We have seen a gush of well-paid manufacturing jobs leave the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, presided over by the government.

Conservatives come before the House today and talk about good jobs and job creation. Let us see a job-creation plan from the government. We have been asking for this since we got here in 2011 and we have not seen a single one. Conservatives want to talk about good jobs. Let us put a plan on the table and not play around with the facts about jobs. I would like my colleague to respond to that.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we have been waiting with bated breath for the government to table a plan that would actually grow decent paying jobs in Canada. Instead, we have seen a huge increase in the number of temporary foreign workers. Last year alone, we brought in 191,000-plus temporary foreign workers because employers can pay them less. However, we do not give them any rights of residency or a pathway to residency, and at the same time we have very high unemployment. We have the highest unemployment among our youth, and yet the minister says the government is going to encourage even more people to come to Canada.

What about growing decent jobs for our young people who are graduating from universities, colleges and high school, and what about decent paying jobs right across this country? Instead, the government is trying to shut the door on EI.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise in the House on behalf of the citizens of Surrey North to speak to Bill C-24, the proposed free trade agreement between Canada and Panama.

As the Asia-Pacific Gateway critic and someone who is very concerned with Canada's trade deficit, I know my colleagues on the opposite side do not like facts and figures but I am going to give them some. When the Conservatives came into power in 2006, our trade surplus was \$25 billion. That is a fact. The Conservatives like to talk about trade and how they want to expand our markets. However, under the Conservative government that \$25 billion surplus has turned into a \$50 billion deficit. That is the Conservatives' record and they like to talk about numbers. I have gotten that off my chest so I will carry on with my speech.

I am very supportive of an open and progressive approach to trade. That includes building a stronger economy and promoting Canada's interests. Unfortunately this agreement would not fit the bill. I will not be supporting the bill for a number of reasons. Chief among those reasons is that when the bill's previous incarnation, Bill C-46, was studied at the committee stage, we heard very compelling testimony from many witnesses regarding the use of Panama as a tax haven for tax evasion and tax avoidance. Furthermore, Panama has a poor record on labour rights, and the deal's side agreements for labour and the environment are very weak. We are also very concerned that the agreement would provide greater rights and powers to foreign investors. This is worrisome, given controversies regarding the environmental and human rights records of some Canadian mining firms in Panama.

Government Orders

Bill C-24 was studied very briefly at the international trade committee of which I am a member. The testimony we heard confirmed that these issues continue to be of concern today. Motions and amendments that would address these glaring issues in the agreement were introduced by the member for Vancouver Kingsway, our NDP international trade critic, but were opposed and defeated by both the Liberals and the Conservatives.

After studying the situation in Panama more closely, one of my greatest concerns is that while Canada and Panama are in the process of negotiating a tax information exchange agreement, tax disclosure issues have yet to be meaningfully addressed despite protestations to the contrary from the Panamanian government, and undoubtedly the Conservative government, when we raise these issues. It is a major issue that the U.S. Congress refused to ratify a free trade agreement with Panama before signing a tax information exchange agreement.

There are very compelling reasons not to sign the agreement with Panama in the interest of Canadian taxpayers. In 2011, Canada's bilateral trade with Panama represented 0.03%, which is less than 1%, of our overall global trade. The agreement would represent the Conservatives' quantity over quality approach to trade deals. There is no need to rush into an agreement before meaningfully addressing the concerns about Panama being a tax haven.

I will speak in more depth about the tax information exchange agreement because it is very concerning and should cause us to pause before we enter into this agreement with Panama. In March 2012, Canada and Panama entered into the negotiation of a tax information exchange agreement. However, this agreement has not yet been signed. This is very troubling, considering the large amount of money laundering in Panama, including money from drug trafficking, that we heard about at the committee level. Panama's lack of taxation transparency has led the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to label the nation a "tax haven".

● (1325)

As I said before, the U.S. Congress refused to ratify a free trade agreement with Panama before it signed a tax information exchange agreement. Canadian Parliament should be equally cautious. However, analysis of these agreements indicates that they are highly ineffective in preventing legal avoidance or illegal tax evasion. These agreements typically do not have an automatic information sharing provision, rather an individual request must be made. Furthermore, they generally do not require a partner country to provide the information necessary for determining tax compliance in other nation if it has not been previously created.

Recently, Panama was removed from the so-called OECD "grey list" after substantially implementing the standard for exchange of information when it signed a tax information exchange agreement with France. I believe it has about 14 agreements in place.

At committee, prior to the clause-by-clause review of Bill C-24, my colleague, the member for Vancouver Kingsway, proposed a motion to the international trade committee that would stop the implementation of the Canada-Panama trade agreement until Panama agreed to sign a tax information exchange agreement. I voted in favour of the motion, as did the other New Democrat members of the committee. I supported it because it does not make

sense to sign a free trade agreement without a tax information exchange agreement in place.

Unfortunately, the motion was defeated by the Conservatives, along with the Liberals. They argued that progress was being made and negotiations were under way to sign an agreement. I strongly disagree with this line of reasoning. This is putting the cart before the horse. There is no reason to rush the agreement through Parliament. If we in fact are on our way to signing a tax information exchange agreement, why not wait? What is the rush? Why not get that agreement in place before we sign a free trade agreement with a nation that has been known to have money laundering and tax evasion schemes in place? That question has still not been answered by the government.

Considering Panama's history and reputation on such matters, it should be clear why such an agreement is necessary before signing a trade deal and why we need to examine its terms and adequacies. The U.S. Congress would not ratify a free trade agreement with Panama before a tax information exchange agreement was signed. Why should we not have the same basic requirement in Canada? It does not make sense to me and I do not understand why or how it makes sense to the members of the House who intend to vote to pass the bill.

At the committee level, we proposed several reasonable amendments that would have made progressive changes to the bill. These included the addition of the crucial concepts of sustainable development and sustainable investment, a requirement for tax transparency and provisions to incorporate the protection of labour rights in the bill, including the right to collective bargaining. Other amendments would have required the Minister of International Trade to consult with labour and trade unions, as well as work with human rights experts and organizations in order to create impact assessments for the trade agreement.

There are many amendments. In total 13 were introduced, yet the Conservatives voted them down. They were reasonable amendments that would have made reasonable corrections to some of the things the Conservatives have overlooked in this free trade agreement. The NDP prefers the multilateral approach to trade and supports trade agreements that expand Canadian exports by reducing harmful barriers to trade and encourage the development of value-added industries.

I want to conclude by saying the same thing I started with. The Conservatives' trade record is very poor. When they took over government it was \$25 billion in surplus. Now we are \$50 billion in deficit. We should look this deal over before passing it.

● (1330)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with some of the things the member said. When the Conservatives became the Government of Canada there was a significant trading surplus. The government policies of Mr. Chrétien and Paul Martin had a lot to do with that surplus. It is unfortunate that we have a huge trade deficit now. Many Canadians are equally concerned about that trade deficit.

Government Orders

One of the ways to deal with that trade deficit is to look at opportunities south of the border where we have lost a great deal of trade. It seems to me that the government is placing a high priority on Panama. It has been working on this for the last few years. It even had the support of the Liberal Party to get it through. It could have passed through the House two years ago, but the government continues to bring in the bill.

Does my colleague believe that the government is neglecting trade relations with other partners around the world at a fairly significant cost and that is one of the reasons why we have a huge trade deficit today?

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, our trade has gone from a surplus of \$25 billion to a deficit of over \$50 billion. That is absolutely correct. Not only that, but the manufacturing trade deficit has ballooned six times and is up to \$90 billion. Manufactured goods that we sell to other countries are the value-added products that produce good paying jobs.

The member is absolutely right. We have to encourage the government to be more progressive in negotiating trade agreements with other countries, such as Japan. We have to look at India, Brazil and South Africa. These countries have a growing market for our goods. We should be doing that at all times.

•(1335)

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it seems like my colleague across the way is one of the few in the NDP caucus who truly believe that trade is important for Canada, especially as Canada is an exporting nation.

Canada has a commodity that the opposition NDP seems to oppose everywhere it goes and that is the oil industry. This industry is well represented within my constituency, contributes largely to the Canadian economy and benefits us all. Obviously the opposition wants to bring forward a costly carbon tax for Canadian consumers, which is unfortunate. Those members have stood in the way of seeing this product move to other jurisdictions. There is a need for it in Asia and the United States. There is a need for it in a whole host of places. There is a demand for the product we are producing, which does lead to high paying jobs here in Canada. Unfortunately the NDP continues to oppose that specific industry.

I am wondering if the member opposite would agree that the oil industry is an important industry and one that we need to continue to hold up as a commodity that could benefit from additional trade agreements.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, not only am I supportive of an open and progressive approach to trade but the entire NDP caucus is open to a progressive trade policy.

I have looked at the Conservative record on this over the last six years. They will beat drums and talk about how they want to expand our markets. However, Canada had a surplus of \$25 billion and that surplus is now a deficit of \$50 billion. That is the Conservative Party's trade record. The Conservatives ideological approach is not working. We need to rethink and go strategically into countries that we can trade with, where we can send our manufactured goods, so we can create jobs here in Canada.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to be standing here in this House to speak about the issue of the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. I have had the opportunity to listen to members opposite and to some of the questions that have gone through to our colleagues.

Let me start by establishing, if I might, that part of my bona fide is that I have been on the trade committee since I was first elected, and I am now in my fifth year. It has been a privilege to be on that committee, because it has been a very active committee. I will touch on that in a moment.

It is rather interesting to hear members from the other side talk about the issue of free trade as if they were the primary proponents of it, when in fact in my experience over the last four years and some, they just do not support free trade. I will grant that members opposite, without a voice vote, chose to support the Jordan free trade agreement, and I salute them for that.

However, that is a modest deal. It is an important deal for what we are going to establish in the Middle East, but it is only a piece of a much larger spectrum of what Canada is trying to do.

As I address my comments, I am not sure whether I want to address members opposite in terms of some of the things they have said or whether I want to stay specifically to the point of the text and the message I want to deliver. Perhaps I can share a bit of both for the benefit of the House.

Yesterday I was in the 10th largest city in Canada: London, Ontario. Our hon. Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development was with me, as well as the members for Elgin—Middlesex—London and London North Centre. Mr. Butters, the president and CEO of Purifics, a water treatment facility success story, when asked by a person who was not in support of free trade how he could justify it, said he would not be here were it not for free trade. He said he deals with free trade in Europe and in the United States, and it is critical to his success, his survival. It is the reason he is in business today.

I can echo those comments right across the spectrum of businesses across our great country. Why do we think the job creators of this country are the ones who support free trade? It is because they know Canada's survival is as a trading nation.

Mr. Speaker, you would know, because you seem wise, that one out of every five positions in this country is predicated on trade, and that is growing.

I find it baffling that members opposite would stand up in this House and pretend to support free trade when in fact they do not vote in favour of it. I struggle with that very deeply. I need them to search their souls.

Mr. Speaker, you might advise them accordingly to consider that, to actually think about what it means to be without free trade in this country. It is that critical.

Government Orders

I have a couple more things I wanted to share because I really think it is important. The member opposite, in his comments, said it is only a small deal. I suppose in some respects it is only a small deal. However, could anyone tell me how small that is to the humble potato farmer of Prince Edward Island when he has to pay a huge tariff when he delivers his potatoes, whole, and his frozen fries to Panama?

Tell me, what would my friends from P.E.I. say? If they had any respect for the humble potato, if for no other reason than that, they would want to stand up and support this free trade deal.

There is much more. In every province and every territory in this country, there are those industries that significantly benefit from free trade. I would like to touch on those a little.

Can members opposite tell me how they justify tariffs of up to 15% in Nova Scotia on fish and seafood? I cannot understand why they would want to do that. Right now paper and paper board products in Newfoundland are suffering tariffs as much as 15%, which kills jobs. The party opposite talks about creating jobs, but I am not sure about that. If it were, it would look to Alberta.

I know members opposite are challenged for some seats in Alberta. Forest products have 15% tariffs; milling products have as much as 40% tariffs. Would members opposite say this agreement is not good enough for Albertans? I would say, if they want to grow some seats in that section of the country, they might just want to say it is good for Alberta, and if it is good for Alberta, it might even be good for them, if they would get behind this and endorse it.

If members opposite were from Saskatchewan, they would say that pulses and cereals have tariff rates that range anywhere from 15% up to 40%. That is killing jobs and prevents additional job creation in the province of Saskatchewan. In Manitoba, the oil seeds and pulses, again, have tariffs of up to 15%.

When we sign this free trade agreement with Panama, almost every tariff will be eliminated. Those that are not eliminated are going to have a range of some three to five years and then they will be eliminated.

● (1340)

What would our friends opposite say to the pork industry? I would actually ask them, and they have consistently heard from the pork industry, which says, "Please, let us do business in Panama without the job-killing tariffs". That is what they tell us.

I wonder what some members opposite would say to that. How can they stand up and say they support trade when in fact it has not been their history? I know, because I have sat in my chair at every meeting every week at the international trade committee, and that is not the position they take.

I have already excused Jordan, whatever excuse anyone might make about Jordan, and I have great respect for that trade agreement. However, I say it goes much more and greater and beyond that, and if they do ever want to imagine that at some point they would be at some spot other than that side of the House, they would have to come back and say trade is good for Canada and good for Canadian jobs. Frankly, I do not hear it from them. I hear a lot of rhetoric and I do not hear that.

When NDP members say it is a small deal, I would not say to these industries, companies and individual jobs in provinces and territories across this country, which are dependent on exporting to Panama, that this is just a small deal. I think that is rude, and we would never be rude in this House.

The interesting thing is that NDP members also ask what the rush is. I would like to inform the House, for those who do not know. Here is the rush. Did they know that last week the United States did sign its deal and ratified it with Panama? That automatically puts us at a significant disadvantage, because we are now behind the U.S., and we have to push this deal along. What is the rush? It was in 2008 that we started speaking about this and 2010 when we brought it back. It died in the last Parliament. We are trying to bring it back, so we can ensure that industry across this country is protected. We want to do that with every opportunity.

My colleague opposite made the comment that he would prefer to do multilaterals. This government has always said that multilaterals are good, and if Doha were around, we would support that. However, I fear that Doha is as dead as Elvis, and the problem with that is that we have to look at bilaterals and opportunities where we can.

Why are we doing CETA? That is 27 countries. That is a bilateral technically, but it is 27 countries with which we are doing business. We did EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, which is four countries: Norway, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Iceland. That was important to them and important to us.

I do not know why members opposite cannot celebrate good news. This is good news for Canada. It is great news for Canadian jobs. If we get behind the United States in terms of ratifying these deals, good deals for Canada, then frankly it puts our workers and jobs in Canada at a huge disadvantage.

It is interesting too, because I have heard of issues like environmental and labour rights. One of the things I am very proud of is how our officials have established the negotiations they have done with Panama, as they have done with other countries. They have been very proper and very thorough, dealing with labour co-operation agreements with Panama and environmental co-operation agreements.

There are just a couple of things I would like to emphasize, because I think they bear noting. Here is what it means for labour. Members opposite, particularly in Her Majesty's official opposition, think their only role is to oppose. Maybe some day in an off moment someone will explain why they are given that title, because that is all they seem to want to do, oppose. If they would just celebrate and get on board, put their politics aside and do what is right for Canada and Canadians and for jobs in this country, I would say that is the right thing. They should get on side with that right away.

Government Orders

It is interesting, when I hear about the concerns members opposite talk about with respect to labour. I want to touch on this. The labour co-operation agreement we have put in place has several things: the right to freedom of association; the right to collective bargaining; the right to the abolition of child labour; the elimination of forced and compulsory labour; the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

If members opposite were so compelled that they truly believed in that—forget the potato for just a moment—they would get behind this for the sake of labour in Panama. I am glad this does good things for the great people of Panama, whether it is from the environmental standpoint, whether it is from the labour co-operation standpoint, whether it is for their ability to improve their standard of living by being able to bring goods into our country. However, what about Canada?

• (1345)

Who is speaking for the Canadian worker? Who is speaking for Canadian jobs? Who is speaking for Canadian businesses that want this deal? Is that not the point? The Conservative Party is speaking for Canadian jobs, and I am proud to be a member of the party that does that.

I would like to touch on a couple of other things, because we have heard of issues like money laundering and how it is rampant in Panama. I decided to pull a piece out of a very interesting publication. Panama historically had challenges with respect to money laundering. Its improvement has been so significant that it has been taken off the grey list, because it has tried very hard to improve its financial institutions. Not only that, but we have great institutions like Scotiabank, which has been in Panama since 1983, and from a corporate social responsibility has helped show the way to do business properly with financial institutions in Panama. As a result of that success, it has become the fifth largest bank in Panama. I say bravo to Scotiabank for its leadership and commitment to corporate social responsibility. We can all be very proud of that.

There are other things about the opposition to this that frustrate me. We have heard discussion earlier today about the Panama Canal. The Panama Canal is a project of some \$5 billion or \$6 billion. I have heard at committee and in the House that somehow that has passed us by. That is not exactly true. We had the Ambassador of Panama to Canada come to our committee a few months ago, and he said there are still huge opportunities. They are not just with that \$6 billion project, but there are offshoots of that relating to infrastructure that represent some \$13.2 billion of economic benefit that will be available in the market. Would I not want to give businesses like EllisDon, McKay-Cocker and M.M. Dillon out of London, Ontario, which do great international work, and all those other London companies great opportunities to do business? Why would the opposition members deny it? That is just wrong.

If members were truly committed to supporting jobs in all their communities, as I know this side is, they would say this is a deal we must get behind. Maybe they have to think of it like Jordan, that it may not be the biggest deal, but it is important to various industries in every province and territory in this country. It is truly beneficial, and we know it to be because the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, local chambers of commerce and job creators say so. If that is truly

the case, it begs the question why members opposite cannot say they want to do this for the sake of their communities. I think it is the right thing for them to do. By getting behind a deal like this, they would be setting the stage for a very interesting dynamic, because Panama is the hub of Central America, which is the gateway between two major oceans and the gateway to South America.

We have done deals in Colombia and Peru, and in case there is some confusion, we deal with every country in the world in trade today. Canadian businesses deal with every country in the world today. Businesses are asking for a rules-based system so they know what happens. It is only right that businesses have an expectation that, when they do business in a foreign country, they know the consequences, the rights and the obligations. That seems to me to be fundamental. With my 30-plus years of business experience, I would say that if I wanted to do business in any country, I would want to know the rules.

Earlier I heard a member opposite say we need to do more business in the United States. By the way, I do not think any member of the House would challenge that, but we want to decrease the dependency on our business with the United States. I want to grow that business, but I want to expand it right around the world. That is why this government has been so committed to trade deals, everywhere from South America, to Jordan, to EFTA. We are now negotiating CETA, which involves the 27 countries of the European Union. We are negotiating the trans-Pacific partnership. We have recently been invited in. That involves many countries in the far east that will give us a gateway to Asia.

• (1350)

There is another opportunity we have not talked about. Several countries with which we already have trade, and in fact, with which we have trade agreements, but on a bilateral basis, are coming together in South America and Central America to try to establish more of that multilateral kind of concept. We support that. As long as a multilateral is not formal, I will do a bilateral agreement with every country in the world where I get a chance. That is my commitment to Canadian jobs.

I want to remind members that what we have here is a Canadian opportunity. However, we are already a little late. We cannot be late any longer. If we want to protect Canadian jobs, grow those opportunities, and protect that humble potato and everything else we do, we have an obligation to act expeditiously and as appropriately as we can to ensure that. Because Panama has already signed a deal with the United States, which is our major competitor in Panama, what we must do is put it in place as quickly as the House will allow. Then we must send it to the Senate, of course, for royal assent, as quickly as we can, for the sake of Canada, for the sake of our jobs, and to make sure that our kids have futures. Do not steal those jobs away. Give us the opportunity, give us the tools, to do that.

Statements by Members

As I stand in my committee, we hear members who have very thoughtful views about trade with other countries, and I respect the fact that they have those views. I am surprised, after they have done as much as they can, that they would not fully embrace the concept of free trade. It is so basic. It is basic business and basic humanity. If we were to do business with a country like Panama, it would be raising that standard of living. It really would. We would also be raising our standing of living in Canada. That is what is important.

We have created some 800,000-plus jobs since the economic action plan was put in place. That was not done by accident. That happened because we have a plan, and a critical part of that plan includes putting in free trade agreements right around the world.

If we truly want to consider opening up the gateways to South America, and we already have some avenues in place, we have to do that with Panama. That will matter to Central America. That will matter to South America. It sends a message that Canada is open for business. That is the key to what we are speaking about here.

It absolutely dazzles me when members opposite do not seem to understand that. I would truly like them to take their partisanship off, and for the sake of jobs in this country, come forward, just as they did in Jordan, where they showed that they could, to say that they support trade, because look at what we did in Jordan. I hope that was not just a ruse. I hope that is not the case.

I am not a cynical guy. My Cape Breton mom said, "You've got two things in your life. You've got your name and your integrity, and you don't mess up one without messing up the other."

I would ask the members opposite whether for the sake of Canada, for the sake of business, and for the sake of the Canadian worker, they would do as they did in Jordan and come alongside the Conservatives and let us just do this. Some things are just the right thing to do. That is fundamental.

It is a privilege for me to be on this committee, where I have an opportunity to have an opinion or two. I will apologize. My Cape Breton mother always said, "You remind me of your Cape Breton grandad. Why use 10 words when 100 can do the same thing?" I will raise my hand to say that this might be a modest fault. However, she also said, "If you don't stand for something, you fall for anything." Therefore, I say to members opposite, do not fall for anything. Stand for the right thing. Stand for Canadian jobs. Let us make a difference in this country and let us grow it to be the greatest in the world.

• (1355)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, you are familiar with the expression:

[English]

when nothing goes right, turn left.

[Translation]

I think that is what we need to do.

[English]

My colleague should know better. Trade is not only free trade. It can only be fair trade. That is very important.

[Translation]

The NDP wants balanced trade agreements that allow us to export our products and do business with the rest of the world while protecting workers' rights, local democracies, the environment and human rights. However, these things are never on the Conservatives' radar. My colleague was talking about a plan, but let us talk about facts, about what the Conservatives' plan is and the results of that plan.

Under the Conservative government, the trade surplus of \$26 billion a year has become a trade deficit of \$50 billion a year, which represents a sixfold increase in the trade deficit.

In my opinion, the Conservatives' plan is to have a race to the bottom while continuing to say that everything is fine.

[English]

Mr. Ed Holder: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure there was a question there. However, let me respond to one of the comments my hon. colleague made, which is that we are not paying attention to issues along the lines of labour and the environment. That is certainly not true.

If he was listening closely to my comments, and I am sure that he wanted to, he would have heard about the government's commitment to put in place very strong labour co-operation and environmental agreements that have teeth. What that means, and I will say it again, because opposition members may not have heard, is that labourers would have rights to freedom of association, collective bargaining, the abolition of child poverty, the elimination of forced or compulsory labour and discrimination in respect of employment.

If they are truly interested in improving the quality of life for people in Panama, and I do not think there is a member in the House who would not say that, I would tell them that by embracing this free trade deal, they get that benefit. What is nice is that this is actually a good thing for Canada, too. I wish they would think of Canadians in the same way.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for government orders has expired. The hon. member for London West will have eight minutes remaining for questions and comments when this matter returns to the House.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

RADIO STATION ANNIVERSARY

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my great pleasure to congratulate CHAB, an AM radio station in my riding, on its 90th anniversary of broadcasting to residents of Moose Jaw and southern Saskatchewan.

Statements by Members

Over the years, it has changed formats from country to pop or gospel. Now it is an oldies radio station featuring local talk shows and providing listeners with local news, weather, sports, agriculture features and great music.

I look forward to seeing many residents at the celebration this Friday, 90 years to the day since CHAB first broadcast as 10AB. The celebration will feature the Uncoolas Hit Revue, which is an eight-piece show band. Prizes and a walk down CHAB memory lane will be part of the fun.

I am pleased to congratulate the entire CHAB crew on reaching this milestone and I wish them best of luck in the future.

* * *

• (1400)

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the abuse of women is an unacceptable tragedy that affects women from all walks of life. It is often left unspoken and is swept under the rug. The Shine the Light on Woman Abuse campaign, started by the London Abused Women's Centre in 2010, aims to change that reality and get women the help they need and deserve.

Because of raised awareness during the Shine the Light campaign in November 2011, service demands in London increased by 125%. That demand has remained constant, and during the summer of 2012, more than 600 women, their families or friends called for support or information to help a loved one who was being abused. That volume of calls was unprecedented in the centre's 30-year history.

I am grateful that this very successful awareness campaign has spread to seven communities across Ontario, and I share the dream of shining a purple light in every community in Canada. With everyone's help, we can spread the message of courage, survival and hope. We can finally end woman abuse.

* * *

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday I tabled Bill C-461, CBC and public service disclosure and transparency act.

If passed, the statute would amend the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act to remove a deficiency that allowed the CBC to deny access requests if it affected its journalistic, creative or programming activities. My bill replaces this blanket exception with a discretionary exemption based on an injurious test. For the exemption to apply, the Information Commissioner would have to be satisfied that disclosure would result in injury to the CBC.

In litigation between the CBC and the Information Commissioner, the Federal Court of Appeal referred to the existing provisions as "not a model of clarity". The Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics recommended in March of this year that section 68.1 of the Access to Information Act be amended to remove the blanket exception and to provide clarity with respect to CBC disclosure.

This bill is in accordance with that committee's report and the Federal Court judgments. Accordingly, I encourage all hon. members to support the CBC and public service disclosure and transparency act.

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LINCOLN BOSWALL

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the passing of Lincoln Boswall. Lincoln was an integral part of P.E.I.'s farm community. He was a long-time exhibitor of swine and cattle at Old Home Week and other exhibitions around the Maritimes as well as at the Royal Winter Fair. What really struck me about Linc, as he was often called, was that one could actually feel the pride he took in his livestock.

In 1973, marking the 100th anniversary of the province's entry into Confederation, Lincoln and his wife June had the chance to show their prized purebred Yorkshire swine to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip during a royal visit to Charlottetown. Among other achievements, he served as president of the P.E.I. Swine Breeders Association and several terms as director of the provincial exhibition.

On behalf of the House, I would like to thank Lincoln for his contributions to island life. His commitment to the island's agriculture community was unwavering, and we thank him. Our condolences go out to June and his family.

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CANADIAN FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this weekend I had the honour of attending the Canadian Football Hall of Fame induction ceremony in Winnipeg, where a great educator was recognized for his contribution to youth in this nation.

Peter Connellan was the coach of the University of Calgary Dinos and won four Vanier Cup championships. He is a recipient of many coaching awards for his work at the University of Calgary as well as for coaching at the high school level. His Alberta coaching career started with the Innisfail Ocelots over 50 years ago. Those same players kept in touch with Peter over the years, and when our team was reconstituted in 2002, after a nearly 20-year absence, he was there to help once again.

Always the teacher, always the mentor, Peter Connellan has created a legacy for youth in my riding. In his mind, anyone could succeed in sports. The only limitation was the commitment of the coaches. This was also his philosophy as a teacher over his successful teaching career. His sense of humour and his optimism was contagious.

Congratulations to Peter on a reward well earned.

Statements by Members

●(1405)

*[Translation]***QUEBEC BRIDGE**

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Quebec Bridge should be an architectural gem, the symbol of a dynamic city, but instead it is a shameful symbol of our general decline. A rusty bridge might still be safe, but rust does nothing for the bridge's lifespan. Otherwise, what is the point in maintaining a bridge? When it comes to infrastructure, anything that is not maintained deteriorates.

Where are the Conservative members for Lévis—Bellechasse and Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière? This bridge is used mainly by their constituents. We have not heard a peep out of those two MPs. Do they even care about their constituents?

A bridge should never be anything other than public infrastructure. Its maintenance should not depend on shareholder dividends. In the meantime, the minister is content in his role as Pontius Pilate, which he plays very well, by the way.

I invite the minister to drive his car across the world's longest cantilevered bridge and see for himself how ugly it is.

* * *

*[English]***VETERANS**

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in this Veterans Week, I want to profile Mr. John Bennett, a resident of the veterans wing at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in my riding of Don Valley West in Toronto.

John Bennett was trained as an artist and has been a gifted painter all his life. He served as a camouflage officer during World War II and landed on the beaches of Normandy 10 days after D-Day. For the next two years, he served his country in Europe, all the while painting what he saw.

In October, 78 of Mr. Bennett's war-time water colours were accepted into the permanent collection of the National War Museum here in Ottawa. John, his family and five other veterans from Sunnybrook came to Ottawa to tour the War Museum, the National Gallery and Parliament Hill. On November 11, I will represent our government at the annual Remembrance Day ceremony at Sunnybrook. I encourage all Canadians to attend a ceremony in their community, talk to a veteran, listen to their stories and thank them.

Lest we forget.

* * *

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I rise in the House to express my support for a women's group in my riding. Our government has made women's issues a top priority and is working hard with women across this country to end violence against women and girls.

In October, I was pleased to attend the 2012 launch of the London Abused Women's Centre's Shine the Light on Woman Abuse

campaign. The goal of this campaign has been to raise awareness around the issue of woman abuse and its effect on society. Organizations, schools, neighbourhoods and places of worship across London will be asked to participate by wearing purple.

This year, the Shine the Line on Woman Abuse campaign is in honour of Ashley and Stephanie Daubs. These two beautiful girls were brutally murdered by their father. I was pleased to recently meet their mother, Debbie Ratellie, who shared her story with us.

Today, I am pleased that for the second year in a row, members from both sides of the House are joining me in wearing purple in support of the Shine the Light on Woman Abuse campaign. I would like to congratulate the London Abused Women's Centre, especially executive director, Megan Walker, for her tireless work in shining the light on woman abuse.

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*[Translation]***WORLD KINDNESS DAY**

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Tuesday November 13, 2012, is world kindness day. The Drummond branch of the Association québécoise de défense des droits des personnes retraitées et préretraitées, or AQDR, is inviting everyone to use this as an opportunity to take a stand against violence and bullying. We must condemn and fight all forms of bullying—against seniors and young people alike. As a father myself, I have a personal interest in this complex phenomenon.

In my riding, several organizations and stakeholders in the education field have decided to join forces. In fact, the people of Drummond were invited to an event for the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying on October 1, 2012, at the Maison des arts Desjardins Drummondville. I would like to personally congratulate the stakeholders in our community for their incredible contribution, which made the event a resounding success.

As the member of Parliament for Drummond, I am especially proud of this groundswell of solidarity. Thank you to all of the stakeholders and the AQDR Centre-du-Québec. Let us all show just how kind we can be.

* * *

*[English]***SKILLED TRADES AND TECHNOLOGY WEEK**

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, across Canada thousands of young people are participating in activities that highlight careers in the skilled trades and technologies. Skilled Trades and Technology Week was created by Skills/Compétences Canada to raise awareness of the trades and technology careers among parents, youth and the general public. Today, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development helped launch Skilled Trades and Technology Week. This week provides an opportunity for organizations across Canada to get involved in a hands-on way, and introduces young Canadians to career options available in the trades and technology sectors.

Although best known for its competitions, Skills/Compétences Canada offers additional programming throughout the year to over 150,000 youth. Together with its member organizations, Skills/Compétences Canada is able to provide Canada's next generation with activities that reinforce its skills and interests.

* * *

• (1410)

VETERANS

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to thank our veterans and active military personnel and their families for their sacrifices in defence of Canada and our values.

New Democrats have always fought for improved rights for those who serve our country. We fought for DND and RCMP personnel to end the pension clawback. Together we succeeded.

This recent victory is to be celebrated, but clearly our work is not finished when it comes to making sure that our veterans and their families are able to live and retire in dignity.

It is our duty to ensure that every veteran who has served our country is afforded a dignified burial. That is not the case today, as 70% of applicants are refused access to the last post program, which is supposed to ensure that even our least fortunate veterans receive a dignified burial. New Democrats will continue to fight today in this place to change that.

Moving forward I will soon table a motion calling on the federal government to invest in the physical infrastructure of the branches of the Royal Canadian Legion to ensure they remain a comfortable and safe haven for members.

To our veterans and members, ladies auxiliary, friends and families of Royal Canadian Legion branches in my riding and right across Canada, I send my thanks for strengthening our communities. Lest we forget.

* * *

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION WEEK

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today regarding Holocaust Education Week, which runs this year from November 1 until November 8 in the greater Toronto area. It is one of the largest educational forums of its kind on the Holocaust. I ask that my hon. colleagues join me in acknowledging the efforts of the organizers and supporters of Holocaust Education Week for their important work.

Jan Deboutte, the Belgian chair of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research, is in Ottawa today.

In 2013, Canada will proudly assume the position of chair of the ITF. Last year we hosted the Interparliamentary Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism in Ottawa, which led to the signing of the historic Ottawa Protocol, a new set of international commitments to fight anti-Semitism.

Our government has been unwavering in fighting anti-Semitism at home and abroad. I encourage all Canadians to learn more about the

Statements by Members

Holocaust and anti-Semitism so that we can help fight it around the world.

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ROBERT KAPLAN

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Robert Kaplan served the House with distinction as a member of Parliament from 1968 to 1972 and again from 1974 to 1993. He became Solicitor General in 1980 and served in that post until 1984.

He was a thoughtful, intelligent man. He cared deeply about Canada, about the democratic process, about protecting and advancing human rights as well as ensuring Canada's security interests.

As Solicitor General he introduced important legislation on the creation of Canada's security agency, CSIS, and the civilian oversight that would be necessary to ensure that the protection of national security did not infringe on individual liberty.

I saw Bob Kaplan for the last time in late summer this year. He was very ill with cancer but lucid and of good cheer. As always, he was following events around him closely, and with that sense of gentle irony that I came to know as his hallmark.

We send our deepest condolences to his family and friends. *Shalom chaver shalom.*

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Centre-North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at academic institutions and industrial research labs across the country, including the University of Calgary and SAIT in my riding, Canadian scientists are working to address issues related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. They are working to make our fuel, appliances, vehicles and energy production processes more efficient across numerous disciplines, all to support the long-term health of our environment.

Our government partners with many of these scientists through strong support of the tri-council granting agencies, the CFI, and numerous industrial research partnership programs.

While our government is supporting research in these areas, and in turn supporting jobs in a greener economy, the NDP supports a carbon pricing scheme that is not aligned with many of our major trading partners and could competitively disadvantage Canada's economy while the global economy undergoes a period of instability.

I am proud of the work that our government has done to support these important areas of research, and proud that we continue to green our country while focusing on growing our economy.

Oral Questions

● (1415)

*[Translation]***TAXATION**

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, do you know how much money the Conservatives took out of the pockets of Canadians last year by imposing all kinds of different fees, even though our economy was struggling? No less than \$8 billion, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

These taxes disguised as hidden fees became the Conservatives' cash cow. They have more than doubled since 2000.

While the Conservatives' corporate friends are increasing their profit margins without increasing salaries—thanks to generous tax cuts—Canadians must pay more to get passports, visit their beautiful national parks and, unfortunately, to get divorced.

Canada ranks second, among all the G7 countries, in terms of the highest hidden fees. That is the Conservatives' legacy.

Since the Conservatives came to power, they have been taking money directly from the Canadian middle class, one fee at a time.

In 2015, the NDP will put an end to this injustice.

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*[English]***THE ECONOMY**

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week our Prime Minister is in Asia telling the Canadian economic success story to the world. That story is one of the best job growth in the G7, the best fiscal position in the G7 and a beacon of economic light to the world. Under our Prime Minister's great leadership, Canada has become the economic model to the world. Canada is a better place for it. The world is a better place for it.

While the NDP advances a \$21 billion job-killing carbon tax, also known as the NDP economic pain, our government will advance our Conservative economic plan, the economic plan that is the model for the world and will ensure a great quality of life for Canadians for generations to come.

ORAL QUESTIONS*[Translation]***FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in trade talks with India, Canada has consistently demanded the independent power to verify that Canadian nuclear material is used only for peaceful purposes.

Can the government confirm that the Prime Minister obtained such guarantees from the Indian government?

[English]

In trade talks with India, Canada has consistently demanded the independent power to verify that Canadian nuclear material is used only for peaceful purposes. Could the government tell us, yes or no,

whether the Prime Minister's nuclear agreement with India includes these guarantees?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada has strong obligations with respect to nuclear proliferation. They are obligations we take incredibly seriously. I can tell the House and all Canadians that the agreement the Prime Minister signed today will not only help create a lot of jobs in Canada, it will honour all of our international agreements to ensure that Canadian nuclear material does not make its way into a weapons program.

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*[Translation]***FOREIGN INVESTMENT**

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have a funny habit.

The Prime Minister was in Russia when he announced the new investment agreement with China. The Prime Minister was in Switzerland when he announced that the retirement age would go from 65 to 67 here in Canada. Yesterday, in Beijing, Canada's ambassador said that the decision to approve the Nexen takeover would be made by December 10 and that the deadline would not be further extended.

Why was this announcement made in China and not in Canada? Why do they give Chinese executives more information than they are prepared to give Canadians?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think that report has since been corrected.

The Prime Minister announced a foreign investment promotion and protection agreement to ensure that Canadian businesses enjoy in China the same rights and privileges that Chinese businesses have in Canada. He announced that in China after meeting with his Chinese counterpart and was able to sign it on the margins of an international conference.

We can all be very proud that Canadian businesses are competing around the world, and our government is doing all it can to ensure they are successful abroad so they can create more jobs here at home.

● (1420)

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the question is, why do Canadians learn about these decisions from late night press releases, while Chinese oil executives are given a full briefing by our ambassador?

Oral Questions

Under the Conservatives' new Canada-China investment agreement, China will now have the unlimited right to buy up new leases on Canadian natural resources, through companies like Nexen. If a province such as Alberta tries to limit Chinese ownership, it could be challenged under the law and dragged into international courts. Is this what Conservative MPs came to Ottawa to do, to sell off Alberta's natural resources to China?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there he goes again with his tinfoil hat predictions.

The foreign promotion and protection agreement is something that Canadian investors, Canadians, Canadian businesses and people who look at their pension plans and RRSPs want in order to ensure that with any investments made in China, Canadian operations have the same rights and privileges ensuring that those investments are safe and secure.

Canadian businesses are competing around the world. They are competing with the best and they are winning. We want to ensure that they enjoy the same legal protection. That is exactly what our government is doing, and that is creating a lot of jobs and opportunity.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Parliamentary Budget Officer's most recent report proves that the Conservatives are still hiding key information about the budget cuts.

Canadians are being asked to tighten their belts, but the Conservatives are refusing to explain the impact of the cuts on services. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has less than 3% of the information on the Conservatives' cuts.

Why are they hiding this information?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we continue to be accountable to Parliament in accordance with the usual procedures regarding estimates, quarterly financial reports and public accounts. The departments provide Parliament with public information about their finances, and the government continues to provide the PBO information in accordance with his mandate.

[English]

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, they are not doing great so far.

When the Indian government offered bulletproof Mercedes S-Class for the Prime Minister, he said "no thanks" and blew \$36,000 an hour to bring over his own limos. Meanwhile, the Conservatives are throwing people out of work and slashing programs and services that Canadians rely on.

However, when the PBO asked for details, only a third of departments reported the number of planned staff reductions. Is this information being deliberately withheld from the PBO, or do they honestly have no idea what they are doing?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am tremendously proud, and all Canadians are tremendously proud, to see our Prime Minister representing our great country abroad, fighting for trade and jobs.

Operational security issues are dealt with by the RCMP, as we would expect them to be. I want to say that all of us on this side of the House, when we have to deal with terrorism, when we have to deal with security, are going to take the advice of the RCMP over the NDP every single time.

* * *

INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we do know that the Prime Minister is prepared to go almost anywhere in the world, is he also prepared to meet with the premiers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada to deal with the issues that affect all Canadians on the economy?

Every single issue that affects the federal government affects the provinces as well. Every successful federation involves prime ministers and premiers, first ministers, all meeting together in co-operation. Whether it is Germany or India or any other federation in the world, first ministers meet.

Why would they not meet when the Prime Minister goes to Halifax?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister regularly meets with provincial premiers and territorial premiers from coast to coast to coast, all the time.

We have a constructive working relationship. At the bottom of the economic downturn, when the Canadian economy was really struggling, we had unprecedented co-operation with Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic governments, all working together to bring forward a stimulus plan to create more jobs and more opportunities.

I have good news: the plan worked. We have seen more than 800,000 net new jobs created. That is the Prime Minister's leadership.

● (1425)

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that Canadians would not mind if the Prime Minister took his limousine to Halifax if he wanted, if that meant that the Prime Minister would finally meet not just a premier or two, but all the provincial premiers together in order to deal with our economic problems and challenges.

That is how every successful federation operates. The Prime Minister of Canada is the only one who refuses to attend the first ministers' meeting. Why not deal with our economic challenges together instead of individually?

Oral Questions

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, under the Prime Minister's leadership, we have had unprecedented co-operation in tackling Canada's economic challenges over the past four years.

Every single provincial premier, Liberal, NDP, Conservative, all put politics aside. We brought forward one of the most ambitious economic action plans. We worked together quickly to roll that out, and great things happened. Since the bottom of the recession, we have seen the creation of some 800,000 net new jobs. That is an incredible accomplishment, and it happened through co-operation and through leadership by this Prime Minister.

* * *

FOREIGN INVESTMENT

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when talking about the situation of the economic environment in India, the Minister of International Trade said that "we [still] have a relatively opaque investment environment here in India".

I wonder if the minister can tell us, what did the Prime Minister tell the Indian government about the climate for foreign investment in Canada? What did he tell them about the rules? What did he tell them about the definition of net benefit? What did he tell them about the process that would be gone through? What did he tell them about the transparency in this country?

It could well be argued that we have an opaque economic environment—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the members what the Prime Minister discussed with our Indian friends during his visit. What he is discussing is how Canada is a magnet for jobs, investment and opportunity. He told them about our low tax plan to create jobs. He told them about our plans to ensure we have effective but not overly burdensome regulations. He told them about the fact that we do not have a large \$21 billion carbon tax. He told them that the source of so much Indian wealth could be buying goods and services from this great country, that Canada is responding to the international trade challenges, and that we can create a lot of jobs together.

* * *

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in her 11 and a half months in federal custody, Ashley Smith was involved in 160 use of force incidents. She was subjected to a barrage of inhumane treatment: pepper spray, taser, duct tape, and chemical restraints.

We know our correction system failed Ashley Smith, and we know that the correctional investigator has put forward basic recommendations to prevent tragedies like this from ever happening again.

Once again I ask the minister, will he commit today to fully implementing these recommendations on dealing with mental illness

in our correction system so there are no more tragedies like Ashley Smith's?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a very sad case. Our thoughts go out to Ms. Smith's family.

This tragedy continues to show that individuals with mental health issues do not belong in prisons but in professional facilities. At the same time, our government continues to take concrete steps on the issue of mental health in prison. Since 2006, we have invested nearly \$90 million in mental health for prisoners, and we have taken action to improve access to mental health treatment and training for staff.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a tragedy is an accident; it is something that cannot be foreseen. In the case of Ashley Smith and too many women suffering from mental illness, someone should have seen this coming.

For a week now, the NDP has been asking questions about this and calling on the Conservatives to implement the recommendations made by the Correctional Investigator of Canada. For some time now, the investigator has been calling for the creation of treatment programs for offenders who have a history of self-injury.

Will the Conservatives take the advice of the Correctional Investigator of Canada, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we continue to work with the correctional investigator, and we review all of his recommendations.

However, I would note that the NDP, while consistently speaking on behalf of prisoners, never speaks on behalf of the victims of these prisoners. It never talks about the damage done to people outside of prisons. I wish New Democrats would take a more balanced view about what it means to have a safe society, not simply the individuals in the prisons, but those who are abused outside of the prisons.

● (1430)

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, is that minister capable of understanding that she was the victim here?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have made it very clear where our government stands on that, and I am very proud of the position that the Prime Minister took in terms of ensuring that our officials in Correctional Service Canada cooperate completely with the coroner.

I would like to ask that member, who has never once stood and spoken for victims, why is it that he is always silent when it comes to victims outside of our prisons?

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this week before Remembrance Day is not a time for partisan rhetoric. We should be focused on improving care for veterans and their families. We should all agree that impoverished veterans deserve a proper burial service equal to the sacrifice they made for this country.

Oral Questions

I would like to ask the minister once again, does he believe that every veteran who serves this country deserves a proper and dignified burial service?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, like the Minister of National Defence who met with families of the fallen this morning, this government has the greatest and utmost respect for veterans and their families, as do all members, actually, who this morning attended a ceremony at the National War Memorial.

When talking about funeral and burial assistance, we are providing this program to more than 10,000 veterans. I can assure the member that, unlike the Liberals, we will not cut this program and, unlike the NDP, whenever there is a program for veterans we will support it, as long as we are taking care of veterans and making sure we are making their lives better.

* * *

[Translation]

LABOUR

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-377, introduced by a Conservative backbencher, is that party's latest assault on Canada's workers. It creates a bureaucratic monster and red tape that will cost millions of dollars to manage and administer, all under the pretext of transparency.

Let us talk about transparency. We are told that this bill is a personal initiative. Really? Well-funded anti-union groups have held dozens of meetings behind closed doors with high-ranking Conservatives.

Can someone tell me what the Prime Minister's chief of staff or the Minister of Finance's policy director have to do with this?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we believe that workers should have the right to know how their mandatory union dues are spent. That said, we are meeting with groups on both sides of this debate, unlike the NDP, which by contrast has held 75 meetings combined, with the Canadian Labour Congress, CUPE and PSAC, three unions that together gave the NDP \$61,000 in illegal union money.

Speaking of PSAC, it represents federal public servants whose jobs rely on a united Canada, but it endorsed the separatists in the last provincial election. What does the member think about that?

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is no secret that notorious union buster Terrance Oakey is once again darkening the towels of the Prime Minister's Office. After successfully killing off the fair wages act, his next target is Bill C-377, the Conservatives' latest assault on labour.

Why are Conservatives letting the special interests of one well-connected Conservative lobbyist upset the labour peace in this country? If they do want to declare war on labour, why do they not do it through the front door instead of skulking around with a private member's bill like a bunch of cowards?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I always have to congratulate that member for the creative imagery that he brings to the House. Now that he is talking about groups that are skulking around the Hill, meeting and trying to lobby the interests of the government and Parliament, maybe he can tell us a little more about what happened at those 75 closed door meetings that his party held with the Canadian Labour Congress, with CUPE, with PSAC, all groups that gave a combined \$61,000 in illegal union money? What happened at those meetings?

* * *

● (1435)

41ST GENERAL ÉLECTION

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, startling new federal court documents directly link RMG's alleged voter suppression calls with Conservative Party headquarters. Conservative scripts on election day notified voters about polling location changes. The problem is that these were four ridings that had no poll changes. More evidence that organized voter suppression occurred in the federal election of 2011.

Will the government commit today to support NDP Bill C-453 to put an end to fraudulent election calls?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party has every interest in ensuring that all of its voters make it to vote at the right locations. That is why we have always opposed any efforts to suppress voters. It is also why we ran a clean and ethical campaign in the last election.

By contrast, in that very same election, the NDP was in possession of illegal union money that it had taken from workers without their consent. Could the member rise now and explain to us how that illegal money was used during the campaign?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we will certainly not be lectured by a party whose headquarters were raided by the RCMP.

The Federal Court documents do not lie. The president of RMG confirmed that his company called voters and used a script provided by the Conservatives. These calls notified voters of poll changes in ridings where there were actually no changes. Last spring, the NDP motion to give more investigative powers to Elections Canada was adopted. Since then, the Conservatives have done nothing, probably because they are too busy figuring out which Republican trick to use next time.

Oral Questions

When will the Conservatives give the Chief Electoral Officer more powers?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our party ran an ethical and clean campaign in the last election. We will continue to abide by all the rules and work proactively with Elections Canada to find out what happened in Guelph.

[*English*]

By contrast, the NDP used illegal union money in the last election. It had accumulated \$340,000 of illegal money. If NDP members want to support legislation in the House to crack down on that kind of law-breaking, why do they not stand and support more union financial transparency? What do they have to hide?

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, he needs to stop waving that cardboard sword or he is going to hurt somebody over there.

We all knew the Conservatives were under investigation for voter suppression in Don Valley East, Nipissing—Timiskaming, Elmwood—Transcona, Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, Vancouver Island North and Yukon. It is a veritable who's who of the no-names on the Conservative backbench. Now court affidavits show that a Conservative-paid phone bank deliberately sent people to the wrong polls on election day. This was a coordinated scheme that goes all the way back to Conservative Party headquarters.

When will the Conservatives get serious about dealing with election fraud on election day?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are working seriously and proactively with Elections Canada in order to ascertain the details of the allegations in the riding of Guelph. Beyond that, we ran an ethical and clean campaign in the last election. By contrast, that member represents a party that campaigned on illegal union money, money the NDP members tried to cover up for half a decade. Even when the questions started coming in, their leader refused to tell Canadians how much workers' money was involved. Why did he keep it secret for so long?

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CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Public Safety praised the Prime Minister for changing the direction of the coroner's inquest in Toronto and for giving different instructions to Corrections officials than in fact took place.

I would like to ask the minister very directly, why did he not issue these instructions months, indeed years ago? Why did lawyers for the Government of Canada consistently take the position that the coroner's inquest did not have jurisdiction over critical issues facing Ashley Smith?

Why would the minister have left this up to a statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons in response to a question from the opposition?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have made it very clear that we want to ensure Corrections Canada co-operates fully with the coroner's inquest.

It was for that reason that we made sure, through the Prime Minister's statement, that the arguments with respect to the limited constitutional jurisdiction of the coroner were no longer pursued. In fact, the coroner has the full ability to look into this particular case.

* * *

• (1440)

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today the Minister of Veterans Affairs unveiled a ribbon. It is easy to see that the minister—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

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

Mr. Sean Casey: It is easy to see that the minister is focused like a laser on the priorities of veterans.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. I have asked members before to hold off on their applause until the member has finished putting the question. These interruptions are eating up a lot of time.

The hon. member for Charlottetown has the floor.

Mr. Sean Casey: Yes, Mr. Speaker, it is symbols over substance.

When will the minister unveil more funding to help veterans' families with funeral costs?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind my colleague that it was the Minister of National Defence who launched the initiative for families of fallen soldiers.

This morning I met with two little girls, one in grade one and the other in grade four. All they will have as a memento of their father is a purple ribbon. I am very proud to have accompanied the Minister of National Defence to present them with a ribbon. My colleague should understand that we have commemorations and veterans' services. I am very proud of my Conservative colleagues who, in the past six years, have given more than ever before to veterans.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I fear amid all the applause that the minister may have missed my question, so let us give it another go.

Two years ago Veterans Affairs conducted a review of the burial assistance program and the Conservatives chose to ignore it. Today, the minister unveiled a ribbon. He once again chose symbols over substance. That is what he did.

Oral Questions

Let us try this again. Will he increase funding to help veterans' families with the funeral costs?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me get to the very substance of the funeral and burial program. It is a program that is provided to veterans in need. Since 2006 this program has been provided to 10,000 veterans and their families.

I can assure the member of one thing. We on this side of the House will not cut this program, like the Liberals did.

* * *

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in his landmark report, Justice Cohen was clear that weakening fish habitat protection would put Fraser River sockeye in peril. We already had strong protections for fish habitat, but instead of enforcing them, the Conservatives are getting out of the business of oversight to make it easier for their oil lobbyist friends to push through their pipeline projects.

Instead of stalling, will the minister listen to Justice Cohen and reverse the government's reckless move to weaken habitat protection?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has to remember that it was this side of the House that called the commission because we are concerned about the fate of B.C. salmon.

I can assure the member that we are focusing on protecting the productivity of Canadian fisheries. There are more than 650 fishery officers in over 100 locations across Canada who will be available to conduct investigations related to the fisheries protection provisions of the Fisheries Act. In British Columbia and the Yukon alone, there will be over 170 officers in over 30 locations that will conduct investigations and other as required.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, even the Council of Canadian Academies agrees that Canada is sliding backwards on fisheries science compared to the rest of the world.

Despite evidence that staff are already stretched to the breaking point, the Conservatives are—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1445)

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam has the floor.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Mr. Speaker, despite evidence that the staff are already stretched to the breaking point, the Conservatives are slashing habitat protection staff on the west coast, getting rid of capacity. Justice Cohen points to the DFO staffing levels as a problem.

I have a simple question. How does the minister expect these offices to properly investigate fish habitat violations with a third fewer staff?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, amendments to the Fisheries Act have been made to

provide consistency, fairness and some common sense for proponents and stakeholders. To put our resources where they are needed the most makes the most sense.

As I said, there are 650 fishery officers in over 100 locations across Canada who will be available to conduct all kinds of investigations and to protect Canadian fish. In British Columbia alone there will be over 170 officers in over 30 locations because we take the management of Canadian fish very seriously.

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[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a common goal behind the weakening of fish habitat protection and the gutting of the Navigable Waters Protection Act: the construction of more pipelines without environmental assessments.

When the transport minister naively said the other day that the Navigable Waters Protection Act and fish were not related, he clearly had not consulted the Fisheries and Oceans Canada website, which says that “[the Navigable Waters Protection] Act is administered by the Navigable Waters Protection Program (NWPP) / Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.”

How does he explain this contradiction?

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, if anyone is naive here, it is not on this side of the House. When we talk about navigation, we are talking about the ships that are on the water, not the fish that are floating and swimming in the water. The members opposite want to cause confusion. On our side, we are going to do what needs to be done. Navigable waters are for navigation in Canada.

Once again, the members opposite were given all the answers to their questions today in committee. It is never enough for them. They are experts at confusing Canadians.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if there are fish floating on the water, then it is because they are dead, and the Conservatives have a problem.

The Conservatives did not keep the promise they made in 2009 when they said that they would hold public consultations before making changes to the Navigable Waters Protection Act.

In my riding, we are lucky to have magnificent waterways that are appreciated by residents and tourists alike: Lac des Seize-Îles, Lac St-Joseph, Lac Simon, Rivière de la Petite-Nation, Rivière du Nord and others.

None of these waterways are on the list of protected lakes and rivers. Why not?

Oral Questions

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, municipal associations throughout the country—municipal associations in Quebec and in all the provinces and territories—were consulted before we went forward with this process. Representatives were consulted. We will not go into every place and every coffee shop to consult people, as the member is asking us to do. We consulted with all the representatives of municipal and other associations. They are the ones who have been asking us for years to get rid of all the red tape so that the economy can move forward.

* * *

[English]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Remembrance Day is a time for Canadians to pay unpoliticized tribute to the service and sacrifice of our brave men and women in uniform. It is also a time to pause and honour the loved ones they leave behind. Our government has consistently taken concrete and substantial action to support the men and women of Canada's military, veterans and their families.

Would the Minister of National Defence inform the House as to what our government is doing to recognize the personal loss and sacrifice of the close family and friends of Canada's fallen?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Edmonton Centre for the question and also for his 31 years of service with the Canadian Forces.

Today I was honoured to be with the Minister of Veterans Affairs to announce the creation of the Memorial Ribbon as part of our government's ongoing support to Canada's military and their families. The Memorial Ribbon will recognize loved ones of our fallen heroes who have not been recognized by a Memorial Cross.

This demonstration of our continued care and concern for Canada's military families extends to our brave men and women who have served our country but also their families and loved ones who have sacrificed so much for us.

We honour those families. We will never forget their sacrifices. Lest we forget.

* * *

• (1450)

[Translation]

INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs has 32 public servants working for him at the Privy Council Office, including eight senior policy advisors. He also employs 16 exempt staff, including a policy director and another senior policy advisor.

Since he has such a large team, could the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs give us an update on his strategic plan for the three parts of his mandate?

[English]

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what I can report on is the fact that the latest public accounts make it very clear that spending in ministers' offices has declined by 11.4%. This is the respect for the taxpayers that this government holds true to and will continue to do so in the future.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I guess eight senior policy advisors and sixteen ministerial staff are just not enough to help the minister get up and answer questions in QP.

His job is to provide policy advice and strategic planning; liaise and advise on relations with provinces and territories; and assist with communications and parliamentary affairs. The minister is also responsible for coordinating interprovincial meetings.

I wonder if the minister could give us a report on some of the positive outcomes in the last few interprovincial meetings that he has attended.

Hon. Peter Penashue (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that this job has given me a great opportunity to spend time with the premiers and intergovernmental affairs ministers right across the country. I have learned a lot, and I have learned a lot about our country. I am very proud of what we have accomplished as a country. I had a wonderful meeting with Premier Dunderdale and with the premiers of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and I have been to Alberta as well.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is good to see the minister on his feet here in the House.

I understand the most recent national interprovincial meetings were with the National Aboriginal Women's Summit and the federal-provincial-territorial meeting of ministers responsible for justice and public safety.

The Privy Council Office says that he and his staff are responsible for "communications and parliamentary affairs support on issues and initiatives with important federal-provincial-territorial dimensions".

Given the high profile of both these issues in Canada today, can the minister provide the House with a report on the results of his meetings about justice and public safety?

Ms. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, among the initiatives that we have been taking with our provincial and territorial counterparts is showing leadership and taking action on the important issue of missing and murdered aboriginal women.

Oral Questions

The ministers of justice and public safety met just last week with their provincial counterparts to further develop strategies, coordinate efforts and share expertise on this issue.

In January 2012, a comprehensive missing women report provided 52 recommendations. The provinces recently acknowledged that our government has implemented almost all of them.

We have invested \$25 million over five years—

The Speaker: The hon. member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl.

* * *

ETHICS

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister fails to get on his feet to answer questions about his own portfolio. Let us talk about something else the minister is responsible for. His election returns suggest his campaign cashed a cheque for \$5,500 from a construction company. He then tried to cover his tracks by coming up with after-the-fact personal receipts.

This matter could be cleared up right now if the minister would stand up and explain what happened. Will he do it now?

• (1455)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's eyes have obviously played a terrible trick on him. He said that the member did not stand up. We just saw him stand up and talk about the pride he has in working on behalf of all Canadians.

It seems that his speaking notes have likewise played a similar trick on him. He would have known, if he read them correctly, that it was in fact his party that accepted \$340,000 in illegal union money and that it was his leader who attempted to cover it up over months and months.

Why does he not stand up and tell the rest of the House why it took so long for the NDP to be forced—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Malpeque.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, seasonal industries contribute \$78 billion to our economy, yet the government treats seasonal workers as second class citizens. The minister has now eliminated five weeks of EI payments to those workers. This change will affect tens of thousands of Canadians, reducing many to poverty; yet not a minute of study, no economic analysis, no consultation and no discussion at committee. Why is the government stealing five weeks of income from seasonal workers?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as usual, the hon. member has his facts all wrong. This temporary additional five weeks was a pilot program. It was brought in in the past. It was reintroduced and extended during the worst of the recession in 2008. It was extended

again in 2010 because we recognized it would take people longer than usual to find work.

Fortunately, we have seen a major resurgence in job creation in the country. Over 820,000 new jobs have been created. This program has come to its natural end. That was foretold two years ago because, frankly, we are creating jobs.

* * *

SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, she is not doing a very good job, as a matter of fact. Fourteen million times, Canadians phoned Service Canada to get an update on their EI and 14 million times they were hung up on. That is 14 million times Canadians were hung up on, not to mention the three-quarters of a million Canadians who waited almost six weeks to get their first EI cheques.

The only thing the Conservatives have been good at is taking the service out of Service Canada because they gutted the jobs of the people who provided the service. This is not a game. People are hurting. When is she going to fix this?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are monitoring the performance and delivery of our services at Service Canada very closely. That is why in the spring, when we encountered a seasonal surge in claims, we put additional resources there, so that Canadians would get the benefits they need and deserve in a timely manner.

I would point out that when I first came to the House and the Liberals were in power and they were in charge of EI, in my beautiful riding of Haldimand—Norfolk it was taking 10 weeks for people to get their cheques.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CANADA POST CORPORATION

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, listen to this: Canada Post will soon charge \$200 per address in new residential developments, which are obviously located primarily in suburbs and in the regions.

New homebuyers must already pay a municipal tax, a welcome tax, a school tax and a water tax, among others. And now the Conservatives want to impose a postal tax.

As of January 1, for a new neighbourhood with 100 houses, for example, there will be a total of \$20,000 in taxes for developers. We can easily imagine that they will pass that on to buyers.

Why do the Conservatives want to impose a new tax on Canadian families?

Oral Questions

[English]

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to universal, effective and economic postal service for all Canadians. As a crown corporation, Canada Post operates at arm's length from the government and is responsible for its operational decisions. We expect that no taxpayer money would go into Canada Post.

I know the NDP would rather control Canada Post. It would rather have it all unionized, run by the government, and charge a fortune to the taxpayers. We will not do that.

• (1500)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, and then part of the profits of Canada Post goes to general revenue of the federal government.

Rural B.C. communities are experiencing a reduction in postal services. Beaverdell, a small community in my riding, will see the closure of its post office on Saturdays as of November 17. As a concerned citizen pointed out to me, "There are folk who live here but work in Kelowna or elsewhere who can only access their mail on Saturdays". Our government should not allow Canada Post to trim its budget on the backs of rural communities.

Will the minister commit today to contact Canada Post and put a stop to these ruthless measures?

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, sadly, Canada Post has not posted positive revenue in the last couple of quarters in large part due to the work stoppage, which that member's party continued and caused many of Canada Post's customers to move to other forms of transmission of data.

In regard to rural areas, we have the new Canada postal service charter and we expect Canada Post to follow it.

* * *

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the natural resource sector is responsible for nearly 20% of Canada's economy and over one million Canadian jobs. It is the backbone of communities across Canada that rely on a strong natural resource sector for their livelihood. On the other hand, the NDP would rather throw out these jobs with its \$21 billion carbon tax.

Could the minister update the House on the importance of natural resource jobs?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian building trades yesterday said that natural resources are game changers for construction workers across Canada, with over 45% of their members engaged in oil and gas. They support our efforts to create streamlined, efficient environmental reviews. They understand that. To quote, "Jobs matter in this economy—Canada can't afford to put that at risk".

When will the NDP listen to hard-working Canadians, stop opposing resource development and stop advocating a—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

[Translation]

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today, Resolute Forest Products announced that it is shutting down paper machine No. 10 and thereby cutting 111 jobs at its plant in Grand-Mère and hundreds of indirect jobs in Mauricie.

This announcement once again shows the federal government's lack of commitment to Canada's forestry industry.

When will we see investments to help revitalize the forestry industry?

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 questions are completely misleading.

No other government has ever invested as much to diversify the forestry economy and seek new markets and new products.

That being said, these are business decisions. Unfortunately, forestry companies are still going through tough times. We know that the pulp and paper market is not growing. It is not easy, and we sympathize with the workers. We know that it is always very tough on the families that are affected, but we will continue to support the industry as a whole, in the hope that it finds other markets.

* * *

AIR TRANSPORTATION

Mr. José Nunez-Melo (Laval, NDP): Mr. Speaker, far too often passengers are not allowed to board a flight they have paid for. This happens when airlines accept too many reservations. For that reason, I introduced the bill to create a passengers' bill of rights. Travellers deserve to be protected, as they are in Europe, against overbooking and delays.

Will the government undertake to protect air passengers' rights?

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, Transport Canada is doing all it can so that we have the best air transportation system in the world.

We are working very hard on air safety and security and the accessibility of all services. Obviously, we do not manage the airlines.

Points of Order

My colleague would like the government to manage all the companies, bring in more workers and introduce a \$21 billion carbon tax to provide the government with more money. That is not our approach. We are doing our job and we will respect all airlines that provide excellent service across Canada.

* * *

• (1505)
[English]

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my spectacular riding of Yukon and, indeed, the rest of Canada's north is home to world-class natural resources, representing tremendous economic potential not just for northerners but for all Canadians. Under the leadership of the Prime Minister, I have seen our government's unprecedented commitment to Canada's north and northerners creating jobs and economic opportunities.

Can the minister please tell the House what the government is doing to further streamline regulatory processes in the north?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this morning I was proud to introduce the northern jobs and growth act. This act would bring about important changes to help create a more stable investment climate in the north. It would also increase the predictability and efficiency of the regulatory review process for major northern projects. This act would allow northerners to benefit from projects that create jobs in mining, oil and gas, transportation and other business sectors in the north and across Canada.

* * *

FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, small businesses in Canada pay among the highest credit card processing fees in the world, and as of April 1 these fees are set to increase by a whopping 33%. Small businesses in my community of Surrey are hurting. The Conservatives must take action to protect small businesses and stop hiding behind the ineffective voluntary code of conduct.

When will the minister stand up for consumers and small businesses by regulating the credit card industry?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, when will the NDP ever stand up to protect small businesses? It has had the opportunity to do that time and again and has refused to do so. When we brought forward a code of conduct to do exactly what the hon. member is asking about, to make sure that businesses have choice in what cards they use and to protect their bottom line, what did the NDP do? It voted against it.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT SPENDING

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' obsession with the monarchy knows no limits. They continue to waste money: millions of dollars are being squandered to commemorate the War of 1812; thousands

of dollars were spent on a stained glass window in the Senate bearing the image of the Queen, and now the Prime Minister is announcing the creation of an advisory committee to help him appoint the Governor General and lieutenant governors.

Is there anyone in this government who will finally put an end to these monarchist leanings and, like the Quebec minister of intergovernmental affairs, speak out against the fact that money is being shamefully wasted on archaic and outdated symbols?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, frankly, this is ridiculous. What the Prime Minister announced was a consultative approach with others about these positions, which were created for and are important to our institutions.

With regard to Canada's heritage, we have certainly made investments. The hon. member forgot to indicate that we also made unprecedented investments in the 400th anniversary of Quebec City and the 375th anniversary of the city of Trois-Rivières. We are investing in every part of the country to protect Canada's heritage.

* * *

[English]

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of Mr. Jan Deboutte, 2012 chair of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, very briefly, on a point of order arising out of question period today, I noted the Conservatives were quite obsessed with the number of meetings that our members have been holding with members of workers' unions across the country.

I would like to add to the record that Conservative ministers have met 28 times with big union bosses, including the Prime Minister—

The Speaker: Order, order. If the hon. member wishes to add something to the record, he can do so during a future question period or perhaps statements by members, but not through points of order.

*Government Orders***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[English]***CANADA-PANAMA ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PROSPERITY ACT**

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-24, An Act to implement the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Panama, the Agreement on the Environment between Canada and the Republic of Panama and the Agreement on Labour Cooperation between Canada and the Republic of Panama, be read the third time and passed.

The Speaker: There are still eight minutes left for questions and comments for the hon. member for London West. The hon. member for London West.

● (1510)

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would be delighted to do that, but with regret I must attend a committee in just a few moments. I will not be able to pursue that additional part of time now.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is too bad there were no questions for the member for London West, because in his remarks he talked about Canada being open for business.

That is for sure, but not only is Canada open for business, what we are also seeing in all of the Prime Minister's initiatives on free trade is that Canada is really up for sale. That is what worries us. It is one thing to be open for business, but it is entirely another to be so desirous of agreement at any cost, regardless of what the net benefits are for Canada, that Canada is really up for sale. That is what I wanted to ask the member to see how he might respond. I guess he is going to the same committee meeting that I have to go to.

On Bill C-24, the Canada–Panama FTA, since negotiations concluded on this trade agreement, more than 1,155 days have passed. That is more than 38 months or more than 3 years.

The Minister of International Trade has claimed that the reason for the delay in passing the legislation is the opposition. The real reason has nothing to do with any opposition party, but is clearly related to government incompetence in trying to utilize the House to get legislation through.

The Liberal Party has supported this legislation, and if this were any priority for the government, it could and should have passed the legislation, but has failed to do so.

Mr. Ed Holder: Mr. Speaker, I would like to respond as part of my allotted time, because we will be going to the same committee meeting. I cannot let the kind of comments the hon. member just made go without a response—

The Speaker: I will stop the member there. I thought that the member had indicated he would not be able to remain for questions and comments, so we have moved on with debate to the member for Malpeque. If the member from London West feels the need to respond to something the member for Malpeque says in his speech, he can certainly do so during questions and comments in regard to the member for Malpeque's speech. Unless there is unanimous consent to revert back to questions and comments for the member for London West, we have already moved on.

I will give the floor back to the member for Malpeque.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, it is too bad that the member declined the earlier opportunity, because he is such an interesting speaker. As well, I really did enjoy his quite energetic remarks. That he was wrong on some points is beside the fact.

The reason the government should have passed this legislation earlier, during that 38-month period, was made clear to us by government officials. Before going to that point, I want to come back to the 38 months. That is a long time. The Conservatives had the support of the Liberal Party even when they had a minority government; they would not even have had to use closure. However, if the current government could in any way work with opposition parties and the House and allow the latter to work effectively, the legislation could have been in place long ago. Because the government tries to browbeat legislation through this place, it gets a push back. That is clearly what is wrong with the way the government operates.

As far as what the government officials said is concerned, two year ago during a meeting of the international trade committee on November 3, 2010, the officials warned that the U.S. had concluded an agreement with Panama and that as a result Canadian exporters could face very stiff competition if that agreement were acted upon. Thus, there was a degree of urgency to conclude an agreement on behalf of Canada.

When asked by a Conservative MP at the international trade committee on September 25, 2012 if there were any urgency to concluding and ratifying the FTA with Canada, government officials reiterated their warning. They said:

[I]f the U.S. agreement comes into force before the Canadian agreement...there could well be an impact on Canadian exporters who are already in the Panamanian market. They will no longer be on a level playing field with their American competitors, and the U.S. will have in some cases a significant tariff advantage....

Here is the headline from Reuters World News Service on October 31, just a few days ago. It said, "Bush-era trade deal with Panama goes into force". Hence, six days ago the U.S.–Panama agreement came into effect. In other words, it is active.

The government of Canada virtually wasted 38 months, and now we are already non-competitive in that market and are trying to push the legislation through the House. The losses that Canadian exporters will likely incur are the responsibility of the Conservative government, and no one else. The government is responsible for the position that Canadian exporters now find themselves in within the Panamanian market, with the loss of their competitive edge, because the U.S. has now activated its free trade agreement. If this crowd cannot get a deal with an economy as small as that of Panama, which, according to government officials, represents one-hundredth of one per cent of our total trade right now, why should Canadians have any confidence that something like the Canada–China investment agreement would not turn out to be a disaster?

The government and this minister are good at reciting the talking points the Prime Minister's Office sends them, reiterating the number of trade discussions under way and the signing of a number of trade agreements. However, what really matters is the results at the end of the day.

The Conservatives claim that trade is their most important file. In fact, the Prime Minister was in China and signed an investment agreement, about which there is a lot of controversy and which has never been debated in this House. I understand that when the Prime Minister was leaving China, the chairman of the Chinese government said that they would like an FTA with Canada, and the Prime Minister accepted readily. That is because the Chinese know that with this particular Prime Minister, the Canadian government will sign a deal, regardless of its net benefits to Canada, just to get a deal. That is our concern with every trade agreement the Conservatives are doing.

•(1515)

The proof is in the pudding. When we look at the results on trade, we now see that for the first time in over 30 years, Canada has a merchandise trade deficit. On the government's watch, there has been a merchandise trade deficit in 32 out of those 44 months. That is serious. What it clearly shows is that the government can reach an agreement on trade, but it has failed to develop the strategy around which Canadians can make the best use of them and add the most value for Canadian industries that are exporting into those markets.

I want to now turn specifically to trade with Panama. Although it is three-hundredths of 1% of our global trade, it is substantive for those people who are in that Panamanian market.

I come from a province where frozen french fries are very important to potato producers and processors in terms of getting into Panama and exporting product there. There is no question that Panama is Canada's largest export market in Central America. It gives us a kind of gateway into the Central American and South American markets, so we need to pursue that.

Primary Canadian merchandise exports to Panama include machinery vehicles, electronic equipment, pharmaceutical equipment, pulses, which mainly come from the west, and frozen potato products, which mainly come from Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. Canadian service exports include financial services, engineering and information and communication technology services. Those are all important.

However, I want to point out something that I pointed out earlier in the debate. The government goes to great lengths to talk about how the Panama Canal is being twinned and how that is a big infrastructure investment, and therefore Canadian engineering, infrastructure and construction companies would benefit from the deal. That is mostly smoke and mirrors because the fact of the matter is that the Americans already have that sewed up.

The other markets and services, the sale of potatoes, pulses and the like, are extremely important to Canada. That is why we need the deal. However, for whatever reason, the government has tried to oversell it, and it does that with nearly everything it does. It has misrepresented the benefits of whatever particular issue it is in fact dealing with.

To point out and put on the record again, as it relates to the Panama Canal, this is a quotation that appeared in the United States Congressional Research Service report to Congress on the proposed U.S.-Panama FTA, dated April 21, 2011. It states:

Government Orders

Another unique feature of the FTA negotiations was the treatment of business issues with respect to the Panama Canal Area. Its status as an autonomous legal entity under the Panamanian Constitution required separate negotiations for government procurement, labor, investment, and other areas. The United States is the only country with which Panama has been willing to negotiate issues related to the canal area in an FTA.

We really need to ask the Conservative government to clarify its assertions on the ability of Canadian firms to participate in the canal infrastructure work, given those congressional research statements. That comes back to my point on overselling the deal with respect to the Panama Canal. Its expansion is well on its way and the U.S. basically has that sewn up.

•(1520)

As the parliamentary secretary said earlier, and I will agree with him on this, there are added opportunities in the future for spin-off industries from the widening of that canal, for engineering, designs and so on. However, let us not allow the government to oversell the trade agreement.

The bottom line specifically on the Canada-Panama agreement is that the government had 38 months to get this legislation through. It failed during that 38-month period to work with this Parliament and allow the legislation to come forward to a legislative debate and final vote, so now the U.S. has a step up on Canada in terms of that marketplace. Our industries that are exporting to that market will now be at a disadvantage.

The government tends to attack the NDP members for their opposition to the Canada-Panama FTA, but they have some legitimate concerns. I think we have to respect them. However, the Liberal Party has said that it will support this deal. There is no need to go to closure in order to get it through. What would we lose? We would lose one more day, when the government already had 1,155 days to deal with this issue and have a proper debate where those issues were outlined on the table.

Of course there are concerns about money laundering in Panama. We raised those concerns at committee, and we were not satisfied with the answers that the Ambassador gave us. We know there are concerns about money laundering in Panama.

We agree with the side agreements on labour and environment, and they will move us a step forward. They are side agreements. They are basically guidelines, a kind of wish list on labour and environment. They do not go as far as we would like to see them go by having them encompassed in legislation itself, where we would have enforcement ability under the law to have people live up to labour standards and environmental standards. They are not as good as we would like, but on balance, the fact that there are side agreements improves the agreement somewhat. Therefore, on balance, we are willing to support this agreement and move it forward.

Government Orders

We do not have a problem with the government pursuing new agreements, but we must negotiate them in the best net interest of Canadians. That is what we are worried about, and why I started my remarks by going after the member for London West a bit when he talked about Canada being open for business. Yes, we are. We always have been.

However, the difficulty with the Prime Minister is that Canada seems to be up for sale. There are many areas we could go to talk about that. We see the CNOOC-Nexen deal in today's press. It looks like it will be reviewed and now accepted for the Prime Minister. What are the implications of that agreement? Does that mean another country where a company is 64% state owned is in control of Canadian resources? These are serious issues. The government, it seems, makes these decisions about trade agreements on the fly, as the Prime Minister is flying around the world.

It is not good enough. There needs to be a trade strategy. One of the government's most important areas is trade it seems. However, where it fails is in developing an industrial strategy that follows the trade strategy that makes it possible for industries, be they agriculture, fisheries, electronics, service or financial, whatever they may be, to build up that industrial strategy so we in Canada can take advantage of these trade agreements and add jobs and value within our own country.

• (1525)

The benefits of trade agreements should be felt in our own country, and that is not happening under the Conservative government. The results prove it. For 32 of the last 44 months the Conservative government has racked up merchandise trade deficits, and that is just not good enough. We are seeing job losses in our manufacturing sector in Canada.

As I raised in question period, the seasonal industries which create a lot of wealth in this country, \$78 billion to our economy, are under attack by the government. That makes no sense at all. They contribute a lot to our exporters, our manufacturing base and our primary industries.

We are seeing the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development basically attacking the people who work in those seasonal industries, who require EI in the off-seasons. The industries that work in those sectors require that skilled labour when the season kicks back in. This minister is attacking them, first with the clawback, in which she is clawing back for the government 50¢ on every dollar that a person earns while working on claim, and now the cancellation. She got up in question period and talked about it being a pilot project. We know that. We know that in the Atlantic region of Canada that program is still necessary, and to take five weeks of income from seasonal workers plus the clawback is attacking those who need that income the most. It is going to drive them into poverty. Those seasonal industries and workers, the ones who work in the potato industry and the fisheries industry, are some of the workers who would contribute to Canada's exports under the Canada–Panama agreement. We need to get it through, but think of the—

• (1530)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The time for the hon. member has expired.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Hochelaga.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I gather from the Liberal member's speech that he did not think the agreement was perfect. He even talked about tax havens.

This makes me wonder why the Liberals not only did not propose any amendments in committee, but also rejected every one of the NDP's amendments.

He mentioned earlier that conducting another study would not have taken much time, but voting for these amendments would not have taken much time either, and I think some of them would have suited him, so I do not understand his reasoning.

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I believe we did agree with one of the amendments that was put forward by the NDP. However, we certainly did not agree with them all because some of them did not make a whole lot of sense to us. The amendments as posed by the NDP would stretch the timeframe in terms of this discussion on the Canada–Panama bill too far into the future. I agree that the bill has some flaws, but on balance it would improve our trading relationship with Panama. The force of that agreement would also give Canadians greater leverage in terms of dealing with Panamanian authorities on labour, environment and money laundering because of that further economic relationship that would be created

I also believe, as I said in my remarks, that Canada now finds itself under the gun. On October 31, the Americans activated their agreement. We now have exporters who, day by day in the Panamanian market, are becoming less competitive. We need those players in that marketplace contributing jobs and investment for Canadians.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from my colleague. I just want to pick up on a point. We heard about the Atlantic potato industry earlier. In Manitoba, whether it affects potatoes or pork, which are two vitally important industries in our province, this agreement will ultimately have an impact.

In good part, the concern would be why it has taken so long to get the bill passed. I have indicated in the past that the bill had the support of the Liberal Party. I think it is important to recognize that the government has to take a good portion of the blame for the bill not passing. From what I understand, it was on the table before. It was the prorogation of the session by the Prime Minister that ultimately led to where we are today. It could have, in fact, passed years ago. I wonder if my colleague could provide comment on that issue.

Government Orders

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, my colleague outlined in great part the difficulty we have had with the government. It had 38 months in which to debate, discuss and implement this legislation so that we would have a secure and activated free trade agreement between Canada and Panama. First, the legislation was coming along not too badly, but the Prime Minister prorogued Parliament. That created a delay. However, I think the biggest delay has been because of the fact that the only way the Conservative government seems to think it can operate is by invoking closure.

There were minority Parliaments. The government knew full well that the Liberals were in support of this agreement. Yes, other parties were in opposition. As I said earlier, they had some legitimate reasons to put on the table. However, on balance, I think the majority in this House would have passed the bill. It was the government itself that failed to give the bill priority. For the government to blame opposition parties for the fact that legislation did not get through, when it had the opportunity to get it through, is just silly. However, this is the kind of spin the Conservative government always has. It blames the opposition for everything. On this one, it could have had the job done, but it failed, and it failed clearly.

• (1535)

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's comments. I think he may have free-trade envy of the Conservatives, because we have brought forward so many free trade agreements that benefit Canadians.

He is saying, all wrapped up in process, that if there were a vote, the bill would probably pass the House. The answer is yes, it would pass the House, because the government has a majority in the House. The question is whether his party supports the bill. Would his party stand up for free trade, or has it decided to go the way of the NDP and the way of its interim leader and be against anything that would expand the pie for everyone in the world? Does the member support free trade? Does his party support free trade? Does his party support this free trade agreement?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I think I made it clear in my remarks that we have supported the Canada-Panama free trade agreement for some time. We felt that there should be a legitimate debate. We even felt that the concerns of the NDP should be addressed. I outlined in my remarks that labour and environment side agreements are all well and nice, but they are not really enforceable by law. They have some good thoughts. The fact that we have an economic agreement with a country gives us some leverage to try to deal with those issues.

Let me be absolutely clear. Do we envy the Conservative government's results on free trade? Absolutely not. The Conservatives go for the numbers. There are nine trade agreements. The U.S. is our biggest trading market. The nine trade agreements they have amount to only 126.5 hours of trade with the United States. That is not very much. They are small countries. They are small agreements. They do not mean a heck of a lot. The government tries to say that nine agreements means a lot. Meanwhile, the government is failing to challenge the Americans on exports of our products to their marketplace, where they are shutting us out. For 32 of the last 44 months, the government has been showing a deficit in trade. For the first time in 30 years, we have a deficit in trade as a result of the

Conservatives' actions. Is there envy of the Conservatives? Absolutely not.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member for Malpeque said that the government has a tendency to oversell these trade agreements. In fact, Conservatives talk about how they have signed all these trade agreements, but they do not want to talk about the details of the agreements. They do not want to have them examined in the House. They do not want to subject them to analysis and evaluation after the fact.

Would the member have agreed to support an amendment to subject the agreement to various reviews after it was signed so that we could test the over-promotion by the government?

• (1540)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Malpeque, give a short response, please.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the simple answer is yes. If there is anything we need to do with the government, it is put it to review.

I said in my remarks that the Canada-China investment agreement is a very serious issue that was not debated in the House. It may not have been signed by the Governor General as of yet, but it has come into effect. It has serious implications for Canada and Canadians. I firmly believe that if a Chinese investor, under this agreement, invested in Canada, and a province made a decision that affected that investment in a way that, in the future, that investor lost profits, that investor could sue, and the Canadian government would have to respond. I have a number of written questions—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I am sorry. We will have to wait perhaps for another time for those.

Resuming debate, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the House today on the many benefits of the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. Our Conservative government is committed to protecting and strengthening the long-term financial security of hard-working Canadians. Canada's prosperity is directly linked to reaching beyond our borders for economic opportunities that serve to grow Canada's trade and investment. Trade has long been a powerful engine of Canada's economy. This is even more so in these globally challenging economic times.

Government Orders

Today I would like to spend a few minutes talking about how this agreement with Panama fits into our government's broader economic plan. This government understands the important benefits of trade. As an export-driven economy, Canada needs to open its borders. With one in five Canadian jobs generated by exports, our government's ambitious pro-trade plan is essential to bringing continued prosperity to Canadians. That is why deepening Canada's trading relationships in dynamic and fast-growing markets around the world, markets such as Panama, is such an important part of this government's pro-trade plan for jobs and growth.

Regional and bilateral trade agreements have taken on increased significance, given the challenges with the WTO Doha Round. Our government also recognizes that there are a growing number of countries where Canadian companies are at a competitive disadvantage because their competitors have preferential market access under some form of trade agreement. In fact, just last month, the United States and Panama brought into force their bilateral free trade agreement. Canada cannot afford to sit on the sidelines while other countries pursue trade deals to secure better market access for their products and services. The NDP's consistent attempts to delay this legislation are putting Canada's exporters at a disadvantage. This agreement has been debated in the House for more than 60 hours. Our government is committed to ensuring open markets for exporters. That is why we are committed to moving forward with this important legislation.

The Canada-Panama free trade agreement is another step our government is taking to help Canadians compete and succeed in international markets. With 60% of our economy generated through trade, it is clear that Canadian workers and their families depend on the business we do with other countries. Our government's pro-trade plan is a key driver of Canada's prosperity, productivity and economic growth. By securing access to international markets for Canadian exporters, we are supporting economic growth right here at home and are creating new opportunities for hard-working Canadians. Canada's exporters and investors are calling for these opportunities. Business owners and entrepreneurs need access to global markets. Our government is committed to creating an environment in which our exporters can compete and win against the best in the world.

Our track record speaks for itself. Since our government was elected in 2006, Canada has concluded new free trade agreements with nine countries: Colombia, Jordan; Peru; the European Free Trade Association member states of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland; most recently Honduras; and, of course, with the bill we are speaking about today, the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. We are negotiating with many more, including the European Union, which is a lucrative market of over 500 million consumers. A deal with the European Union would represent the most significant Canadian trade initiative since the North American Free Trade Agreement. It is expected to boost our bilateral trade by 20%. It would provide a \$12 billion annual boost to Canada's economy, which is like a \$1,000 increase to the average Canadian family's income, or almost 80,000 new Canadian jobs. A Canada-EU agreement would benefit workers and their families across the country.

Our government is also intensifying our focus on the fast-growing markets of Asia. In fact, the Prime Minister is in India as we speak, working to strengthen our relationship with this important partner. Just this past March, the Prime Minister also announced the launch of negotiations toward a free trade agreement with Japan and the start of exploratory discussions with Thailand. The potential benefits of these initiatives are enormous. In addition, Canada is working to modernize its existing bilateral free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica and Israel.

All of these initiatives are critical for the economic future of our country. With the global economic recovery remaining fragile, it is important that Canada continue to deepen its trade and investment ties with its strategic partners. Our government understands, as most Canadians do, that trade is fundamentally a kitchen table issue. Canadians intuitively understand that trade helps families put food on the table and make ends meet. It helps parents pay for their children's education and save for retirement.

● (1545)

In short, trade is a matter of fundamental importance to the financial security of hard-working Canadians and their families. Expanding Canada's trade and investment ties around the world will help protect and create new jobs and prosperity for hard-working Canadians.

The Canada-Panama free trade agreement is another step in the right direction. This agreement represents an opportunity for Canadian exporters to grow their businesses in a dynamic and fast-growing economy. Upon implementation of the free trade agreement, Panama will immediately lift tariffs on 89% of all non-agricultural imports from Canada with the remaining tariffs to be phased out between five and fifteen years.

Tariffs would also be lifted on 89% of Canada's agricultural exports to Panama. This will benefit a range of sectors across the Canadian economy, including fish and seafood products, paper products, vehicles and parts, machinery and many more. This agreement would also provide service providers with a predictable, transparent environment, which would facilitate access to Panama's over \$20 billion services market.

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As Panama is a significant financial centre for Central America and South America, the financial services provisions of the agreement would benefit Canadian banks and financial service providers operating in Panama. This represents a significant benefit to Mississauga and the greater Toronto area where I am from. People will know that the banking and financial service industries in the Toronto area employ tens of thousands of people. Earlier today in the debate it was mentioned that Scotiabank, one of our largest banks, is a major supplier of financial services to the entire Central and South American region. That is something Canada should be proud of. It is an industry that can be expanded around the world, and this free trade agreement will assist Canadian banks and financial institutions in doing so.

The agreement will also support Canadian companies in their efforts to participate in large infrastructure projects such as the \$5.3 billion expansion of the Panama Canal by providing non-discriminatory access to a range of government procurement opportunities in Panama.

Members do not have to take my word for it. I will share with the House the words of an old friend of mine, Mr. Fred Blaser, co-chair of Republica Media Group of Central America. He and his wife, Rosemary Engels, are Canadian citizens who have lived in Costa Rica for approximately the last 12 years. I would call them both Canadian and Central American success stories. They relocated to Costa Rica in Central America approximately 12 years ago to manage a rather small newspaper called *La República* in San José, Cost Rica. They have grown that business, which they now own with their partners after having acquired it from Hollinger a few years ago, into a major business media empire throughout Costa Rica. That is cause for celebration both for Canadians and the people of Central America.

Mr. Blaser wrote an op-ed article in the *Globe and Mail* in March of 2011 about the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. I would like to share a few of his quotes with the House.

He stated:

It's been a year and a half since Canada and Panama signed a free-trade agreement that creates important opportunities for Canadian producers. Parliament should ratify it.

Panama may have a small economy, but it thinks big. During the past three years, a bad time for most of the world's economies, Panamanian output grew, on average, by a robust 5 per cent a year. In the previous five-year period, Panama had the fastest growth of any Latin American country, with the real value of national production increasing by an average of more than 9 per cent annually.

Even more important, Panama is a country with a plan. Its goal is to become the world's third great logistics centre, after Hong Kong and Singapore, by focusing on three pillars: advanced logistics, a unique commercial centre, and a strong banking system.

A new, \$5.3-billion canal, scheduled for completion in 2014, will allow passage of most of the new generation of container ships. As a result, Panama will continue—for at least several decades—to be part of the main sea route between Asia and North America's east coast.

He also stated:

Infrastructure for ordinary Panamanians is also growing impressively. Last month, Panama City started work on a \$1.5-billion subway, Central America's first, and announced plans for three additional lines....

As far as banking is concerned, investors from unstable countries throughout the hemisphere have relied for decades on Panama's financial system, as a secure haven for their savings.

He goes on to say:

—the government of [President] Ricardo Martinelli plans to spend close to half of its proposed \$14-billion budget over the 2010-2014 period on services related to education, health, housing and social welfare.

● (1550)

It is my view that this free trade agreement will assist President Martinelli in achieving those goals and objectives. Mr. Blaser continues:

Since Panama has a small agricultural sector and makes few manufactured goods, Canadian producers have excellent opportunities in the Panamanian market, in areas that include wheat, processed and frozen foods, and industrial equipment and machinery. They would have better access to the Panamanian market if the free-trade agreement came into force.

Panama has reinvented itself. It's time for Canada to rethink its approach.

Those are words that the House should take seriously. I know that Fred Blaser would be embarrassed if he knew that I was speaking so highly about him today but he is a recognized expert in business and commercial opportunities in the Central American region. It would be a good idea for Canadians to listen to one of their fellow Canadians on this topic. I hope my friends across the aisle, especially those in the NDP, will look at Mr. Blaser's words and some of the other articles he has written on the subject.

Fundamentally, this is a good deal for Canada. This agreement will support Canadian jobs by creating new opportunities for our exporters. This is why implementing this free trade agreement is a priority for our government. The NDP has held up this agreement for long enough. I ask all members to join me in support of the Canada-Panama free trade agreement.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague across the way for his very interesting speech. Before deciding to ask him a question, I took the time to look at the timeline of this agreement and how it was discussed in committee.

In the previous Parliament, the government introduced Bill C-46 on the Canada-Panama free trade agreement, which died on the order paper. The government is now introducing Bill C-24 on the same subject. A number of witnesses came to committee to discuss Bill C-46. They said, among other things, that the Republic of Panama was used as a tax haven and that it had a bad record when it comes to workers' rights and environmental protection.

The hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway moved a number of motions and amendments to address the most contentious aspects of this agreement, but they were all defeated by the Conservatives and the Liberals.

I am sure that my colleague across the way is just as concerned about tax havens, environmental protection and workers' rights as most Canadians. So why then did the Conservatives not support the NDP's amendments to flesh out Bill C-24?

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[English]

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, a few years ago there were concerns about Panama and its status as a tax haven. We know though that the Bank of Nova Scotia, one of Canada's great financial institutions and a very large employer of Canadians that is doing well around the world, has operated in that marketplace for a number of years and has become one of the major financial players. It does not do that sort of thing in tax havens that help people hide their taxes from the governments that need to collect those taxes. The OECD has removed Panama from its grey list. The United States and 12 other countries have entered into tax information sharing agreements and Canada is also negotiating one.

We can take a lot of comfort in the fact that banks such as the Bank of Nova Scotia are operating there, and that agreements are in place with the United States, our largest trading partner, and other key trading partners. In addition, President Martinelli is planning to make Panama one of the great banking centres of Central and South America. That cannot be done if the country is operating simultaneously as a major international tax haven.

• (1555)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party of Canada has a long tradition of supporting freer trade with other nations. That is one of the reasons why we have the development and the economic opportunities that we have here today.

In the member's comments, he made reference to Japan, Thailand, Chile, Costa Rica and Israel. He also made reference to the trip that the Prime Minister is currently taking to India.

The Prime Minister is also going to be visiting the Philippines. Given that the Philippines is Canada's number one source of immigrants today, and has been for many years in the province of Manitoba, does the member see a potential opportunity in the Prime Minister and the government aggressively pursue freer trade with the Philippines?

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question and also for pointing out the many trade agreements that the government has entered into over the last several years. I think he is making a good point.

I do not have anything to announce today, but the very fact that the Prime Minister will be visiting the Philippines and making a significant visit there, on this trip, is an indication of the importance of the Philippines as a trading partner for Canada. I am certain that we will be pursuing trade agreements with the Philippines. The member is right in pointing out that the Philippines is Canada's number one source country for new Canadians right now. That is a great source of pride to Canada. Those people come to Canada, work very hard and make huge contributions to the prosperity, peace and cultural diversity of our country.

I know that if we enter into a trade agreement with the Philippines, it will be a great boost to our economy and to the economy of the Philippines.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest not only to my colleague's speech

but to his responses. It is really obvious that he has a great command of this file.

I represent a riding that has both urban and rural components. We have all kinds of primary agriculture. Some of the most productive farmers in Canada are in the Waterloo region. In addition to that, we have all kinds of food processing in the Waterloo region, companies like Schneiders, Piller's and Conestoga Meat Packers. We also have Conestoga College, which is doing great work in implementing a food processing technology course for students.

We often miss the fact that not only are we going to be exporting agricultural products but value-added products as well through the food manufacturing and food processing industries. I am wondering if my colleague could comment on the importance of that, not only for big cities in terms of food processing but for rural communities that are facing some pretty significant challenges economically.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for that very insightful question.

We like to talk about what a great agricultural producer Canada is, and it is truly one of the great agricultural producers of the world. However, we also produce a lot of processed food and that employs people throughout Canada, not just in the rural areas but in ridings like his and ridings like mine in Mississauga.

The fact of the matter is that those are not products that are produced in great quantities in Panama, so entering into this agreement will open up some very significant opportunities for food processing companies and the people who work in them across Canada.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the fact that there were reasons for those of us on this side to be concerned, such as the lack of tax transparency with Panama.

He acknowledged that other countries, including the United States, entered into an agreement with Panama on tax information exchange before they signed off on their trade agreements. The member said that Canada was negotiating such an agreement with Panama and the government has acknowledged there is a need for such an agreement.

If that is in fact the case, why will the member not show some respect to Parliament and bring that signed agreement to the House before he asks us to vote on this final agreement?

• (1600)

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out earlier, Panama has entered into a tax information sharing agreement with the United States, our greatest trading partner, a country with which we have reciprocal tax treaties and have for many years. We have a great two-way sharing of tax information between Canada and the United States.

Many of the countries that operate in Canada also operate in the United States. Tax information is available to us through that U.S. treaty. We know that Panama is no longer on the OECD grey list, and many of our other trade partners are entering into and have entered into such agreements. We can take comfort in that.

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What we need to do is to get this deal done to create those jobs for Canadian workers who need them now. The NDP should vote with us and get this done for the workers of Canada. We will proceed with those other negotiations.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, my question to the hon. parliamentary secretary relates to the claim we have heard a lot today, that Panama is no longer a tax haven. It clearly is still a tax haven. It has merely been moved by the OECD from the list of unco operative countries that have refused to make commitments. It remains a tax haven and it has created quite a lot of debate in the U.S.

Now that the treaty before us includes investor state provisions, which means Panama could complain should Canada later impose different conditions for more tax transparency in its dealings with Panama, should we not, as the official opposition has been suggesting today, execute those tax transparency measures prior to giving Panama the right to sue us if we bring them in later?

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, I am kind of surprised by the member's question. She knows that all treaties in Canada are subject to Canadian law, so there is no way that Panama, or any other government under any treaty, could make a claim against Canada for doing something that is subject to Canadian law. Therefore, the question really does not make any sense in that context.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River.

I must confess that I am worried about Bill C-24, which will have a serious impact on people's lives. The free trade agreement between Canada and Panama will negatively affect a lot of people. Yet the government flatly refuses to adopt the amendments we have proposed. I would like to explain why I oppose this bill.

First of all, Panama's status as one of the world's worst tax havens is not improving any. I think that one of the main functions of government is to ensure that all citizens and businesses contribute to public revenues in an equitable way. Implementing this free trade agreement will make tax evasion even easier for unscrupulous individuals and businesses.

To ensure that this agreement does not provoke even more tax evasion, a tax information exchange agreement needs to be signed before we go ahead with a trade agreement. That is exactly what the U.S. Congress did. It refused to ratify its free trade agreement with Panama until a tax information exchange agreement was signed.

The Conservatives can claim all they like that these fiscal matters have been addressed, but the truth is that they have not been adequately addressed. And they certainly have not been finalized. I find this very troubling, especially considering the high volume of money laundering activities in Panama, including laundering of money from drug trafficking.

The agreement does not yet contain any provisions regarding the automatic exchange of information. Individual requests must be made. For these kind of requests, it is often necessary to know the name of the person suspected of tax evasion in order to request tax

information from the other country. As one can imagine, governments rarely obtain this information unless there is a whistleblower.

The member for Vancouver Kingsway moved a motion that made a lot of sense. He suggested that we postpone the implementation of the trade agreement with Panama until an information exchange agreement is signed. Unfortunately, both the Conservatives and the Liberals opposed this motion. Apparently the U.S. Congress had more foresight than the two old parties in the House of Commons. But during negotiations for this agreement with the Republic of Panama, Canada had the upper hand. That was the time to bring in all of the important clauses. But sadly, the Conservatives missed that opportunity.

We must also consider the environmental aspect. We cannot ignore the fact that this free trade agreement is a gift to large mining companies. The agreement has a chapter on the environment, but this chapter is not binding. The agreement is extremely weak from an environmental perspective. No monetary penalties are imposed if a party violates the rules.

There are some great principles but they are not enforced. There are empty words and honourable intentions, but there is nothing concrete to back them up. There is no control mechanism other than sheer political will, and in Panama, political will rarely favours protecting the environment. So we have to wonder: who will ensure that environmental standards are met?

Under this agreement, international mechanisms will be used for dispute resolution. As we know, these mechanisms are very expensive and cumbersome. Take the case of the American multinational that wanted to locate in Mexico a few years ago. The land had been purchased but construction had not yet started. The local government realized that operations of the plant would contaminate the groundwater and hence the region's drinking water. It was opposed to the multinational moving there. Citing chapter 11 of NAFTA, the U.S. firm dragged the local government before an international tribunal. Although the multinational did not even have a shovel in the ground and its operations would have contaminated the region's source of drinking water, the court sided with the company.

No local community will be able to afford to have its arguments heard before international tribunals. What the men and women of Panama are being told is that this has nothing to do with them and that they have no say. That is unfair and insulting. Why are big companies, such as mining companies, entitled to recourse, but mere citizens are not?

That is the old way of going about development. The NDP intends to promote the sustainable development of natural resources while respecting the will of the people. That is the opposite of the Conservatives' approach.

To conclude my remarks about the environment, I will quote Jennifer Moore, of MiningWatch Canada.

●(1605)

In committee, she said:

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...this agreement is going to ensure greater legal stability for the Canadian mining industry within the context of a regulatory regime in Panama that has demonstrated itself to be ineffective at preventing detrimental consequences to...the environment....

Is that really what the Conservatives want? What image do they think that projects of our country on the world stage? This problem would have been easy to fix, but no, the government refused to listen to us. It is unbelievably sad.

Another thing I am concerned about is workers' rights. This is important to me and to the NDP. We believe that major development projects have to be carried out respectfully without ideological confrontations. That is why I wonder why there are no clauses in the agreement on protecting workers' rights. There is no mention of the right to strike, for example. Employers have carte blanche to fire striking employees. They also have the right to hire scabs. For years, the Conservatives have been refusing to add anti-scab legislation to the Canada Labour Code, so we should not be too surprised that they do not object to this practice in Panama.

Workers' rights have often not been respected in Panama. I am not talking about decades ago. Just a few months ago there were violent confrontations between striking workers and the police. They took a terrible toll: six demonstrators were killed, several were injured and 300 union leaders were detained arbitrarily. This is a frontal attack on the fundamental rights of workers. What did the Conservative government do about all this? Nothing at all.

My colleague from Vancouver Kingsway proposed two amendments on this in committee. He wanted to guarantee that unionized workers in Panama had the right to collective bargaining. He also wanted to require Canada's representative on the joint Panama-Canada commission to consult on a regular basis with representatives of Canadian unions. But, alas, the Conservatives rejected all these ideas.

We are being asked to support a free trade area where workers' rights will be further degraded. It is distressing. I would also like to point out how inflexible my Conservative and Liberal colleagues were throughout this entire debate. We proposed a host of amendments to improve this agreement. One after the other, our ideas were rejected, even though there was practically no debate on their relevance. Simply put, they did not take our ideas seriously.

Is that not also the case with several private members' bills that propose changes suggested by the official opposition? This government is making a complete mockery of democracy.

The NDP supports trade, and, like many Canadians, we want to eliminate trade barriers. But this is no reason for us to lose our critical thinking. At second reading, we voted to send this bill to committee in the hope of bringing forward some progressive amendments, but not one was accepted.

Yet this is a simple and straightforward matter. What the NDP wants is international trade that encourages the development of value-added Canadian industries, that creates jobs in Canada by expanding access to foreign markets for our products, and that promotes sustainable development around the world and responsible investment that protects the rights of workers here and everywhere else, while protecting our tax system.

The NDP is in favour of fair trade for all, not just blind free trade that benefits large corporations most of all. But the Conservative government does not want Canadians to know this. Once again, it is imposing a time allocation motion to limit the debate on this.

For fiscal, environmental and social reasons, I do not support Bill C-24. This bill is not good for either Canadians or Panamanians.

I invite my hon. colleagues to reflect carefully on the arguments I just raised. Let us reflect carefully on the consequences of what we are about to do. The consequences will be very apparent for a very long time.

• (1610)

[*English*]

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member claims that the NDP is in favour of free trade, yet there is no example of the NDP ever supporting a free trade agreement. In fact, the NDP has opposed every free trade agreement, including the free trade agreement with the United States, NAFTA, and dozens of other agreements.

Free trade allows everyone involved to raise their standard of living. Why does the member and her party want to deny the people of Canada and the people of Panama an opportunity to raise their living standards?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, I just said that we are in favour of trade, but economics is not the only aspect to trade. Yes, the economic aspect is important, but there are also the environmental and human aspects.

We will always oppose agreements that do not propose anything to improve the lives of citizens and workers in terms of their rights, for example. We will absolutely oppose that.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I find it somewhat interesting regarding the principles the member talks about when discussing the rights of labourers and the need to protect our environment that the vast majority of Canadians, if not all, would agree with them. That does not necessarily mean that we do not enter into free trade agreements. If we were to apply those same principles to trade in general, we would not be able to trade with many of the countries we trade with today.

Is the member suggesting that the government should not allow for trade with countries that, in her opinion, would be compromising human rights and issues of that nature?

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, the answer is no. I have said twice now that we support free trade agreements when there are agreements and assurances that human rights will not be violated.

I forgot the second part of my answer. I apologize.

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Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been here in the House of Commons for many years. We have studied a number of free trade bills. I remember that the Liberals were against free trade during the time of Brian Mulroney and they voted against it. But when they came to power, they were in favour of it. My memory is good and that is what I remember.

We also talk about fair trade. The Conservatives are constantly telling us that we have always voted against it. Perhaps we will be in power in 2015 and we will be able to negotiate an agreement that would benefit both big business and workers. The existing free trade agreements always benefit major corporations but offer nothing to workers. I would like to hear what my colleague has to say about that.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, I now remember the second part of my answer.

We have the upper hand when we are discussing and negotiating the agreement, and that is when we can bring in everything we want. We cannot do it after the fact. Afterward, we no longer have that option. The best time is when we are negotiating an agreement. That is when we should include rules to protect workers and the environment, to ensure that we end up with a real agreement and not an illegitimate one.

[*English*]

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, to respond to one of the previous questions by the minister, we have supported free trade and would dearly love to support all free trade agreements, because we do believe in free trade.

However, the Conservatives put forward incomplete agreements. They put forward agreements that with some amendments, like the amendments we put forward to the bill, could be fantastic. I do not know why they only want to go halfway.

Today a number of Conservative speakers talked about the NDP holding up these bills. Let me provide some history to the bill. On August 11, 2009, the Conservative government concluded negotiations for this free trade agreement with the Republic of Panama. The agreement included side agreements on labour co-operation and the environment, and it was signed on May 14, 2010.

An hon. member: Where is it now?

Mr. John Rafferty: Exactly. On that same day the Conservative government tabled the agreement in the House as Bill C-46. The bill passed second reading and committee stage, but it died on the order paper at the dissolution of the 40th Parliament. The legislation was reintroduced on November 15, 2011 as Bill C-24. So we can hardly be accused of holding this legislation up.

Nonetheless, we are opposing the bill for a number of reasons. When the committee considered Bill C-46, it heard compelling testimony from witnesses about the use of Panama as a tax haven for tax evasion and avoidance. Furthermore, Panama has a poor record on labour rights and the deal's side agreements on labour and the environment are very weak.

I started my speech by saying that with some amendments and more careful consideration of the bill, we could make it a better bill. Here, I hope that someone on the government side asks me a

question about the two side agreements, one on labour and one on the environment. If the Conservatives simply put those side agreements into the body of the agreement, then those agreements would have teeth. Those two side deals would have real consequences in this agreement. We would accept that. That would be wonderful and reasonable, but the Conservatives refused to do it.

We are also very concerned that the agreement provides greater rights and powers to foreign investors. That is worrisome given the controversies on the environmental and human rights records of some firms operating in Panama. Recent committee testimony on Bill C-24 confirms that these issues continue to be of concern. Motions and amendments that would address the glaring issues in the agreement were introduced by our critic from Vancouver Kingsway, but were opposed and defeated by the Conservatives and Liberals.

We have tried to make this a bill that we could support. The amendments were reasonable and well thought out, and I will talk about them in a moment. Prior to clause-by-clause review of Bill C-24, our critic from Vancouver Kingsway proposed to the Standing Committee on International Trade a motion that would stop implementation of the Canada-Panama trade agreement until Panama agreed to sign a tax information exchange agreement, called TIEA. His motion was defeated.

The Conservatives and Liberals argued that progress was being made in the negotiations under way to sign an agreement. Considering Panama's history and reputation in such matters, it should be clear why such an agreement is necessary before signing a trade deal and why we need to examine its terms to assess its adequacy. The U.S. Congress would not ratify the American free trade agreement with Panama until this was signed.

I do not know what happened behind closed doors with the Conservatives. Perhaps they asked Panama to sign the same kind of agreement the Americans had. Maybe Panama refused, but the point is that the Conservatives have gone ahead without having any sort of agreement signed.

• (1620)

Subsequently, during clause-by-clause review of the bill, our critic proposed several amendments that would have made progressive changes to the bill. These included the addition of the crucial concepts of sustainable development and sustainable investment, a requirement for taxation transparency, and provisions to incorporate in the bill the protection of labour rights, including the right to collective bargaining. Other amendments would have required the minister of international trade to consult with labour and trade unions, as well as to work with human rights experts and organizations to create impact assessments for this agreement. A final amendment would have required Parliament to vote on extending the provisions of the act after five years. All of these amendments were voted down by the Conservatives, with the help of the Liberals.

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The status of labour rights in Panama is a major concern, and it is a complete failure of this trade agreement that it fails to ensure that these rights are not denied to Panamanian workers, as they would have been in the past. Moreover, I reiterate that the side agreements could easily have been incorporated into the body of the agreement. Had that happened, there might have been considerable support from this side of the House for this agreement. There were other amendments that we proposed, but those two are very important.

We did support the free trade agreement with Jordan. We have, at second reading, voted to support trade agreements to get them to committee so that we could offer amendments to make the legislation even better. Canadians expect us to work together in the House to come forward with the absolute best legislation we possibly can. In this and the last Parliament, we have seen legislation from the other side that could have been better if the government had just accepted suggestions and amendments from our side of the House. It could have been legislation that all Canadians could be proud of.

Two of the amendments put forth in committee by our critic would have protected trade union workers in Panama by offering them the right to collective bargaining, as well as requiring the minister of international trade, as the principal representative of Canada on the joint Panama-Canada commission, to consult on a regular basis with representatives of Canadian labour and trade unions. Like all other amendments, these were defeated.

Unfortunately, this creates a free trade zone that belittles the rights of labour. This is a serious problem that is already quite prevalent in Panama. I believe that we had 13 amendments to the bill at committee stage. Not one of them was accepted. The Conservatives and the Liberals had no amendments. We have been working to make these agreements better, but we have not had any success.

In addition, two amendments regarding definitions were proposed by our member from Vancouver Kingsway. The first was regarding sustainable development. That amendment defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, as set out in the Brundtland Report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development”.

The second amendment was regarding the definition of sustainable investment. The amendment would define sustainable investment as “investment that seeks to maximize social good as well as financial return, specifically in the areas of the environment, social justice, and corporate governance, in accordance with the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment”.

The labour co-operation agreement is not as strong as it could be. Its enforcement mechanisms are weak, the fines are small, there are no countervailing duties, and there is no provision for abrogation or any such remedy. Quite frankly, it is troubling.

We do want free trade, but we support free trade agreements that expand Canadian exports by reducing harmful barriers to trade. We encourage the development of value-added industries. We believe in creating Canadian jobs by increasing market access to our products; increasing productivity by encouraging new investment; diversifying

our exports, especially in emerging markets; and also agreements that help reduce Canada's trade deficit.

● (1625)

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is very aware of the area I represent. In fact, he has visited many times and I have welcomed him to come back and visit. He knows my area is richly blessed with primary agriculture and also food processing. I am sure his riding has some agriculture as well.

However, I am concerned that we do not simply throw this trade agreement out. It would have a major impact on our rural communities in terms of allowing them to export agricultural products. We know that beef, pork and much of these processed foods are finding a great market overseas.

I would ask my colleague—and I want to give him lots of time to answer this question—if he would make a list for us of the free trade agreements his party has supported over the last 20 years, and I will take the time to take notes.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from my colleague for Kitchener—Conestoga. I do know the area well, and I know he is a very hard-working and smart member. However, I am sure he will agree with me that this agreement is not as good as it could be.

I have already said we believe in increasing access to markets for our goods, not only goods from his riding but from mine and ridings right across Canada. We believe that is one of the things free trade agreements should do.

Would this agreement do that? Well, there would be some, but we could make it better. We could make this agreement work not only for Canadian business but for Canadians right across this country.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think this might be an appropriate time to highlight the fact that Canada is a trading nation. I like to believe we all recognize that very important fact. Over the last few years we have seen a huge decrease in the trade surplus versus deficit, which has not been in Canada's best interest.

Prior to the Conservatives coming into government, there was a huge surplus, estimated somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$25 billion. Today, that has disappeared, and now we have a huge deficit.

Recognizing how important it is for us to get on the right side of the trade deficit issue, does the member believe that the government has been neglecting the trade file and spending maybe a bit too much time on this particular file?

Yes, it is important. The potato industry and Manitoba's important pork industry are important, but we seem to be spending a lot of time on something that could have passed a year or two ago.

● (1630)

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I will not apologize for trying to make the absolute best trade agreement we possibly can. If that takes a couple of extra days, weeks or months, then that is what it takes because it is important for all Canadians.

Government Orders

The member talked about a deficit and I think it is interesting. Maybe to get off topic slightly, there was a huge surplus when the Conservative government took power and it has been frittered away. We had \$50 million in gazebos and fake lakes and all sorts of money spent. There was a surplus in this country, but now, of course, it has all disappeared and it will take years and years to get back to balanced books.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my two colleagues who just spoke, the member for Hochelaga and the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River, gave excellent speeches.

My northern Ontario colleague represents many workers who want to protect the environment and, especially, their rights as workers. He finds the debate we are having in the House very interesting.

The member for Hochelaga raised some very serious points about the agreement: the absence of the right to strike and the possibility of hiring scabs in Panama. That is a very aggressive stance towards workers.

Does my colleague not find that this agreement violates the rights of workers in Panama?

[*English*]

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend for her kind comments and all the hard work she and everybody on this side of the House have been doing in putting forward amendments on this bill. I am on the public safety committee, and we recently put forward a whole bunch of amendments to make the RCMP bill better, but none of them was accepted. They were good, well-thought-out amendments. I do not understand the aversion the government has to looking at our amendments, trying to understand them and incorporating them into bills.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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 Montcalm, Persons with Disabilities; the hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan, Aboriginal Affairs.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Okanagan—Coquihalla.

Mr. Dan Albas (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to rise in the House today. The Albas family has a strong connection to Panama. In fact, when my great-grandfather left Spain, he found work constructing the Panama Canal, and eventually was able to work his way up to Canada where he set roots. The rest is history.

I am very pleased to rise in the House today to talk about the Canada-Panama free trade agreement. Our Conservative government has been very clear about the priority it places on implementing free trade agreements. These agreements help Canadians compete in overseas markets. We know that an export-driven economy helps Canadian companies, producers and investors to grow into international markets. When they grow, they add jobs in our local communities. One in five jobs in Canada is related directly to trade.

It is clear that jobs in the communities across Canada depend on the business we do with other countries. This is certainly true in my riding of Okanagan—Coquihalla. I would like to share an example of that with the House today.

Recently in my riding, with the support of our government's agricultural innovation program, a new food packaging technology was developed that can drastically increase the shelf life of fresh fruits. This increase in shelf life means that marine shipping can now be an option for international markets instead of very costly air freight. Let us not forget that marine shipping is also more environmentally friendly than air freight.

We have a large number of fruit growers in my riding. I must say I am a little biased, but we grow some of the world's best fruit. Even this exciting new food technology, without having a free trade agreement that opens up new markets, quickly becomes pointless.

That is why trade agreements with countries like Panama are so important. It is why our government is committed to protecting and strengthening the long-term financial security of hard-working Canadians. Statistics demonstrate that trade flows more than double with our FTA partners after 10 years.

Looking at the Canada-Chile free trade agreement, for example, since the agreement was made 15 years ago, bilateral trade between Canada and Chile has more than tripled. I mention that because one of the largest private sector employers in my riding has built specialized equipment that is also sold into Chile. That provides jobs in my riding. I think that is pretty exciting.

Numerous studies have of course demonstrated the same positive impact of trade agreements on various sectors of our economy, but I prefer to walk through the plants in person to meet the workers and to see the innovative projects on which they are working.

It has been shown that the free trade agreement between Canada and the United States of America led to an improvement of 13.8% in productivity in the Canadian manufacturing sector, a remarkable trade-related achievement. In turn, increases in productivity lead to higher wages and a higher standard of living.

The benefits are clear. These trade agreements are helpful to our local economies. That is why our government is in the midst of the most ambitious pursuit of new and expanded trade and investment agreements in Canadian history. Since 2006, Canada has concluded free trade agreements with nine countries: Colombia, Jordan, Peru, the European Free Trade Association member states of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, and most recently with Honduras and now, of course, Panama.

As another example, some of these countries are more prone to earthquakes.

● (1635)

In my riding, we have a value-added wood manufacturer that manufactures specialized cross-laminate wood panels. These wood products are as strong as concrete, but four to five times lighter. They require less energy to produce and they can be made from less valuable timber. It is easy to ship, and most important, it is very earthquake resilient.

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We have the product. We have the technology and the expertise. However, now we need more markets opening their doors to these innovative products. That is why we are also negotiating with more than 50 countries, including major economies such as the European Union, India and Japan. These are potentially huge market for that specialty wood manufacturer in my riding.

All of these initiatives are critical to the economic future of our country. In order to grow at home, Canadian enterprises must be allowed to succeed abroad. They must be able to compete in a predictable, transparent and rules-based trading environment. More important, Canadian firms must be able to compete on a level playing field. They must not be at a competitive disadvantage in markets where other countries have these trade agreements in place.

There are a growing number of countries where Canadian companies are at a competitive disadvantage because their competitors have preferential market access under some form of trade agreement, and this is precisely what is happening in Panama if this House does not act quickly to approve this free trade agreement. While this House debates the merits of a trade agreement with Panama, the United States and the European Union are moving forward to implement their respective trade agreements with this vibrant and prosperous economy.

The United States-Panama trade promotion agreement entered into force October 31, 2012. Panama also signed a free trade agreement with the European Union this past July, which could enter into force by the end of the year. Many Canadian goods and services are now in direct competition with those of the United States and potentially the European Union in Panama.

Let me provide another example of this. In the community of Okanagan Falls, in my riding, is one of the world's leading manufacturers of electrical power and control equipment. It does a lot of business in the international mining sector, and right now Panama has a thriving mining industry.

It is important that Canadian manufacturers can bid on work equally with their international competitors, and this is precisely why I am here today speaking in support of this agreement. In my view, we cannot allow American and European firms to have preferential access to the Panamanian market on a number of products that are key exports for Canadian firms.

It is not just for the benefit of my riding. Canadian firms exporting products, such as beef, pork products, frozen french fries, pharmaceuticals, pulp and paper, vehicles and machinery will all be at a competitive disadvantage. They will continue to face duties, while products from the United States now enjoy preferential access. We, in Canada, cannot afford to sit on the sidelines while other countries vigorously pursue trade deals to secure better market access for their products and services.

This government will not stand by, and we will defend the interests of Canadian companies to compete on a level playing field. This is precisely what this agreement does, and that is why I am supporting it on behalf of the people in my riding who will benefit from it. It is imperative that we implement the Canada-Panama free trade agreement to ensure Canadian companies remain competitive

in the Panamanian market and can quickly move to access that market.

This will benefit Canadian families in my riding of Okanagan—Coquihalla, and many other regions in our great country. The member for British Columbia Southern Interior has a tremendous amount of timber supply in his riding, which supplies the firm in Okanagan Falls that manufactures the cross-laminate beams. This is important for everyone in the interior of B.C.

● (1640)

Before I close, I would like to share one more thought about free trade in general.

Recently a local newspaper in my riding reran some of the stories of the day from 25 years ago. As some members may recall, the same anti-free trade rhetoric we are hearing today was also being used 25 years ago against the Canada-U.S. free trade deal. Some members may recall that the anti-trade critics in those days ran commercials illustrating the border between Canada and the United States being somehow erased. Claims were made that tens of thousands of Canadian jobs would soon disappear and that Canadian sovereignty itself would be compromised. The critics claimed that Canada could never compete on a level playing field with the United States and that the deal, if it went ahead, would be the end of our great nation. Today we can clearly see how very wrong those critics were.

Since the agreement came into force, in 1989, our Canadian annual GDP has risen by \$1.1 trillion dollars. Nearly 4.6 million jobs have been created in Canada, and our two-way trade in goods and services with the United States has more than tripled. Today our economy, our economic growth rate, our unemployment rates all consistently outperform the United States, and Canada is the strongest nation economically in the G7. Recently Canadian household wealth surpassed the United States for the first time in history.

As for the critics who were wrong about the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, in my view, they have simply recycled the same arguments from 25 years ago and are using them again today.

Getting back to that story from 25 years ago in the Okanagan, the story was focused on a local grape grower who pondered what free trade might do to the Okanagan grape growing industry. The comments from the B.C. grape grower were not unlike what we hear from free trade opponents today. Those comments from 25 years ago were as follows:

...B.C. grape growers are doomed once provincial government mark-ups on imported wines are phased out over seven years. "I know for sure there is no way we can compete with California..." The Americans have cheaper land and labour.

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Of course today we know we can not only compete, we can produce some of the best wine in the world. Today in the Okanagan, premium grape growing land is some of the most valuable agricultural land in the province of British Columbia, if not Canada as well. One of my constituents even consults in the United States on how to produce great wine. Under free trade, the B.C. wine industry has grown from a handful of wineries 25 years ago to well over 206 today. Speaking to some of the wine operators, I should also add there are another 40 or so that are going through the permit process. That number, I am hopeful, will soon jump to over 246. I should also note the B.C. wine industry now supports 3,000 jobs. Those are a lot of jobs, and that is what can be achieved with the power of free trade. That is why I am in full support of this deal.

I urge all members of Parliament to support the passage of Bill C-24.

•(1645)

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to the speech of the member opposite.

The Republic of Panama has sheltered the police from legal action. Signing treaties like this with the republic would condone this type of thing.

Why does my colleague condone the impunity of the police in Panama?

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, we have before us a free trade agreement that would be in the best interests of both Canada and the people of Panama. I was not elected to represent what goes on in Panama itself, other than to say that my great-grandfather worked on the Panama Canal and I would sincerely hope the Panamanians would reap the benefits as much as Canadians.

If the member has a question specifically about our government's position and the Conservative government's ideas on free trade, I would be more than happy to answer that.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have been fairly clear in terms of the principle of freer trade and free trade agreements. Bilateral agreements can be a very positive thing. All in all, they have been that for Canada.

My question is related to an issue that many Canadians are very sensitive to. There are industries that there are concerns about, and Canadians look to the government to protect those industries, especially those that have built-in protections. As a specific example, Air Canada was supposed to be maintaining overhaul bases in the city of Winnipeg and two other jurisdictions, in Quebec and Ontario. Air Canada made a determination through the back door to dispose of its employees, even though there is federal legislation that mandates those jobs have to be protected in those three locations.

Speaking specifically in terms of Winnipeg, why is it that the government does not stand up for those jobs? Those are the types of jobs that are important in certain sectors of the industry. As a result of the government's not doing that, there are a lot of people who are nervous when it brings in free trade agreements, of whatever nature.

•(1650)

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's concern. Obviously today we are supposed to be debating a free trade agreement that would bring benefits to both Canada and to the Panamanian people. I would like to limit my comments today to working on that. Ultimately, this free trade agreement is about jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity. We sense that the Liberal Party has concerns only about process. The Liberals say they support free trade, and I hope the member will help us to see this bill through so the benefits can start working for both countries.

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his excellent remarks. It was very interesting to hear about his family connection to Panama.

Can the member explain why free trade with countries big and small is so important, and why the New Democrats seem to always vote against free trade, in spite of the fact that it creates wealth and jobs in both Canada and whatever country the free trade agreement is with? Can the member spend a few minutes explaining to the members opposite about the benefits of free trade?

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, going back to my comments from the speech, we see wood products that would benefit people who may not be currently using wood construction and are in earthquake zones. It is not just toward the improvement of our standard of living by selling these value-added products, but it would also help protect the health and safety of people abroad who would be very happy to receive those products.

The member well knows that the New Democrats have said many times that they support free trade in principle, but when it comes to actually supporting agreements, they say it is never good enough. I will remind members that this is a free trade agreement between two different countries, and just because one particular element of the House in a minority position has ideas on it, if this were to be amended that would take extra time. We would have to take them back to Panama, and by that point the Panamanians may have already said to forget it, that they will not deal with us.

Let us not let perfection become the enemy of the good. Let us see further engagement with Panama. Let us see benefits for Canadians. Free trade is a good way of doing it.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my esteemed colleague said that he really likes Panama. However, something is really bothering me. This agreement will reduce tariffs significantly.

That could have serious consequences in a poor country like Panama. For example, Panamanian goods will be competing with Canadian goods. Panamanians will not have more opportunities to export their own goods, unless they are produced in very miserable conditions. This trade agreement does not provide real protection for the workers or for the environment.

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I would like my colleague to talk more about this.

• (1655)

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the concern because we want everyone to do well, whether here in Canada or in Panama. That is a very worthy thing and I certainly sympathize with the member.

Part of this agreement is called the agreement on environment, in which there are provisions encouraging the use of voluntary best practices of corporate social responsibility and a commitment to promote public awareness of the parties' environmental laws. The agreement reaffirms the country's international commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. I would say those concerns are being addressed.

As I said in my earlier statement, we are wealthier as a country because of the free trade agreement with the Americans. The NDP voted against that. I would be mindful of that as we move forward in our deliberations.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, earlier I asked my colleague to comment on the opportunities that would be created through food processing and he commented on food processing in terms of the packaging of fruit that originates in his riding. I would like him to expand a bit on that. That is a fantastic idea and I do not think he had enough time to elaborate on that in his speech. I want to give him a few minutes to tell us a little more about that great technology.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, this is both a private and public collaboration through the Pacific Agri-Food Research Centre in Summerland, which is in the heart of my riding. The people of Summerland love to visit it, not just because of the natural beauty but also because of the fascinating science projects that take place there that continue to help our economy.

The basic idea is that by creating a new form of shipping container, it will allow Okanagan cherries, apples and perhaps even grapes to be shipped because they will last up to 30 days. Right now most product can only be sent in less than two weeks. That is an excellent opportunity for people in my riding to start thinking about the far and emerging markets that this government is pursuing trade agreements with.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member for Okanagan—Coquihalla knows that the finest wines made in this country are actually in my riding. I would be happy to bring a bottle and if he wants to bring one as well, we can perhaps decide which is better, though not in the House, of course.

Let me ask a two-part question. First, the member said he could not wait to have a perfect bill. Is he suggesting that we should have imperfect legislation? Second, he talked about the wine industry in Okanagan—Coquihalla, which is a fine region without a doubt. I have been there. Is the Canadian wine industry as a whole actually increasing its market share or is foreign competition coming into this country and taking over a larger piece of the market than what it had before we saw the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement?

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Speaker, first, when I made the statement that we should not let perfection become the enemy of the good, if we did not have that argument, and I would include the member in this, most of us would not be married right now. I will leave it at that. He does not seem to be disagreeing with me.

Second, I would say that we have an affinity with the United States. We trade with them. In fact, many of us have spouses who were born in the United States. We are strengthened by increasing our investment in one another. It is very elementary to say that together we are stronger. With a small population in such a big country blessed in natural resources, we can work together to harvest those—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. We are out of time.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to mention that I will be sharing my time with my highly esteemed colleague, the member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing. I wish her well with her speech.

I have already told the House that I was a member of the Standing Committee on International Trade for one year. During that time, I observed what I hoped was a certain naïveté on the part of government members. It would have been touching, insofar as international trade is concerned, except for the very serious ramifications for our communities. The reality is that it is not naïveté, but a stubborn desire to stick with the old ways.

That is truly unfortunate because if the government were more open to dialogue—or at least a bit more open—we could work in a constructive manner and sign free trade agreements that would benefit all Canadians. Unfortunately, that is impossible. That is what I observed directly and that is what we see every time the government presents a free trade agreement to the House.

There is another very important aspect to consider and that is a very serious consequence of hastily signing free trade agreements and blindly entering into commitments without taking into account the relationships that exist between the countries involved, particularly the countries with which we are doing business. With regard to international relations, we must act very carefully. Every move Canada makes on the world stage is closely scrutinized by our closest neighbours and by the community of nations, not to mention independent research institutes throughout the world.

Government Orders

Canada has an excellent reputation that the Conservatives are unfortunately in the process of very quickly destroying. Because of this reputation, the eyes of international observers are always on Canada. When we do something as significant as giving a country such as Panama status as a favoured nation, we are sending a very important message, which is that we respect the practices of the country in question. With regard to Panama, this raises many questions.

As a courtesy to the members opposite, I will not confuse them by touching on too many different topics since the implications of a free trade agreement are obviously extensive. Instead, I will focus on a single topic, and that is the fact that Panama is a tax haven. I hope that members of the House will listen closely and understand that signing such agreements causes Canada to wander far along a path or become deeply involved in an activity that is widely condemned throughout the world.

Before I begin talking specifically about tax havens, I would like to provide some statistics from UNICEF on income inequality. For the period from 2000 to 2010, 40% of the poorest households shared only 11% of the wealth in Panama, whereas 20% of the richest households—only a small portion of the population—shared over half or 57% of the country's wealth. This gives an important indication of the social situation in Panama and shows just how inequitable this country is. That is one of the reasons why we must be very careful. Obviously, these statistics are not necessarily directly related to the fact that this country is a tax haven, but no doubt they are fairly closely related to it.

Lacking a precise definition, the OECD tried to set some criteria for a tax haven. I will briefly mention the four criteria: very low or no taxes; no exchange of tax information with other nations; lack of transparency regarding its tax system; and no substantial activities of the taxpayer in the country in question.

● (1700)

Since Panama excludes a large part of its population from political, social and economic activities, as demonstrated by the UNICEF figures, we must be careful not to condone practices that are simply reprehensible.

Tax havens are characterized by a lack of transparency, banking secrecy and shady financial operations. The Tax Justice Network ranks Panama 14th on its financial secrecy index of the world's most opaque nations. What is very interesting is that, in addition to ranking countries, that organization asks a number of questions related to Panama's practices.

Regarding banking transparency, it said, "Panama does not adequately curtail banking secrecy". Regarding trusts and foundations, it said that "Panama does not put details of trusts on public record". Lastly, regarding corporate transparency, it said that "Panama does not require that ownership of companies is put on public record.... Panama does not require that company accounts be available on public record".

Here we can see just how much impunity corporations can enjoy, especially in the Panamanian banking and financial systems. Unfortunately, when an organization like that takes a stand, the government tries to discredit it. So I will lead the government into

territory that it should be more familiar with and should find more credible.

I found a European website called "the best tax havens in 2012". The information on that website is very up to date, which is good. I mentioned it briefly earlier, but the website says:

Thus, there is no single, definitive answer to the question, "what is the best tax haven", especially since it is often better to combine several offshore jurisdictions. If you are an entrepreneur or a manager of an SME in Europe and especially in France, we would recommend the following tax havens:

Then it lists just under 10 countries, including Panama. So that is wonderful confirmation that Panama is an ideal place to shelter one's money from taxes.

I am going to talk about another aspect that I mentioned earlier. CCP Inc., a company that can be found online, basically claims that it can create any type of offshore company in the five tax havens. In order not to spread itself too thin, the company chose the countries with which it is easiest to do business, namely, Antigua, Belize, Dominica, Nevis and Panama. In the case of Panama, CCP Inc. encourages people to allow it to help them create a foundation by telling them to feel free to contact the company or to use its online form. I will not put the link on my website because I in no way condone this.

If we sign the various agreements that will link us to Panama, we will send a message to the world that Canada condones tax havens and tax evasion. Clearly, everything is negotiable. CCP Inc. suggests that people create a foundation to shelter their assets from taxes, saying "Security and Privacy are Your Rights!"

When I first ran for election in 2006, this government said that it wanted to be transparent. I am going to ask my colleagues to be consistent and not to condone banking secrecy or questionable practices, such as those in the Republic of Panama.

● (1705)

I would like to thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the time I have been given. I await my colleagues' questions.

● (1710)

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Beauport—Limoilou for his excellent speech. The member for Hochelaga also briefly mentioned the fact that Panama is a tax haven in her speech.

While they were speaking, I visited the OECD website and learned that Canada has not signed an information exchange agreement with Panama, although it has done so with many other countries. I will not list them all, because we have signed information agreements with several dozen of them, which means that we can exchange tax information with them.

I think that is a serious flaw with Bill C-24. What does the member for Beauport—Limoilou think about that?

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Alfred-Pellan for raising this point. I appreciate her bringing it up, because I unfortunately forgot to mention it.

Government Orders

It is unbelievable to see this government's lack of priorities. It does not know how to set priorities.

We could ask the government a question. Once the agreements are signed and passed in the House—if they unfortunately succeed with the help of the Liberals—will Panama agree to sign this famous information exchange agreement? I highly doubt it, and that is very worrisome.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from the member. I do not necessarily agree with his comments.

At the end of the day, there are industries in the province of Manitoba, as in other provinces, that see merit in having a free trade agreement with Panama. I can talk about the potato industry, as I have. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs within the province of Manitoba. We could talk about the pork industry, which has great potential in the province of Manitoba and again creates many jobs.

Freer trade with other countries around the world has generated the wealth Canada has today. I suspect that if the member went through every free trade agreement ever passed through the House of Commons, he would find room for improvement. There is no doubt that this particular agreement is the same. Yes, it could be better. Is the member suggesting that if we do not have a perfect agreement, the agreement should never pass? When I say “perfect”, I am referring to things such as environmental laws, human rights issues, labour laws, and so forth. Is that what it takes for the NDP to pass or support an actual free trade agreement?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Speaker, my colleague's comments were very disappointing. I will turn the question around. Will we have to condone child labour and child exploitation in order to sell pork or potatoes? Will we even have to condone eugenics or reprehensible practices such as female genital mutilation? I am not sure. I do not want to go too far and accuse him of anything.

Quite frankly, it is disgusting that they are turning a blind eye so easily for the sake of trade. That is my response.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have time for a quick question. The hon. member for Sherbrooke.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to ask a question of my colleague from Beauport—Limoilou, who taught tax havens 101 to my Conservative colleagues. I am glad that was done today in the House, because it shows what this is really all about. He did a good job defining what constitutes a tax haven.

As my colleague from Alfred-Pellan said earlier, Canada did not sign an information sharing agreement. In my colleague's view, what message is the government sending when it signs a free trade agreement with a country that is considered a tax haven? What message is the government sending to the international community about the fight against tax havens?

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Sherbrooke very much for asking me that question.

This sends a terribly ambivalent message. We have a human rights legacy that goes back decades. In fact, we fought for human rights throughout the entire 20th century. Canada was a pioneer; it is among the leading countries in this regard. The government is in the process of destroying that legacy and, frankly, that is disappointing.

● (1715)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou for sharing his time with me.

[*English*]

Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to debate Bill C-24.

While the members opposite might not want to recognize it, New Democrats are absolutely in favour of developing good trading relationships. We understand the need for expanding our markets, but that does not mean that we will give our support to bad agreements. We cannot give uncritical support for the mere notion of trade, and we will stand opposed to those agreements that unnecessarily expose Canada to playing fields that are anything but level.

New Democrats would like to see agreements that go about creating and preserving jobs here in Canada, not documents that hasten the movement of production to other countries. I think most Canadians would agree that keeping good-paying jobs in Canada should be a bare minimum condition for a trade deal and that creating more and better jobs should be the real goal.

The government is fully aware that only New Democrats proposed amendments to the Canada-Panama free trade agreement when the bill was studied at committee. That is a clear example of how we are willing to work to make this agreement better. We clearly are focused on agreements that prove to be of net benefit to Canadians. It cannot be said that New Democrats did not come to the table prepared to work and make the agreement better for Canada and Panama. In that respect, we are pragmatic about trade agreements. The government paints that as something else. However, we have seen that over time, New Democrats' reservations are usually based on probable outcomes and not on an exercise in wishful thinking.

With Bill C-24, there are critical problems that underline the significant differences in belief that separate us from the Conservatives and the Liberals when it comes to negotiating trade deals. For example, we believe that the preconditions to ensuring a level playing field should already be more or less in place. Without that, one country may reap a significant advantage, such as an abundance of cheap, poorly paid labour that operates under substandard labour laws with respect to important Canadian ideals such as workplace health and safety.

Government Orders

New Democrats have also had long-standing disagreements about the significance of environmental protection and the role that should play as these agreements are developed, contrary to the other side. In fact, this trade agreement, like too many others, has a critical flaw in terms of environmental protection. Those measures have been tucked inside a side deal instead of being given prominence in the agreement itself. That further entrenches the belief that the environment must take a back seat to economic interests, which is a view that is irresponsible and unsustainable.

Therefore, when we look at Bill C-24, we ask ourselves what the advantage is for Canada. Will Canada come out ahead? This is not guaranteed. Does this deal reflect the kind of country we are? Again, there are no guarantees, and there are more than a few requests that we take a leap of faith instead. We are asked to take a leap of faith on the environment, on labour, and on the transparency of the Panamanian government and its intention to deal with Panama's reputation as a tax haven. Quite simply, Panama has a long history of being a tax haven. It has gone out of its way to help people hide money from countries like Canada, and that sends up a red flag for many Canadians.

The Conservatives tell us that they are negotiating a separate deal with Panama to address this concern, but on this issue, the government has a credibility problem. It is easily argued that the Conservatives have little interest in addressing offshore tax havens. I will let members decide what the motives for that might be. We know that the Conservative government cut back on inspectors and the resources Revenue Canada uses to catch offshore tax cheats. That is not the stuff of a government that takes the problem seriously. It does not even make economic sense. We know full well that every dollar spent investigating offshore tax fraud nets five dollars in return. Any person on the street would tell us that this is money well spent. Therefore, we can dump the argument that this is somehow about saving money.

• (1720)

This is why New Democrats have a difficult time believing the government's claim that it is addressing the problem in a separate agreement. The fact that it is not already in place, ahead of this free trade agreement, is distressing. I am certain that most Canadians would agree that if someone were bleeding their income, they would not go out of their way to do more business with that person without first addressing that pre-existing problem. It is not as if we are the junior partner here. This is an agreement we do not absolutely need to make, so the question of why the tax loopholes were not addressed first is legitimate.

Labour conditions are another concern that should be considered more important in the negotiation of trade agreements in general and with Panama specifically. We know that any labour rights in the agreement are not built into the deal itself. They are part of a side agreement that does not really have much in the way of teeth.

Consider that Panama is quite a bit smaller than Canada, with only 3.4 million people, and is a significantly unequal society. A full 40% of the population is poor. The rate of extreme poverty is 27%. That problem is particularly acute among indigenous populations.

Given those facts, it should be clear that we are in a position to use a trade agreement as a tool to help Panama address its problem. Yet

without better entrenching labour conditions, we are passing up that opportunity. It is too bad, since we know that the country has gone through significant structural adjustment, liberalization and privatization in recent years that has not translated into economic benefits for the population. Without a bit of a push from a larger partner in a trade agreement, it is difficult to imagine much changing, and it is an opportunity lost. I say that being fully aware of worrisome trends in Panama and how that country is vulnerable when it comes to labour rights and human rights.

Many members will know that in 2010, President Ricardo Martinelli unilaterally changed Panamanian laws. He put an end to environmental impact studies on projects deemed to be of social interest, banned mandatory dues collections from workers, allowed employers to fire striking workers and replace them with strike breakers, criminalized street blockades and protected police from prosecution. Predictably, President Martinelli's attack on labour rights resulted in strikes and demonstrations. Six people were killed, while other protesters were seriously injured. Many were blinded by tear gas and police violence. Ultimately, 300 trade union leaders were detained before the president withdrew the labour provisions and called for a national dialogue with moderate trade union leaders and business leaders. This is not the behaviour of a government that respects labour rights, or human rights, for that matter.

I know there are many on the benches opposite who view organized labour as adversaries. However, I am sure there are precious few who would agree with the severity of the Panamanian response or even with the measures that set these events in motion.

Therefore, when New Democrats say that we would like to see labour rights better protected in this trade agreement, one can see that this is based on very real concerns and unsettling trends. We are not convinced that Panama is quite ready to be given favoured trading partner status or that this agreement has the teeth needed to help lift Panama up to our standards.

I would like to reiterate that we are happy to use trade agreements as a way to make our economy stronger and more vibrant. We believe this can be done without blinders that limit the scope and imagination of what can be negotiated. On this issue, as with so many others, we hear the words of our former leader, Jack Layton, urging us on with a simple phrase: "Don't let them tell you it can't be done".

Therefore, we call on the government to similarly challenge itself to arrive at trade deals that expand Canadian exports by reducing harmful barriers to trade, that encourage the development of value-added industries, that create Canadian jobs by increasing market access for our products and that increase productivity by encouraging new investment. We say negotiate agreements that diversify our exports, especially in emerging markets, and deals that help reduce Canada's trade deficit and improve protections for labour rights, human rights and the environment.

Government Orders

We support agreements that benefit consumers by expanding choice and bringing down prices and that reflect Canadian values such as transparency, accountability and human rights. That is what Canadians deserve.

• (1725)

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague raised an interesting point in her speech about the environmental agreement portion being broken away from that act. Continuously in the House members opposite have urged the government to break up bits of legislation and now are suggesting that in doing so in this agreement it would somehow weaken it. Is the member now advocating for an omnibus-type trade agreement?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Mr. Speaker, it has been clear from the start that the Conservatives were not interested in any amendments that were being put forward. A Conservative member asked a while ago why the government should wait and try to make sure this is a really perfect agreement because it wants to move on. That is exactly right. Canadians do deserve better. They deserve agreements we can live by; they deserve agreements that can be respected, as labour laws should be respected.

With all our riches, Canada should be in the driver's seat and negotiating deals that would protect critical public resources and services. We should be helping make Canadian firms global leaders in the world economy.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party supports the importance of labour laws, the importance of environmental laws and the importance of human rights, but we also recognize the importance of freer trade among other nations. Where we can enter into free trade agreements where both countries, in particular Canada, can benefit, the question is then why not. They would enhance the economic opportunities of all Canadians, if we decide to move forward.

I do appreciate the member's comments because they are the closest to the late Jack Layton's comments. She implied that we cannot have a free trade agreement with another country if that country's environmental laws are not equal to Canadian environmental laws, if labour laws abroad are not equal to Canadian labour laws.

Could my colleague expand on why she believes there should be equality between Canadian laws and the laws in other countries before an agreement can be achieved?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Mr. Speaker, let us not forget that the Conservatives have never seen a trade agreement they did not like. The fact of the matter is that we need to make sure that, when we do trade agreements, they are of net benefit to Canadians. We also have to look at the labour rights and human rights of workers in those other countries. For example, we do not allow the use of asbestos here in Canada, yet we send it elsewhere for those workers to use without the proper safety net in place. We have to look at that.

New Democrats are pro-trade, but we believe in the superiority of multilateral trade agreements. We believe in agreements that are fair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoulu, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her excellent speech.

I asked a member across the way a question about something that is particularly troubling when it comes to Panama. Pursuant to legislative measures taken by the Republic of Panama, the police is immune to prosecution. Accordingly, labour laws, among other things, can be violated with impunity.

I would like my colleague from Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapus-kasing to say a few words about that.

• (1730)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapus-kasing has 40 seconds to reply to the question.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Mr. Speaker, 40 seconds is not much time.

However, in my speech I talked about how we must ensure the well-being of workers, especially when we enter into agreements such as this. We are not against free trade agreements. However, we must ensure that the rights of people, and human rights such as labour rights, are respected.

The Deputy Speaker: I would like to inform the House that speeches will now be 10 minutes, followed by five minutes for questions and comments.

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is certainly a pleasure to rise in the House today to talk about the Canada-Panama free trade agreement.

I am sure we have heard some great speeches today, particularly from my colleagues. I do not imagine I will speak as eloquently or as passionately as did our member for London West earlier today, but I heard his talk and it was exceptional. My colleague from Mississauga—Erindale did a fantastic job of addressing this issue, as did our great member for Okanagan—Coquihalla. I have a tough role to follow.

We have been debating the key elements of this trade agreement and the discussions around it for nearly 60 hours. We are certainly aware that Canada is a significant trading partner with Panama.

I was amazed to hear, throughout the speeches and debates today, how significant that total is. We did over \$235 million in trade with Panama in 2011 alone. That is significant for a country of that size.

Canada's prosperity is directly linked to reaching out beyond our borders for economic opportunities that serve to grow Canada's trade and investment. This is another excellent example of how we are doing that.

Panama is an established market for Canadian exports and holds significant potential for Canadian businesses.

We have also heard about the tremendous opportunities that exist in Panama with respect to government procurement. In addition to the ongoing \$5.3 billion that is to be spent on the Panama Canal expansion project, the government of Panama has numerous infrastructure projects, either under consideration or already in progress, to build or improve ports, roads, hospitals, social housing projects, bridges and airports. These projects are part of a \$13.6 billion Panamanian government strategic investment plan for the years 2010 to 2014.

Government Orders

A country like Canada with so much expertise could certainly take advantage of these significant opportunities in Panama. Panama is also a strategic destination for Canadian investment, with the stock of Canadian investment in Panama reaching over \$121 million in 2010.

Looking beyond investment, government procurement and market access for goods, this agreement is a comprehensive free trade agreement with obligations that extend well beyond these subjects to include other areas of importance to Canadian business.

The free trade agreement provides detailed obligations in areas such as financial services, temporary entry of business persons, electronic commerce, telecommunications and competition, monopolies and state enterprises.

The Canadian banking system is consistently recognized among the best in the world, and today the World Economic Forum has ranked Canada's banking system as the most sound in the world four years in a row. This is an area where Canada is truly excelling. The Canadian financial service sector is a leader in providing high quality and reliable financial services.

Across the Americas, Canadian banks are helping foster economic growth through access to credit and other financial services. In Panama specifically, Canadian financial institutions such as Scotiabank have an active presence and are offering a wide variety of banking services. This agreement will help those Canadian financial institutions take advantage of those opportunities that exist in Panama.

On financial services, this agreement provides market access parity with what Panama was offered to the U.S. through the trade promotion agreement and contains a robust prudential carve-out. This agreement substantially lists obligations for the financial service sector, including banking, insurance and securities.

These market access commitments are complemented by key obligations that ensure non-discrimination, provide a right of establishment for financial institutions and promote regulatory transparency in the financial sector. These are key elements that the Canadian financial service sector is seeking in order to ensure it is able to compete in an increasingly competitive global market. Our Conservative government is now responding to this demand.

Another important area included in this trade agreement is to ensure businesses are able to fully maximize the opportunities in Panama in temporary entry for business persons. This is an important issue for Canadian businesses to ensure their employees are able to work in Panama, and it is a natural complement to market access for goods, services and investment.

• (1735)

In recognition of the significant number of Canadian companies operating in the region, the agreement removes unnecessary barriers impairing the ability of companies to bring in the skilled workers they require. These would include impediments such as the requirement for labour certification tests, quotas, proportionality requirements and any other prior approval procedure. The agreement extends to an extensive list of professionals, including various technicians and provisions for spousal employment.

The strength of this free trade agreement does not stop there. It also extends to the areas of electronic commerce and telecommunications. Electronic commerce is an important addition to the previous free trade agreements in light of the importance of ensuring that new digital economy issues, such as protection of personal information, consumer protection and paperless trade, are not overlooked. These issues are increasingly important to business in the 21st century, and Canada and Panama have recognized this importance.

In the free trade agreement with Canada, Panama has agreed to a permanent moratorium on customs duties for products delivered electronically. This includes items such as electronic surveillance software, music purchased online and digital books. The moratorium is important not only for business but for consumers as well.

In addition to electronic commerce, telecommunications provisions were also included to support the competitive development of the telecommunications sector. Through this free trade agreement, Canadian telecommunications service providers will be able to better compete with their American counterparts in the Panamanian market.

Clearly, there are many benefits to this free trade agreement with Panama that go beyond trade in goods and investment. The agreement on the environment commits both countries to pursue high levels of environmental protection, to improve and enforce their environmental laws effectively, to maintain appropriate environmental assessment procedures and to ensure they do not relax their environmental laws to encourage trade or investment.

The agreement on the environment also includes provisions on encouraging the use of voluntary best practices of corporate social responsibility and a commitment to promote public awareness of the parties' environmental laws. The agreement reaffirms the countries' international commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity to promote the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities.

In addition, the agreement on the environment provides for co-operative activities between Canada and Panama aimed at achieving the environmental objectives and obligations of this agreement.

The final area I would like to touch on is the obligation of the free trade agreement related to competition, monopolies and state enterprises.

This agreement meets Canada's objective of assuring that anti-competitive business practices and the actions of monopolies or state enterprises do not undermine the benefits of trade and investment liberalization achieved in this agreement. Canada and Panama will co-operate on issues related to competition policy through their respective authorities. The obligations ensure that Canadian companies doing business in Panama are treated fairly.

There are many other areas of the agreement, which will offer real commercial benefits to Canadian companies.

Government Orders

Overall, this is a high-quality and comprehensive trade agreement. It will allow Canadian businesses to compete and excel in the Panamanian market, where many key exporters are seeing enormous potential. According to a report published by the CAPA Centre for Aviation, Panama is the fastest growing economy in all of Latin America and it is expected to be the fastest growing economy in Latin America for the next five years.

Panama's real gross domestic growth for 2011 is estimated at 10.6%, which is faster growth than that of many of the other rapidly emerging economies. It clearly illustrates that the commercial potential in Panama is significant.

I see my time is coming to an end, so I will just say that this free trade agreement has the support of key exporters and investors across Canada and its passage through the House would ensure that Canadian businesses are able to take advantage of opportunities in that market. I urge all members of the House to consider their support of it.

• (1740)

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have talked on this side at some length about our concerns regarding transparency of tax matters, the fact that international concerns have been raised about Panama's status as a tax haven. The Conservatives said that the OECD took Panama off the grey list and that removes all concerns. However, the member will undoubtedly recognize the fact that the OECD still has very significant reservations and other countries, including the U.S., would not sign onto an agreement with Panama until an agreement on tax information exchange was completed.

Does the member agree that we should ensure that the agreement on tax information exchange is made available before we sign on to this agreement?

Mr. Ryan Leef: Mr. Speaker, as my hon. colleague rightly pointed out, the U.S. has now signed an agreement with Panama, which is one of the reasons that we are focused on getting this agreement through the House. Canadian companies are finding themselves at a disadvantage on the Panamanian market as U.S. consumers and our competitors in that market have a distinct leg-up.

As we move forward, these kinds of agreements foster growth and regulations. They foster a positive change for countries that engage in these reciprocal trade agreements. I see this as an excellent opportunity for Panama to improve its position on the world stage and improve its relationship with Canada.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we appreciate the fact that there have been a number of trade agreements that have gone through the House since Conservatives have taken the government reins in Canada, but one of the things we need to recognize is the trade surplus/deficit situation. When Conservatives came to government, they had a huge trade surplus in excess of \$25 billion. It was a wonderful gift to have walked into a situation like that. Conservatives have turned that surplus into a trade deficit of \$50 billion.

They have been successful at signing some trade agreements. We could give them a pat on the back to a certain degree for that, but can the member explain why it is that we have lost that trade surplus and

under the current government we now have a huge trade deficit? Why is that?

Mr. Ryan Leef: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the member missed the global economic recession that the entire planet faced, but our government introduced an economic action plan that allowed Canadians to weather that storm and do better than G7 and G20 countries. We are now moving forward with trade agreements that are going to improve the deficit the member is highlighting. I could not help but notice he spent a good portion of time patting himself on the back for all the work he is trying to take credit for in years past.

We had an unprecedented recession and Canada weathered that storm quite well. With the 800,000 net new jobs that our government has created across all sectors, we are going to be able to take advantage of these kinds of trade agreements to move Canada even closer to being a global economic power.

• (1745)

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to engage in the debate on Bill C-24 at third reading, as I did at second reading, because it is an important debate and an important bill. It is about how we trade with other nations in the world. I have said before and will say again that it is my contention, and that of the official opposition, that Canada should be much more engaged in promoting multilateral trade. We should be working with the international community in its entirety. That is the best way to work toward better deals and arrangements to lift the trade standards of all countries equally, rather than trying to do one-offs with countries to beat the U.S. or the European community. Otherwise, it is kind of hit and miss.

As has been stated here, the Conservative government has not been particularly successful in improving our trade circumstances. We have such a significant trade deficit in this country. Deals with countries like Panama, while being important to the people who are doing business with Panama, and I do not want to understate that importance whatsoever, pale in comparison to our trading relationship with the United States and with many of the other countries that we are trying to trade with.

My colleague, the member for Beauport—Limoilou, did an excellent job of talking about the reason that we should be concerned about Panama's status as a tax haven. He talked about why that was such a problem and why it is that the government should be paying more attention to the concerns that have been raised by the international community, the OECD and the United States Congress, which refused to sign on to a trade deal with Panama until an agreement on the exchange of tax information was completed.

Government Orders

I heard one member opposite say the fact that the U.S. has signed on to a trade deal with Panama is another reason that we must hurry up and that we are again being surpassed by the U.S. This trade deal was originally signed by the current government back in 2009. The government members have not shown any urgency whatsoever to get it done. Now that we finally get it into the House and start to look at it and debate it, the Conservatives should not try to scare me, as a member of this chamber, into cutting down on my questions and concerns simply because the government has been tardy and as a result the United States has beaten us in that relationship with Panama. However, it has also shown us a bit about negotiations and about ensuring it is protecting the interests of Americans, in that case, because their Congress insisted on getting an agreement on the exchange of tax information before signing on to the deal. That is something the Conservatives have not done.

In the past three years, since the deal was signed, what have the Minister of International Trade and his colleagues been doing? What has the parliamentary secretary been doing? They should have been ensuring that this additional agreement on the exchange of tax information was completed and signed. We could have debated it in the House and it would have gone some distance in helping to encourage members of the opposition benches that this was a deal that had some merit. However, they did not do that.

● (1750)

I sometimes get the feeling, from the way government members talk about what great free traders they are, that all they are concerned about is being able to say they have signed a deal on trade. When it comes to ensuring the deal is the best one we could get, not perfect but the best one we could get, that would be good. That would be a point well taken. Unfortunately, the government tends to say it has a deal and it has to be signed regardless of members' objections.

New Democrats introduced 13 very reasonable, modest, important and integral amendments at committee and not one of them was supported by the government. There was everything from ensuring the side deals on labour and the environment are included, to tax transparency, to the question of increasing sustainable investment, to harmonious and sustainable development. These are matters that are important to us and to the Panamanian people. Surely, members opposite do not want to benefit from the exploitation of others.

While we can agree that we want Canadian companies and businesses in this country to profit and benefit from any trade we do with other countries, surely we recognize that does not mean we are at all content with benefiting at the expense of others. If it is as a result of exploiting child labour or causing the degradation of the environment of another country or exploiting or penalizing workers, surely members opposite will agree that it is simply not worth it.

Frankly, that is why I say we should be going the way of Australia and establishing principles on which to make sure we conduct ourselves as we relate with the rest of the world. As we engage in economic relationships with other countries, we need to set standards, as Australia has done. The standards deal with the promotion of multilateral trade with other countries to ensure that we all benefit from economic activity in the global community. That should be in the best interests of this country and the members of the House.

I want to pick up on one thing that caused me some concern and that is the comments made by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The question of investor-state provisions was raised. He was asked a question about the fact that this agreement contains the same investor-state provisions as the free trade agreement with the United States. In that respect, it ensures that Canadian companies will be dealt with in that country on the basis of certain laws and rules, and so on. That is questionable when dealing with a country such as Panama that is developing its justice system. However, the Panamanian companies that are dealing with Canada can have access to those provisions and can sue our companies or our subnational governments, if they feel they are being wrongly dealt with economically.

● (1755)

I am concerned, in light of the fact that the government is engaging in the FIPA, the foreign investment promotion and protection agreement with China, in complete secrecy by the way, that he does not understand an important part of the provision with Panama, let alone an important part of the FIPA with China.

Perhaps I will get a chance to address this concern more fully when questions are asked.

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have heard a lot this afternoon about balance of trade. The balance of trade definition, for those in this House who may not be aware of it, is the difference between a country's imports and exports. In order for us to increase our exports, we need to have more markets for them. That is the purpose of negotiating trade agreements; increasing our exports grows our economy.

To my colleague who just spent 10 minutes talking sort of superfluously about maybe getting more trade and growing the economy, how does the member feel about trade in general? Will his party finally support an agreement that promotes new markets for Canadian products?

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I am disappointed that the member found my intervention on this important piece of legislation superfluous, but then again we all have different standards of debate in this House.

Let me say that the official opposition has said, on numerous occasions, that we support free trade and that we support multilateral trade. We are a trading nation. I am from the trading province of Nova Scotia. We support and promote trade.

However, we want to make sure that the trade is in our interests and in the interests of the country we are trading with. Let us not be caught up in the fact that we simply want to be able to say, "Hey, we got another deal." We want to be able to say, "Hey, we have a good deal for Canadians."

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. friend from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour for his speech related to comments on investor-state provisions.

Government Orders

I wonder if the member wants to share any reflections on the irony that our Prime Minister is currently in India, where the Indian Parliament has refused to ratify the investor-state agreement with Canada because of the very concerns that members of the opposition benches in this House have. India is apparently allowing their parliamentarians to vote; whereas in Canada we are not to see Parliament have a chance to speak to this issue before ratification. I am speaking of the Canada-China investment treaty.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, my colleague raised this issue earlier about the concerns around the investor-state provision, which I followed up on in my intervention.

The irony of the way the government deals with issues like foreign investment is truly incredible. We expect the government to get an agreement on tax information exchange transparency when it will not even be transparent on an important deal with China that is going to lock us in for 31 years.

As has been suggested in the question that was just asked, India has refused to sign on to the investor-state provision with Canada without having this matter come before their Parliament. I bet Canadians who are listening to this debate, and I am sure there are five or six, as well as the ones who will be reviewing *Hansard* later, will also recognize the huge irony in the position of the government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my esteemed colleague for his speech.

There is one thing that strikes me about free trade agreements. I find that, on our continent, Canada lacks vision and its agreements are not very ambitious. They focus solely on trade and the benefits to certain major companies. That is all.

There does not seem to be a regional vision for integrating the other countries. We would all do better if certain basic conditions were met.

I would like my colleague to talk a bit more about that.

● (1800)

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciate that question. That is what I was talking about in terms of establishing principles. It is about promoting multilateral trade with principles whereby our country and the people of our country and the country we want to do business with are all lifted higher, and we make sure that their rights and our rights are equally protected.

* * *

[*Translation*]

PROTECTING CANADA'S SENIORS ACT

The House resumed from November 5 consideration of the motion that Bill C-36, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (elder abuse), be read the third time and passed.

The Deputy Speaker: It being six o'clock, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at the third reading stage of Bill C-36.

Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

● (1840)

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(*Division No. 491*)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Welland)
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)	Allison
Ambler	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson
Andrews	Angus
Armstrong	Ashton
Aspin	Atamanenko
Aubin	Ayala
Baird	Bateman
Bélanger	Bellavance
Bennett	Benoit
Benskin	Bergen
Bernier	Bevington
Bezan	Blanchette
Blanchette-Lamothe	Blaney
Block	Boivin
Boughen	Boulerice
Boutin-Sweet	Brahmi
Braid	Breitkreuz
Brisson	Brosseau
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)	Bruinooge
Butt	Calandra
Calkins	Cannan
Carmichael	Caron
Carrie	Casey
Cash	Charlton
Chicoine	Chisholm
Chisu	Chong
Choquette	Christopherson
Clarke	Cleary
Clement	Coderre
Côté	Cotler
Crowder	Cullen
Cuzner	Daniel
Davidson	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day
Dechert	Del Mastro
Devolin	Dewar
Dion	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre
Dreeshen	Dubé
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)	Dusseau
Dykstra	Easter
Eyking	Fantino
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Garrison	Genest
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Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	Harris (St. John's East)
Hassainia	Hawn
Hayes	Hiebert
Hillyer	Hoback
Holder	Hsu
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Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Kent
Kerr	Komarnicki

*Adjournment Proceedings***PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS***[English]***CITIZENSHIP ACT**

Bill C-425. On the Order: Private members' Business

May, 30, 2012—Second reading and reference to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration of Bill C-425, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act (honouring the Canadian Armed Forces).—Mr. Devinder Shory

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Calgary Northeast is not present to move the order as announced in today's notice paper. Accordingly, the bill will be dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[Translation]

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on June 8, I asked the minister where the follow-up report on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was, why it was late, and if it was overdue because the government was dragging its feet. The government ratified the convention in 2010 and had two years to issue its follow-up report—

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. It is way too noisy. I cannot hear the speaker. Please vacate the chamber if you are not staying for the speech. If you are staying for the speech, please sit down and be quiet.

The hon. member for Montcalm.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Canada ratified the convention in 2010 and had two years to issue its follow-up report, which was due in April 2012. This obligation is set out in article 35 of the convention. At the time, the government was over two months late issuing the report, and now it is over seven months late.

The purpose of this convention is to protect the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. The government has an obligation to promote, protect and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights by people with disabilities and to ensure that they enjoy full equality under the law.

I did not receive an answer to the question that I asked in June. No reason was given to justify the fact that this follow-up report was late and no indication was given of even an approximate date as to when the report would be issued. The minister did mention it, nor did she mention the process. Instead, she spoke about the programs that the government put in place for people with disabilities and her intention to implement new programs.

Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
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Larose
Lauzon
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
Leef
Lemieux
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
MacKay (Central Nova)
Mai
Masse
May
McCallum
McGuinty
Menegakis
Merrifield
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
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Quach
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Toet
Toone
Trottier
Turnel
Valcourt
Van Kesteren
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Lake
Lapointe
Latendresse
Lebel
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leitch
Leslie
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacAulay
MacKenzie
Marston
Mathysen
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Nantel
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Norlock
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Opitz
Papillon
Patri
Péclet
Perreault
Plamondon
Preston
Rae
Raii
Rathgeber
Raynault
Reid
Richards
Ritz
Sandhu
Scarpaleggia
Scott
Shea
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)
Sitsabaiesan
Sopuck
Stanton
Strahl
Sweet
Tilson
Toews
Trost
Truppe
Tweed
Valeriotte
Van Loan
Warawa
Watson
Williamson
Woodworth
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Zimmer — 268

NAYS

Nil

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried.
(Bill read the third time and passed)

The Deputy Speaker: It being 6:40, the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business, as listed on today's order paper.

Adjournment Proceedings

The government has indeed introduced various programs for people with disabilities, but that is not the issue. The issue is what progress has been made or what steps backward have been taken. Nothing could be less certain in this regard. A number of reports published over the past few months have suggested that there are still serious problems when it comes to education, accessibility and equality of opportunity and income for people with disabilities.

Let us talk about these programs, such as the disability tax credit, which is problematic in many respects. In order to be eligible for the tax credit, a person must have a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions for at least 12 months. This condition is difficult to fulfill for people suffering from chronic or recurrent conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome, mental illness or hearing loss. These people are rarely eligible. Some impairments, such as those mentioned, are different. For example, people with multiple sclerosis may be able to carry out daily activities and even work for a certain amount of time. Then, suddenly, it becomes impossible for them to do anything.

Unfortunately, because of the cyclical nature of these diseases, these people are very vulnerable and rely on most of the programs for those with functional impairments, including the tax credit. In fact, the tax credit is based on the idea that the disability is permanent and does not change significantly. To give an idea to those who are watching, in Canada, 55,000 people have multiple sclerosis and 333,000 people have chronic fatigue syndrome.

Consider the most recent report by the Canadian Human Rights Commission. This report, which came out this past summer, points out the significant gaps in equality of opportunity for persons with disabilities.

If the government does not implement adequate corrective measures, then there is cause for concern. However, again, we do not have all the necessary information to take action.

Canada has to report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the progress it has made in implementing the convention. This progress report is a requirement under the convention. The public wants to know what has been done to implement the convention and the impact that the legislation and the programs for persons with disabilities have had. People want to know in what tangible way the lives of persons with disabilities have changed, what shortcomings have been identified and what the government intends to do about them. A modicum of transparency would be welcome.

I will repeat my question: when does the government intend to table this report?

● (1845)

[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the hon. member for Montcalm on persons with disabilities.

Our government is investing in empowering Canadians with disabilities. We are helping to remove obstacles and are creating opportunities for these Canadians to fully participate in their communities and in the labour force.

[Translation]

Our goal is to create a truly inclusive society in which everyone can participate and contribute to their communities.

[English]

Let me mention some of the specific measures our government has undertaken to support people with disabilities.

We are helping individuals with disabilities and their families save for the future through the registered disability savings plan, the Canada disability savings grant and the Canada disability savings bond. We support students with disabilities by helping to finance their post-secondary education through special grants and loans. We have employment programs, such as the opportunities fund, which has helped over 60,000 Canadians with disabilities get into the job market. We continue to support the full participation of people with disabilities in their communities through the enabling accessibility fund, which contributes to projects that improve accessibility and that remove barriers to facilities, activities and services. Our government has provided accessibility funds to more than 835 projects throughout Canada.

[Translation]

The Office for Disability Issues in HRSDC is promoting coordination across the government on disability policy and is the federal focal point on matters relating to the convention.

[English]

Our government has a steadfast commitment to ensuring the full inclusion of people with disabilities in Canada and will continue to promote ongoing compliance with the convention moving forward.

Unfortunately, the NDP continue to vote against all of these efforts that we have put forward for persons with disabilities. It is exceptionally disappointing for an individual like me, who has spent time as a professional dealing with families and particularly children with disabilities, that the NDP continue to not support these initiatives.

● (1850)

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Mr. Speaker, let us get back to the issue and talk about Canada's commitments under the convention.

The government has a commitment to ensure that no Canadian lives in poverty simply because he or she is disabled. According to the recent HungerCount 2012 report, more than one out of every ten people assisted by food banks relies on disability benefits as a primary source of income.

Adjournment Proceedings

Why does the government allow the disabled to live in poverty? These people are forced to turn to food banks just to have enough to eat. The convention recognizes that disabled persons have the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food. We need to know how the government is upholding its commitments to disabled persons. We need to know whether the government is following through on its commitment, whether the programs implemented are in line with the targeted objectives, the guiding principles and the obligations of the convention.

In less than a month it will be the International Day of Disabled Persons. Will the government present its long-awaited report by then, yes or no?

[*English*]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, each year our government transfers significant funds to the provinces through federal-provincial training programs for persons with disabilities. These agreements support a broad range of services and programs to respond to the labour market participation and the needs of individuals with disabilities. This helps people with disabilities to get the training for the jobs they need. About 300,000 individuals are assisted each year through these programs.

Our government also supports the income security of people with disabilities through the registered disability savings plan, the Canada disability savings grant, the Canada disability savings bond and a range of tax measures, including the disability tax credit, the first time home buyers tax credit and the working income tax benefit disability supplement.

I hope that members of the House will join me in supporting our improved and focused strategy for data collection and in celebrating the progress we have made in society to include all individuals with disabilities so they can participate in their communities and in the job market.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when I last raised this question I asked the government what it was going to do about the nutrition north program, specifically whether it would commit to fixing the program given that it is not working for northerners.

I want to refer to the Feeding My Family Facebook group, which has been working hard to bring awareness of the fact that the high cost of food is preventing many northerners from living healthy, happy and productive lives. They have some suggestions for how to tackle this problem.

Their current objectives include encouraging northerners to empower themselves to create independence from within the people at the grass roots level; unifying people across the north to share one voice; encouraging government policy-makers and retailers to find better ways of lowering the cost of food, given that Nutrition North Canada is not doing enough; encouraging new food suppliers to operate in the north in order to increase competition and lower prices; encouraging improvements in food quality through better inventory control, such as removing inedible and rotting food from store shelves, proper food shipping and handling, and reducing transit time for perishable foods; encouraging the establishment of

more food banks; and working with government and other NGOs to improve the overall quality of life for northerners.

I do not have time to go over all the statistics, but according to recent reports, residents spend an average of \$14,815 per year on food, or 25% of their total expenditures. This compares to an average of \$7,262 in Canada overall. One of the other problems is that the few food banks that are around the north have seen an 18% increase in use over the past year, according to Hunger Count.

Hunger Count also indicates that it has some solutions the government might want to look at. In its report it says:

It is clear that a new model for household food security in the North is necessary. Although there is much innovation and experimentation at the community level, a new model requires investment, which is sorely lacking in many northern communities.

It recommends:

The creation of a federal Northern Food Security Innovation Fund, to help jumpstart and sustain community-based, community-led food initiatives across the North;

The establishment and adequate funding of comprehensive school breakfast programs across the territories;

Significant investment in community-building infrastructure in northern communities, including the construction or rehabilitation of community-identified resources like community centres and community freezers.

Given the fact that the price of food in the north is still far beyond what Canadians in the south pay, will the government pay attention to what northerners are asking for and commit to working closely with them to invest in the programs and services that northerners are proposing would help address the high food prices?

● (1855)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the question from the hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan. I think after more than a couple of years on the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, it is pretty safe to say that we both share a passion to improve the lives and fortunes of first nation communities. It is probably also safe to say that we do not necessarily agree about how to get there, but I think the focus here is on the outcome.

Adjournment Proceedings

Let me assure the hon. member that our government is committed to providing northerners with greater access to healthy food choices at the point of purchase in their communities. That means at the cash register in the grocery store in the their communities. Nutrition North Canada is one of these programs. This is a program that improves access to perishable and healthy food in isolated northern communities without year-round surface transportation. Since the program's launch on April 1, 2011, Nutrition North Canada has provided retailers, suppliers and country-food processors with subsidies for a variety of perishable foods, including fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, meat, cheese and bread.

Subsidies are also provided for country or traditional foods that are commercially processed in the north such as Arctic char, muskox and caribou. These are foods that people in these communities have been eating and have depended on for nutritional sustenance perhaps since time immemorial. As well, some other direct foods are subsidized.

With an advisory board uniquely made up of northerners to help guide the program, Nutrition North Canada currently benefits 103 remote northern communities in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Nutrition North Canada is helping bring healthy food to northern homes and providing northerners with healthy food choices. The program follows a new market-driven model, which is a sustainable, efficient, cost-effective and transparent means of helping northerners access nutritious perishable food at reduced cost in their communities.

After the first year of operation, we have seen prices decrease and consumption of healthy food increase across the north. We have seen these results with a similar level of funding as under the previous program. Prices have dropped, for example, by as much as 37% on some products, such as two litres of milk. The Nutrition North Canada program was designed to be flexible and adjustable, based on feedback from consumers, retailers and suppliers while working within the program's budget.

We continue to work in concert with northerners, retailers and suppliers through the Nutrition North Canada advisory board to address stakeholders' concerns and provide recommendations to our government as the Nutrition North Canada program develops and evolves. We are committed to providing a subsidy program that is focused on the most nutritious foods with greater accountability and transparency. We have an advisory board comprised of northerners to help us meet this commitment.

In my own riding, which has more isolated and remote communities than any other riding in this country, it might surprise some folks to know that at the point of purchase in their grocery stores, for the first time ever, my constituents are experiencing reduced prices. More first nation communities are getting on board with this program because they are seeing these results.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, that still does not deal with the fact that many northern communities are facing prices that are more than double what southerners pay.

In the statistics that came out from January 1 to March 31, country food was the least subsidized food. Only 192 kilograms of country food was distributed to communities at a total cost of \$218. Yet country food is often talked about as being an important staple. In a question on the order paper I asked the government what it was doing about country food, and it indicated that Health Canada and the CFIA have said that there are no legal implications for applying a federal government subsidy to country food that is certified by a territorial or provincial regulatory authority, as long as the food remains within the same territory or province in which it was certified.

The government says that the program is prepared to consider subsidizing traditional country food, subject to these criteria. It has also indicated that the departments will continue to support access to country food with a view toward bringing together the relevant actors. What is the government doing to improve access to country foods?

● (1900)

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that rebuttal. Our government recognizes the importance of aboriginal and northern people having improved access to nutritious and perishable food, including country foods. The nutrition north Canada program is one way we are taking action in these regards. Through targeted subsidies and enduring partnerships, our government is working to improve the accessibility of nutritious foods for northerners and aboriginal people. The Government of Canada has committed \$53.9 million in subsidies per year toward nutrition north Canada. Also, knowing the benefits of partnership, we have engaged northern leaders so that together we will find concrete and lasting solutions for improved access to healthy and perishable food in the north.

Our government recognizes the importance of northerners benefiting from abundant and healthy food choices.

I will reiterate, because this member worked with me at committee, that it is important to understand that for the first time ever there are subsidies on certain foods at the point of purchase in these communities. We are developing, and we are very enthusiastic about the prospect of continuing to decrease the price of country foods so that northerners can eat their traditional foods at reduced costs.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:02 p.m.)

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