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Speaker: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, December 13, 2021

The House met at 11 a.m.

[*English*]

Prayer

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1100)

[*English*]

CRIMINAL CODE

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (for the Minister of Justice) moved that Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to join the House this morning to speak to Bill C-5, an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. I want to acknowledge that we are gathered here on the traditional unceded lands of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

This bill fulfills a platform commitment to reintroduce former Bill C-22 within 100 days, and I am proud to work with the Minister of Justice on this important piece of legislation. The proposed reforms represent an important step in our government's continuing efforts to make our criminal justice system fairer for everyone by seeking to address the overrepresentation of indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities. Bill C-5 focuses on existing laws that have exacerbated underlying social, economic, institutional and historical disadvantage and which have contributed to systemic inequities at all stages of the criminal justice system, from first contact with law enforcement all the way through to sentencing.

[*Translation*]

Issues of systemic racism and discrimination in Canada's criminal justice system are well documented, including by commissions of inquiry such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System.

More recently, the Parliamentary Black Caucus, in its June 2020 statement, called for reform of the justice and public safety systems to weed out anti-Black racism and systemic bias, and to make the administration of justice and public security more reflective of and sensitive to the diversity of our country. I was pleased to sign this statement, as were numerous cabinet colleagues, including the Minister of Justice, many members of Parliament and senators representing the different political spectrums.

The numbers speak for themselves. Black Canadians represent 3% of the Canadian population yet represent 7% of those who are incarcerated in federal penitentiaries. Indigenous people represent roughly 5% of the Canadian population yet represent 30% of those who are federally incarcerated. The number is profoundly higher for indigenous women, who represent 42% of those who are incarcerated.

Indigenous people and Black Canadians have been particularly marginalized by the current criminal justice system. The calls for action recognize that sentencing laws, and in particular the broad and indiscriminate use of MMPs, or mandatory minimum penalties, and restrictions on the use of conditional sentences have made our criminal justice system less fair and have disproportionately hurt certain communities in Canada.

This is precisely why Bill C-5 proposes to repeal a number of mandatory minimum penalties, including for all drug-related offences and for some firearm-related offences, although some MMPs would be retained for serious offences such as murder and serious firearm offences linked to organized crime. Data shows the MMPs that would be repealed have particularly contributed to the over-incarceration of indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities.

This bill would increase the availability of conditional sentencing orders in cases where offenders do not pose a risk to public safety. CSOs allow offenders to serve sentences of less than two years in the community under strict conditions, such as house arrest and curfew, while still being able to benefit from employment, educational opportunities, family ties and community and health-related support systems.

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I want to talk about who we want to help with Bill C-5. It is the grandmother who agrees to let her grandson leave a gun at her house overnight even though she knows she is not supposed to because he did not purchase the gun legally. It is for the young indigenous man who shoots a hunting rifle at what he believes to be an empty building and no one gets hurt. The incident prompts him to get his life back on track. He goes into a rehab program to get off drugs and starts counselling to address childhood and intergenerational trauma that has haunted him throughout his young life. By the time of sentencing, he has a job and a new relationship, and is ready to contribute positively to his community.

• (1105)

These are not the hardened criminals. These are people who deserve a second chance or an off-ramp from the criminal justice system. They are people who, with the right support, will never offend again. Sending them to jail, which hurts not only them but their families and communities, will do nothing but put them on a path toward further criminality. This is why MMPs that tie judges' hands can lead to negative outcomes in the justice system and for our society more broadly.

To appreciate the pressing need for these reforms, we must go back to the foundational principles of sentencing in Canada. The fundamental purpose and principles of our sentencing regime are rooted in trail-blazing reforms made in 1996, which created a statutory recognition that sentencing is an individualized process that relies on judicial discretion to impose just sanctions. Such sanctions are proportionate to the degree of responsibility of the offender and the seriousness of the offence.

To achieve these sanctions, the 1996 reforms directed judges to take into account a number of sentencing principles, including rehabilitation and deterrence. Some of these principles acknowledge that in sentencing less serious crimes, imprisonment is often ineffective, unduly punitive and to be discouraged. The sentencing principles also recognize the need to address the over-incarceration of indigenous persons, who were at that time already overrepresented within the system. As such, the amendments to the Criminal Code directed judges to consider all sanctions other than imprisonment that are reasonable in the circumstances before choosing to send an offender to jail. This principle applies all offenders, but requires judges to pay particular attention to the circumstances of indigenous offenders.

To give full effect to these principles, the 1996 reforms created conditional sentences of imprisonment that allowed judges to order that terms of imprisonment of less than two years be served in the community under certain conditions. An offender could be eligible for a conditional sentence if serving their sentence in the community would not pose a risk to public safety, if the offence for which they were convicted is not subject to a mandatory minimum penalty and if the community-based sentence would be consistent with the fundamental purpose and principles of sentencing.

Unfortunately, the previous Conservative government's increased use of mandatory minimum penalties and imposition of additional restrictions on the availability of conditional sentencing orders have restricted judicial discretion and made it difficult for courts to effectively apply these important principles. These so-called tough-

on-crime measures have actually made our criminal justice system less effective by discouraging the early resolution of cases. These measures have eroded public confidence in the administration of justice.

[*Translation*]

The biggest problem with these measures has been that they disproportionately affect indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities.

• (1110)

[*English*]

In fact, the Ontario Court of Appeal recently found in its 2020 decision in *R. v. Sharma* that certain of the limits on conditional sentence orders enacted in 2012 undermine the purpose of the Gladue principle by limiting the court's ability to impose a fit sentence that takes the offender's circumstances into account. The Court of Appeal held that those limits perpetuate a discriminatory impact against indigenous offenders in the sentencing process.

By targeting these sentencing policies, Bill C-5 seeks to restore the ability of courts to effectively apply the fundamental purpose and principles of sentencing, and ensures that sentences are individualized and appropriate for the circumstances of the case. Although it is important to ensure that fair and compassionate sentences are imposed, it is equally important to ensure that measures are in place to avoid contact with the criminal justice system in the first place.

This is why Bill C-5 would require police and prosecutors to consider alternatives to laying or proceeding with charges for the simple possession of drugs, such as issuing a warning, taking no action or diversion to addiction treatment programs. We want to focus on getting individuals the help they need, whether that be treatment programs, housing or mental health support, instead of criminalizing them. These measures are consistent with the government's public health-centred approach to substance use and the opioid epidemic in Canada.

Together, these measures would encourage responses that take into account individuals' experiences with respect to systemic racism, health-related issues and the particular supports they could benefit from. These reforms would allow police, prosecutors and the courts to give full effect to the important principle of restraint in sentencing, particularly for indigenous offenders, and explore approaches that focus on restorative justice, the rehabilitation of individuals and their reintegration into the community.

[*Translation*]

It is essential that Canadians have confidence in the justice system and that they believe it is there to protect them, not harm them or their community. These reforms reflect what we have heard from Canadians.

Government Orders

[English]

The 2017 national justice survey revealed that Canadians overwhelmingly support diversion measures, less restrictive sentences and judicial discretion in sentencing, even in cases where there is an MMP. For instance, 91% of Canadians indicated in the survey that judges should be granted flexibility to impose a lesser sentence than an MMP. Moreover, 69% of those polled believe that diversion could make the criminal justice system more effective and 78% believe that diversion could make it more efficient by reducing the caseload for the courts and court processing times.

I would like to assure my colleagues that our government takes violent gun crimes seriously. I am from Scarborough, a community that has issues with gun violence. I understand the need to crack down on firearm traffickers and the organized criminal element that threatens our communities. In my previous life, I ran a youth organization and saw many young men buried as a result of gun violence. I saw the pain in the faces of the parents. In fact, I recall one mother, whose son was killed over 20 years ago, who is still grieving for her loss. This affects the community as a whole. That is why we are not repealing MMPs for those offences.

I had a chance to speak with Louis March of the Zero Gun Violence Movement this morning. He has advocated for taking guns off our streets. He came to Parliament about two years ago, just before the pandemic, to advocate for MMPs to be removed, because he feels it is crucial for judges to have discretion over decisions and that MMPs have disproportionately impacted members of the Black community. Many of the mothers who came here that day were broken by what they saw as a problem with guns. I bring the issue of gun violence to Parliament each and every day, and in many ways, in Toronto and other major cities, it is a significant problem that requires a significant response. Our government is working toward that.

For less serious offences, particularly when someone is a first-time offender who is young or non-violent, MMPs are not the answer. MMPs that send young Black men in my community to prison, when they could be rehabilitated and turn their lives around, only serve to continue the vicious cycle that leads to involvement in gangs and further criminality.

We are repealing the MMPs for robbery and extortion with a firearm, and for discharging a firearm with intent or recklessly when this does not involve a restricted firearm or organized crime. In other words, where the offender—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1115)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I apologize for interrupting the hon. member, but I want to remind members of the official opposition that they will have an opportunity not only to ask questions and make comments, but to also debate the issue. I would ask them to hold off on their comments while the hon. parliamentary secretary is speaking.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, in other words, this would apply when an offender uses a firearm that may other-

wise be legal. A review of the case law reveals that many indigenous offenders and marginalized groups who have experienced significant trauma, including the legacy of residential schools, commit non-violent offences using long guns.

Maintaining the four-year mandatory minimum penalties that relate to the commission of these offences with firearms that are not restricted or connected to organized crime would directly undermine our important commitment to reduce the over-incarceration of indigenous peoples. We know that Canadians are troubled by gun violence. By maintaining the MMPs for serious offences, using restricted firearms or an association with organized crime, we keep the strong tools in our tool box to combat serious and gang-related gun crime.

Our government will also work to crack down on gun crime in other ways. In our platform we committed to continuing to combat gender-based violence and fight gun smuggling with measures we previously introduced, such as increasing maximum penalties for firearms trafficking and smuggling, from 10 to 14 years of imprisonment; lifetime background checks, to prevent those with a history of abuse against their spouse or partner from obtaining a firearms licence; red flags that would allow immediate removal of firearms if that person was a threat to themselves, or otherwise to their spouse or partner; and enhancing the capacity of the RCMP and the Canada Border Services Agency to combat the illegal importation of firearms.

Our government is taking steps to ensure that the strong hand of criminal justice is used where it is needed to keep people safe, but not where it would be discriminatory or counterproductive. Bill C-5 is an important step taken by our government to address the injustice of systemic racism in our criminal justice system and to ensure that it is fair, just and compassionate for all Canadians.

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, the parliamentary secretary said that one of the targets of this legislation is not targeting a marginalized offender who perhaps shoots a firearm at a residence that he or she does not know to be occupied.

First, I am not sure why anybody would be doing target practice in such a scenario on a residence. Second, section 244 of the Criminal Code deals with discharging a firearm with intent, and that provision is under the mandatory minimum sought to be repealed.

Government Orders

If there is intent to harm, how does that fit in with the government's narrative?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, I want to congratulate my friend for Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo on his recent election. I know he has a great deal of experience as a Crown attorney, and I appreciate the question he posed.

The mandatory minimum sentences that we are proposing to repeal are 14 of the 57 that are in the Criminal Code right now. This reflects that we are maintaining the ones that involve serious criminality. We are taking down 14 of them that have a disproportionate impact on indigenous and Black Canadians. The facts kind of speak for themselves, as I outlined earlier.

• (1120)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am still hearing people think loudly. I would ask them to hold off, because there are 10 minutes for questions and comments. They may get another question. My interrupting is eating up the time, so I would ask members to be respectful.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou.

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Madam Speaker, the United States and Australia have much harsher mandatory minimum sentences for drug trafficking than Canada does.

However, we have not seen any major differences in drug use on the ground. What we have seen is—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I have to interrupt the member because there seems to be a problem with the interpretation.

Is it working now?

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I invite the hon. member to repeat her question.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Madam Speaker, minimum sentences for drug trafficking are much harsher in the United States and Australia than they are here in Canada.

Despite that, there is no on-the-ground evidence of reduced consumption. What we are seeing is more small-scale dealers in prisons. These are not the people who are least likely to be rehabilitated. They typically rehabilitate on their own.

The thing is, when people get involved in drug dealing, arms trafficking or any kind of trafficking, they are doing it to get more money because they are in tough situations.

That is why it would be good to look upstream at prevention, especially at things like adequate social housing, health transfers for social needs, and social supports.

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, I completely agree that there are many issues within our society that need attention. Our government is focusing on housing, including a national housing strategy, but as a government we are also investing in

youth programs that would enable youth to be proactive and would enable them to get out of the criminal justice system.

The amendments that we are bringing forward are off-ramps that would allow young people to have a second chance. That is precisely what we are trying to do today.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to start by welcoming the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice to his role. I did a lot of positive work with his predecessor, and I think Bill C-5 shows there is a lot of work we could do to improve legislation.

When this bill was introduced as Bill C-22 in the last Parliament, lots of stakeholders in the community criticized it for its narrowness and for being a half measure. Certainly the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, more than six years ago in its call to action number 32, called for the restoration of judicial discretion to ignore mandatory minimums when there were good reasons to do so.

Why has the government chosen to pick just 14 offences instead of following the truth and reconciliation call to action to give judges back their discretion when there are mandatory minimum sentences?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, we have taken very important steps today with Bill C-5, which is the reintroduction of Bill C-22. It was part of our platform commitment. We promised to introduce this within 100 days, and we had the mandate from Canadians to do that. We look forward to a very robust discussion at committee and at every stage of the bill. I look forward to working with my friend opposite on this.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, what this bill represents, and what we are going to witness today throughout this debate, is the stark difference between two approaches when it comes to our correctional institutions. There is the approach of the Conservatives, which is “lock 'em up and throw away the key”, then there is the approach of more progressive governments that believe in rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice provide some perspective on the benefits of properly rehabilitating individuals so that they can be reintegrated and become productive members of society?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, let me divide this into two. With respect to offences under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, six mandatory minimum penalties are being repealed. This reflects that drug use, possession and so on affect health. We are trying to have an approach that will allow individuals to get the support they need. Whether they need mental health support, counselling or rehab, it allows the system to do that.

With respect to the 14 Criminal Code offences, again this allows the judge, the prosecutor and the police discretion in terms of diverting programs and allowing individuals to get off the criminal justice highway and become contributing members of society.

Government Orders

• (1125)

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to congratulate my friend, the parliamentary secretary, for his recent appointment.

The problem with the bill is that it is not as advertised. The parliamentary secretary spoke about the fact that the bill supposedly helps those who are struggling with addictions, except there is nothing in the bill that provides that. He speaks of minor possession. The Public Prosecution Service of Canada has issued a directive not to prosecute. However, what the bill does is reward those who imperil the lives of those struggling with addictions by eliminating mandatory sentences for drug trafficking offences and for those who are the producers of fentanyl and crystal meth, which are killing on average 20 Canadians a day.

How does that help those who are struggling with addictions? It does not.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, let me reframe this discussion. Bill C-5 is meant to address the systemic inequities within the criminal justice system. We see that the numbers speak for themselves.

If I may, I will just repeat those numbers. Three per cent of Canadians are Black, yet 7% of the prison population are Black offenders. We have an indigenous population of 5% across the country, yet they represent 30% of people within the criminal justice system. That number is 42% for indigenous women. We have significant public-policy issues that we need to deal with, and that is what we are going to address here within Bill C-5.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, the media reported a couple of days ago that we have the worst overdose deaths in Vancouver, in my community. The government has a choice to decriminalize small possession of drugs to save lives, along with instituting safe supply.

Why is that not included in this bill, given the urgency of the situation all across the country?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, Bill C-5 is reintroduced from the previous Bill C-22.

The issues that my hon. colleague discusses are very important. They are in the hands of our Minister of Mental Health and Addiction, and our government is reviewing the requests of British Columbia and other places with respect to drugs. We will make decisions in short order.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to this bill.

It is unfortunate, though, that the government is taking the first opportunity possible to flex its soft-on-crime approach. They have very much reinforced this approach with Bill C-5. It would do nothing more than reduce punishments, and truly reduce accountability, for perpetrators of violent gun crimes and drug dealers. It would keep those individuals in our communities, among their victims, rather than in prison, where they belong.

Bill C-5, for those who are just tuning in, would eliminate a number of mandatory minimum sentences for very serious crimes. I

am talking about a soft-on-crime approach, and I would like to contextualize that. This bill would reduce the mandatory minimum jail time for robbery with a firearm, weapons trafficking and discharging a firearm with intent. The hon. member for Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo demonstrated very ably, in response to a question by the parliamentary secretary, why this approach is so problematic, and why the example given does not make sense. It would not achieve the result they are looking for.

This bill would also reduce the mandatory minimum jail time for possession of an unauthorized firearm, possession of a prohibited or restricted firearm, possession of a weapon obtained by commission of an offence and possession for purpose of weapons trafficking. These are incredibly serious offences, but the government is taking its first opportunity to reduce the accountability mechanisms available for the commission of these serious offences. Instead, we are seeing the Liberals posturing, and they hope Canadians will confuse motion for action on gun crime. The motion and activity they will generate will be to crack down on law-abiding firearms owners instead of gun smugglers and drug traffickers.

I find one talking point the Liberals use particularly offensive, and that is that this bill would help those who are struggling with addiction get the help they need. Of course, it would not do that. Canadians, and anyone who is struggling with addiction, should be receiving treatment, but that is not what this bill would do. In fact, the problem would get worse under these Liberals because this bill would also eliminate mandatory prison time for those convicted of trafficking, or possession for the purpose of trafficking; importing and exporting, or possession for the purpose of exporting; and production of a substance in schedule 1 or 2.

The Liberals would literally be letting drug traffickers and manufacturers off the hook while saying it is helping addicts and people in our communities. We are in the grips of an opioid crisis in this country. People are dying every day. We should crack down on the people who are peddling that poison in our communities. However, that is not the approach the Liberals are going to take.

I also heard mention from a representative of the government that they would be getting rid of these nasty Conservative minimum penalties. Rightly, many of these laws came into force in the mid-nineties, and the government of the day was a Liberal government, so there is a bit of a disconnect between what they are saying and what they are doing, as is often the case.

• (1130)

The Liberals want to blame Conservatives for laws that former Liberal governments enacted. They say that they are helping addicts and communities, but they are actually reducing sentences and eliminating accountability for traffickers and manufacturers. Instead of punishing gang members, they are looking to crack down on law-abiding firearms owners.

Government Orders

To be clear, the process and the system we have in place in this country for law-abiding firearms owners is robust. There is no disagreement in the firearms community, with hunters and sport shooters, on the need for that system to be robust. Background checks and CPIC checks are already in place. They are effective and important. When we have a group of citizens who are following the laws in place, it might seem like low-hanging fruit for the government to say that they will just make tougher restrictions and demonstrate that they are putting more laws on the books, and Canadians will somehow believe that they have gotten serious about this.

However, it speaks to the priorities of this government when, last year, its members voted against the Conservative private member's bill that would have seen punishments for weapons trafficking strengthened, but here we are with them proposing to weaken it with this inadequate law. While Conservatives seek to empower victims of crime and to defend their rights, this Liberal government wants to empower the criminals: the drug manufacturers, the traffickers and the gang members.

I have heard from people in my community who have been victimized, or who have loved ones who have been victims of violent crime, and they have serious concerns about the rise of violent crime in Canada. However, it seems like the approach that this government is taking is one that is soft on crime and not one that stands up for victims.

I have certainly heard from police who are at their wits' end. They are doing their part to keep our neighbourhoods and communities, our country, safe, but they are dealing with a justice system and a government that would rather see criminals released back into the community instead of putting them in jail. For example, the police will pick up someone for a violent offence, for one of the offences listed here, on Friday, and by the end of the weekend, that person is back in the community, then rearrested on a different crime, released and rearrested in the same week.

I took the opportunity to go on a ride-along with local police in my community, and in the time it took us to drive five minutes away from the station, the officer observed someone who was violating their release conditions. When the officer called back to dispatch to say that the person was detained and there would be an arrest, the person was still showing as being in the system because the person had been released so recently. The release was processed, and the person was rearrested. The officer was tied up with that individual for the evening.

I then went out on the road with another officer, and before the end of the shift, that same person was back on the street again. I heard story after story from these officers and from officers across Canada who, while dealing with fewer resources, are dealing with a government that wants to see police further taxed with fewer resources available for our law enforcement, less protection for our victims, and leniency and less accountability for criminals.

● (1135)

It is important to note that we are not talking about someone who is accused of a criminal offence. We are talking about individuals who have been convicted. They have, in fact, committed and been convicted of committing the offence, and the government's re-

sponse is to let them out. They would let them out for robbery with a firearm or for extortion with a firearm or weapons trafficking. It is unbelievable to think that these are the priorities of the government.

We heard the government talk about conditional sentencing and the expansion of conditional sentencing. That means that someone could be put on house arrest, as the parliamentary secretary said, for a number of offences, including kidnapping, sexual assault, human trafficking or trafficking in persons, abduction of a minor or a person under 14 years of age, and being unlawfully in a dwelling house.

It is incredibly concerning that this is the approach that the government wants to take. Those individuals ought not to be released into the community after having been found to have committed the offence for which they were accused. They were found guilty. This bill would only result in an increase in violent crime, fewer resources for our police and law enforcement, and more fear in our communities.

This soft-on-crime approach is full of talking points about helping folks who are struggling with an addiction, but it does not do that. We know that currently the justice system and the police are exercising their discretion in dealing with folks who are struggling with addiction for things like simple possession. If the government wants to get serious, we should be talking today about its expansion for support for people who are struggling with addiction or their mental health.

We know that the House passed a call for a national three-digit suicide prevention hotline, but government members have not done that. Instead, they are dragging their feet and dragging the pot, talking about CRTC consultations that go on and on and on. Get serious. Members from across the country called for this to take place.

That would be a concrete action, but it looks like the government does not want to do it because it was proposed by a member of the official opposition, by one of my Conservative colleagues. That is not in the spirit with which we should be approaching serious issues like addictions and mental health. How will Canadians get the help they need when the government will not even streamline the process for them? We know that that three-digit number is not currently in use. We need to get the lead out.

We saw the government take a full two months after what it deemed to be the most important election that we have had. It certainly did not do that to hand out mandate letters to their ministers, name parliamentary secretaries, or consult with Canadians on any of a number of things that it now wants to rush through this place. It is concerning. Canadians are concerned.

I hear those in the Liberal benches heckling that they have a mandate. Do you have a mandate to let people out for kidnapping someone under the age of 14? Do you have a mandate—

Government Orders

• (1140)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I do want to remind the member that he is to address questions and comments to the Chair and not directly to the government.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, I do appreciate that. I will direct them through you. Of course, I hope that the government is reminded about its heckling, as the opposition is held ruthlessly to account.

We want to ask the government these questions: Does it really have a mandate to expand conditional sentences for these crimes? Does it have a mandate to let someone out, and to not have someone go to jail for a minimum amount of time, for the crimes of importing or exporting an unauthorized firearm, extortion with a firearm, and robbery with a firearm? The government says it has a mandate. Did government members really go to their communities to say that this is right, and that the community wanted them to let people out who have committed robbery with a firearm? Is that the kind of accountability in justice that we want in this country? I do not think so.

Does the parliamentary secretary have a mandate for recklessly discharging a firearm?

• (1145)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: On a point of order, Madam Speaker, are we in questions and comments right now? I believe my friend opposite asked me a specific question that I would be glad to—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): That is not a point of order.

I am hearing heckling on both sides and individuals providing their feedback, even on the hon. member's side. I know that the hon. member is very capable of delivering his speech.

I want to remind members on the government side that should they have questions and comments, they should wait until that time comes. There should be no heckling and participating in the debate until it is time for questions and comments.

The hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I am concerned, Madam Speaker, that the parliamentary secretary has been named as a representative of the government, but does not understand how simple debate works in the House. He thinks that if a rhetorical question is put through the Speaker to the government in response to Liberals creating disorder in the House, suddenly they have standing to interrupt debate and start answering questions.

However, I have more questions for the parliamentary secretary and perhaps he will rise and courageously proclaim that the Liberals' expansion of conditional sentencing for people convicted of dangerous and violent offences is what Canadians sent them here to do. I would encourage him to do that, to stand up and say just that, not to blame previous Conservative governments for enacting mandatory minimum penalties. It was Jean Chrétien who put most of those on the books.

It is unbelievable that Liberals are so fearful that the truth about this bill is going to be exposed that they do not even want the debate to unfold. It has been happening for 40 minutes and they are already in a panic. I hear members on the Liberal benches again attempting to create disorder. The heckles do not come from the official opposition. We know that, rightfully—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. parliamentary secretary is very well aware of the rules in the House and I hope they can serve as an example to others by ensuring that they wait for questions and comments. The more we have to stop the clock, the more it takes away from other members who wish to debate.

I remind members that there are only two minutes and 30 seconds left for the hon. member to finish his debate and there will be opportunities for everyone to participate during questions and comments.

The hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, much to the chagrin of the member for Kingston and the Islands, who is very upset that the Conservatives continue to expose the Liberal government's soft-on-crime approach, we are going to continue to do that, because we have a mandate from Canadians. We know the government wants to crack down on law-abiding gun owners while letting gangbangers out with a warning. It is no problem if someone possessed a firearm for the purpose of weapons trafficking, no problem at all. The Liberals will continue to push their soft-on-crime approach, a criminal-first agenda, and everyday Canadians will suffer the consequences. It is truly shameful. Hug a thug, indeed.

Conservatives will stand up for the victims of crime and for the safety of our communities. In spite of the disorder Liberals look to create in this place, we will not be silenced by their attempts.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am a little speechless as to how to respond to my friend opposite, because there is very little truth in what he said.

Let me very clearly—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am going to interrupt. The hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes just asked me to be very vigilant on the heckling on the other side, and he is doing the same thing. I would ask the hon. member to wait to hear the question so he can answer it. I am sure he will want to hear all the details.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

• (1150)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Speaker, at the outset, let me just be clear: Bill C-22 was introduced earlier this year. It was in our platform. On September 20, Canadians gave us a mandate to reintroduce that bill, because we promised to do so within the first 100 days. That is exactly what Bill C-5 represents.

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I have a very direct question for my friend opposite. He has not used the words “systemic racism” at all. He has not even acknowledged that systemic racism exists within the criminal justice system. He has not addressed that within his comments this morning.

Why has he not included that important term in his speech today?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, the parliamentary secretary is talking about Bill C-22, which is really interesting. We are dealing with Bill C-5. Why are we dealing with Bill C-5 and not Bill C-22? It is because the Liberal Prime Minister, against the agreement of all parliamentarians in the previous Parliament, called an election during a pandemic. He killed his own legislation. He did not want to enact anything he had put forward at the time, because Liberals like to try to confuse motion for action. They get very little done. In this case, it is dangerous that one of the first pieces of legislation they are looking to enact is a soft-on-crime bill that punishes victims and rewards criminals.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to give my hon. colleague a chance to talk about something he failed to mention regarding this bill. Perhaps he has an opinion on this.

Does he not believe that, as we face this disturbing opioid crisis, it is important to ensure that addictive behaviours are not criminalized and, with that in mind, the best approach to helping people who are struggling with substance abuse and addiction is to repeal mandatory minimum sentences? That is one aspect of the only approach that works, namely, harm reduction.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, we know that the Public Prosecution Service of Canada has already issued a directive with respect to these types of diversion measures. The effect of codifying them and having Bill C-5 enacted is that there will not be much of a difference between what is currently happening and what would happen as a result of this bill being put in place for those measures.

What we would see is the repeal of these mandatory minimum penalties and conditional discharges, weakening the accountability for folks who are committing drug trafficking and drug manufacturing offences. This, of course, is going to gravely impact our communities and have a negative impact on folks who are suffering from addiction. With respect to diversion measures, the ones that are currently in place and the directive issued are appropriate.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Madam Speaker, I feel like I am stuck in some kind of time warp after hearing the comments from the member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. That speech could have been given 10 years ago.

In the meantime, we have had more than a decade of experience with mandatory minimums and we know what they result in. They do not result in less crime. They result in the overincarceration of indigenous people and the overincarceration of Black Canadians. The academic literature is clear; our practical experience is clear,

and even jurisdictions like Texas have given up on mandatory minimums as a solution to crime problems.

Will the Conservatives join us in the 21st century and give up this dated rhetoric about mandatory minimums that somehow implies that taking them away removes penalties altogether?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, it is incredibly important that we have accountability measures in place. The mandatory minimums being repealed are going to weaken accountability; it is that simple. The crimes that are going to be impacted and the criminals who will be impacted will have been convicted of committing serious offences.

Victims need someone speaking up for them. That is exactly what we are doing here today. These crimes, the list I have read out twice, are not minor offences. They are serious and dangerous offences committed by dangerous people. The penalties being repealed serve as an accountability mechanism and should remain in place.

• (1155)

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I cannot believe what I just heard from my colleague from the NDP. If he thinks it is a relic of the past to put people in prison for sexual assault, for trafficking in persons and for kidnapping, I will be a relic of the past for a long time. They just—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am sorry. I have a point of order from the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands.

I want to remind members to hold off on their thoughts while someone is speaking.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, it is not like me to come to the defence of members of other parties, but what the member from the Conservative Party just stated was a complete, utter lie and misrepresentation of what was—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): That is debate.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, the member for Kingston and the Islands just accused the member for Regina—Lewvan of lying. I am just wondering, with respect to—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Given the information that the hon. member was providing, he did not indicate that the hon. member was lying.

The hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes may finish.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, with respect to your response, I am sure, if you consulted with Hansard, you would find that at the conclusion of the member's comments he did in fact make that very assertion. The member for Kingston and the Islands said the member for Regina—Lewvan lied. My understanding is that is not how we speak in this place.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, on that point of order, you do not even need to check Hansard. I can confirm that I did indeed accuse the member of lying, based on what I heard the NDP member say and what the member for Regina—Lewvan said. Because it was unparliamentary of me to do so, I apologize.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There we go. We have an apology in place.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Speaker, I wish to raise this point of order.

The comments made by the member for Regina—Lewvan are a misrepresentation of what my colleague the member for Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke said. We are all hon. members here. We are all hearing and listening carefully to the debate. It is inappropriate and I find it offensive that someone would get up in the House right after another person spoke and misrepresent what they said. I would ask the member to retract those comments.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The information the hon. member is providing is part of a debate. I want to remind members to be extremely judicious and careful in their comments, to ensure that they are not speaking directly about an individual. I just want to make sure members are very judicious and respectful in their debates and responses in the House.

The hon. member for Regina—Lewvan can finish his question.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Madam Speaker, I am sorry to indulge this debate with some common sense.

I was going to say that if it is a relic of the past to say that people should go to prison when they commit the offence of sexual assault, trafficking in persons and kidnapping, I will be proud to represent that common sense for as long as I am allowed to be in this House. Would the member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes agree with those comments?

● (1200)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, I expect this is not just a point of order, but perhaps a question of privilege. For a member to stand up and completely distort and say that I had said something that I most certainly did not say in the debate affects my ability to do my job as a member of Parliament. It becomes part of the official record.

What I said was that the Conservatives were arguing about the concept of mandatory minimum sentences. I did not say people should not be subject to penalties under the Criminal Code. I said they should not be subject to mandatory minimum sentences, which have been demonstrated not to work, to be ineffective and to result in the overincarceration of indigenous people and Black Canadians.

The member is completely distorting my remarks for his own political purposes, and I consider that a violation of my privilege as a member of Parliament.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I appreciate the hon. member's setting the record straight. I want to again remind members to be very judicious in their comments and their words in the debate. This is a very passionate and very sensitive bill that we are discussing at this point. Again, I just reiterate the fact

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that we need to make sure we are not attacking individuals and we are speaking to what is in the bill and not what is not in the bill.

The hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, with respect to the comments on the elimination of mandatory prison time for people who have committed serious offences, it is contrary to ensuring we have accountability when these crimes are committed. Again, I remind people these are not folks who are accused of committing crimes, these are people who have been convicted of committing criminal offences such as discharging a firearm with intent, weapons trafficking, extortion with a firearm or robbery with a firearm.

Surely we can all agree one should go to jail for those offences, but it does not seem we have an agreement on that in this place. I heard from a previous member that this is an argument of decades past. I do not think so. I want to ensure the folks who live in my community know that anyone who commits those offences will be held fully accountable, and that includes time in prison.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on the topic of sticking to what this bill is about and what this bill is not about, I have a very simple question for my colleague, with whom I share a floor in our office.

If we can agree things need to change in order to get better and we can agree this is about helping people get better and helping society heal, can we not agree the system, as it currently stands, is overreliant on incarceration, is overreliant on penalties rather than helping people get better, and that we should be relying more on various methods by which people are reconstituted into society and brought back in so they can develop and redevelop as people, or is it all just about punishment?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, I think we do agree that Canadians who are suffering from addiction should be getting treatment, and if the crime is simple possession, there are currently directives in place and the discretion can be exercised to divert those individuals from the criminal justice system to help them get help. That is entirely appropriate. We absolutely need to help people who are suffering from the scourge of addiction, and this bill is not about that. It does codify the discretion currently in place, but I would much prefer we have a conversation about helping people who need help instead of relaxing important accountability measures in place for people who commit serious crimes.

● (1205)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Madam Speaker, Bill C-5 is important. It was introduced during the previous Parliament when it was known as Bill C-22. The two bills are substantially the same, with some minor differences. What really makes Bill C-5 different from Bill C-22 is context. Society is in a completely different place now.

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In my mind, Bill C-5 might be better off being split up. The debate over diversion and the debate over minimum penalties are two completely different debates. People could be very much in favour of one and against the other. If we want to be able to work effectively on this bill, all members of the House need an opportunity to speak to each of the aspects of the bill. We should be able to agree with one aspect and disagree with the other.

That said, the Bloc Québécois has historically been in favour of decriminalization. We believe that rehabilitation is an essential step to eliminating crime in a society. We can never completely eliminate crime, of course, but rehabilitation would at least help make our society better and more in line with our values.

The Bloc Québécois believes in rehabilitation. This can be seen particularly in Quebec's young offenders legislation, which facilitates diversion. For example, young people who have broken the law are asked to do community work, to engage in activities with various organizations.

I know of a case where a young man who shoplifted and vandalized the wall of a convenience store had to meet with the store owner, clean up the wall and do some work for the store. They ended up fully reconciled. While the young man and the convenience store owner may not have become great friends, they developed a relationship that was probably conducive, if not essential, to the young man's rehabilitation. There are other positive experiences and cases like that one. That is why the Bloc Québécois believes that diversion has a role to play and it has historically agreed with this principle.

With respect to minimum penalties, the courts must be able to exercise their power freely and judiciously. The Bloc Québécois has always believed that minimum penalties are a hindrance, but that is not always the case. In some circumstances, minimum penalties can be a way of sending a clear message to offenders. We need to look at this aspect of the question. However, generally speaking, we do not think that minimum penalties contribute to a healthier society. On the contrary, we believe that they may have given rise to some highly regrettable situations.

I remember one case in the Lower St. Lawrence region of Quebec. An 18-year-old man had a 16- or 17-year-old girlfriend. Both families were aware of the relationship and approved of it. Everything was fine. However, for one reason or another, they found themselves in court, and the young man was found guilty of corrupting a minor. The judge said he hated to do it, because the situation did not warrant it, but he had no choice, because there was a minimum penalty in the Criminal Code, and he had to impose it. At the time, this caused an uproar and a certain amount of frustration in Quebec, and for good reason. I was one of the ones who felt that, in a situation like that, not only did the minimum penalty not help, but it hindered the judicious exercise of judicial power. For this reason, the Bloc Québécois has historically also been in favour of the abolishment of minimum penalties.

That being said, I am speaking from a historical point of view, but we are now in 2021. The situation is not the same as it was in 2020, 2019 or 2018. I could go back as far as 1867.

• (1210)

Circumstances are changing, and the law is changing. There is a reason we pass laws here in Parliament and in the legislative assemblies of Quebec and the provinces. We are continually passing laws because circumstances change, society evolves and, as a result, the laws must be adapted to fit our different realities.

What is the context surrounding Bill C-5?

I think that it is important to discuss it, because that is our job as legislators. We cannot simply pass a law that will apply to everyone without considering the consequences. We cannot pass a law until we evaluate the context in which a decision will be made concerning Bill C-5. What is going on in Montreal in 2021?

On January 4, 2021, a 17-year-old boy was injured in a shooting in the Saint-Michel neighbourhood of Montreal. On January 31, 2021, a 25-year-old man suffered minor gunshot wounds in the Rivière-des-Prairies borough of Montreal. On February 7, 2021, 15-year-old Meriem Boundaoui died from a gunshot wound to the head in Montreal.

On July 5, 2021, 43-year-old Ernst Exantus was shot dead in Montreal North. He was known to police for his ties to organized crime. On July 26, 2021, a 22-year-old woman was injured by glass shards when her vehicle was shot at. On August 1, 2021, an 18-year-old man sustained gunshot wounds to his lower body during a dispute between groups. On August 2, 2021, three people were killed and two others were wounded in a shootout in the Rivière-des-Prairies borough of Montreal.

On September 1, 2021, once again in Rivière-des-Prairies, a man was shot during an attempted murder. On September 10, 2021, 35-year-old Patricia Sirois was in her vehicle with her two young children when she was shot dead by her neighbour, a 49-year-old man from Saint-Raymond. On the night of September 24 to 25, 2021, a 19-year-old woman was shot dead in her vehicle.

On September 26, 2021, once again in Rivière-des-Prairies, 33-year-old Yevgen Semenenko was found dead near a vehicle with bullet holes in it. On September 28, 2021, a man was shot as he was walking down the street in Mount Royal. On October 25, 2021, a 25-year-old man was shot and wounded in Montreal.

On November 14, 2021, in the Saint-Michel neighbourhood of Montreal, 16-year-old Thomas Trudel was shot dead as he walked home. On December 2, 2021, in the Anjou borough, 20-year-old Hani Ouahdi was shot dead in a vehicle; a 17-year-old boy in the vehicle was also wounded. On the same day, in Coaticook, Quebec, 80-year-old Jeannine Perron-Ruel was shot dead by her 38-year-old neighbour. On December 3, 2021, in Montreal, a woman in her fifties was injured at home by a bullet that came through her window. On December 6, 2021, an 18-year-old man was shot and wounded in a Laval library.

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I have just listed 18 incidents that took place in Quebec in 2021. Were there more? Probably. I found 18 after a quick search.

Were there others outside Quebec? Probably. I would be surprised if crimes of this sort and gunshot victims were found only in Quebec. There are undoubtedly others. In any case, in the past 11 months, there have been at least 18 incidents involving as many, if not more, gunshot victims.

On September 21, the mayor of Montreal asked the federal government to institute gun control measures.

● (1215)

On November 22, the City of Montreal reiterated its request, and the Quebec government said that it wanted to increase pressure on the federal government regarding gun control at the border and banning handguns.

Many debates have taken place in the House in recent weeks, and I have taken part in them. We demand that the government take responsibility, because Quebec and certain parts of Canada are turning into the wild west.

We want the government to set up a special task force. Illegal firearms are flooding into Canada via the St. Lawrence River through the Akwesasne reserve, which borders the U.S. and the St. Lawrence. Quebec and Cornwall, Ontario, are just across the river.

We need a special task force. Currently, we can do little to prevent arms trafficking because there are too many jurisdictions involved. We need a special joint task force made up of U.S. agents, peacekeepers, the Ontario Provincial Police, the Sûreté du Québec and the RCMP to fight these crimes effectively. It could be funded by an investment from the federal government. For example, we could have five boats patrolling this part of the St. Lawrence 24-7. I can guarantee that the problem would be solved within a year. There would be no more firearms crossing the border there. They might cross elsewhere, but we will fight them where they are.

We need to take concrete action. We demand investments in the fight against arms trafficking and the creation of a joint task force. A bill against organized crime could be tabled, like the one I introduced in the House in 2016 during the 42nd Parliament. Unfortunately, the bill was rejected for reasons that, in my opinion, were not justified, but I will not reopen a debate from the past. Maybe the bill could be reintroduced, because organized crime, arms trafficking and the government's complacency on gun control are causing immense harm and putting Quebecers in an unsafe and vulnerable position. We cannot let that happen, not in 2021.

I read out a list of 18 incidents. I explained that cities in Quebec and the provinces are demanding that the government take action. What did the government do? The latest incident I mentioned happened on December 6, when the 18-year-old man was shot and wounded in a library. A library seems like the ideal place to find peace and harmony, yet this young man was shot and wounded in a library on December 6. While we have been debating the topic for weeks, on December 7, the day after that particular shooting, the Liberal government chose to table Bill C-5, the bill we are considering today, for first reading. This bill aims to divert certain offences away from the justice system and to abolish certain mini-

imum penalties, including for offences involving the possession and use of firearms and the commission of certain other crimes.

As I said, the Bloc Québécois has historically been in favour of abolishing mandatory minimum penalties. However, I am starting to seriously wonder about the Liberal government's timing. If the Liberals were tabling Bill C-5 and creating a joint task force; if they were proposing to deploy river patrols starting Monday to put an end to the arms trafficking; if they were investing in the creation of a special unit to patrol the entire border of Quebec and the other Canadian provinces to fight arms trafficking; if they were adopting a bill like the one proposed by the Bloc Québécois in 2015 to create a list of criminal organizations and treat members of these organizations in the same manner as members of listed terrorist organizations, so that if someone in organized crime is caught with a firearm, he gets his comeuppance; if that were what they were proposing, I would feel less uneasy voting in favour of Bill C-5.

Right now, I am feeling very uneasy about the government's timing and its complacency in the face of an almost unheard-of situation that is threatening not only people's quality of life and ability to thrive, but the very survival of our youth on the streets of Montreal.

● (1220)

Once again, we are not in the wild west. This is not the 1600s or 1700s, when cowboys rode around with guns, shot at each other for no reason and were summarily hanged because a trial was too much trouble. It is 2021. I think that we should be able to agree on the importance of keeping our teenagers and the entire population safe, and we should not have to discuss it. We need to do something about it.

Once the government has done something about that, then we can talk about diversion programs. In fact, we could talk about it at the same time; we could talk about it now. With respect to minimum penalties, we need to abolish many of them. The Supreme Court itself has said so, and far be it from me to go against it. I think that it is entirely justified: some need to be abolished, and others need to remain in place.

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Bill C-5 warrants a good, solid discussion in committee. We need to review the details of this bill, but the government needs to step up, for goodness' sake. We cannot tell citizens that we are going to do away with minimum sentences when there are people going around with guns, yet nothing is being done to stop gun trafficking and people keep getting shot at week after week on the streets of Montreal. That would be absurd. If the government is serious and really wants to get tough on crime, then we would be talking about diversion programs because we want to rehabilitate young people, and we would be talking about doing away with minimum sentences because we want judges to be able to do their job effectively and judiciously. Most importantly, the government needs to get tough on crime by taking responsibility and putting an end to firearms trafficking and the gun violence we have been seeing over this past year.

We will take responsibility and work effectively in the public interest. I am here for one thing. I want to represent my constituents and Quebecers, and I will not keep silent on this issue.

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I fully appreciate the concerns outlined by the member opposite.

The 18 specific incidents that the member refers to will not be impacted in any way by the repeal proposed in Bill C-5. We fully recognize the concerns respecting guns, not just in Quebec but also in Ontario and other places, and we will take decisive action in that regard as per our platform.

I do want to emphasize that we will work with the member and the Bloc Québécois to ensure we address all the important measures in the bill that would allow for off-ramps, that would allow for people who are charged with minor offences to receive the help they need, but also the discretion of the judges to ensure people are rehabilitated.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Madam Speaker, I would not want to suggest that my colleague opposite is not speaking in good faith, but I am sick and tired of hearing that. They always say they are going to take things into consideration. I am not talking about what is going to happen next week, next month or next year. I am talking about what is happening now, today, Monday, December 13, 2021. This is the situation facing our society now. Does the government want to work with society as it is, or does it want to make promises about what it will do someday when society is different? If what the government is saying is that it will take action at some point and is taking things into consideration, then when the time comes, any action will probably be too late because the situation will have evolved.

What is the government going to do now?

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is always a pleasure to rise on behalf of the citizens of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo.

My hon. colleague noted the necessity for a balanced approach. The hon. parliamentary secretary mentioned the term “systemic racism”. My question is a general one.

If the issue is one of systemic racism, why are we repealing all mandatory minimums? Why would the government not simply put what we call a safety valve or an exceptional circumstances provision in the legislation, so people who are the targeted outlaws, the people who are committing violent crimes, could be put in jail, and those who fit into that one category or classification could be dealt with as the government proposes? Would my colleague support that?

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Madam Speaker, that subject does concern me. I must admit that I always feel a little uneasy when I hear government members tell us that they are going to abolish minimum sentences to help the Black community or the indigenous community. Let us think about that for a moment. The Criminal Code applies to everyone, and everyone should be treated the same, regardless of their skin colour, race, religion or background.

Accordingly, if we think the Black community is being treated unfairly in the justice system, let us fix that problem. I personally think that, generally speaking, the courts are relatively fair. If that is not the case, then we need to train the court officials and police officers who work in the field to ensure that everyone is treated fairly.

I think it is crucial that everyone be treated the same. I do not think the Criminal Code should apply differently to anyone based on the colour of their skin, whether it is white, black, red or yellow.

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Madam Speaker, the issues the member for Rivière-du-Nord has spoken about is a topic that the public safety committee now will be seized with, and I look forward to commencing our study on that.

Listening to the previous speech from the Conservatives, one would be forgiven for thinking that we were doing away with sentences for all time. I liked how member spoke about judicial discretion. It is incredibly important for people who are listening to this debate to understand that, while the Criminal Code is very much reactive legislation and it happens after the fact, there is a very important section in it, section 718.2, which allows judges to increase or reduce a sentence based on aggravating factors. Not every case that comes before them is exactly the same, which is precisely why there is a problem with mandatory minimums.

Could the member expand on that existing section of the Criminal Code, which does give judges the freedom to increase the severity of a sentence if there are certain aggravating factors at play? We should all have some trust in our judges across Canada, that they are the best equipped people to lay such a sentence down.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Madam Speaker, that is a good point that we could debate for hours. Let us just say that the Bloc Québécois trusts the justice system. We think that judges generally do outstanding work and, as my colleague was saying, their work is essential when it comes time to tailor a sentence to a specific situation.

Even though every bill we pass applies to everyone in all circumstances, there are situations where we wish the law were different, and that is normal. That is why I think it is essential to give judges the power to adapt a sentence based on how the evidence was presented in court.

My colleague is right to raise that point, and I think that is what should be done. Again, if issues are raised with the fairness of judges' decisions, I think the solution might lie in educating and training the courts.

I personally trust the justice system and believe that we need to give the courts the freedom to tailor sentencing to the situation at hand.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Madam Speaker, I first want to congratulate my colleague from Rivière-du-Nord for his very clear and very informative speech on the Bloc Québécois's position. Above all, he demonstrated that we are open to debating Bill C-5.

However, the problem is that nothing is happening right now, and we would like to know why. The situation is urgent, because people are being killed every day in Montreal and even elsewhere in Quebec. It seems that the government is just twiddling its thumbs while all this is happening, because it is not responding, even when called upon to do so by various levels of government and by our party.

As a former section president of the Quebec bar and now the Bloc Québécois's justice critic, I would like my colleague to explain the government's failure to take action.

● (1230)

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Madam Speaker, I am aware of my colleague's concerns about the administration of justice and I think he is right to raise them.

As I was saying, legislation has to reflect the social context. We have to ensure that legislation is adapted to that context when it is passed.

In the past year, no one in my riding has complained about how odious minimum sentences are and no one has talked to me about diversion programs. However, every week, people in my family, friends and constituents tell me that what is happening in Montreal makes no sense. They ask me what the hold up is, why we are not doing anything about the people who are getting shot to death. Some parents are no longer comfortable sending their kids to high school, because they believe it is no longer safe.

The Criminal Code is a federal responsibility. People are asking me to do something about this and I very much want to, but are my colleagues across the way equally concerned or are they just as out of touch as they seem? That is what I am wondering.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, virtually all of us know that systemic racism is very real. If we take a look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, we see 94 calls to action. One of those calls is to take a look at the minimum sentences. It is believed and ultimately proven to be effective in dealing with things such as systemic barriers to have legislation of this nature.

I wonder if my colleague could provide his thoughts, as this is an important step towards truth and reconciliation and the calls to action.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Madam Speaker, I agree with my colleague that diversion and reduced minimum sentences are important.

I am not going to repeat what I said, but my point is that the bill needs to reflect our current situation. With all due respect to my colleague, Quebecers and Canadians are calling on us to act now to curb arms trafficking and to get weapons off our streets. This is the government's responsibility. It is what we need to be working on, and I am appealing to the government's sense of justice.

[*English*]

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Madam Speaker, let me start by thanking the voters of Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke for sending me back to the House once again, this time for a fourth mandate. In particular, I would like to thank my partner for more than 20 years, Teddy Pardede, for his constant and enduring personal and political support. My role as an MP is now taking up more than half our relationship and I will never be able to repay him.

As I said during the campaign, I very much wanted to come back to the House to be able to deal with unfinished business from the last Parliament. Indeed, there were lots of things we made progress on that were cut short by the early and unnecessary election. That is why I was pleased to see the quick passage of the ban on conversion therapy, Bill C-4, unanimously no less, both here and in the other place.

There are other examples of bills on which this House had held hearings, had achieved a broad consensus on moving forward and is now able to do so. Those include my Bill C-202, to make coercive and controlling behaviour and intimate partner relationships a criminal offence and Bill C-206, which would remove self-harm from the military code of conduct as a disciplinary offence and instead make sure that self-harm is treated as the mental health challenge that it truly is. I hope we can find a way to move forward on both of those bills that were left undone in the last Parliament.

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Today, here we are debating Bill C-5. I am frankly surprised to be up on Bill C-5 so soon because its predecessor was not one of those bills which had been to hearings and it was not of those bills where we had lots of discussions about how to come to a consensus on what needed to be done. Normally, I would be glad to see the House moving quickly to get stuff done that sat on the back burner for far too long. That would be especially true of the issue of systemic racism in the justice system and it would be even more true of the opioid crisis on our streets today.

However, Bill C-5 is a virtual carbon copy, to date myself with an archaic phrase, of Bill C-22, which the government introduced at the eleventh hour in the last Parliament. At that time, we New Democrats clearly told the government we found Bill C-22 to be weak sauce. After its introduction, there were only very limited discussions before Bill C-22 was reintroduced in this session as Bill C-5. In those brief talks I made it clear that New Democrats wanted to see a bill with a few more teeth. We have a crisis of over-incarceration, we have a crisis of opioids on our streets, and the bill is not strong enough.

I am not sure how happy I am to be rushing forward on a bill that remains a half measure, especially when it is not even very clear what it is a half measure of. Here is the first and most important question I have for the government about Bill C-5: Is this a bill to address systemic racism in the Canadian justice system? If so, why is its focus so limited? We know mandatory minimum sentences are one of the causes of the over-incarceration of racialized Canadians and indigenous people. Then why does the bill restrict itself to only removing mandatory minimums for some offences, namely personal possession of drugs and some firearms offences?

We have years of experience now with mandatory minimums. We know they do nothing to reduce crime. We know that they only result in the incarceration of people who have no place in the prison system.

As the over-involvement in the justice system is a real problem for indigenous and racialized Canadians every day, I still have my doubts of some of the provisions in Bill C-5, like introducing those diversion programs instead of more fundamental reforms. In the absence of tackling the thorny question of reform of the RCMP, again I still have some doubts about increasing police discretion in drug cases as Bill C-5 proposes.

If Bill C-5 is actually about racism in our justice system, then there is surely much more it could do. I will return to this question later in my remarks. If Bill C-5 is not about tackling the broad issues of systemic racism in the criminal justice system, then is it really about something else? In fact, the heavy focus on removing mandatory minimums for drug crimes might lead us to believe that Bill C-5 is actually about the opioid crisis. If that is the case, then once again, it makes it hard for me to be excited about quick action on the half measures to confront the opioid crisis that we have in the bill, especially when we have known for so long what is needed.

• (1235)

As an elected official, I first spoke in favour of decriminalization of personal possession of all drugs more than a decade ago as a city councillor in Esquimalt. At the time, I argued that decriminalization

provided the most effective path, along with safe injection sites, to tackle the emerging problem of deaths from drug overdoses in my community.

Even then, I was able to point to early signs of success in Portugal where decriminalization was adopted in 2001. Since then, Portugal has seen an 80% reduction in overdose deaths. It has seen the proportion of people who use drugs fall from 52% to 6% when it comes to new HIV and AIDS diagnoses. It has seen a decrease of incarcerations for drug offences by over 40%. Instead, in Canada over the last decade, we have seen so many preventable deaths and now this problem has accelerated into a full-blown crisis across the country.

Last month the Province of British Columbia announced a record number of people had died so far this year from overdoses. There were 201 deaths in the month of October alone, the highest ever in a single month. Think of all the families we are talking about, all 201 families affected by the loss of loved ones in a single month in a single province. This is a crisis.

Numbers released by the B.C. Coroners Service show a death toll in the first 10 months of 2021 in British Columbia being 1,782, surpassing the 1,765 deaths recorded in all of 2020. B.C.'s chief coroner, Lisa Lapointe, was direct in her assessment of the situation in B.C., a situation no different than any other jurisdiction. "Simply put, we are failing," she said. With six people dying every single day in British Columbia, the status quo cannot be accepted.

That is why recognizing the stark reality of the opioid crisis, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia and now the City of Toronto have all three applied to the Minister of Health for an emergency exemption from the provisions of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act that criminalizes personal possession of small quantities of illegal drugs. They are asking that we recognize that criminalization only adds more harm to the toll addiction takes on its victims.

Where are the Liberals on decriminalization of so-called "hard" drugs, either as a temporary exemption or permanent strategy to shift our response to addiction from punishment to health care? One might be surprised to learn that decriminalization is the official policy of the Liberal Party, endorsed more than three years ago at its 2018 convention in Halifax. Perhaps some will be even more surprised to learn that the government was advised to move on decriminalization of personal possession of drugs before the last election.

The previous Minister of Health appointed a commission of experts to advise on drug policies well before that election. Don MacPherson, executive director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition at Simon Fraser, was part of the task force that simply said that charging people with simple possession and seizing their drugs makes no sense.

In a CBC Radio interview, MacPherson said, “There’s mountains of evidence that show it’s a bad thing. It’s harmful, it hurts people and there is not really an upside to it.” He continued saying, “So the task force...came fairly quickly to the conclusion that the federal government should immediately start work on putting forward a plan to decriminalize simple possession of drugs across the board.”

The task force submitted that report before the election and has since followed up with the new Minister of Health and the new Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, but MacPherson reports they have yet to hear anything back.

Since we returned to Parliament last month, MPs have been increasingly vocal in raising their concerns about the opioid crisis. Certainly, my leader of the New Democratic Party, the member for Burnaby South, has repeatedly called on the government to commit to moving quickly on decriminalization. This call has come from all parties and all parts of the country, urban and rural.

Last August, during the election campaign, even the Conservative leader added his voice to those calling for shifting our approach from punishment to treatment as the way to respond to the opioid crisis, though he did not go quite as far as decriminalization.

Last week, the new member for Yukon, who was previously the territory’s medical health officer before running for the Liberal Party, rose in this Commons to acknowledge that the Yukon has the highest rate of opioid deaths in the country. The new Green MP, the member for Kitchener Centre, made a moving statement in this House on the scourge of opioid deaths in his community.

• (1240)

Indeed, when the new cabinet was appointed, we saw the appointment of the first Minister of Mental Health and Addictions at the federal level, which many of us took as encouragement and acknowledgement of the urgency and seriousness of the opioid crisis.

Therefore, when we know the severity of the problem and we know the solutions, it surely becomes incumbent upon all of us in the House to ensure that we act. Therefore, where is that action? It is not in Bill C-5.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the three emergency decriminalization applications from Vancouver, B.C., and Toronto, we have no indication that things are moving quickly. Under the leadership of Mayor Kennedy Stewart, a former member of the House, Vancouver submitted its preliminary application for an exemption on March 3, and its final application June 1. British Columbia’s application was submitted November 1 and Toronto’s December 1. It is not like the government has been taken by surprise by these requests, yet all the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions is reported to have said is, “We are looking at these proposals very, very seriously.”

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At the same time, the minister refused to set a timeline for a decision on these applications. Instead, the minister veered off into an argument that decriminalization alone would not solve the opioid crisis, as if anyone ever thought decriminalization by itself was a solution to addiction rather than an important measure of harm reduction.

The minister said that other options were being considered, including establishing a safe supply of opioids to give injection drug users an alternative to the increasingly toxic fentanyl now on the streets. She indicated the federal government was also looking at setting up more safe injection sites and making more counselling available. Yes, that it is all good, but there is no need to wait on decriminalization while putting together a more complete package.

What was especially disappointing to hear was the minister in one interview referring to these ideas as “innovative”. She should know that these are not new ideas, but rather tried and true harm reduction strategies with a track record of nothing but success.

When it comes to the temporary decriminalization applications, the B.C. minister of mental health and addictions, Sheila Malcolmson, also a former member of this House, told reporters last week that Health Canada staff had identified no barriers to speedy processing and approval of B.C.’s decriminalization application.

Where are we? On the one hand, we see no real sense of urgency on the short-term exemption applications and, on the other hand, that leaves us with Bill C-5, which reflects none of that necessary urgency to move toward permanent and complete decriminalization of personal possession of drugs. The narrow scope of Bill C-5, as drafted, certainly means that, for technical reasons, we cannot likely add decriminalization through amendments at the committee stage.

That brings me back to the question of what Bill C-5 is really about. It seems that in the government’s mind, this must be a bill primarily about tackling systemic racism in our justice system. If that is the goal of the bill, is there enough there to support?

Clearly removing mandatory minimums for drug offences would be a step forward. Even better would be removing mandatory minimums for all but the most serious violent offences. That is not there, not in Bill C-5. The frustration with the ineffectiveness of mandatory minimums has gone so far as to see a provincial court judge in Campbell River last week substituting probation for a mandatory jail sentence for a woman convicted of dealing fentanyl to support her own addiction. The judge said that she could see no positive impact of a jail sentence in that case.

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Not only does Bill C-5 fail to address cases like the Campbell River case, but as well Bill C-5 is missing other elements that would help right the wrongs caused by systemic racism in the justice system. Let us make no mistake about how serious this problem is.

Correctional investigator Ivan Zinger reported in 2020 that while indigenous people made up 4.9% of the total population of Canada, they made up just over 30% of the people in Canadian prisons. Approximately 3.5% of Canadians identified as Black in the last census, yet Black Canadians make up more than 7% of those in prison.

When we look at indigenous and racialized women, the figures are even more stark. Zinger reported that Black women made up just over 9% of women incarcerated and indigenous women made up a shocking 42% of the population in women's prisons. This is the result of mandatory minimums.

• (1245)

The injustice does not end with incarceration as then there is the legacy of a criminal record. Not only have indigenous and racialized Canadians been disproportionately targeted for investigation, prosecution, diversion, fining and imprisonment, the most marginalized among us then end up stuck with criminal records, criminal records that make getting a job almost impossible, criminal records that often restrict access to affordable housing. Bill C-5 lacks any provision for automatic expungement of criminal records for drug possession, something for which the NDP has been calling for more than two years.

Automatic expungement is clearly what is needed after seeing the failure of the government's program for expedited pardons for marijuana convictions, a program that has granted pardons for less than 500 people of the estimated 10,000 eligible in the two years it has been operating. We need something better; we need automatic expungement of these records.

Again, the narrow drafting of Bill C-5 means, for technical reasons, we likely cannot add those elements we really need to tackle racial injustice to the bill. Certainly we cannot add expungement. It is likely we cannot even add additional offences where mandatory minimums now apply to the removal list.

Therefore, I have a question for the government, one I had already been exploring with it before we rushed into this debate. Is there not a way we can make this bill do more to address both racial injustice and the opioid crisis?

The New Democrats are ready to talk, but we probably need to do so before we reach the conclusion of this second reading debate. There is one possibility I will put forward right now to get the ball rolling, and I have to credit the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which put forth the following recommendation in call to action 32 more than six years ago. This call to action states:

We call upon the federal government to amend the Criminal Code to allow trial judges, upon giving reasons, to depart from mandatory minimum sentences and restrictions on the use of conditional sentences.

This proposal would allow judges to ignore mandatory minimums where there are good reasons to do so, including the good reason that mandatory minimum sentences are, in and of themselves, most often unjust. This call to action to restore discretion to

judges over sentencing for offences where mandatory minimums have been imposed is clearly doable, it is just not in Bill C-5.

A way to put this call to action into legislation has been provided in what is now Bill S-213. Again, it is probably not possible to add restoring discretion for judges when it comes to mandatory minimums to Bill C-5 in committee, because this idea is far beyond the scope of the existing bill.

What I am asking of the government is whether we can think about using the relatively rare process of sending Bill C-5 to committee before the vote at second reading. This would allow the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights to alter the scope of the bill and to add missing provisions like the TRC call to action 32 to Bill C-5, and to add expungement to it. That would put some teeth in this bill.

Sending Bill C-5 to committee before a second reading vote would require a motion from the minister, and he has that opportunity later today when he speaks.

Let me conclude with this offer to work with the government on Bill C-5. This is renewing the offer New Democrats made when the bill was originally introduced in the last Parliament. I make this offer pointing to the progress we were able to make on bills like Bill C-4 and Bill C-3, when we were able to work together on common goals and purposes.

If sending Bill C-5 to committee before a second reading vote is not the way forward in the government's view, then let us work together to find other ways to strengthen the bill.

Am I optimistic about the chances of Bill C-5 proceeding? With the bill as it stands, can the government actually convince the New Democrats that there is enough in Bill C-5 to justify proceeding quickly or even proceeding at all? As I have said, I have good ideas about how we can ensure that is true.

I know there are misgivings in other parties about certain provisions of the bill, but I also know that no one in the House is unaware of the systemic racism in our justice system and its impact on racialized and indigenous Canadians. As well, I know no one in the House wants to turn a blind eye to the suffering imposed on families by the opioid crisis.

I also know we will not get a lot of opportunities to address systemic racism in the justice system in this minority Parliament and will not get many, if any, other opportunities anytime soon to respond effectively to the opioid crisis. Let us not waste the opportunity we have before us now with Bill C-5 to do one, the other or both—

• (1250)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am afraid the hon. member has run out of time.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Humber River—Black Creek.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is critically important to hear from many of us, as we try to deal with some of the issues facing society today. The numbers speak for themselves, no matter what we want to think otherwise. The numbers clearly indicate that the governments of the day have to take some action. They are asking for that action, and I would hope our government will respond in a very quick fashion.

Given that we now have a Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, does the hon. member recognize that this is another step in the right direction to accomplish the goals that many of us in the House want to see?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, as I said in my speech, the creation of the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions at the federal level is encouraging. Now the minister has to actually take actions. Since March, the government has had a proposal from the City of Vancouver for a temporary exemption to the criminalization of personal possession of small amounts of drugs. When will the minister act on that application?

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is always a pleasure to rise on behalf of the citizens of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo.

One thing that seemed to be missing from my colleague's eloquent words was victims. Frequently victims are racialized people, disproportionately, in fact, and that has to be stated when we are discussing this. I also thought I heard my hon. colleague say that he was in favour of repealing all mandatory minimums.

Would that go for sexual offences against children, including those under section 164.1 of the Criminal Code, which involves production and distribution of child sex abuse material?

• (1255)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, I am going to speak very carefully here.

In no way did the member hear me say, “removing all mandatory minimums.” I said, very clearly, except for “the most serious violent offences.” I always take offence in the chamber when members rise and accuse me, an adult survivor of child abuse, of being weak when it comes to offences against children. I have this personal experience and I am happy to speak about it publicly, because the more the victims of this abuse speak out, the more effective we can be at helping them go on with their lives.

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[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, I want to echo what my colleague from Rivière-du-Nord said earlier. Violent gun crimes have been on the rise, and someone was even shot in a library in Laval not too long ago. However, the bill that the government has introduced includes a provision to repeal minimum penalties for certain firearm possession crimes. This is a rather strange time for the government to propose that. What does my colleague think?

[English]

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, I spent 20 years teaching criminal justice before I came to the House. The literature, professionally, was already clear that mandatory minimums did nothing to deter crime. No one who is about to commit a crime gets out his or her Criminal Code, looks up what the penalty will be and makes a decision on whether to commit that crime based on whether there is a mandatory minimum. It is simply an absurd view.

However, as I stated in a previous question, we have had more than a decade of experience with mandatory minimums in our country, especially on firearms, and they have done nothing to deter firearms crime. There are many other ways to tackle this crime; mandatory minimums make no contribution.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Madam Speaker, early this year in the previous Parliament, the Standing Committee on Public Safety released a report on systemic racism in policing in Canada. When I look at the new additions to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act that Bill C-5 would make, such as the declaration of principles, the warnings and referrals section, it gives me a bit of a pause. We can look at the experiences of indigenous and racialized Canadians with police forces. Through this bill, we would be now making it entirely dependent on the judgment of police officers as to whether they would issue a warning or referral or whether that declaration of principles would guide them in the interaction.

Could my colleague comment further on that approach and the problems that might be inherent in it?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, that is an important question, and I did raise the issue in my speech. Given the history of systemic racism in policing, I am a bit concerned about who will actually benefit from the warnings and referrals section and whether only more mainstream and less marginalized Canadians will benefit from it. Perhaps, instead, racialized and indigenous Canadians will continue to be over-involved in the justice system for things that are actually a reflection of poverty and addiction instead of an intent to commit crime.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his years of advocacy around decriminalizing illicit drugs and for the decision to include a mention of call to action 32 from the TRC in his speech this morning.

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I wonder if the hon. member is willing to comment further on to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. To cite the report at page 644, “Mandatory minimum sentences are especially harsh for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people.... This leads to higher incarceration rates.”

Would the hon. member be open to sharing his views on this?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, the hon. member re-emphasized a point I was trying to make in my speech. We have known for a long time that the main impact of mandatory minimums falls very heavily on indigenous women. When we look at the figures, with more than 40% of the women incarcerated in this country being indigenous, we see there is something seriously wrong with our system, and not just with our justice system, but with our social system as a whole.

The missing and murdered indigenous women and girls inquiry and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called our attention to this and called for action. We have the chance to take actions now by strengthening Bill C-5. I very much hope that we can have those discussions at committee, but that would require the minister to refer this bill to committee before a second reading vote.

• (1300)

Mr. Adam van Koevorden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague from Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke for his expertise and decades of advocacy on issues of social justice and others like it. I also want to acknowledge that he is an expert on the subject matter.

He mentioned that we were rushing into debate a bit. I tend to agree with that, but I also agree with him about the urgency of this matter and the importance of correcting the wrongs of the past. I have here a list of the mandatory minimum penalties that would be repealed and the ones that would not be repealed. I also want to thank him for his bravery in speaking out on the aforementioned issues.

I would like to read an excerpt from another colleague, the member for Beaches—East York, who has worked hard on bills relating to these matters. He said the bill would “require police and prosecutors to consider alternative measures—including diverting individuals to addiction treatment programs, giving a warning or taking no further action—instead of laying charges or prosecuting individuals for simple possession”. I agree that the bill would address systemic racism in our judicial system, but I also agree that it would not fix everything.

In closing, I want to express interest and enthusiasm in collaborating with the member on this bill, because I think of all of us here in this place, he has some expertise that we will all benefit from.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for his kind remarks and compliments.

I think we have shown in this Parliament that when we put our minds to it, we can get things done. When I said we were rushing into the debate, I meant yes, we need to rush on this because of the urgency of the issues, but we should not rush into the debate before we have had a chance to have discussions about our common purpose here and what we can accomplish by working together. That is

what I was referring to. We certainly need to have those talks and we need to have those talks soon.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Parkdale—High Park.

I stand before the House as the member of Parliament for Whitby, but I grew up in Peel region. My father who was a homicide detective there for much of my upbringing and then moved to the National Parole Board. In terms of my life history, he spent most of his career catching individuals who were committing crimes in our community and making sure they were convicted of those crimes. He then spent the latter half of his career working toward reintegrating offenders successfully within society. Also, I spent seven years working with a local halfway house in Brampton, which definitely gives me a unique perspective on the bill we are debating today.

It is a pleasure to speak on Bill C-5, an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. Today, I will be speaking to the issue of mandatory minimum penalties, MMPs for short, in the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

The importance of equitable sentencing laws in the criminal justice system cannot be overstated. Indeed, imprisonment represents one of the most grave intrusions by the state into the lives of individuals. As such, sentencing laws must be carefully reviewed in order to ensure they reflect the values that Canadians hold dear.

Unfortunately, there are inconsistencies within the current sentencing regime provided by the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act that have disproportionately impacted indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities right across Canada. This bill proposes to repeal the particular MMPs that have been shown to have the most significant impact on those communities, while ensuring that courts can continue to impose sentences for violent and serious crimes that respond to their seriousness and the harms caused.

When considering the appropriate sanctions for an offender in a criminal case, a judge must effectively balance the principles of proportionality, parity and restraint. The principle of proportionality requires a sentence to reflect the gravity of the offence and the degree of responsibility of the offender, also taking into consideration some of the background circumstances within which the offender offended. The principle of parity requires sentences to be similar to those imposed on similar offenders in similar circumstances. Perhaps most important is the principle of restraint, which dictates that an offender should not be deprived of liberty if less restrictive sanctions may be appropriate in the circumstances. Balancing these principles is highly individualized and is a process that demands an assessment of all relevant factors, including the personal characteristics and life experiences of the individual standing before the court.

However, when an offence carries a mandatory minimum penalty, the minimum punishment is prescribed by law. This removes a certain amount of discretion from judges, and it means they cannot impose sentences below the legislated minimum, even in cases where they find that a shorter period of imprisonment or no imprisonment at all would be an appropriate sentence given the circumstances of the offence. I will also add here that the Canadian Sentencing Commission recommended the abolition of all MMPs except for murder, and 90% of Canadians when surveyed agreed that judges should be given sentencing discretion.

While proponents of MMPs often argue they ensure consistency and fairness in sentences for the same crime, the reality is that for some crimes they can and do yield unfair results that can have negative impacts on the justice system writ large, as well as on victims. MMPs can be inconsistent with the direction in the Criminal Code requiring judges to use imprisonment with restraint and to consider all available sanctions other than imprisonment that are reasonable in the circumstances for all offenders, with particular attention to the circumstances of indigenous offenders.

Data shows that between 2007 and 2017, indigenous and Black individuals were more likely to be admitted to federal custody for an offence punishable by an MMP than were other Canadians. In fact, the proportion of indigenous adults admitted with an offence punishable by an MMP almost doubled between those years, from 14% to 26%. Similarly, in 2018-19, Black people represented 7.2% of the federal inmate population but only 3% of the Canadian population.

• (1305)

Indigenous people and Black Canadians are particularly overrepresented for firearm and drug offences carrying mandatory minimum penalties. Specifically, Black Canadians comprised 43% of individuals convicted of importing and exporting drugs in 2016-17, while indigenous people comprised 40% of those admitted for a firearm-related offence that same year. To quote from the study, “Over the ten-year study period, Black and other visible minority offenders were much more likely to be admitted with a conviction for an offence punishable by an MMP.”

In response to this data, Bill C-5 proposes to repeal mandatory minimum penalties for all drug offences in the CDSA, as well as for one tobacco-related offence and 13 firearm-related offences in

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the Criminal Code. MMPs should remain for offences such as murder, sexual assault and all child sexual offences, and for certain offences involving restricted or prohibited firearms or where the offence involves a firearm and is linked to organized crime.

While MMPs have been in place since the Criminal Code was first enacted, they were largely the exception until relatively recently. Over the last two decades, there was an increased reliance on MMPs to further denounce crimes, deter offenders and separate them from society. What is interesting here is that the evidence shows the contrary. In fact, there is really no deterrent effect provided by MMPs. No criminal stands in contemplation before committing an offence and considers the length of the sentence they will get, so MMPs do not deter future crime. One of the intentions behind support for MMPs in the first place was that they are supposed to deter crime, but that is actually false based on the evidence I have seen and based on my personal experience from working with ex-offenders.

MMPs are also incredibly expensive and ineffective in general, and they increase the rate and volume of incarceration. Prosecutors can use the threat of mandatory minimum sentences as a bargaining chip. Harsher penalties increase defendants' incentive to go to trial because of higher stakes, which means they are less likely to plead guilty and instead go to trial. They clog up the justice system. They lead to charter challenges and, in essence, increased court costs. Also, longer, harsher sentences lead to the overcrowding of our prisons and increased prison costs.

Overcrowding in prisons also contributes to congestion within the criminal justice system, which soaks up vast quantities of limited resources. This takes away resources that could otherwise be dedicated to release planning and reintegration efforts that actually reduce recidivism. Remember, recidivism is the rate at which offenders who are released reoffend, and in many cases it is a measure of success regarding the measures that are implemented. In addition, lengthier sentences actually increase the likelihood of reoffending. The evidence shows that recidivism actually goes up the longer people stay in prison. There are many reasons for that. There is more institutionalization, offenders are subject to greater stigmatization when released and they have a harder time finding work and reconciling with family members.

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I will end with a story. I worked with federal offenders to help reintegrate them into society. I did this for about seven years with St. Leonard's Place Peel. These offenders were out on statutory release under conditions, and many of them, with the right reintegration supports and programming in the community, were not reoffending. We had about a 92% to 96% effectiveness rate. We can see that in essence, the whole tough-on-crime agenda and approach seems to be an ideological narrative that is not based in facts and reality.

I hope that all members of the House will support Bill C-5.

• (1310)

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to talk about getting back to reality for a second for the member opposite.

In 2015, 25% of the prison population was indigenous. Now it is 30%. Why has the Liberal government failed in reducing the percentage of indigenous inmates across Canadian penitentiaries?

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Speaker, the overrepresentation of indigenous people in our prison system is a direct result of having mandatory minimum penalties entrenched in our Criminal Code. This is exactly what Bill C-5 would help to address, as it would repeal those mandatory minimum penalties. I think that there is much more we can do, but a lot of it has to do with the work our government is doing on reconciliation, with the largest amount of money in any federal budget dedicated to indigenous people.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Madam Speaker, it has been said that this is not a good time to bring this bill forward, especially with respect to eliminating mandatory minimum sentences for firearms offences, such as discharging a firearm with intent or robbery or extortion with a firearm. What does my colleague think about that?

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Speaker, in terms of the timing of this piece of legislation, there is no better time than now to deal with systemic racism within our justice system. It is long overdue. Evidence has been accumulating for decades on how ineffective mandatory minimum penalties are. In fact, they do nothing to deter gun crime. In essence, I am not really sure how to respond to the member opposite because, in my view, there is no better time than now.

• (1315)

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened to the debate, and it appeared that the Conservatives' approach to address the opioid crisis is a criminal justice approach. We in the NDP, and I hope on the government side as well, have a different perspective. If we really want to address the issue and save lives we must treat the issue as a health issue.

Will the member call on his own government to decriminalize possession of small amounts for personal use and to bring in a safe supply now? We have a crisis. People are dying and it is urgent.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Speaker, I agree with the member's general sentiments.

From my perspective, the opioid crisis and all substance use are health issues and should be treated as such. Our government is definitely looking at safe supply and harm reduction methods, and is making investments and headway in that area.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would ask the member a very specific question with respect to off-ramps in the criminal justice system. I know that diversion programs are very important, as well as for judges to have discretion in sentencing.

Could the member talk about his experience with the types of supports that are available for young people who want to get out of the criminal justice system?

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Speaker, that question gives me the opportunity to talk about some of those off-ramps for offenders, whether they be young offenders or federal offenders.

From my perspective, there is a robust support system in communities that can help to effectively reintegrate offenders. Certainly, there is also a lot at the front end that we can do to deter gang violence and crime, and to prevent crime from happening. Our government has placed a lot of emphasis on dealing with poverty reduction, homelessness and substance-use issues, but through a health lens and through a social justice lens.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am rising to join this important debate on Bill C-5. I am speaking today from the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe people in Canada's House of Commons.

This bill that is being debated today, and the changes it proposes to make to the Criminal Code of Canada, are critical to addressing systemic racism and systemic discrimination in the criminal justice system. Anyone who has been listening to this morning's debate knows quite clearly at this point that we are facing a very serious issue. That issue is the overrepresentation of Black and indigenous persons in our criminal justice system, primarily Black and indigenous men.

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How did we get to this situation? We have prepared legislation, tabled it in the last Parliament and retabled it in this Parliament because we have fundamentally listened to experts I had the privilege to consult with in my capacity as parliamentary secretary to the minister of justice in the last Parliament. We have also listened to Canadians, among whom are my constituents in Parkdale—High Park. We have been seized with certain issues that relate to challenges not just with individual acts of discrimination, vis-à-vis one particular person or group of people, but rather norms and rules that embody our systems and our institutions. There is no more robust place to do the hard work and the heavy lifting that goes into addressing systemic racism than the criminal justice system of Canada.

We know that Canadians in every riding in this country were seized by the videos we saw of George Floyd. Things were also occurring here in Canada with respect to indigenous populations. We could talk about the response of law enforcement to the Mi'kmaq fishers on the east coast. We could talk about RCMP officers and the overuse of violent force with Inuit individuals in Canada's far north. These images, stories and issues really captivated our nation. That is why we are here today acting and mobilizing on that sentiment. We are here to listen to those voices and act upon them.

We have also consulted the statistics, and they are startling. In 2020, despite representing 5% of the Canadian adult population, indigenous adults accounted for 30% of federally incarcerated inmates. That is a sixfold increase. That is reprehensible. I think I heard that from across the way. Although Black individuals represent 3% of the Canadian population, in 2018-19 they represented 7.2% of the federal offender population. This was more than a twofold increase.

What I have heard from my constituents in Parkdale—High Park and from people right around this country is that we need to act. That is why we are taking action now, specifically as it relates to Black and indigenous persons and other persons of colour. There is a unanimous sense I have heard that there is a need to take action.

Today, we are talking about a bill that would do so in three areas. Before I touch on those, I want to outline two broad themes that underlie the points I am making today. The first point is that we need to tackle systemic racism. The second point is that on this side of the chamber, we are a government that believes in judicial discretion. That is fundamental because it will underpin what I am going to speak about.

First, Bill C-5 would repeal mandatory minimum penalties or imprisonment for certain, but not all, offences to address the disproportionate impact on indigenous and Black offenders as well as those struggling with substance abuse and addiction, as appropriately raised by the member for Vancouver East. Second, it would allow for greater use of conditional sentence orders, or CSOs in the legal parlance, when an offender faces a term of less than two years' imprisonment and does not pose a threat to public safety. Third, it would address issues dealing with drugs, opioids and addiction in this country by requiring police and prosecutors to consider measures other than laying charges or prosecution for simple possession of drugs, such as diverting individuals to addiction treatment programs.

In terms of the first category, we heard about mandatory minimum penalties ad nauseam during this morning's debate: why they exist and whether they are useful, etc. I rest on the side of the evidence. The evidence has shown us clearly that regardless of how they are imposed, who imposed them or how long they had been in place, mandatory minimums have only served to disproportionately impact men of colour in particular, but also indigenous women, by having them be overrepresented in our criminal justice system.

These are for crimes such as simple possession of narcotics, simple possession of a firearm, or a first-time offender using a firearm. More likely than not, people of colour are entrapped in the criminal justice system based on these charges, and more likely than not, because of the mandatory minimums they face jail time.

● (1320)

This is problematic because it eschews judicial discretion. We heard about this from the member for Whitby. He spoke about his family's experience, including his father's, and about what we need to do to ensure people are not sent down a certain path for the rest of their lives. The way we do that is by not putting people into a revolving-door situation of incarceration after incarceration where people are habituated to a life of criminality behind bars.

The way we do that is by ensuring there are other options available. One of those options is to give judges the tools they need to craft sentences that are appropriate for particular individuals. As a minor digression, that is what informs our motivation behind the impact of race and culture assessments, which we are also funding. We want to be able to look hard at accused individuals and understand their life circumstances, what got them to this place and how we can ensure they do not reappear in front of a court six months or six years from now on a repeat offence.

We want to get them out of a cycle of potential criminality and toward a cycle of productive life, contributing to our communities. By binding the hands of judges, we have seen exactly the opposite. The exact law and order methodology that is professed by members of the official opposition is turned on its head by this kind of blanket prohibition. All it does is produce more criminality, not less. That is why we are standing up against it.

Secondly, judges have spoken out against these types of penalties. Decision after decision rendered by courts as high as the Supreme Court of Canada has found these types of penalties unconstitutional. They violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That is why we are taking action: We believe in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and adhering to it particularly when guided by the judiciary.

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The impacts of these penalties have been legion. In terms of worsening over time, we know that in 1999 indigenous peoples represented approximately 2% of the adult population, but accounted for 17% of admissions to federal penitentiaries. By 2020, after a series of mandatory minimums were added to the Criminal Code by the previous Conservative government, 30% of the federal inmate population was indigenous. That is a trend in the wrong direction, and it is a trend we need to correct.

I do not want this bill to be mischaracterized. Canadians are watching, and I know it is not just our mothers and fathers who watch in the middle of the day. Other people watch the House of Commons in the middle of the day. They need to know that we are not purporting to get rid of mandatory minimum penalties for serious offenders. Mandatory minimums involving cases of firearms, and those who traffic, smuggle, commit repeated violent assault or murder using firearms, are not being targeted. We are targeting single, first-time offenders in low-level offences. That is who we do not want destined for lives of criminality.

The other serious issue that needs to be addressed concerns conditional sentencing orders. I want to emphasize that this is the old-fashioned notion of house arrest. It goes back to the point I made at the outset of my remarks today. If we want to ensure that individuals are not subjected or destined to lives of criminality, or lives interacting with the criminal justice system, one good way to ensure that is to ensure that they do not spend time behind bars for their first offence.

Instead, when they are not a significant threat to public safety and when they are not likely to reoffend, at that point in time we would subject them to a conditional sentence order. This would allow them to serve their sentence outside of incarceration, subject to certain restrictions. This is critical, because we need to ensure there is a penalty applied. However, by not having them placed behind bars, we do not subject people to lives of criminality.

We have seen that conditional sentence orders entrenched by Allan Rock, who was the Minister of Justice 26 years ago, were eroded over time by the previous Conservative government. We are trying to return to the status quo.

My last point is on drug diversion. This is critical. The reason we are doing this is simple: We are listening to the evidence in the city of Toronto and the city of Vancouver. We are listening to the Canadian chiefs of police who have advocated for this type of drug diversion, and we are listening to the director of public prosecutions. They have said that not having diversion clogs our system and renders it less effective in addressing the true cause of criminal behaviour.

These are important initiatives. They are threefold within this legislation. I hope all members will stand behind this important bill.

● (1325)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague's speech, but I would like him to clarify something about maintaining mandatory minimum sentences.

Would Bill C-5 maintain mandatory minimum mandatory sentences for firearms offences? I am thinking of firearms trafficking, firearms importation and exportation, certain restricted or prohibited uses of firearms, and use and authorization related to organized crime.

While my colleague may not be able to offer us any guarantees, would he at least be open to maintaining these sentences?

Mr. Arif Virani: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Montcalm for his question and I congratulate him on returning to the House.

I can emphasize that this bill is for simple offences, such as an individual violating the Criminal Code for the first time and in a minor way. For the more serious offences that the member raised, such as trafficking and importation, the penalties are more severe. We will certainly take those offences seriously, with corresponding and commensurate penalties.

[*English*]

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Madam Speaker, could the member cover how we will be able to reduce drug abuse in our country? That is something everyone has talked about in all of the speeches I have listened to this morning and this afternoon.

If this bill has fewer punishments for drug trafficking, and for those people who are putting fentanyl and opioids back on the street for people to consume, how does this bill help in the opioid crisis we are fighting today, which many members in the chamber have talked about? This bill would do nothing to aid in a solution to the crisis we are trying to limit going forward.

Mr. Arif Virani: Madam Speaker, as one point of clarification, this bill does not touch on issues such as drug trafficking. That is not a low-level drug offence. What this bill does touch on is mandatory minimums that relate to simple possession of narcotics and for people such as first-time offenders. That is point number one.

Vis-à-vis drugs and the opioid crisis, we are treating it as a health problem and not a justice problem. We have done that with our approach to safe supply. We have done that with our approach to safe injection sites. We will continue to do that as we consider requests from cities such as Vancouver and Toronto for things like the decriminalization of simple possession. This is critical in facing a battle against the opioid crisis, in which we all share responsibility.

● (1330)

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, there are things in this bill that I am very pleased to see and am very supportive of. I am wondering, though, if the member would agree that a useful next step would be to send this bill to committee, so the bill can be built up, amended and have things added to it, such as recommendations from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Would he consider first sending it to committee before the vote?

Mr. Arif Virani: Madam Speaker, I welcome the member for Edmonton Strathcona to the House after her re-election.

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It is critical that this gets studied thoroughly at committee. That is very important. Having served on the justice committee for many years, I believe it is one of the best committees in Parliament in terms of its scrutiny of legislation that comes before it. Considering the timing of when it goes to committee, we have already commenced second reading debate, so the stage at which it would go to committee has already been addressed, and it would be following this second reading debate.

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague touched on judicial independence, a fundamental part of this legislation, which would tell judges and those adjudicating these cases that they are better placed to make decisions based on the nuances of the facts of each individual case. I know the member opposite has a legal background. Could he speak to how fundamentally important it is to allow judges to take this on, as opposed to parliamentarians imposing it?

Mr. Arif Virani: Madam Speaker, it is fundamental. On this side of the House is a government that believes in the quality of our judiciary, as well as its ability to analyze an individual accused before the court and consider factors of social context, including systemic racism and discrimination, something we amended in legislation on judicial training in the last Parliament. That is exactly the kind of characterization that judges need to account for in allowing them to calibrate the penalty for an individual accused, which is fundamentally to avoid recidivism.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Madam Speaker, before I begin today, I would like to first thank the fine people of Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner for putting their trust in me for the third time. It is an absolute honour and privilege to serve them in this capacity.

I thank my core campaign team, including our chair, Ryan Thorburn; volunteer coordinators, office managers, get-out-to-vote leaders, full-time encouragers, and basically the real bosses of the campaign, Sharlyn Wagner and Margo Dick; our IT go-to guy, Dean Grey; my financial wizard and agent, Dave Camphor; planning and printing logistics, Tim Seitz; volunteer care and event planning, Val Seitz; and all things signs, Alex Dumanowski and Gary Proctor. I thank them all so much for their dedication and hard work. They are a testament of what can be accomplished when people get together as a team. I will always be indebted to them.

I thank the many volunteers who door knocked, put up signs, helped in the office and volunteered with scrutineering on election day. None of this is possible without them, and I thank them very much.

I will turn my attention now to Bill C-5, which is the exact same bill, ironically, that was introduced as Bill C-22 in the last Parliament before the Prime Minister called his snap vanity election.

The Liberals would want Canadians to believe that Bill C-5 is simply about reducing minimum sentencing for simple drug possession, but that is not so. Most Canadians would be alarmed to learn that the Liberal bill, Bill C-5, is aimed at eliminating mandatory prison time for criminals who prey on our communities and victimize the vulnerable.

Bill C-5 proposes to eliminate mandatory prison time not for petty crimes but for things like drug trafficking and acts of violence. It

would even allow violent criminals to serve their sentences on house arrest and not in prison, putting our communities at continued risk.

Over the last six years, Liberal legislation on crime and the criminal justice system has been largely out of touch with the realities of most Canadians, especially those impacted by crime. Canada's crime stats confirm that we are seeing rising crime rates all across this country, increased gang violence and shootings, increased organized crime activities, and increased drug trafficking, drug use and drug overdoses.

Let me focus for the next few minutes on examining several of the main areas of Bill C-5, those being the elimination of mandatory prison time for firearm offences, the elimination of mandatory prison time for drug dealers, the expansion of conditional sentences and the diversion for simple drug possession.

I try to look at this legislation through the lenses of having been in law enforcement for 35 years and of being a parliamentarian representing the constituents of my riding and their voices. Let us first of all look at the elimination of mandatory prison time for firearm offences.

In contrast to the Liberal spin on their being so-called tough on gun violence, which is what they have been feeding Canadians, there is the complete hypocrisy of Bill C-5, which proposed to eliminate several mandatory minimum sentences related to gun crimes, including serious gun crimes such as robbery with a firearm, extortion with a firearm, using a firearm in the commission of an offence, discharging a firearm with intent, which is Criminal Code language for shooting at someone, illegal possession of a prohibited or restricted firearm, importing or exporting an unauthorized firearm, discharging a firearm recklessly and other firearm offences such as weapons trafficking, importing or exporting knowing the firearm is unauthorized, possession of a prohibited or restricted firearm with ammunition, possession of a weapon obtained by the commission of an offence in Canada and possession for the purpose of weapons trafficking.

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What does this really all amount to? Because the Liberals believe the current laws are unfair, they would be eliminating mandatory prison time for criminals who commit such crimes as robbery with a firearm, drive-by shootings and unlawful possession of firearms. It is clearer than ever that the Liberals are more interested in protecting criminals than they are protecting our communities. If we think things are bad now, just wait for this legislation to take effect, should it pass in its current form. I am afraid the worst is yet to come.

• (1335)

Let us look at the second area of the bill, which is the elimination of mandatory prison time for drug dealers. At a time when we are experiencing the heartbreak of addiction and overdose deaths in our country, the Liberals' solution is to eliminate mandatory prison time for several offences in the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which specifically targets drug dealers and offences such as trafficking, or possession for the purpose of trafficking; importing or exporting, or possession for the purpose of importing or exporting; and production of a schedule 1 or schedule 2 substance, which are drugs such as fentanyl, crystal meth, heroin, cocaine, the very drugs that are wreaking havoc on our communities. How does that even make sense?

The Liberals are trying to spin it and say that Bill C-5 will help those who struggle with addictions. Come on, Canadians are not that naive or stupid. They know the Liberals are purposely failing to point out that the mandatory minimums they are eliminating are for drug dealers who specifically prey on those with addictions. This is not the solution. It would only make the current problems a lot worse.

The next area I want to look at in Bill C-5 is the expansion of conditional sentencing. The bill allows for greater use of conditional sentencing orders, such as house arrest, for a significant number of serious offences for which the offender faces a prison term of less than two years. Those offences now include sexual assault; kidnapping; criminal harassment; human trafficking; abduction of a person under the age of 14; assault causing bodily harm or assault with a weapon; assaulting a peace officer causing bodily harm, or assaulting a peace officer with a weapon; trafficking or importing schedule 3 drugs, which are hallucinogenic like LSD and psilocybin; and many other offences, such as prison breach, motor vehicle theft, theft over \$5,000, breaking and entering a place other than a dwelling house, being in a dwelling house unlawfully, arson for a fraudulent purpose, causing bodily harm and criminal negligence.

What this all means is that criminals who prey on victims in their communities can now serve their sentence at home, many times in the same neighbourhood as their victim. Again, this clearly puts communities at risk. For years now we have heard whispers that the Liberal government was trying to empty out our prisons, expedite parole and reduce sentences. It now appears that those whispers are coming true. I wonder how conditional sentences will deter criminals who prey on our communities.

I also want to touch briefly on another aspect of Bill C-5, which is the diversion measures for simple drug possession. Again, the Liberals are trying to tell us, and are asking Canadians to believe, that the diversion section in Bill C-5 all of a sudden gives police

and prosecutors the ability to use their discretion when determining for simple drug possession whether to lay charges, warn, or refer to support programs. It might come as a complete surprise to the Liberals, but that has been the case all along.

Police have been doing that. For decades they have been using their discretion whether to lay charges on someone for drug possession. In fact, Canada's Public Prosecution Service has previously issued a directive to prosecutors to avoid prosecuting simple drug possession unless there are major public safety concerns. Yes, I admit, Bill C-5 now does codify this approach, but it is unlikely to have any impact because this is already the practice when dealing with simple drug possession.

This legislation is out of touch with rising crime on our streets. It is out of touch with the needs of victims and communities battling gang violence. It is out of touch with law enforcement from across the country, who continue to report rising crime, increased violent crime and more gang shootings. This legislation is out of touch with our country's opioid epidemic. Crime has been increasing every year the Liberals have been in power, reversing a two-decade trend. This is the worst government on keeping Canadians safe in the last 20 years.

According to Stats Canada, the crime severity index has risen since 2015 from a 66.9 rating to a 79.5 rating in 2019, a 25% increase in serious crime. The violent crime index has increased from 70.7 in 2014 to 89.7 in 2019, which is also a 25% increase in the last five years.

• (1340)

Stats Canada also reports that rural crime and the rates of rural crime are increasing 23% faster than urban crime rates.

The Toronto Police Service has some of the best publicly available stats when it comes to the realities in its community. There has been an increase in shootings, gun homicides and injuries in each year of the last six years the Liberals have been in government. In comparison, let us first look at 2014, before the Liberals formed government, as the baseline for the Toronto numbers. In 2014, there were 177 shootings in Toronto alone, which resulted in 103 people killed or injured. Those are unacceptable numbers, but pale in comparison to the years that followed. In 2016, there were 393 shootings in Toronto, with 183 people killed or injured. In 2017, there were 367 shootings, with 180 people killed or injured. In 2018, Toronto again had 393 shootings, with 208 people killed or injured. In 2019, those numbers jumped to 492 shootings, with 284 people killed or injured. In 2020, there were 462 shootings, with 217 lives lost or injured. So far, in 2021, those numbers are continuing, at similarly unacceptable rates, with over 380 shootings and 198 people killed or injured.

I am sure Canadians are wondering how this bill will reduce shootings and people dying even by just one. What will removing mandatory minimum sentences on firearms offences such as the ones I have mentioned do for our communities? Safer communities should be the focus of the current government, but sadly they are not.

Since 2016, nearly 30,000 Canadians have died from opioid-related addiction and overdose. Why is the first action of the Liberal government to reduce sentences on drug trafficking? How does this help the tens of thousands battling addictions whose habits are being fed by the very drug dealers preying on the vulnerable this bill is meant to protect? Going after these drug dealers should be the priority of this place.

Canadians do not feel safe and nothing in this bill will help them be any safer in their homes and communities. In 2020, an Angus Reid survey found that 48% of Canadians felt crime was getting worse. Canadians are rightly tired of being afraid in their own neighbourhoods and homes. The top priority of any government should be the protection of its people. This bill does nothing to address those threats against Canadians; it only protects criminals from being held responsible for their crimes.

The bill really shows how far out of step the Liberal government is with the needs and concerns of everyday Canadians. A legal scholar recently suggested that when looking at legislation we should be asking what the problems are that we are trying solve and whether the proposed legislation would solve those problems. It is the kind of question that should be asked in this place every time the Criminal Code or any similar act is used to try and solve policy problems. I can say that after reviewing Bill C-5, I would assert that the legislation may actually contribute to the problems we are facing in this country, rather than trying to solve them. It does nothing to improve public safety.

Let us be clear. The problem the government should be trying to solve is gun violence committed by criminals and gangs using illegal firearms, mostly smuggled into this country and used to kill in communities across Canada. It should be trying to solve the addiction and drug problems we have and the overdose deaths plaguing our communities across this country, not catering to those who are contributing to the epidemic. It should hold criminals responsible

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for their violent crimes and drug dealing and focus on rehabilitation, not a revolving door of justice. However, the Liberal solution to these problems is a lazy, misguided approach that caters to criminals, ignores victims and does not protect Canadians.

• (1345)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, one of the statistics that my friend did not mention is on the racialized nature of incarceration. For example, 42% of women in federal penitentiaries are indigenous women. As another example, 7% of the male population in prison are Black males whereas they only represent 3% of the population. He also did not mention the term “systemic racism” at all in the context of this debate. I wonder if the member can reflect on it and maybe incorporate that into what we need to ensure that there is fairness within the overall criminal justice system.

Mr. Glen Motz: Madam Speaker, yes, it is fair to say. I was in public safety for a number of years with some of my colleague from across the way, and there are a disturbing number of incarcerated individuals who are racially marginalized. However, one of the things we found through those studies is that certain individuals, by nature of who knows what, and the studies are still ongoing, do not access the programs that are available. They do not access the justice system supports that are available to help them navigate their way through the justice system.

That being said, I do not know what in the bill before us would prevent people from being held responsible for their crimes, nor does it abdicate the responsibility of those individuals to be responsible. Furthermore, there are some offences that we are talking about here that are not petty crimes. They are not things that society would consider to be more property offences or things where we can rehabilitate an individual. Generally, we are talking about people who commit crimes against other people, and in that case—

• (1350)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am sorry, but I have to allow for other questions. I am sure the hon. member will be able to continue during the next question.

Questions and comments, the member for Longueuil—Saint-Hubert.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, when we hear the Conservatives talk about crime, it always seems that their solution is to lock up all the criminals and throw away the key, as my colleague said earlier. Unfortunately, that is not consistent with the facts.

There is a report from a few years ago posted on the government's own website that compiles the very interesting findings of 50 studies involving over 300,000 offenders. Government researchers state the following:

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None of the analyses found imprisonment to reduce recidivism. The recidivism rate for offenders who were imprisoned as opposed to given a community sanction were similar. In addition, longer prison sentences were not associated with reduced recidivism. In fact, the opposite was found. Longer sentences were associated with a 3% increase in recidivism.

An analysis of the studies according to the risk of the offender also did not show a deterrent effect.

What does my colleague think about those figures?

[*English*]

Mr. Glen Motz: Madam Speaker, it is fair to say that, certainly on this side of the House, we advocate for a compassionate, fair and rehabilitative approach to criminal justice and incarceration, but that also includes accountability for those who have committed a crime. However, that does not stop people from reoffending, and I appreciate the comment that these numbers do not support people from reoffending, whether they have served a short or long period of time.

I think the problem is inside, where the programs are not available for folks to receive the help they need, whether it be addiction counselling or skills training. One of the gaps we have in Correctional Service Canada is the limited ability for individuals to be rehabilitated and learn new skills, and that is the biggest issue we have for those who find themselves incarcerated.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have been curious throughout today's debate on Bill C-5. Is it the position of the Conservative Party that its members do not have faith in the men and women of this country who serve as judges? The Conservatives do not seem to believe at all in judicial discretion. The problem with the Conservative approach is that they think that by supporting this bill, or supporting the idea that mandatory minimum sentences should be done away with, means that we somehow also believe that people should just walk away scot-free, when nothing could be further from the truth.

I would like to draw the attention of the member to section 718.2 of the Criminal Code, which gives judges the ability to either increase or reduce a sentence based on aggravating factors. Would the member not agree that we cannot have a black-and-white approach to every single case? I would rather put my trust in the person who is sitting on the bench who can look at an individual's circumstances and look at the particular severe aspects of the crime and then make the appropriate judgment in each individual case.

Mr. Glen Motz: Madam Speaker, I do have faith in our judicial system. I have a number of provincial court judges and Queen's Bench justices as friends whom I respect highly. I have been in courtrooms where I have watched the adjudication process and admired the skill and the fairness approach that our justice system has.

However, one of the things we have to remember is that our court systems are busy. Prosecutors are looking at ways to limit the number of court exposures. While that may work in some cases, it does not work in all cases. Many times, the habitual criminals continue to be habitual criminals preying on our communities.

• (1355)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his service as a police of-

ficer. The government has been clear that it wants to reduce gun crime in Canada, and all Canadians would agree that is the right thing to do. However, I do not understand why reducing the penalty for gun crime would actually reduce gun crime. I wonder if the member could illuminate me.

Mr. Glen Motz: Madam Speaker, many things from the government have baffled me in the last five years that I have been here, and its whole approach to solving the public safety issues surrounding gun violence is certainly one of them. Targeting law-abiding Canadians who statistically have been shown to not be the problem with gun crimes in our communities, and targeting them by taking the lazy approach to firearms legislation is certainly an example of that. The Liberals are considering having no mandatory minimum sentences for people who important firearms, who are in possession of firearms, who use a firearm in the commission of an offence and who shoot at people with a firearm. What deterrent is there?

It is interesting. I had the privilege of being in the now public safety minister's riding a couple of years ago. We visited a mom whose two daughters who were shot, thankfully not killed, in the crossfire of gang violence. I asked the woman what should be done by us, legislators in this House, to solve this problem. She said clearly that the gangs who shoot up their streets in Toronto are not afraid of the police, are not afraid of the law; that we need to have some teeth in the law that is going to hold those who commit gun crimes to account in our country, and that until we do that, we will continue to see gun crime and the killing of their kids in their communities.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to acknowledge my colleague's 35 years of service in policing and also acknowledge his very clear sense of duty.

Sadly, the member used the word "liberal" more than he used the word "racism", so I would remind him that this bill is not about parties or politics but more so about who mandatory minimum penalties actually harm. Mandatory minimum penalties have not improved public safety one bit. In fact, they have only exacerbated racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Therefore, I would ask him to perhaps reflect in his comments with respect to his inclusion of the term "systemic racism".

Mr. Glen Motz: Madam Speaker, it is fair to say that in my years of service in law enforcement, watching the criminal justice system for years and listening to debate in this House on public safety, we have biased outcomes throughout all aspects in the justice system and the prison system. I would think that it is a fair assessment to say that there is some work to be done.

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my thanks for the opportunity to begin my speech at second reading debate on C-5, an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

Today, our government is taking an important step toward making our criminal justice system a more effective and fair justice system where decisions are based on facts. Most importantly, we are delivering on our promise to reintroduce former Bill C-22 within the first 100 days of our government.

[English]

Indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities are overrepresented, both as victims and as offenders in the criminal justice system. They face systemic racism and discrimination and are the collateral damage of law reforms that have not made us safer or the justice system more just.

Bill C-5 is an important part of our government's plan to address this unfortunate reality in our criminal justice system. It is also an important step in reorienting our criminal justice system so that it is both fairer and more effective, while ensuring public safety. This bill accomplishes these important objectives by advancing a series of coordinated sentencing measures and policies in three broad areas, which I will take up afterward.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

● (1400)

[English]

POLAND

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Madam Speaker, 40 years ago today, at midnight, the communist dictatorship in Poland declared martial law. Tanks and soldiers filled the streets. Communications were cut to the outside world. Minutes after midnight, armed secret police arrived at our family's door in Poland and arrested my father. Like thousands of members of Solidarnosc, the first free and independent trade union in the Soviet bloc, he was imprisoned without trial. Families were left wondering for weeks whether the arrested were alive or dead.

After the crackdown, Canada opened its doors to over 6,000 Polish immigrants and political refugees like my family, who shared their talents and energy to build communities across Canada, while never forgetting the struggle in their homeland.

This evening, on the 40th anniversary of the imposition of martial law, Polish Canadians across Canada will light a candle in their window representing the light of freedom, to show solidarity with those who fought for democracy then and solidarity with those around the world fighting for freedom, democracy and human rights today.

* * *

POLAND

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Madam Speaker, 40 years ago Polish communist leaders imposed martial law across Poland to crack down on the growing democratic trade union movement known as Solidarnosc. Military units would occupy cities; labour unionists would be jailed until 1986, and the families of Solidarity members would be persecuted and expelled.

My father was a member of Solidarnosc. A shipyard worker at the Lenin Shipyard, he would leave Poland in 1983 during martial law. That is how my family was eventually allowed to come to Canada in 1985.

Canadians responded to this Solidarity wave. The Roman Catholic diocese in Vancouver created a Polish emergency fund and a refugee fund. Hundreds of Polish sailors trawling the waters off the west coast would be welcomed by Canadians and allowed to stay. Canadians from coast to coast welcomed Poles in their homes, raised funds for them and marched in the streets in solidarity.

On this historic 40th anniversary, let us celebrate the indomitable will of freedom shown by Solidarity members and recognize the dehumanizing cruelty of Soviet communism.

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LABRADORIANS OF DISTINCTION AWARD

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge the Labradorians who recently received the Labradorians of Distinction Award. The award was created in commemoration of Canada's 150th celebrations, and it recognizes individuals who have contributed to the social, cultural, environmental and economic development of Labrador society.

It has been through their achievements, advocacy and contributions that Labrador continues to proudly chart its own path. This year's winners now join 160 past winners, who have instilled themselves in the fabric of Labrador's history and its people. Congratulations to Toby Obed, Todd Kent, Claude Rumbolt, Mabel Russell, Craig Porter, Lucy Pike, Mark Nui and my mother, Barbara Rumbolt, on receiving this award this year. Also, congratulations to the posthumous recipients, William Grayson Crowley and Barbara Wood.

Their legacy will live on in this award and the amazing impact they have had in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Canada.

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[Translation]

FOOD SECURITY ORGANIZATION

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Christmas is a time of joy for many, but it can be a time of distress, anguish and worry for others.

People say the face of poverty has changed. One person who knows a lot about that is Colette Thibault, who has been in charge of an organization called Fin à la faim for over 25 years. This organization plays a crucial role in our community by addressing families' basic food needs, and that is no small task.

In Lanaudière, the number of requests for food aid has gone up by 60% in the past year, and let us not forget that food prices are expected to rise by 7% in 2022.

Statements by Members

When food is available but prices are too high, that puts a major strain on lots of people. It does not take much for people to start going into debt. They can find themselves caught in a downward spiral that is difficult to escape.

It is for all these reasons that I want to stress how vital a role Fin à la faim plays in our region. I am grateful to Colette and her team of amazing volunteers, who make sure everyone has access to food because nobody should have to go hungry.

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• (1405)

ORLÉANS

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was a privilege to invite the people of Orléans to a movie night at Ciné Starz last Friday.

As everyone knows, the pandemic has had a profound effect on our ability to host events and meet in person, so I am proud that we were able to get together before the holiday season. It was heartwarming to see generations of families spending rare quality time together, and enjoying a free movie with popcorn and juice for people of all ages.

I would like to thank the 350 or so residents of Orléans who came out for the event, as well as the staff at Ciné Starz for hosting us. Special thanks go to my team and to the many volunteers who contributed their time to ensure everyone's safety by checking for proof of vaccination and making sure public health guidelines were followed.

In closing, as this will be my last speech in the House before the break, I want to wish everyone in Orléans and all my colleagues a very happy holiday season and all the best in 2022.

* * *

[*English*]

ERVIN ABBOTT

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Ervin Charles Abbott of Three Hills passed away earlier this fall, and it is an honour to recognize him today in this place.

Mr. Rabbit, as he was known to my kids, showed during his almost 61 years that individuals can make a difference. I got to know Erv when he first got involved in the Battle River—Crowfoot Conservative EDA, and we quickly became friends. Erv's friendship was impactful on the lives of everyone he knew. Anyone who knew him knew he lived in the fast lane. That included tractor pulls, motorbikes and airplanes, but in the midst of that he always demonstrated the love of Christ. He could be counted on to make time for those in need, no matter how busy he was. He always stood up for what is right, and he had a work ethic few could keep up with.

To Sandra, Micah and Kayla I extend my deepest condolences as they grieve. I thank them for sharing Erv with us. The world could certainly use many more like him. My friend Erv is missed, but his impact will not be forgotten.

THE AGA KHAN

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today Ismailis here in Canada and around the world mark the 85th birthday of His Highness the Aga Khan. It is an important occasion, one that gives us a chance to reflect on the impact His Highness has had in his over 64 years as imam.

In 1972, the Aga Khan was pivotal in securing the safe arrival in Canada of thousands of Ugandan Asian refugees fleeing the dictatorship of Idi Amin, including me and my family. As an Ismaili representative in this House, I take great pride in the Aga Khan's contributions. In Canada, these include the Aga Khan Museum, the Ismaili Centre in Toronto and the Global Centre for Pluralism right here in Ottawa, which exemplifies our shared values of inclusion and diversity.

Internationally, the Aga Khan's commitment to health, economic development and children's education in the developing world is renowned. It is this legacy that prompted the Government of Canada to confer upon the Aga Khan our highest tribute, that of honorary citizenship.

On this special day, I wish all of my fellow Ismailis *Salgirah Khushali Mubarak*. To His Highness, I say, "Happy birthday, Hazar Imam."

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HAMILTON TIGER-CATS

Ms. Lisa Hefner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to humbly join my colleagues in congratulating the Winnipeg Blue Bombers on their Grey Cup victory, but I would particularly like to thank the Hamilton Tiger-Cats for an absolutely incredible season.

This jersey I am wearing is from 1999, the last time the Ticats won the Grey Cup. It was signed by Ticat Hall of Famer Joe Montford a day before the legendary game. The year 1999 was also when this Calgary-raised journalist arrived in Hamilton to work at The Hamilton Spectator. Of course, the Ticats were playing the Calgary Stampeders in the final that year. Members can see where my allegiances now lie. Ticats fans are the loudest and most passionate in the CFL, and their enthusiasm is infectious.

This Grey Cup was special to my city, given that it was played at Tim Hortons Field in downtown Hamilton and Hamilton's much-loved Arkells rocked the halftime show.

I thank the Ticats again for an exciting season. We are so proud of our hometown team.

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on a starry night many years ago, there was a message of hope: “Be not afraid, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. On this night, a saviour was born. Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth and goodwill to all people.” If there has ever been a time we needed some good news to pierce through the darkness of fear, doubt and despair, it would be the last two years. May we embrace the peace that was promised all those years ago and overcome the fear and uncertainty we face today.

May the goodwill that was expressed that night continue through our lives, as it has been so clearly displayed in the valiant efforts of our frontline workers, small business owners, truckers, grocers, farmers, teachers, postal workers and so many others, who have all made tremendous sacrifices and have laid together the foundation for our country's comeback.

May the love, peace and hope that was brought that night many years ago be with everyone and their families this Christmas. God bless.

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• (1410)

MEL LASTMAN

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to the memory of the former mayor of Toronto, Mel Lastman. Mel may have been a small man in stature, but he was a giant against others. He was never afraid to take on other levels of government and fight for the necessary funding for many issues, such as women's shelters, affordable housing and the expansion of the Yonge subway.

Mayor Lastman was a champion of his beloved city of North York for 25 years. He was an example to all of us as elected officials of what real commitment was and what hard work can accomplish. Mel had a heart to help others and was always ready to help those with charitable initiatives, no matter how outlandish the activity may have been. He was a wonderful politician, an entrepreneur and a successful businessman. Of course, those of us from Ontario can picture him on our TV screens with his famous line, “Noobody.”

It was an honour to work with Mel for many years. To his sons, Blayne and Dale, and other family members, we send our deepest condolences. We will miss Mel. Best wishes.

* * *

CHRISTMAS

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my favourite time of the year in Calgary Midnapore, Christmas.

Growing up, every Christmas Eve I would go skating on Lake Bonavista and attend church at Holy Nativity, and then we were off to my grandmother's home in Acadia for treats and to open one single present.

Statements by Members

The holiday season is alive and well in 2021, as constituents from Fairview to Walden continue to celebrate. They might go meet Santa at Southcentre, play hockey on Lake Sundance or cross-country ski the trails of Fish Creek. They will light up the pond in Legacy, go to the Christmas craft fair in Queensland or meet up with friends for a festive pint at Brewsters, Kildares or the Windsor Rose.

We can find them stocking up on antipasto and panettone at the Italian Centre or finishing their shopping at the stores of Shaughnessy or Willow Park Village, enjoying the holiday lights of Park 96, Lake Bonaventure and Maple Ridge.

As we celebrate with family, friends and community, we can be sure that in Calgary Midnapore, it is the most wonderful time of the year.

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CARBON PRICING

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this Christmas, Canadian families across the country are feeling the squeeze. Inflation is fuelling a cost of living crisis, and for my constituents, it is a problem compounded by the Prime Minister's failed carbon tax.

Paul, a small business owner in my riding, recently shared his gas bill with me, which included a carbon tax charge nearly equal to the amount charged for fuel. Heating one's home is not a luxury, and Paul is nervous about the upcoming winter gas bills. He certainly is not the only one. The failed Liberal carbon tax is driving the cost up on basic necessities and is particularly punishing on rural communities.

It is about time that the Liberal government stopped shrugging its shoulders and focused on delivering solutions to addressing the cost of living crisis in our country. For my constituents in Battlefords—Lloydminster, removing the failed Liberal carbon tax is a great place to start.

* * *

POLAND

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a boy, I lived next door to the Polish Consulate in Toronto, and I remember seeing countless demonstrations by the Polish Canadian community in support of Solidarnosc, one of the most well-known and most successful pro-democracy and human rights movements of our time.

The communist regime in Poland wanted to crush Solidarnosc and to do that, 40 years ago it imposed martial law. Solidarnosc was banned, borders were closed, tens of thousands of people were arrested and almost 100 people were killed.

Statements by Members

Today, on the 40th anniversary of martial law in Poland, I rise to commemorate the victims; to pay tribute to the Polish people who continued their struggle for freedom and democracy and the rule of law, values that we all share; and to recognize the tremendous role Canada and Polish Canadians played in supporting Solidarnosc and welcoming many refugees who were fleeing that oppression. The House, in fact, passed a motion unanimously in support of the Polish people at that time.

Today, let us honour their memory. *Czesc ich pamieci.*

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● (1415)

CHRISTMAS SEASON

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to first thank the people of South Okanagan—West Kootenay for giving me the honour of representing them in this chamber, and we are debating some of the most important issues of our time here: climate change, the pandemic, deadly opioids and a housing crisis. Canadians expect us to all work together to solve these problems.

This is a time of year when we think of less fortunate Canadians, whether they have lost their jobs during the pandemic, lost their homes to fire, flood or renovations or whether they simply find it more difficult to pay for groceries. For all Canadians, this is a time of hope, and they have invested some of that hope in our deliberations here to build a fairer Canada.

This is a time of year for family. This is my parents' anniversary. For my wife's family, with their Swedish ancestry, this is Santa Lucia, a time to celebrate light in the darkness of winter.

I wish you, Mr. Speaker, and all Canadians a safe and happy Christmas.

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[*Translation*]

GASTON MIRON

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, 25 years ago, we lost Gaston Miron, the poet who captured the soul of the Quebec nation with his words.

Unfairly imprisoned during the October crisis, Miron never sank into bitterness and violence. He knew that it is love that sets us free.

In his works, Miron shows us that no one should be ashamed to evoke their past and their culture to give meaning to their condition. At a time when everyone is preoccupied with personal freedom, Miron instead shows us that the “we” is noble. He reconciles us to the idea of a shared destiny. He sincerely believed that it was in working towards becoming a country that the men and women of Quebec would find their purpose.

Miron's *L'homme rapaillé* represents me, you, them and all of us finally united one day in a country that will be our own. It is at that moment that we will become, as he said so well, “ferocious beasts of hope”.

Our dear poet, 25 years after you left us, your words still breathe life into the soul of this nation of people that to this day has yet to be born.

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[*English*]

GREY CUP

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, despite it never leaving, the Grey Cup is back in Manitoba where it belongs. After a thrilling Grey Cup final, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers were victorious after a nail-biting 33 to 25 overtime win against the Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

This victory came as no surprise to most Canadians after a stellar regular season by the CFL's best-performing team. Not only did the Blue Bombers win the coveted Grey Cup, but the team also won player of the year, coach of the year, lineman of the year and defensive player of the year.

Next year's Grey Cup will be hosted at Saskatchewan's Mosaic Stadium. I can assure the House that nothing would be better than achieving a Grey Cup hat trick in our favourite rivals' home stadium.

We will see everyone in 2022 to once again defend the cup.

* * *

GREY CUP

Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what a Grey Cup final. I congratulate the Winnipeg Blue Bombers on their second consecutive Grey Cup victory in a gutsy overtime win over the tenacious and talented Hamilton Tiger-Cats.

With the best 2021 record, the Bombers were led by the CFL's coach of the year, Mike O'Shea; the league's outstanding player, quarterback Zach Collaros; and the CFL's most outstanding defensive player, linebacker Adam Bighill, who happens to be a resident of my riding of Winnipeg South.

Three homegrown talents, Andrew Harris, Brady Oliveira and Nic Demski, contributed mightily to a great season and to winning the cup. All three were born and raised in Winnipeg and attended Oak Park High School.

Player comments after the game relayed the true brotherhood that exists between the Bombers teammates and the love they have for our community. They played for each other and they played for our amazing and grateful Winnipeg fans. That is why we are so proud the Grey Cup is coming home to Manitoba.

ORAL QUESTIONS

• (1420)

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, the new Minister of National Defence apologized for the Liberals' failure to take sexual misconduct seriously, and that is all well and good. However, what we have not heard is an apology from the Minister of International Development. That minister was actively involved in covering up allegations against the most senior officer in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Will the Minister of International Development stand up today and apologize for the role he personally played in covering up sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Armed Forces have always had our backs, but far too many members of the forces have suffered sexual harassment and sexual assault or discrimination. We must acknowledge the pain and trauma that have occurred, and today's apology is just one example of the steps we are going to take to work toward a place where all members of the armed forces feel safe, respected and protected.

* * *

SMALL BUSINESS

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the former minister needs to apologize and, frankly, it is disappointing to hear that minister covering up for the negligence of the former minister and the role that he played in covering up sexual misconduct allegations.

Small businesses in Canada are reeling from the lockdowns and closing their doors at an alarming rate. Knowing this, though, the Liberals have decided to go ahead with their CPP increase, a payroll tax increase that can kill many small businesses, and will. The Minister of Tourism, when talking about this, said callously that small businesses could afford it.

Why are the Liberals once again hitting small businesses when they are already down and out?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is clear that the Conservatives do not like the CPP, but we and Canadians do.

Let us be clear that the CPP enhancement represents a major step in improving retirement outcomes for all Canadians, allaying the fears of younger people about precarious work and making sure they have a retirement plan for the future. The CPP is among, if not the, most successful program in the history of Canada. We are proud of it. Why are they not?

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals think that small business owners are tax cheats, and it is clear from their actions that they are doing everything they can to hurt small businesses.

Oral Questions

Inflation is already making everything more expensive, so what is the Liberal solution to this? A massive payroll tax increase, starting January 1, 2022. According to the most recent Statistics Canada data, business closures are already outpacing business openings. This is a problem.

Why are the Liberals continuing their attack on small businesses? Why are they doing this to the entrepreneurs in Canada?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian economy is growing. We know the Conservatives do not like that fact, but Canadians do: 154,000 jobs announced in November; 106% of jobs recovered since the base of the pandemic; 5.4% GDP growth; an AAA credit rating; and the lowest debt-to-GDP ratio in the country. The economy is growing, Canadians know it and those members do not like it.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while Canadian families are still struggling with the effects of “Justinflation”, more bad news is on the way. Payroll taxes like EI and pension plans are going up again on January 1.

This is a direct attack on both SMEs and workers. Anyone who earns \$55,000 or more a year will have to pay more. We need this like we need a hole in the head.

Could the government give businesses and workers a break?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canada pension plan is one of the most successful programs in our country's history, and enhancing the CPP is an important step in improving retirement outcomes for workers and reducing the uncertainty many Canadians feel about saving for retirement.

This strengthens one of our most successful programs. That is what we are going to do to make life more affordable for Canadians.

* * *

• (1425)

TOURISM INDUSTRY

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that the pandemic is still taking a toll on our Canadian economy. Currently, the hardest-hit sector is tourism and hospitality, which employs 1.8 million Canadians.

On Friday, the Conservatives proposed that Bill C-2 be split into two bills, to directly address the problem in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Oral Questions

Is the government prepared to work with us to ensure that we can adopt the measures for tourism and hospitality immediately, so we can provide direct assistance to the 1.8 million Canadians affected by these issues?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that we will continue to invest in Canadians' lives, in the tourism industry, in all employees and in all employers.

It is up to the Conservatives to decide whether they are going to continue to support us and support Canadians or whether they are going to decide that Canadians are not worth supporting when they need it most. Those of us on this side will be supporting Canadians.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to set the record straight. Quebec's state secularism law was democratically passed by the National Assembly on June 16, 2019, over two years ago. That law applies to all Quebecers and does not target any community in particular. It does not discriminate against anyone. All Quebecers are subject to it.

I think that is easy to understand. However, the Prime Minister still does not get it. My question is simple. When will this government stop attacking Quebec's reputation here and abroad?

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our position has always been clear. No one in Canada should lose their job because of what they wear or their religious beliefs.

What we are seeing in Chelsea is a community that is rallying to defend one of its members, a teacher. The parents now have to have some very difficult conversations with their children.

Quebeckers are defending their rights in court. That is an integral part of our democracy. As we have said from the start, we will continue to follow the case closely.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, that is ridiculous. Conservative members from outside Quebec, Liberal members from Quebec, Liberal ministers and the Prime Minister are lining up to bash Quebec and Bill 21.

Enough is enough. We are fed up. We are done with the Prime Minister's hedging on this. Time to set the record straight. My question is simple. When will the Prime Minister tell us if he intends to bring a court challenge against Bill 21, which was democratically adopted by the National Assembly?

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always interesting watching the Bloc members rant and rave about this. We said from the start that, although we were personally against this law, it was the Government of Quebec's law, so we would let the process launched by Quebecers unfold in Quebec courts.

SENIORS

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the most vulnerable seniors across the country are facing unbearable distress. This government has taken away their guaranteed income supplement.

Instead of making the rich pay more, this government is going after the poorest seniors and putting them in an impossible and sometimes desperate situation. Will the Liberals fix this now, so that our seniors are not left without food or a roof over their heads in the middle of winter?

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khera (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we have always been supporting seniors, especially the most vulnerable seniors, by strengthening their GIS. We also moved very quickly over the summer to provide immediate and direct payments to seniors. When it comes to the CERB and GIS, we are aware of the issue and are actively working to ensure that we support those affected.

We have always been there for seniors, and we are going to continue to be there for them.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, seniors are homeless because of the government's failure right now in this country. Seniors are telling us the GIS cuts mean they are not able to pay for important things, like health care for their cancer treatment and rent. Some of these seniors are already living on the streets or in their cars in the Yukon.

The Liberals have no problem giving the rich their fair share when they are paying out bonuses, but when it comes to the most vulnerable seniors in this country, they will not stand up. They need this fixed now.

When will the government take action for seniors who are vulnerable?

● (1430)

Hon. Kamal Khera (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, strengthening income support for seniors has been a priority for our government. That is why one of the first things we did was to restore the age of eligibility for OAS back to 65. We strengthened the GIS for vulnerable seniors. We provided a one-time payment during the pandemic to help seniors afford the things they need. We will be increasing support through OAS for older seniors next year.

On the issue the member raised, we are aware of it and are actively working on it to ensure that we provide support to those affected. On this side of the House, we have always supported seniors and we are going to continue to support them.

*Oral Questions**[Translation]***THE ECONOMY**

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as businesses struggle to get back on their feet, The Globe and Mail is reporting that employment insurance and Canada pension plan contributions for employers will jump 18% over two years.

This increase is the result of Liberal policy decisions to spend and make Canadian families and businesses pay for the government's deficits.

My question is simple. Will the Prime Minister announce a break for Canadian businesses and workers in the upcoming fiscal update, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for that really important question, particularly because it is about the small businesses and entrepreneurs in our country, who are really the backbone of the Canadian economy.

We have had their backs throughout the entire pandemic. It has been really important that they get small business loan support and get support to keep people on the payroll and pay the bills and rent. This is the kind of work we have been doing.

We have always had the backs of small businesses, and we will always have the backs of small businesses in Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal method is simple: tax more to spend more or spend more and make Canadians pay for it.

The president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business has told us that there will be tax increases for as far as the eye can see.

Our entrepreneurs need breathing room. It is that simple. Can the Prime Minister confirm that he will not shift the responsibility for his endless spending to our Canadian businesses and workers?

[English]

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the CFIB for their collaboration, co-operation and engagement throughout the entire pandemic. Their voices throughout this very difficult time have helped us create the very emergency support programs that have helped businesses. Countless businesses have told all of us, even those across the aisle, that the support programs have to stay in place so they can get through this vulnerable time of the pandemic.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the reality is that the Liberal government created a \$34-billion deficit in the employment insurance fund because of its decisions. That is an extra \$1,100 per employee that the government has been stealing from the pockets of employers since 2015.

Will the Prime Minister announce measures that will help businesses and self-employed workers or will he continue to spend, increase the deficit and make honest workers pay more taxes?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are working very hard to make life more affordable for all Canadians. That is why we announced some good news today: A child care deal was reached with New Brunswick. That is good news for the people of New Brunswick and all Canadians.

We must not tell the member for Carleton, who said yesterday that it would be better for women to stay home than to go to work.

Why do the Conservatives not want women to access the job market? That is unacceptable.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the finance minister told committee that she did not know how much debt was in Canada or how much a 1% increase in interest rates would cost the federal government, or when she predicted that there would be deflation right before the biggest run-up in inflation in 20 years, we assumed it was just more media manipulation like Twitter found she had already done. Now we learn, in her favourite newspaper, that in fact she “rarely takes department briefings” and has not spoken to her deputies in months.

When will she consult with her department before getting it wrong again?

● (1435)

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, who can tell where the Conservatives are these days? On the one hand they say we need to support seniors more, and on the other side they say not to increase the CPP.

We are not going to listen to the Conservatives, because when it comes to taking care of seniors and their income security, we are making important investments today for the future. Our government will continue to do that so that we are there for Canadians every single day, no matter which stage of their lives.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only thing they are doing for seniors is driving up inflation to vaporize seniors' savings, increase the cost of home heating and increase the cost of groceries by \$1,000 a year. What is the minister doing about it? According to her favourite Liberal newspaper, she is not attending her briefings. In fact, she has not spoken to many of her deputies in months and is spending her time on political outreach.

When will the finance minister start doing her job rather than just passing the bill for her failures on to Canadians?

Oral Questions

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a little hard to take the member opposite seriously when he calls a child care agreement a “slush fund”.

What we know on this side of the House is that we are going to make investments that will make a difference for families. In fact, we just announced a new child care agreement with New Brunswick today, making it the ninth province and 10th jurisdiction in Canada that will have affordable child care for families. We are not going to stop there. We are going to keep delivering for families right across the country.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the finance minister refuses to rise and defend herself against this report, even though it was in her very favourite newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*. *The Globe* further said that her department is in total disarray. This is while inflation is at a two-decade high, we have a housing bubble that could lead to a housing crash and the national debt is over a trillion dollars.

Before she causes inflation to gallop further and the cost of living to go higher on Canadians, will she stand and commit that she will get a handle on her department and get back to work?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are working hard to make the lives of Canadians more affordable. We have a fantastic announcement today on a child care deal signed in New Brunswick that is good for New Brunswickers and good for Canadians. However, yesterday the member for Carleton called accessing child care like putting our hands in a “slush fund”. I cannot believe the member opposite would insult Canadians in that way.

Will the member apologize to hard-working families from coast to coast to coast?

* * *

[Translation]

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have not heard the last of Roxham Road. We learned this morning that the federal government has approved a five-year renewal of the lease on border facilities used to receive migrants who cross illegally. This means that the federal government does not intend to close Roxham Road for five years.

Can we still refer to them as illegal crossings when the federal government is making these reception facilities and resources permanent? Why is it making these illegal border crossings legal instead of tackling the problem once and for all by suspending the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada remains committed to upholding our fair and compassionate refugee protection system, fulfilling our domestic and international legal obligations and protecting the health and safety of Canadians and those who wish to live in our country.

PUBLIC SERVICES AND PROCUREMENT

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, by renewing the lease for these border facilities, the government is making it clear that it has no plan to shut Roxham down for at least five years.

This obviously comes with a price tag, and I am sure it will reassure no one to hear that a Liberal is benefiting from the deal. The federal government signed the lease without a tender in 2017 with a donor who contributed around \$23,000 to the Liberal Party. The lease was even renewed for five years, again without a tender. This is a huge problem with a simple solution.

Why not shut down Roxham instead of jumping right into another Liberal ethics scandal?

• (1440)

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the lease was signed at fair market value.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, things are not going well at Roxham Road.

First, by announcing that it will do nothing for five years, the government is ensuring that crossings at Roxham Road will continue and become normalized, even though these crossings are illegal. Second, it is paying a Liberal donor for these border facilities and there was no tender. Third, the government refuses to tell Quebeckers how much this is costing. These are three serious ethics violations that are not even necessary because there is a solution here. The government should suspend the safe third country agreement.

Why is the government choosing another Liberal ethics scandal over shutting down Roxham Road?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member can appreciate that there were necessary measures put in place to protect the health and well-being of Canadians during the pandemic. Now that the situation has changed, we have made good on our domestic and legal obligations to ensure we are treating asylum seekers in accordance with Canadian and international laws.

I will remind the hon. member opposite that we are moving forward in collaboration with our partners in the Province of Quebec. I will also share that I had a very productive call on this and other matters as recently as last week. We are going to move forward in a way that is responsible, protects the health and well-being of Canadians and considers the perspective of the Province of Quebec every step of the way.

DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will ask the minister this again and this time I would like a real answer. He decided that only the Red Cross is worthy of receiving matching funding, yet B.C. has been devastated by this flooding disaster. Thousands are without homes. We need all hands on deck. The Salvation Army, the MCC, Archway, Samaritan's Purse, the United Way, the Abbotsford Disaster Relief Fund and even the churches and gurdwaras all stepped up to help, yet all have been snubbed by the minister. Will he now reverse course and announce they too will receive matching funding, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the remarkable generosity and support that British Columbians and Canadians right across the country have provided to those impacted by these terrible floods.

We have been working closely with the British Columbia government and the Canadian Red Cross to match funds and, so far, \$175 million has been accumulated between the three donors in order to support British Columbians. The Canadian Red Cross is doing important work in registering those individuals and conducting assessments to ensure the money goes where it is needed the most. At the same time, we welcome the generosity of so many British Columbians in supporting their neighbours.

* * *

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Mr. Speaker, by now the Minister of Emergency Preparedness is well aware that part of the flooding in the Fraser Valley last month was caused by a breach in the Nooksack River diking system in Washington state, yet he should have known about this a long time ago. There are certainly enough reports and studies to that effect, but the government failed to act in a timely fashion to avoid the flooding last month. Can the minister commit today to making sure that he works with federal U.S. counterparts to make sure this never happens again?

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know the water that fell in the Cascades a month ago accumulated in the Nooksack River and much of it has flowed into the Sumas Prairie, impacting Canadians on our side of the border. We are continuing to work with the Americans to manage this, but we are working as well with local officials, the people who reside in the Canadian portion of that impacted area and the British Columbia government. There are a number of studies that clearly indicate there need to be significant investments made into rebuilding a more resilient infrastructure. That is the work we are undertaking now.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the devastation impacting Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon and all of B.C. is unprecedented. Farmers in the blueberry sector are especially terrified about the consequences of another flood and its impacts on food security and the economy of B.C. Will the Minister of Agriculture commit, especially for Matsqui,

Oral Questions

British Columbia, to funding the dike repairs and enhancements throughout the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley to make sure that when the next flood comes our agricultural producers are not put out?

• (1445)

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know that farmers in this region have been significantly impacted by these floods. That is why our Minister of Agriculture met with her B.C. counterpart, visited the area last week and toured those areas impacted—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: I apologize for interrupting the hon. minister. I am trying to hear him, but the noise is getting to a level that I cannot make out the answer. I will have him start right from the beginning so we can all hear the answer that the hon. member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon would also like to hear.

The hon. minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Speaker, I will certainly speak up to allow the member to hear me. This is a very important question. It is unfortunate some of the members opposite are afraid to hear the answer.

Last week, our Minister of Agriculture travelled to British Columbia, met with her counterpart and visited many of the farmers who were impacted in that region. It is very clear that we are going to have to provide significant supports not only to those who have lost livestock in this tragedy, but also to the blueberry farmers the member references. There is significant work to be done. That is why the joint committee of the federal government, the Government of British Columbia and indigenous leadership in the area will be convening an important meeting later today to work together to solve this issue—

The Speaker: The hon. member for London—Fanshawe.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, the Liberals offered an apology to address the harmful culture in the Canadian Armed Forces, but an apology does not erase their failure to act over the last six years. The Liberals have ignored the recommendations of numerous reports. They have failed to take action and stop the harms committed against women over and over again. The Liberals have to prove they are going to do better.

When will the government finally move past nice words and commit to implementing all the recommendations of the Deschamps report so women can serve equally?

Oral Questions

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government takes the issues raised by the member opposite very seriously. That is why on November 4, I moved, as minister, to accept the interim recommendations of Madame Arbour. That is why we offered an apology today. That is why we are going to be moving very quickly after we receive the final recommendations of Madame Arbour. That is why we are implementing Bill C-77.

Our government takes the issues raised in the question very seriously and we will work very hard to regain the confidence of Canadians in the Canadian Armed Forces.

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[Translation]

PUBLIC SERVICES AND PROCUREMENT

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, thousands of migrants are fleeing persecution and seeking refuge in Canada. They are not illegal, just desperate.

The Liberals decided to help a Liberal Party donor make money at these people's expense. Rather than resolving the situation, the Liberals are writing cheques to a friend to lease land near Roxham Road to house asylum seekers. However, all the Liberals had to do was withdraw from the safe third country agreement with the United States, and the problem would be solved.

Why would the Liberals rather give gifts to their friends than help the most vulnerable?

[English]

Hon. Filomena Tassi (Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, transparency and accountability are critically important to our government. The rental agreement was negotiated based on fair market value to arrive at a competitive price. Given the location of the hotel and its proximity to the border, this was an ideal location for CBSA to use for this purpose. Our government is delivering open, fair and transparent procurement processes, while obtaining the best value for Canadians.

* * *

● (1450)

CHILD CARE

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know the importance of child care to helping reduce costs for families, to help supports parents getting back to the workplace, and to support jobs and opportunities.

Can the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development provide the House with an update on the work that our government is doing to establish programs across the country, particularly in light of today's good news?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today, we announced that the ninth province and territory, New Brunswick, signed onto the Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement.

This is fantastic news for families in New Brunswick who are going to see a 50% reduction in fees within the first year and getting to \$10 a day by year five. We are going to increase the number

of spaces by 3,400. Unlike the members opposite, we know child care is good for families, it is good for kids and it—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

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[Translation]

PUBLIC SERVICES AND PROCUREMENT

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister says he does not think about public finances, we know he is telling the truth. He just renewed a five-year contract with a Liberal friend to lease land near Roxham Road without a call for tenders.

Will the Prime Minister show some transparency and tell us how much taxpayers will have to pay for that five-year contract?

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what I told the Bloc Québécois.

The lease was signed at fair market value, and if we are talking about partisanship, then it is important to point out that the same donor made donations to the Conservative Party for eight years.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was expecting that answer from the minister. I would respond that since 2015, he has been donating to the Liberal Party.

What we are seeing right now is that the contract, the kickback, is very high.

We would like to know why we are maintaining a five-year contract for the land on Roxham Road.

Does the government intend to let the Roxham Road problem go on indefinitely?

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if he is thinking of kickbacks, does my colleague have something on his conscience? If he does, perhaps he should answer for what he himself did for eight years.

The government signed the lease at fair market value.

The Speaker: Before we continue, I will remind the members that parliamentary language must be used in the House. We must respect each other, but we also need to remember that we should not cast stones if we live in glass houses.

The hon. member for Elgin—Middlesex—London.

*Oral Questions**[English]***HEALTH**

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's youth are in the middle of a mental health crisis. Fewer than half of youth survey respondents now report excellent or very good mental health. That is down 20% from pre-pandemic days. Increased substance use and heightened anxiety are on the rise for youth struggling with their mental health. We need to reverse this trend.

What concrete steps is the government taking to uplift our youth and put them back on track for success?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think that the Integrated Youth Services is probably the furthest along in our quest for national standards on mental health and wraparound services that wrap around each young person with their unique needs. I am very excited for places like Foundry in British Columbia. These are excellent programs, and I look forward to working with the member and all members of this House to make sure that all young people are able to get the services they need.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a national crisis. Saturday marked the one-year anniversary of a unanimous House of Commons motion to take “immediate action” on an easy-to-remember, 24-7 three-digit suicide prevention hotline: 988. Since that unanimous vote, 4,000 Canadian lives have been lost to suicide. In their darkest, most desperate moment, Canadians should not have to do a Google search to find help that would save their lives.

By what date will Canada finally have an operational three-digit 988 suicide prevention hotline?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his ongoing advocacy for mental health. The three-digit number will be a very important asset as we go forward. It is, as members know, being reviewed by the CRTC, but we need to make sure that when people call that number, it is hooked up to the most appropriate services. We are also going to change the idea of mental health first responders to make sure this is not responded to by a wellness check with disastrous consequences.

* * *

• (1455)

*[Translation]***SENIORS**

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Mr. Speaker, experts expect food prices to rise by 7%. Meanwhile, Ottawa wants to cut back the guaranteed income supplement for 183,000 senior workers, many of them among the poorest seniors who received the Canada emergency response benefit. Grocery bills will be going way up, yet the government is clawing back an average of \$3,500.

In committee on Thursday, the Minister of Finance confirmed that she was actively seeking a solution and would have more to say in a few days. That takes us to tomorrow's economic update.

Will the Minister of Finance be announcing a solution in the update?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know things have not been easy for seniors throughout the pandemic, but we have been there for them. We have delivered up to \$1,500 directly to the most vulnerable seniors. We increased old age security, and we will increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 per year. The government acted rapidly for people with emergency benefits like the Canada emergency response benefit.

We know some of our more vulnerable seniors have been affected, and we are working on solutions. We have always been there for our seniors, and we will always be there for them.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the cost of groceries has increased 7%, but the income of seniors under the age of 75 has not increased at all because the government is denying them the old age security pension increase they deserve. This basically forces seniors, whose health is often fragile, to cut back on the food they buy. I know that the finance minister understands perfectly well that freezing the pension of those under the age of 75 when prices are skyrocketing impoverishes them.

Given that reality, why is the government so determined to have two classes of seniors?

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khara (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we have always been there for seniors. I am happy to talk about our record. One of the first things we did was restore the age of eligibility for OAS and GIS to 65 from 67. We have enhanced the CPP. We have raised the GIS for single seniors. We have invested billions of dollars in home care. We have invested in building 7,000 new affordable housing units for seniors. On this side of the House, we are always going to support seniors.

* * *

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Mr. Speaker, fish have tails and oceans have currents, but the government does not seem to know that. The latest move by the government sees it virtue signalling again, and pushing that we cover 50% of our oceans with marine protected areas by 2050, when this Prime Minister will be drawing CPP.

Will the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans stand with coastal communities and stop threatening their livelihood to earn from the sea with these top-down Ottawa MPA targets, yes or no?

Oral Questions

Hon. Joyce Murray (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, fishers and fisher communities are very important to our government, as is conservation of the oceans. That is what marine protected areas are about.

We are working with communities, and indigenous communities, to develop marine protected areas. They will be the nursery area for restoring fish and having an abundance of fish that will serve our fishing communities for generations to come.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are paying more for food, and the government is making it more expensive. Last March, the government blindsided spot prawn harvesters with a decision prohibiting a packaging practice that has been in place for decades. The government's decision is to increase plastic use and packaging costs, making Canadian food less affordable for Canadians already facing bigger grocery bills.

Why is the fisheries minister continuing her attack on independent fish harvesters and Canadians who need to buy food?

Hon. Joyce Murray (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am so proud of our government's work to reduce plastic in the oceans and to reduce ghost gear. We will continue to clean up the oceans.

With respect to the packaging of prawns, I will be reviewing this potential decision, but we will be thinking about the conservation of all of our fish stocks and ways that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans can ensure that the rules are being respected in the fishing of prawns.

• (1500)

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government needs some time management, because the Liberals are working and studying things and achieving nothing. Gary from Comox received a clawback letter from DFO for his COVID fish harvester benefits. He appealed, and of course in October DFO said, "Whoops, we were wrong. You deserve them." Four weeks later, DFO wrote a letter back to him, asking for the \$6,000 back. DFO and this minister seem confused by their own rules. Gary fulfilled all the requirements.

Will the minister show who is in charge and let Gary and all fish harvesters keep their benefits, yes or no?

Hon. Joyce Murray (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am proud of the work our government did on so many benefits, putting them quickly in place and getting them out the door to people who needed them so desperately. From the outset, the terms were clear for the fish harvesters' benefit. The benefit was specifically for self-employed commercial fish harvesters. Those who were not self-employed will have been asked to repay the benefit.

* * *

[Translation]

COVID-19 ECONOMIC MEASURES

Mr. Joël Lighthound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, although we are seeing some encouraging signs of economic recovery, it is also clear that not all regions of the country nor all sectors

are recovering at the same pace. That is especially true for the tourism sector.

I can see it in my region which, to my impartial eye, is the most beautiful in Canada. My region usually welcomes thousands upon thousands of tourists every year and has a vigorous tourism sector, but it has been affected by the pandemic.

I would like to ask the Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance how Bill C-2 supports the tourism sector.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Louis-Hébert for his excellent question. Bill C-2 offers some excellent solutions to what business owners in the tourism sector are calling for, which is support for operators of hotels, motels, chalets, bed and breakfasts, youth hostels, restaurants, food trucks, catering companies, cafes, concert halls, museums, gardens and botanical gardens.

We must support Bill C-2 and we encourage all members to do so.

* * *

[English]

REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the past two years, every core program delivered by FedNor has failed to meet its service standards for the timelines of funding applications. FedNor is relied upon by municipalities, small businesses and first nations across northern Ontario, and they need clarity on the status of their application timelines.

Can the minister responsible please inform the House of what specific measures she is taking to fix this issue?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think it is an extremely important question. We will take it back and get back to the member.

TRANSPORT

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Walpole Island First Nation ferry in my riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex is a critical connection between the island and Algonac, Michigan. The ferry plays a significant role in the daily life of this community, and it is essential to the local economy. The ferry has been shut down since the beginning of the pandemic. The land borders have been reopened, but the ferry still cannot run. It is shameful to see this Liberal government allow a critical part of this first nations community to be falling through the cracks.

My question is simple. When will the minister treat the Walpole Island ferry like the land border crossings?

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always an honour to stand in the House of Commons to answer questions.

I want to let my colleagues know that the health and safety of Canadians is paramount for our government. We have been working with communities on making sure that we apply health and safety standards at the borders. We are requiring travellers to be fully vaccinated. We are working with stakeholders to make sure that—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Members can let me know when they are ready and I will continue the session.

Order.

The hon. Minister of Transport.

• (1505)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Speaker, I wish Canadians could hear some of the heckles that are going on here in the House of Commons. They would not be happy that members of Parliament here who are supposed to be doing their jobs are spending their time heckling.

However, I want to tell my colleagues that we are doing everything we can to ensure that we protect the health and safety of Canadians, and we are applying border measures to protect everyone.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Stephen Ellis (Cumberland—Colchester, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the ArriveCAN app is just not working. I have a constituent who is a family doctor and cannot return to work. He was out of the country and isolated, as appropriate, and has had multiple negative tests. The government's app is telling him that he needs to stay home for 14 more days. This busy family physician, like many other Canadians, is being held hostage by an app that does not work.

Canadians need to be able to trust the advice of elected officials. Will this government commit to fixing the broken ArriveCAN app and get Canadians home for the holidays?

Oral Questions

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think the member will agree with me that it is true he is not in a hostage situation.

Our government is taking, and will always take, the necessary steps to protect our borders and to keep Canadians safe. ArriveCAN, for the past year, has played a significant role in reducing the introduction and transmission of COVID, and its use is mandatory. In the last few days, the minister has asked for direction for some flexibility rules, and those will be applied. Again, the health and safety of Canadians is our number one priority.

* * *

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government is fully committed to reconciliation with indigenous peoples. Canadians surely appreciate that our efforts should start at home, and that the government must lead in ensuring that our indigenous peoples are represented in every sector of economic life.

Our government set a 5% target for indigenous business representation in federal procurement contracts. Can the hon. Minister of Public Services and Procurement provide members of the House with an update on this critical government commitment?

Hon. Filomena Tassi (Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government is advancing a renewed relationship with indigenous peoples, which includes creating an environment that truly supports economic growth.

We are developing initiatives to increase opportunities for indigenous businesses to succeed and grow. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, PSPC has awarded 38 contracts to 30 self-identified indigenous businesses, collectively worth over \$126 million. As minister, I am committed to increasing opportunities for indigenous businesses from coast to coast to coast.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, despite years of work by my community and years of promises from the Liberal government, gay men and trans women are still banned from donating blood in Canada. This unscientific ban serves only to promote homophobia and transphobia, and only contributes to blood shortages. Canadian Blood Services has now said it will finally be submitting a recommendation to the Minister of Health this week to lift the ban.

Will the minister commit today to act quickly when he gets this recommendation, and to order lifting the ban immediately?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for raising this issue.

Points of Order

I can tell him that we are waiting with great hope for the submission from Canadian Blood Services, as well as from Héma-Québec. I can assure him that when this comes, we will work quickly on it.

* * *

TOURISM

Mr. Kevin Vuong (Spadina—Fort York, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance.

My community of Spadina—Fort York is home to some of the most renowned tourist attractions, from the CN Tower, to Toronto Island, to the Distillery District and its Christmas market. Spadina—Fort York is also home to West Queen West, which Vogue magazine named the world's second-coolest neighbourhood.

These attractions bring in millions of tourism dollars annually, and many of our small businesses rely on that traffic. Sadly, however, some have been forced to close due to the pandemic. Would the minister update the House on what the government is doing to support small business and the recovery of tourism?

• (1510)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me outline just a few of the supports that the government has put in place for entrepreneurs and people in the tourism sector: \$100 million to help Destination Canada market us around the world and in our own country, \$200 million to support festivals and events, \$200 million to support small festivals and large festivals, \$500 million for the tourism relief fund and \$1 billion in 2021.

If the other side of the House would like to deliver a Christmas present to the tourism sector, they could vote for Bill C-2 and see \$7.4 billion put into our economy.

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[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have two points of order that I can do at the same time.

I sincerely thank and congratulate everyone who works on facilitating the debates here and ensuring that the message gets across. Unfortunately, we are experiencing problems with the interpretation on a regular basis, almost every day.

I know that this is no one's fault, but it is a nuisance for francophones in particular, since there are more often issues with the French interpretation. It is difficult for francophones to follow the debate if they are unfortunately not able to hear the interpretation.

I urge you and the technical team, which has done an amazing job, especially over the past two years with COVID-19 restrictions, to address this specific issue. It has been going on for far too long.

As for my second point of order, earlier, the member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon asked a question and the Minister of Public Safety responded.

[English]

We all need to recognize that a minister speaks on behalf of the government. However, in this specific case, we were talking about agriculture, we were talking about farmers and we were talking about 2,000 farming families that were directly involved in this issue. The Minister of Agriculture was ready to answer. We hope that the next time we address this specific issue the actual Minister of Agriculture will address it and will answer clearly our member who is concerned with the issue in British Columbia.

[Translation]

The Speaker: With respect to the first point, I am well aware of this. The table officers are working very hard on the interpretation and will continue their efforts to ensure that everyone has access to simultaneous interpretation. We take this situation very seriously, and the hon. member is absolutely right, we are working hard.

With respect to the second point, I am not clear whether it was a comment or a point of order. It is up to the government, not the Chair, to determine who answers the questions. I cannot make that decision for the government.

[English]

The hon. member for North Island—Powell River.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Speaker, before I ask for unanimous consent to move my motion, I hope you will remind members of the House that we no longer follow colonial practices and that indigenous communities certainly do not belong to Canada.

I believe that if you seek it, Mr. Speaker, I think you will find unanimous consent for the following motion: That, given that the cost of the pandemic recovery should not fall on the shoulders of Canada's poor and vulnerable, that the payment of pandemic benefits, including the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada recovery benefit, occurred in extraordinary circumstances, the House call on the government to: (a) ensure that pandemic benefits will not be counted as income to determine eligibility for normal income support programs like the guaranteed income supplement and the Canada child benefit; (b) guarantee that the onus to deliver any solution to reverse the clawback of income-tested benefits for those who accessed income support benefits falls to government and will not be dependent on Canadians in financial distress navigating an application, and (c) recover payments under the Canada emergency wage subsidy made to companies that posted substantial profits, especially those that paid dividends to shareholders or bonuses to executives.

The Speaker: All those opposed to the hon. member moving the motion will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

● (1515)

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Marc-Aurèle-Fortin on a point of order.

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, you reminded members that the dress code applies whether we are in the House in person or virtually.

Is there a way to ensure that members all follow the same rules, regardless of physical location?

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member. The rules are clear. Men must wear a jacket and tie if they wish to speak, or a jacket if they are in the House. There are no rules for women.

The rules are the same whether we are in the House in person or virtually.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[*English*]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2) and in accordance with the enhanced transparency requirements set out in the amended policy on tabling of treaties in Parliament, I am pleased to notify the House of Commons of the government's intent to initiate negotiations for a Canada-United Kingdom free trade agreement. The Government of Canada intends to commence negotiations by holding a first round of negotiations with the United Kingdom no earlier than 90 days from the date of this notice.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the Veterans Ombudsman Annual Report, 2020-21.

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Terry Duguid (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1) I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association respecting its participation at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association United Kingdom Virtual Forum on Climate Change, March 22 to 24.

Routine Proceedings

RIGHT TO VOTE AT 16 ACT

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-210, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (voting age).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce the right to vote at 16 act, which would amend the Canada Elections Act and lower the voting age to 16.

This legislation is about giving young people a voice at a time when our government faces some of the most consequential decisions in our country's history and on no issue is this more true than that of climate change, the impacts of which today's young people will inherit. This legislation is also about strengthening our democracy, which we can see around the world is fragile.

We should all be concerned that voter turnout in Canada continues to be lowest among the youngest voters and this bill seeks to improve that by forming voting habits while young people are still in school. This bill is also about recognizing the rights of young people to participate in democracy.

I want to dedicate the bill to the courageous young people who are currently taking the government to court on this very issue and to my daughter, who is celebrating her 17th birthday today. I wish Ella a happy birthday.

Finally, I want to recognize others in this place who have tabled similar bills over the years. I thank the member for Victoria for seconding the bill. Lowering the voting age is not a new idea, but an idea whose time has come. I hope it will find majority support in the House.

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

The Speaker: I would remind hon. members that concise is a word they should remember.

● (1520)

CANADA LABOUR CODE

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-211, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (bereavement leave).

He said: Mr. Speaker, there is a Yiddish proverb that says, "Everything ends in weeping." I will not say it in Yiddish.

I want to thank the member for Bay of Quinte for seconding the bill. This private member's bill is like Bill C-307 from the last Parliament. It would introduce six weeks of leave for parents who are weeping for the children they lost. It would also introduce five days of leave for miscarriages, three paid days and two unpaid.

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

*Routine Proceedings***PETITIONS**

HONG KONG

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have a number of petitions to present in the House today, and I appreciate the opportunity.

The first petition, and I know these are greatly anticipated by my colleagues, especially the Minister of Justice, who will want to listen carefully to this one, because it pertains to people from Hong Kong who are seeking to come to Canada. They are concerned about a criminal conviction that is not, by any standards, a real criminal conviction, which is that they have been persecuted as a result of being involved in democratic activism and protests that are not a criminal offence in Canada. They are concerned that if they were convicted of offences that are unrelated to the national security law but are still related to pro-democracy activism, they will be barred from entry to Canada.

The petitioners call on the government to take appropriate steps to create mechanisms whereby people who have been involved in a democracy movement and have been convicted on trumped-up charges in Hong Kong would still be able to make applications to Canada. I know the petition will have the support of many members.

TAXATION

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition is with respect to the carbon tax and the GST.

The petitioners are concerned that the government's carbon tax system results in double taxation, a tax on a tax. They want to see the government eliminate the GST on federal carbon tax levies and additional costs, the newly announced standards charged to Canadians.

HUMAN ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the third petition I am tabling is with respect to organ harvesting and trafficking. We have Bill S-223, which the Senate has now adopted unanimously. It is the third time the Senate has unanimously passed a bill on organ harvesting and trafficking and has sent it to us in the House. Hopefully this Parliament will be the one that gets it done.

The petitioners want to see the government make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad and receive an organ taken without consent.

FALUN GONG

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition highlights the human rights situation of Falun Gong practitioners.

The petitioners call on the government to apply Magnitsky-style sanctions to those involved in these gross violations of human rights. They mention a number of specific individuals who have been involved in that persecution. They also want to see the government refuse immigration or visitor visas to those who are involved in persecuting Falun Gong practitioners.

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition highlights concerns about Bill C-7 from the last Parliament.

The petitioners note this bill raised significant concerns from the disability community about how this would really push people toward death instead of giving them options for life. They called on the House to reject this approach of allowing mental illness to be an adoption for assisted death and to protect Canadians struggling with mental health challenges by facilitating treatment and recovery, not death.

HAZARAS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition highlights the human rights situation of the Hazara community in Afghanistan.

The petitioners are very concerned about an ongoing series of human rights abuses the Hazaras have experienced for centuries. Of course, this has become all that much more acute with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

The petitioners want to see the government formally recognize the 1891 to 1893 ethnic cleansing perpetuated against the Hazaras as a genocide and to designate September 25 as Hazara genocide memorial day. They are also supportive of Bill C-287 from the last Parliament, aimed at ensuring all development assistance is contributed to peace and security of all people in all regions.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition I am tabling highlights the Uighur genocide, a very important topic again, because the House has recognized that Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims are subject to genocide. The government has not yet taken steps and there are various measures that people are calling on to respond to that genocide.

The petition highlights the genocide, forced abortion, forced organ harvesting, forced insertion of IUDs and other measures targeting Uighur women and the whole Uighur community.

The petitioners call on the government to formally recognize Uighurs in China have been, and are being, subject to genocide and to use the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, or the Magnitsky act, to sanction those responsible for these heinous crimes.

CONVERSION THERAPY

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition I am tabling highlights concerns about the definition used in the government's conversion therapy legislation.

The petitioners support efforts to ban conversion therapy. They want to see the government fix the definition to provide greater clarity in the law.

AFGHAN MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the final petition I am tabling today highlights the persecution of other minority communities in Afghanistan specifically. This petition focuses on the plight of the Sikh and Hindu minority in Afghanistan.

This follows six years of activism from the Conservative Party as well as other opposition parties, calling on the government to create a special program to help minorities that are vulnerable to persecution to be privately sponsored to come to Canada, as well as calling on the government to advocate for the human rights situation of minorities.

Sadly, following the Taliban takeover, circumstances have become considerably worse from an already challenging situation, and the government needs to do all it can to help Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Hazaras and other minorities in Afghanistan as well as the people of Afghanistan more broadly.

• (1525)

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is my honour to table, in both official languages, a petition from the citizens in Guelph, started by Bob Fanning. This petition is looking to enact transition legislation on the climate emergency.

PHARMACARE

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have a petition here from Canadians from British Columbia who point out that the costs of prescription medicines are excessive across the country and that, very widely across the country, those costs continue to rise. Many Canadians cannot afford to fill their prescriptions, so the petitioners ask the government to develop a comprehensive, pan-Canadian, single-payer universal pharmacare plan across Canada.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS AND SEARCH AND RESCUE PERSONNEL

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have one petition to table today, and it is to support volunteer firefighters, who account for 83% of Canada's total firefighting essential first responders. In honour of these incredible volunteer firefighters, the people of Beaver Creek, Cherry Creek and Port Alberni are calling on the Government of Canada to support the private member's bill, Bill C-201, and increase the tax exemption from \$3,000 to \$10,000 to help our essential volunteer firefighters and volunteer search and rescue people across the country.

Currently, the tax code of Canada allows volunteer firefighters and search and rescue volunteers to claim a \$3,000 tax credit if 200 hours of volunteer services were completed in a calendar year, which works out to about \$450 a year that we allow these volunteers to keep regardless of their own income and regardless of their regular jobs.

HUMAN ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to present my first petition in this Parliament.

The petitioners are very concerned over the practice of forced organ harvesting and people travelling abroad to regimes where peo-

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ple are not adequately protected from the practice of forced organ harvesting. There is currently a bill before the Senate, Bill S-223, and the petitioners are calling on all parties in the House to support legislation to amend the Criminal Code and the Immigration Act to ensure that Canadians are not going abroad and procuring organs that have been procured as a result of acts of intimidation or forced organ harvesting.

The petitioners are calling on the government to take action on this.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Madam Speaker, members from across Canada have signed this petition. It is based on the fact that we still have the gold digger clause, which disallows pensions to survivors of veterans who married after the age of 60. We know the National Council of Veteran Associations, the RCMP Veterans' Association and the Armed Forces Pensioners' Association of Canada have advocated for the elimination of this clause, and we also know that the Prime Minister's 2015 and 2017 mandate letters to his minister of veterans affairs directed the elimination of the "marriage after 60" clause.

I am hoping this will be dealt with.

* * *

• (1530)

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would ask that all questions be allowed to stand at this time, please.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Does the hon. member have the House's consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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[English]

CRIMINAL CODE

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will pick up where I left off on Bill C-5.

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This bill would accomplish important objectives by advancing a series of coordinating sentencing measures and policies in three broad areas. First, it would repeal mandatory minimum penalties for certain offences; second, it would increase the availability of conditional sentences without compromising public safety; and third, it would amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to require police and prosecutors to consider diverting cases of simple drug possession away from courts at the earliest point of contact. I will address each of these important amendments in turn.

[*Translation*]

With Bill C-5, we are proposing to repeal the mandatory minimum sentences for 14 Criminal Code offences, 13 related to firearms and one related to tobacco. We are also repealing the mandatory minimum sentences for all offences under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. These offences are associated with the overrepresentation of indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of other marginalized communities in our prison system.

[*English*]

These reforms will also repeal the three- and five-year mandatory minimum penalties for illegal possession of a restricted or prohibited firearm and the one-year mandatory minimum penalty for drug trafficking struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Our reasoning is simple. Sentences must be appropriate to the unique circumstances of the crime. All too often, a rigid approach to sentencing results in a grossly disproportionate outcome, particularly when the offence is broad in scope. It has been shown that mandatory minimums have not only failed to protect our communities, but also contributed to the overrepresentation of indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities in our prison system. That is especially true for drug- and firearm-related offences.

[*English*]

I want to pause here for a moment and let the numbers speak for themselves. Data from the Correctional Service of Canada from 2007-2017 reveals that 39% of Black people and 20% of indigenous people incarcerated in a federal institution between those years were there for offences carrying a mandatory minimum penalty. Further, during the same years, the proportion of indigenous offenders admitted to federal custody for an offence punishable by a mandatory minimum penalty almost doubled, from 14% to 26%. During this time frame, indigenous people also represented 40% of all federally incarcerated offenders admitted for a firearm-related offence.

Regrettably, the data does not get better when we look at the experience of Black Canadians and their interaction with the criminal justice system. From 2007-2017, nearly half, more specifically 43% of all federally incarcerated offenders convicted of importing or exporting a controlled substance or possessing controlled substances for exporting under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act were Black adults.

[*Translation*]

These statistics are a sad testament to policies that focus on incarceration and the increased use of mandatory minimum sentences. Some would have us believe that mandatory minimums are the only way to fight crime. That is simply not true.

Mandatory minimum sentences have been around for decades because the previous Conservative government brought in a whole host of new ones without taking into account what kind of impact they were actually having. We know that a more nuanced approach is needed, and that is exactly what our government is doing.

The data show who is in prison and why. If the mandatory minimum sentences are repealed, as provided for in Bill C-5, people can still be given tough sentences. However, the courts will be able to take into account the unique circumstances of each offence and determine the most appropriate sentence, rather than being limited by the mandatory minimums.

I know that many people are concerned about the rise in gun violence we are seeing now. As a Montrealer, I want to say that I understand them, but I also want to be very clear: When it comes to firearms, serious crimes will continue to receive serious penalties.

The repeal of mandatory minimum sentences for some does not mean that public safety will be compromised. Bill C-5 gives the courts the flexibility to consider alternatives for low-risk offenders. By repealing mandatory minimum sentences, we are reducing these individuals' risk of reoffending and building a safer society.

For example, let us look at the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in *R. v. Nur*, which struck down mandatory minimum sentences but upheld a sentence above the prescribed minimum.

That is why the repeal of mandatory minimums in the bill is expected to reduce the overall incarceration rate for indigenous and Black Canadians.

Repealing mandatory minimum sentences ensures that an individual convicted of an offence receives a sentence that is proportionate to their degree of responsibility and the seriousness of the offence, taking individual factors into account. These factors could include an indigenous offender's experience with intergenerational trauma or residential schools, or a Black offender's experience with systemic racism.

● (1535)

[*English*]

To this end, the government recognizes that restoring a sentencing court's ability to consider important sentencing principles is only one part of the equation. The other part is getting this important information before the sentencing court, so that it can account for all relative sentencing factors in imposing a fit sentence.

That is where program funding comes in. The government is providing \$49.3 million over five years to support the application of Gladue principles and the integration of Gladue reporting writing in the justice system. This is critical to help address systemic barriers for indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system by ensuring that the background and systemic factors that bring them into contact with the justice system are taken into account at sentencing. It is also critical to help inform reasonable alternatives to sentencing for indigenous accused.

What is more, the government is making investments of \$6.6 million per year over five years and \$1.6 million in ongoing funding in support of the implementation of impact of race and cultural assessments, or IRCAs, which will ensure that a sentencing court can consider the disadvantage and systemic factors that contribute to racialized Canadians' interactions with the criminal justice system.

The government is also investing \$21.5 million over five years to support access to legal information and advice for racialized Canadians. This would support organizations that provide free public legal education and information, as well as those that provide legal services and advice to racialized communities.

I want to be very clear about who we are targeting and not targeting with this bill. This bill is about low-risk offenders.

[*Translation*]

Bill C-5 does not repeal mandatory minimum sentences for the most serious firearms offences, which of course include offences that result in people being injured, offences committed with a restricted or prohibited weapon and offences involving gangs or organized crime.

We are determined to crack down on the major crimes that make our cities and communities less safe. Let me reiterate: Serious crimes will continue to have serious consequences.

[*English*]

In its platform, our government committed to continuing to combat gender-based violence and fight gun crime with measures we had previously introduced, such as lifetime background checks to prevent those with a history of abuse against their spouse or partner from obtaining a firearms licence; red flag laws that would allow immediate removal of firearms if a person is a threat to themselves or others, particularly to their spouse or partner; increased maximum penalties for firearms trafficking and smuggling from 10 to 14 years of imprisonment; and enhancing the capacity of the RCMP and the CBSA to combat the illegal importation of firearms.

Bill C-5 would make our justice system more fair and more just for young, first-time or non-violent offenders by giving judges back the ability to impose a sentence that fits the crime and the offender. However, nothing in this bill would prevent a judge from imposing a serious sentence where it is warranted.

● (1540)

[*Translation*]

I would like to turn to the proposed changes in Bill C-5 regarding the elimination of restrictions on conditional sentences. Bill C-5

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would allow for greater use of conditional sentences so that courts can impose community-based sentences of less than two years when the offender does not pose a threat to public safety. Here too the evidence is clear. Incarceration, especially for low-risk offenders, is associated with higher rates of recidivism. That is not my opinion; that is a fact.

It has also been proven that alternatives to incarceration, such as sentences served in the community, can have a significant positive impact and improve the likelihood of successful reintegration into the community, which also helps reduce the risk of recidivism. Once again, that is a fact, not an opinion.

It has also been proven that recidivism rates among offenders who receive conditional sentences are relatively low. This is according to a large body of research showing that tackling the root causes of delinquency can produce long-term benefits for the individual, improve the efficiency of the justice system and protect society as a whole. It is not hard to see why. Community-based sentencing is an option that eliminates the negative effects of incarceration, thereby promoting offender rehabilitation.

[*English*]

Restrictions enacted by the previous Conservative government in 2007 in former Bill C-9, an act to amend the Criminal Code, and in 2012 by former Bill C-10, the safe streets and communities act, made it much harder for a sentencing court to impose these sentences. These reforms made conditional sentences unavailable for all offences punishable by maximum terms of imprisonment of 14 years or more, as well as for some offences prosecuted by indictment and punishable by a maximum of 10 years imprisonment. These laws tied the courts' hands. These amendments to the conditional sentencing regime, coupled with the increased use of mandatory minimum penalties, have produced negative impacts on the criminal justice system as a whole.

This bill would increase the availability of conditional sentence orders when offenders do not pose a risk to public safety and are facing terms of imprisonment that are under two years or less, and where imposing such a sentence would be consistent with the purpose and principles of sentencing. CSOs would be available for all offences that do not carry a minimum mandatory penalty, including those repealed by this bill, with certain exceptions. Conditional sentences of imprisonment would not be available for the serious offences of advocating genocide, torture, attempted murder and any terrorism or criminal organization offences that are prosecuted by way of indictment and for which the maximum term of imprisonment is 10 years or more.

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I will turn to the other important amendments being advanced in the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act shortly. Before I do, let me speak to the positive impacts that can be expected by repealing MMPs and making conditional sentences of imprisonment more widely available.

[*Translation*]

First of all, as I have already mentioned, we can expect an overall reduction in incarceration rates, particularly as they relate to the overrepresentation of indigenous people, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities in federal correctional institutions.

Reducing the number of mandatory minimum sentences should also help our courts. In cases involving mandatory minimum sentences, the evidence demonstrates that trials take longer to complete, accused persons are less likely to plead guilty and there is a stark increase in successful charter challenges before Canadian courts.

● (1545)

[*English*]

This all causes delays in the criminal justice system, and we have to deal with them. The bill would improve that situation.

This brings me to the last set of important reforms proposed in Bill C-5. For the first time, we would enact a declaration of principles in the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. It is intended to guide police and prosecutors in the exercise of their discretion to divert simple possession of drugs away from the criminal justice system at an early stage.

At the outset, I would like to thank the member for Beaches—East York for his private member's bill in the last Parliament and his leadership in this area. We agree that these changes to treat addiction as a health issue would improve the state of criminal justice in Canada and may well help save lives during the opioid crisis. These principles are consistent with and informed by the large body of research indicating that criminal sanctions imposed for simple possession of drugs can increase the stigma associated with drug use and are not consistent with established public health evidence.

[*Translation*]

These reforms reinforce the government's ongoing commitment to addressing the opioid crisis and recognize that substance use is a health issue, not a crime. Accordingly, it requires evidence-based interventions to address its causes rather than its effects, with measures such as education, treatment, detox, rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Police forces and Crown prosecutors will be required to consider alternatives to laying or pursuing criminal charges for individuals who are found in simple possession of controlled substances. Possible actions will include doing nothing, issuing a warning, or referring individuals to alternative measures, including treatment programs.

[*English*]

The reforms in this bill align with the August 2020 guideline of the director of public prosecutions. It tells prosecutors to pursue di-

version for simple drug possession cases and instead focus on prosecutions for the most serious drug cases that raise public safety concerns. The proposed amendments also align with the advice given by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. They also reflect calls to action made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, calls for justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and recent calls by the Parliamentary Black Caucus to address anti-Black racism and systemic bias and to make the criminal justice system more reflective of our diverse society.

Taken together, this package of reforms is an important reset of our approach to criminal justice. It would allow actors in the system, including police, the Crown and courts, to determine the right course of action for each individual before them. That could mean diversion to a treatment program for an offender who committed a crime in order to feed an addiction, or it could mean a long jail sentence for the drug trafficker who is profiting from selling those drugs to our most vulnerable citizens.

[*Translation*]

It is high time that Canada adopted an approach that works. Our justice system must be fair and equitable for indigenous people, Black Canadians and marginalized people, and it must be effective in punishing serious criminal offences and protecting our communities.

[*English*]

We have enough evidence now to know that reflexive and punitive justice policies do not work. They do not make our communities safer, they hurt people and the people they hurt most are indigenous, Black and marginalized Canadians.

Our government is set to turn the page on the failed policies of the past. Bill C-5 is an important step in that direction, and I urge all hon. members of the House to support its swift passage.

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened intently to the minister's speech, and there are a couple of things I would like to point out that are mischaracterizations of the bill. One is that it somehow deals with minor offences, and the other is that somehow these penalties are from an era when the Conservatives were in government, the Harper era the minister referred to.

With regard to robbery with a firearm and extortion with a firearm, those mandatory minimums came in under a Liberal government. Minimums for weapons trafficking, again, came in under a Liberal government. Using a firearm in the commission of an offence came into force in 1976 under the government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

What do those offences have in common? One, they were brought in under Liberal governments. Two, they are not minor offences; they are serious offences. When we talk about hurting people, I am concerned about protecting the communities that are being hit day in and day out with firearms offences. Putting people back out on the streets is not protecting those communities.

Will the minister comment on the fact that these mandatory minimums, one, deal with serious offences and, two, came in under previous Liberal governments?

• (1550)

Hon. David Lametti: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. critic for his work on the issue.

To answer the second question first, yes, there has been an accretion of minimum mandatory penalties over the years, and some of them came under previous Liberal governments. However, the real harm or hallmark of mandatory minimums as a central piece of criminal justice policy came in 2007 and 2012 under the Harper government.

Serious crimes will always be punished seriously. We are not talking about maximum penalties. Those are still going to be in place, and if someone does commit one of those offences and is proven to commit one of those offences, judges, given the circumstances, will sentence seriously.

I would also point out that for a number of the offences cited by the hon. member, such as action with a firearm, extortion, robbery, etc., the only weapons we are targeting in those pieces are long guns. If it is a prohibited or restricted weapon, like an assault weapon or a handgun, the mandatory minimum will stay in place.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his very interesting, very relevant, very focused speech. Clearly he knows his file and I congratulate him.

We know that the entire Bloc Québécois caucus will vote in favour of Bill C-5. If ever there were a free vote across the way, I am not even sure that all of the Liberals would vote in favour, but that is another story. I get the impression that our Conservative friends will vote against the bill.

I would like to play devil's advocate and take the point of view of those in favour of mandatory minimum sentences because they help standardize sentencing for similar crimes and therefore minimize disparities in sentencing based on gender, race and ethnic origin. What does my colleague think of that?

Hon. David Lametti: Madam Speaker, the numbers show exactly the opposite. Ever since minimum sentences were adopted in several areas, racialized, indigenous and Black Canadians have been overrepresented in the criminal justice system. We have to maintain some flexibility to allow judges to take into account individual circumstances precisely to address systemic racism and discrimination. It is very important.

[*English*]

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Madam Speaker, there is very little I can disagree with in the minis-

ter's speech, but when this bill was introduced in the previous Parliament as Bill C-22, we raised concerns. Given the scale of the opioid crisis and the scale of the over-incarceration of Black and indigenous Canadians, is there really enough in this bill or are we missing an opportunity?

The way this bill is drafted, which is very narrow, means that some topics we would like to discuss are outside its scope, such as expungement and recommendation 32 from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on restoring discretion to judges completely, not just for a limited number of offences, when it comes to mandatory minimums and conditional sentences.

My question for the minister is very specific. Will he consider referring this bill to committee before a vote at second reading so the committee will have the chance to add some of these things, which are beyond the scope of the bill as it is currently written?

Hon. David Lametti: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for the work he does on these issues, and I appreciate the sentiment behind the question.

I am never averse to any good-faith suggestion, whether procedural or substantive, to make a bill work better. In this case, he has raised a number of issues that are outside of my ministry, such as expungement, which falls under the Minister of Public Safety, and further measures that might be taken with respect to the opioid crisis, which would fall under the Minister of Health or the new Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

I will take that question under advisement and get back to him. It is a discussion I will leave to the House leaders as well.

• (1555)

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): Madam Speaker, this afternoon and even this morning, I heard several members of Parliament make reference to the fact that our criminal justice system disadvantages people who are indigenous, people of colour and people who are racially marginalized. I have read parts of the Criminal Code, although certainly not all of it, and I do not see where inside it there is any disadvantage to being indigenous, a person of colour or racially marginalized. However, I do recognize that the statistics seem to indicate that.

Can the minister tell the House how he comes to that conclusion and where the data is, other than the population?

Hon. David Lametti: Madam Speaker, the data is well documented, and with all due respect to the hon. member, I am going to trust the data over an opinion. Indigenous adults represent 5% of the general population but 30% of federally incarcerated inmates. That is six times higher than the rate of federal custody among non-indigenous adults. Black Canadians represent 3% of the population but 7% of federal offenders.

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I would also point out, with respect to the efficiency of the criminal justice system, that I often hear members on the other side complaining about the slowness of the criminal justice system in light of the Jordan ruling. Mandatory minimum penalties are one of the single biggest factors in clogging up the criminal justice system. They represent almost 50% of all charter appeals. People often win, and cases often result in extremely contentious litigation because people do not plea bargain anymore. By removing the mandatory minimum penalties for these kinds of offences, we will be able to increase the efficiency of the criminal justice system.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the minister spoke about the harm that mandatory minimums can do and the inability of sentencing to take into account additional factors. I would like the minister to speak about youths and ensuring there is a process in place to make sure young people do not get sucked into the cycle of crime because extenuating circumstances or factors are not considered, while also ensuring that serious harmful crimes are punished in a way that Canadians would expect.

Can the minister speak about the impacts of this legislation on youths?

Hon. David Lametti: Madam Speaker, I presume that by “youths” the member means young adults of 18, 19 and 20 at a particular point in their lives. What this legislation does is it allows a judge to take into account a variety of different factors such that a simple and stupid mistake does not end up putting someone in prison for four years.

An example I often use is a young person in the north who is 19 or 20 years old and has a job, has a significant other and is still going to school. He goes out on a Saturday night, has a few beers too many, comes back and, on a dare from a friend, takes out a long gun and puts a couple of bullets into the side of an empty building. There is no harm, no foul there, but let us say a neighbour hears it and calls the police, and he is arrested and gets a four-year mandatory minimum penalty. He loses his job, loses his education and loses his girlfriend, and when he gets out he has no friends, so he moves in with the people he did time with. In this case, all the sentence did was form a different kind of finishing school for a person we could have helped otherwise.

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in this House and speak to this bill. It is my first time rising to give a full speech since the last election. I was able to give a short statement a week and a half ago, but this is my first opportunity to give a full speech. I do want to say a big thanks to the people of Portage—Lisgar who voted for me, and those who did not vote for me, because I am here to represent all my constituents in Portage—Lisgar. This is the fifth time they have sent me to the House.

As I said in my previous statement, it was a difficult election, so I really appreciate the people who stood with me, those who worked and who volunteered. They volunteered in offices and with door knocking, and they donated. They were there for me.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my campaign team. I specifically want to mention Deb, Colleen and Neal. Then there

was Hank, Glenn and Brian, who were always there, and countless others who supported me. As I have a little time today, I also want to say a big thanks to my husband, Michael. This was his second election with me. When we met, he did not know that he would be entering the world of politics, but he is actually pretty good at door knocking. He is very efficient and he knows how to keep me moving through the doors. I appreciate his love and support as well.

Portage—Lisgar sent me to Ottawa to be their voice. It is so important that we, as MPs, stay connected to our riding and put our riding's needs, priorities, and ways of looking at our country and, indeed, of addressing problems that face our country first and foremost in all that we do. That has really been my endeavour since I was first elected back in 2008.

Madam Speaker, you would probably recall that as a new MP, and I think you were a fairly new MP at that time, too, I was able to bring forward a private member's bill to end what we believed was the wasteful and ineffective long gun registry. I have a funny story. Madam Speaker very much supported the long gun registry. We were on different sides of that issue.

In sending thank you letters to everyone in the chamber who supported my private member's bill, I accidentally sent one to Madam Speaker, who was understandably unhappy with me because she did not support it and did not want her constituents to think that she had. I am not sure if she recalls that. I see that she does, and I do as well. Hopefully she has forgiven me for that faux pas back then.

I did appreciate the support I got from people in the chamber. The interesting thing I learned during that entire endeavour was that members of Parliament sometimes say one thing in their riding and then something very different in the House of Commons. Madam Speaker was not one of those. She was consistent in her riding and in Ottawa. She supported the long gun registry.

However, there were MPs from the NDP side, and even a few from the Liberal side, who told their constituents they supported law-abiding Canadians and the ability of farmers, duck hunters, rural Canadians, indigenous Canadians and others to legally have firearms and not have to register them, but then they came to Ottawa and voted completely differently. They were what some would call two-faced in how they presented themselves in their riding and how they voted.

That was an interesting first lesson for me. The other thing I learned working on ending the long gun registry was how valuable stakeholders are in developing legislation. When I am talking about issues around crime, guns and how to combat crime, gun crime specifically, frontline police officers were some of the best resources for me. Certainly I talked the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters a lot. I talked to the Shooting Federation of Canada. I talked to countless men and women who were involved in hunting and who used firearms on their farms.

I have to say, when I talked to frontline officers and asked them, again as a new MP, if we were to end the long gun registry, would we hurt the work they were trying to do as police officers. They overwhelmingly told me, “No, the long gun registry does not help us”.

● (1600)

What they were having problems with, they told me, were criminals, gangsters and drug dealers on the street victimizing people, luring people into gang activity and using guns in the commission of a crime. They said they needed us, as the Conservative government, to get tough on those individuals. Needless to say, my private member's bill did not pass. It was defeated, but it really brought the issue to the forefront.

In 2011, we had an election and a number of the Liberal MPs who had been inconsistent in terms of where they stood on the long-gun registry lost their ridings and the Conservative Party won a majority government. We were then able, through a government bill, to end the long-gun registry and enact what we believed as a government was the best way to combat gun crime.

All of us in the House know that gun crime in Canada is a problem. Thankfully, we do not have the same degree of gun violence that the U.S. has, but the gun violence we are seeing in Canada is alarming, and it is only growing. It was something that we, as a Conservative government, recognized was a problem that had to be addressed.

The Conservative approach to gun crime was to, first of all, not spend time, energy, resources and police time targeting law-abiding Canadians. These are Canadians who legally own firearms, have licences to own their firearms and have gone through safety courses. We have very strong laws, and so we should, around the transport of firearms, background checks, storing firearms and using firearms.

Conservatives believe in that kind of regime. We believe that we should have strong legislation around who owns firearms and how those firearms are used. Conservatives supported that, but we did not believe we should be using all of our resources, political resources and the finances of the country to target law-abiding Canadians. Why would we? They are following the law. They are not using their firearms to commit crimes.

I remember when I was doing the work on this, an interesting statistic was, and I have said this before in the chamber, if someone has a licence to own a firearm, that person is 50% less likely to ever commit a crime with a gun. That statistic was valid back in 2009-10, and I would say it probably still is today. Those of us here who do not have a licence to own a firearm are actually 50% more

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likely to commit a crime with a gun. It is only logical that law-abiding Canadians trying to follow the rules and want to own firearms for the right reasons are going to keep following the law. Conservatives said not to focus on those people, not make life more difficult for those people, but make sure they follow the law and keep the rules strong.

If we look at criminals and criminal activity going on primarily in our major cities back in 2011, gun crime was on the rise in places such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, and even in places like Edmonton, Winnipeg and some of the smaller cities. The Conservative focus was to ensure that people who commit crimes with guns were put in jail.

Over the years, I see more and more that there is hope for many people who find themselves involved in criminal activity. Not all of them are horrible people for whom there is no hope. There is hope for people to change.

Once someone walks into a store with a gun, puts it against the head of somebody and says, “Give me all your money, or I'm going to shoot”, public safety then becomes a priority. The minister referred to somebody who had been drinking too much and did something they regretted. We need to help those people before they get to the point of committing these kinds of crimes. Once they have committed the crime, they need help, and many times the most help they are going to get is in a federal penitentiary. They will actually get more help if they get two years plus than they would in a provincial facility.

● (1605)

Let us help them before they get involved in a life of crime. At least, that is what the Conservatives believe. We proposed some great measures in this last election. Our leader and our party presented some really good, solid and practical solutions to helping people with addictions and mental health issues.

Helping people before they get involved in crime is really the way to do it. However, once they have committed a crime, and I will say it once again, protecting the public should become the government's top priority. That was the Conservatives' top priority. Let us not focus on law-abiding gun owners; let us focus on criminals.

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I would now like to focus on the different approach taken by the Liberals since 2015 to combat gun violence. As the Conservatives, we had our approach, and when the Liberals were elected, they had their approach. Their approach is to get out the big hammer, come down hard on farmers and duck hunters, and throw the book at them because they are easy to go after.

I know not every Liberal in the House should be painted with the same brush, but it would appear the Liberal government wants to do the easy thing, which is a lot of great virtue signalling, but does not accomplish anything. Therefore, they go after what some would say is the low-hanging fruit, the law-abiding Canadians. That is who the Liberals go after.

Then they have no problem being hard and very severe. Once the hammer comes down, somehow they do not care about how people feel or the stress law-abiding Canadians are being put under when they are made out to be criminals. Somehow compassion, common sense, justice and fairness are not words found in the vocabulary of the Liberal government when it talks about what it is going to do to law-abiding Canadians who own firearms.

The minute the government had the chance, it called an election. Then, when it got to this Parliament, the first thing it wanted to do was pass a bill to make life easier for the people who commit armed robbery with a gun and say it will help those people who are marginalized. However, people who are minorities are probably victimized even more by gun crime, so saying that it will help marginalized Canadians and reduce gun crime is insanity.

I want to go to my graph to talk about the evidence. This covers the reporting period from 2004 to 2020. It is entitled, "Shootings & Firearm Discharges in the City of Toronto". I will not go through all of the years, because I do not have enough time, but I will say this. In 2014, we had a Conservative majority government with Conservative legislation and a Conservative approach to combatting gun crimes, and shootings and firearm discharges by year were at an all-time low of 177, although that sounds like a lot. At the start of 2016, all the way to 2020, it was as follows: in 2016, 407; in 2017, 392; in 2018, 427; in 2019, 492; and, in 2020, a whopping 462. The numbers have skyrocketed.

I will now turn to the number of persons killed and injured, the instances where peoples' lives have been impacted. Innocent people and children have been killed and injured, not while they were off hunting with grandpa or killing some rodents on the farm. In cities in our country, children and teenagers have been and are being killed by people who are committing crimes with illegal guns, which have, often times, been smuggled in and sold illegally, so I want to talk about the number of people who were killed and injured per year.

● (1610)

In 2012, there were 114 deaths and injuries. That is sad. In 2013, there were 119. In 2014, there were 76. We start to see the trend go down. By 2015, there were 125. It starts going up and then my graph is cut off. In 2017, there were 148. We have seen the numbers go up consistently under the Liberal government. The point of this is that the Liberal approach to combatting gun crime is not working. It is very disappointing to see that the Liberals are continuing the same pattern they started.

The bill that we are debating today is Bill C-5. It is basically a reintroduction of the previous bill, but it really does the same harm and damage. I think there could be some agreement and work we could do to help people struggling with addictions and mental health, but this approach is so backward. It just feels like what the Liberals do is always backward. When the minister said that if someone commits a crime with a long gun then there will not be mandatory minimum sentences; he was somehow trying to comfort Canadians. I think that is what I heard him say.

No, if a person commits a crime with a long gun, small gun, short gun, handgun or any gun, public safety and justice should be paramount in the government's policy and that person should go to jail. That is a bottom-line principle that the Conservatives believe. The Liberals somehow think that they can kind of twist it around, virtue signal here and soften it there. It is very hard to understand their logic.

Bill C-5 reduces mandatory minimum sentences for a number of drug offences. I am sure we will have a chance to talk about that, but the ones that I am concerned about are to do with gun violence in Canada and its massive increase.

A lot of what the Liberals are reducing in taking away of mandatory minimum sentences have to do with people literally committing crimes with guns, such as robbery. These crimes are just so serious. I do not think any of us can imagine getting held up. Imagine if a person is working in a store or at a local gas station and someone comes in with a gun and asks for all the money or they will shoot, and then the firearm is discharged.

People who commit these kinds of crimes are a danger to society for whatever reason. They may have a mental health issue. They may have an addiction. They need treatment for that, but the protection of the public should come before the treatment of the criminal. That is what Conservatives believe.

I want to tell colleagues what frontline officers are saying. I am going right to an individual who is a frontline officer dealing every day with very serious crimes. She said this:

“Criminals using illicit firearms in the commission of an offence is now a common occurrence. The violence I see is unprecedented. I see it first-hand. I often feel like I am working in a war zone with no end in sight. Recently I was mandated to be certified in tactical trauma care to help save the lives of gunshot victims in the critical minutes following a shooting until we can make the scene safe for paramedics. As a police officer, it is incredibly frustrating to see the revolving door of criminals in and out of jail. Violent offenders out on bail or receiving conditional sentences for the violent crimes they committed. Not to mention continuously breaching their conditions and being arrested again and again. How do I protect victims? Repealing mandatory minimum such as Firearms offences, Discharging a Firearm with Intent, Robbery with a firearm and Extortion with a firearm are incredibly serious offences that put the public at serious risk. Offenders need to stay in custody where they should receive meaningful rehabilitation. I am sickened to hear and sincerely hope that Bill C-5 will not proceed any further in the best interest, safety and well-being of Canadians.”

I respect the work that our police officers do. Let us listen to our frontline officers. Let us definitely help the people who need help, but when they cross the line and commit violent crimes, we have to protect Canadians first and foremost.

• (1615)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I heard on a number of occasions the member talk about the paramount need for public safety after somebody commits a crime and I could not agree more with her. It is absolutely imperative that the number one objective is to make sure that the public is the top priority in terms of what we are looking at.

The problem is that Conservatives do not consider the fact that the proper rehabilitation and reintegration into society of a convicted individual is part of that public safety. This goes to the crux of this issue with Conservatives. Corrections to them is “lock 'em up and throw away the key”, but on the other side of the House—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, they are even saying hear, hear!

On the other side of the House, we believe that rehabilitation and reintegration into society is very important for our overall societal perspective. Would the member not agree that rehabilitation and reintegration into society is part of that public safety?

• (1620)

Hon. Candice Bergen: Madam Speaker, before I became a member of Parliament, I and my family members volunteered in Stony Mountain penitentiary for many years. It was a federal maximum security penitentiary at the time and we worked with violent offenders, lifers, murderers, people who had done very serious crimes.

I did that because I do believe in redemption and I do believe that people can change. I do believe that there is hope for people to change and Conservatives believe that. What Conservatives do not believe is that we have to exchange one for the other. I have been talking with frontline officers and have been told that one of the

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problems is individuals who maybe need some help get two years less a day. They are put into a provincial system that has fewer resources and it is probably more damaging to them.

Let us do the right thing. What is amazing is that when we do the right thing, the right result happens. Let us protect—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Madam Speaker, to follow up on what my colleague was saying about violence and the police, does she think that passing Bill C-5 could jeopardize public safety in any way?

[*English*]

Hon. Candice Bergen: Madam Speaker, I think we can do the right thing and get the right result. There should be a mandatory minimum sentence if people commit a violent crime with a gun. While they are in prison, I do not believe we should just treat them like animals and throw away the key. We need to help individuals who are in prison and help them become functioning members of society, including being integrated back into society.

To answer my hon. colleague's question, I am concerned. When I hear the stories from my colleagues and people I know who are police officers, literally they are not exaggerating when they say that they feel they are in a war zone. Guns are everywhere right now and they are illegal guns. They are being smuggled in and that is one of the other problems with this legislation. It is reducing mandatory minimums for people who are smuggling guns in and selling them. This is sending a really serious negative message to our police officers, that we are not ready to tackle this problem. I have concerns regarding the safety and security of frontline officers.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to come back to compassion and health. I will start by saying that I have heard a lot of talk in the House about building homes and that the construction industry has already been stretched beyond its capacity. I anticipate that we will hear more of it as we try to fill the housing supply gaps and more injuries will come for sure.

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Due to the shortage of doctors, many construction workers are in pain and cannot access care. We might have all seen this week Vicky Waldon of the Construction Industry Rehabilitation Plan tell us that this opioid crisis is hitting them hard in the construction industry. Research states that 83% of construction industry workers have experienced some form of moderate to severe mental health illness, 90% experienced early childhood trauma and 70% have undiagnosed PTSD.

Do the Conservatives accept that the tradespeople need compassion when it comes to managing their pain and potential addiction and that addiction should be placed squarely in public health and out of the criminal justice system?

Hon. Candice Bergen: Madam Speaker, there are some sectors that we think would not have mental health challenges, PTSD or drug addiction, but I think what my colleague is saying is that in every sector in our country there are issues around drugs and addiction, and we need to help them and we need to be there with good, sound policy.

However, I will maintain that we have to take a whole-of-government approach to addiction, and ensure that public safety is paramount, so I do not think we can say that if someone has an addiction it does not really matter what they do, and compassion for the addicted person will lead the way. We have to at the same time have compassion for the victim, we also have to ensure that justice is served and we have to ensure that public safety is protected. Is that sometimes a hard balance? It possibly is, but that is why we are in government and in Parliament, to find these solutions and to end up doing the right thing for Canadians.

• (1625)

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague opposite and I had the opportunity to connect at the airport, and I congratulate her on her fifth election to this House.

She mentioned in her remarks during her introduction of a private member's bill in a previous Parliament the importance of listening to stakeholders. My understanding is that this bill before the House right now has the endorsement of multiple police associations across the country. For me it comes down to judicial independence. We have heard examples in this House; we had one from the Minister of Justice himself about a particular case. The member mentioned a particular instance of armed robbery. Every instance could be different. I have a legal background. There were always nuances; there were mitigating and aggravating factors about each case.

Why does she think she is best placed to be able to balance those decisions versus a judge? I ask, because that is really what this is about; it is about allowing judicial independence to make the decision that is most appropriate on the basis of the facts before the judge in a courtroom.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Madam Speaker, I will quickly say I do not believe that, and I would like to see where there have been police associations endorsing this bill. I have seen police associations, including the RCMP, talk about some of the other Liberal approaches to firearms very critically, saying they would like to see Liberals use evidence-based measures to ensure public safety, and to find ways to stem the smuggling of firearms into Canada. I know

the Vancouver police chief, who also heads up the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, is not thrilled with much of the Liberals' approach to gun violence.

I think the challenge here is that we have seen judges previously, and it was not just under Conservatives, it was under Liberal governments, would sometimes nuance so quickly that violent offenders were out on the streets. It is up to us, here in the House of Commons, to create laws that protect the public from violent offenders who are using guns, especially with gun violence increasing. Do members know what signal this sends right now? The signal it sends across the country at this point in time, that the Liberals are reducing sentencing, is very disturbing.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, congratulations to the member for Portage—Lisgar for her re-election.

I wanted to note that in Bill C-5, of the 73 mandatory minimum penalties, only 13 are repealed in full, 20 in full or in part and only 10 of the 28 that have been ruled unconstitutional are part of the bill. At a time when we know that sentencing judges would still be required to impose a sentence that is proportional to the degree of responsibility and seriousness of the offence and at a time when we know that the TRC call to action 32 has called for departing from mandatory minimums and that mandatory minimums contribute to systemic racism, could the member comment on her opposition to this particular bill?

Hon. Candice Bergen: Madam Speaker, I congratulate my colleague, as well, on being elected and being here in the House of Commons.

As Conservatives, if we want to see a reduction in the overrepresentation of minorities, including indigenous Canadians and Black Canadians, in our criminal justice system and in our jails, we believe the best approach is to help people before they find themselves in a life of crime, whether it is by helping with addictions and mental health, or with support in communities. Those are the areas where support needs to be happening. Our concern is that—

• (1630)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Resuming debate, the hon. parliamentary secretary to the government House leader.

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Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, before I provide my comments on Bill C-5, I want to take a moment to congratulate the Bombers on their performance yesterday in the Grey Cup. I, along with hundreds of thousands of Canadians from coast to coast to coast, take in the annual festivities of the Grey Cup, which is a great Canadian tradition, and we are very proud in Winnipeg of how the Bombers performed. The coaching staff, players and administration all did an outstanding job, winning the Grey Cup for the second consecutive year, although there was a one-year pause in the CFL. I am very proud of the team, and I know I speak on behalf of all residents of Manitoba and Bomber fans in all regions of our country.

Having said that, I am often reminded there is a great divide between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party when it comes to justice-related issues. I approach it with a bit of a different bias, having had an opportunity in different capacities to get a sense of young people's interactions with the law.

I was the chair of the Keewatin youth justice committee for a number of years in my local community and was also a justice critic. I had the good fortune of being an MLA for a number of years and had the opportunity to be a justice critic in the province of Manitoba.

I look at Bill C-5 as positive legislation that would make a difference. Back when I was the chair of the justice committee a gentleman by the name of Gary Kowalski, who was a colleague of mine and represented The Maples, opened my eyes to what justice committees were all about.

There are youth in all our communities who at times do things maybe they should not. They will fall on the other side of the law. In many of these cases, especially in the early nineties, often 16-year-olds or 14-year-olds would go to local stores, pick up something and decide not to pay for it. They were often first-time offenders. As opposed to having local police enforcement, in particular the Winnipeg police department, lay charges against those youths, they were provided the alternative of going before a youth justice committee. If the youths agreed to participate and fulfill the disposition of whatever the youth justice committee came up with, they would not be registered as having committed that criminal offence.

I was amazed when I found out about the group and wanted to know how we could get more people engaged and what sort of level of interest there would be. When I advertised it in the community of Inkster, which was the provincial area I represented at the time, no shortage of people were interested in being these quasi-judicial probation officers, because that is in fact what we were. We were honorary quasi-judicial probation officers.

At the first meeting, we probably had 40-plus residents. The average justice committee was under 20 people, so we had to decide who would be the most interested in moving forward. Some of the personalities on the committee were fairly hard: There were harsh individuals there. When we started to see young people come before the committee, even the harshest of them all had a much better appreciation and understanding. We would see youths who stole

something from a store, and as a direct result they would have to do X, Y and Z and go through the courts.

One can talk about individual youths. One could also talk about the costs to society, such as court costs and so forth. I would argue that the cases we were receiving, at least in the first number of years, were best dealt with by our justice committee.

● (1635)

The committee was dealing with youth who were committing offences in the community. I believe that really had an impact. I remember a librarian at one of our local schools who got to know some of the youth. The dispositions that were typically given were for community service. Whenever we met with a 14-year-old or someone under the age of 18, and that was all of the time, we also had a parent come forward. It was amazing when we saw that 14-year-old without peer pressure, without his or her friends around, sitting in a chair with a guardian who was usually a mom or a dad. That young person would kind of shrink into the chair, head down, often breaking into tears. We got that sense of remorse. There was an appreciation of the terms of the crime committed and the circumstances around it.

We all knew what impact peer pressure can have on a young mind when going into a store with a friend. It does not make it right, but hopefully we could be a little more sympathetic as a community. I would argue that because we took that community approach, we said to our young people coming before us that we genuinely cared for them, and that they had fallen on the wrong side but we wanted to help them get on the right side. I know first-hand that some of the youth who went through our program ultimately ended up working in jobs and made reference to the positive impact of the dispositions given to them. There is an alternative.

When the Minister of Justice was talking, he said that the bill was all about low-risk offenders. However, listening to some of the rhetoric coming from the Conservative benches one would think that a cold-blooded murderer was going to be let go. The Conservatives seem to have this tough-on-crime mentality, whether it is better or healthier for our communities or not. I saw that in opposition and I am seeing it again today. The Conservative Party needs to better understand that people who become incarcerated, generally speaking, are going to be released someday. It is important that our justice system is there to protect the public. The issues of public safety and rehabilitation need to be factored in. The closer we get to doing everything right, the safer our communities will be.

For political purposes, for the three-inch headlines, Conservatives have a mentality that gives the impression that as a caucus they are tough on crime, that there is a consequence for crime, and that criminals are going to go to jail for a long time. That is the impression the Conservatives want to give. What is worse, they then try to give false impressions. Their first speaker, the critic, talked about how the Liberals were saying that if people committed certain crimes they would not have to go to jail: there would be no problem with it. The legislation would pass and people would not have to go to jail.

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• (1640)

One of the fundamental differences between Liberals and the Conservative Party is that we have more faith in our judicial system and the independence of our judges. When judges have been appointed at the federal and provincial levels, especially in the last six years, we have been very diligent in ensuring that judicial appointments were done in a way that Canadians could be very proud of. We are saying that when a judge is appointed, that judge is in a far better position than any one of us to give a disposition in the best interests of the communities we represent and of the individual who committed a crime. That is what this legislation is really about, from my perspective.

Judges are well equipped to deal with low-risk offenders and the circumstances surrounding the offences, but if we listen to the Conservative rhetoric on the other side, one gets the impression that Liberals want these people to be set free: that we want to let them go. We are saying we have confidence in our judges. We are saying that we need to recognize that systemic racism is real, it is there and we need to do something.

The Conservative Party talks about truth and reconciliation and how important it is to the party. As a government over the last number of years, we have passed laws whether on language, children, the statutory holiday or more, all dealing with the calls to action. I keep my little book with me in the chamber that talks about the importance of truth and reconciliation. In fact, it has the 94 calls to action in it.

The member from the Green Party referred to call to action 32. I will read it. It states:

We call upon the federal government to amend the Criminal Code to allow trial judges, upon giving reasons, to depart from mandatory minimum sentences and restrictions on the use of conditional sentences.

The government has enacted a number of the calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We are acting upon somewhere around 75% to 80% of the ones we are responsible for or have shared responsibility for. It is in progress. It is not like we can click our heels and they are all done. We recognize that. That is the reason we feel it is important to get this bill passed.

Many government members would love to see the bill passed sooner as opposed to later, and we understand the Conservatives will have some concerns with regard to the legislation. I would challenge members of the Conservative Party in particular, as an opposition party, to talk to me about truth and reconciliation and call to action 32, and to tell us how and why they believe this legislation goes against it. I suggest the bill supports call to action 32. That is one of the reasons it is getting the support it is receiving, at least from the government and members of the Liberal caucus. When we talk about truth and reconciliation and establishing that relationship, which I know is so important to the Prime Minister of Canada, this is the type of legislation that will make a difference.

• (1645)

If members were listening to the Minister of Justice, he gave us some percentages, and so did the parliamentary secretary. I made a quick note. The parliamentary secretary said that the Black community makes up 3% of Canada's population, yet when we look at federal institutions, it makes up 7%. When we look at indigenous com-

munities across Canada, which make up around 5% of the overall population of our country, they make up close to 30% of federal inmates. That is 30%, based on 5% of the population.

How can we not look at this call for action and react to it? Some of my colleagues across the way said that some of these minimum sentences were put in during other administrations, the odd one even referencing Liberal administrations. It is important to recognize that we have been in government for just over six years. How time goes by.

An hon. member: It feels like 20 years.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I am inclined to say that it is hopefully for a lot longer yet.

Let us take a look at some of the things we have been able to accomplish. On the special relationship with indigenous people, that is something I am very proud of. I know we can do a lot better.

Driving around the north end of Winnipeg, the area I represent, people can see a lot of signs saying that every child matters. We see that. I saw that particularly when I was going door to door during the last election, but it does not even have to be during the election; we still see it.

Inside this chamber, I have made reference to the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and the hundreds who have gone missing. It is well over 1,000. There are women and girls who are still going missing today. I made reference to a red dress on Jarvis. Whenever I go downtown and take Jarvis, there is that reminder, and there are also the ribbons that are tied to the bridge.

Our communities are aware that we need to take action. That is what this bill does. It provides hope for people who want to see the government deal with issues like systemic racism, move forward with reconciliation and call for action number 32, and make our communities safe, especially when it is the low-risk offenders we are talking about. Contrary to the impression the official opposition is trying to give, our judges would be empowered if we passed this legislation.

If members believe in our judicial system, our judicial independence and the importance of keeping it independent, then let us understand that legislation of this nature is a win-win-win for all the stakeholders out there.

If we cut back on the rhetoric, look at the facts and take a better appreciation of what has been taking place over the last number of years, members will find that this legislation would make a difference. I would ask my colleagues to rethink the judicial sentencing options that are there for our judges and our communities. I am all about making our communities safer, and if I did not believe this legislation would make them safer, I would not be standing here in support of it.

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• (1650)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Before we go to questions and comments, 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 Brantford—Brant, The Economy; the hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Housing; and the hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened to all of the hon. member's remarks, and most of them were about someone who steals something from a store. They did not involve armed robbery or serious firearms offences. However, that is what this bill is about. We are seeing the Liberals trying to soft-sell what is in the actual legislation.

The penalties were put in place by previous Liberal governments for robbery with a firearm, extortion with a firearm and weapons trafficking. Does the member think that individuals who are doing those things in his riding should go to jail or not?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I believe that if a person commits a crime, there needs to be a consequence for that crime. However, the difference between the member and myself is that I have more faith in the judicial system than he does, and in having a judge with the discretionary authority to ensure that both the safety of the community and the individual who has committed the crime are taken into consideration. I have more faith in that judge than I do in mandatory minimum sentences for the simple reason that, quite often, it can also be used as a shortcut and prevent other sorts of potential plea bargaining. There are many reasons, but I did not have enough time to provide the type of detail I would have liked to on the many reasons it makes sense.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech. Inmates, indigenous or not, can cost the system up to \$100,000 a year. Does my colleague agree that the money the government will save by abolishing mandatory minimum penalties should be reinvested in youth awareness campaigns, rehabilitation, education or reintegration, for example?

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, it is very important for us to recognize when we think of judicial matters that Ottawa is working, in particular, with provincial and territorial jurisdictions and indigenous leaders so that we can actually prevent crimes from taking place in the first place, and that means by investing. However, I do not think we should look at it in terms of saving money here and investing over there. Wherever we can come up with the investments that are necessary in order to prevent crimes from happening, we should encourage that investment, but it also means that we need to get all levels of government working together. If we are successful at doing that, I believe at the end of the day that we will have safer communities.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague and congratulate him on the Grey Cup win in his community.

However, by removing mandatory minimums instead of decriminalizing possession of small amounts of drugs being used for personal use, the Liberal government is taking half measures. It is not actually protecting people who are suffering from a medical condition. As we all know, addiction is a medical issue and not a criminal issue, but the government is still making those people take part in the criminal system. I wonder why it is always a halfway step.

I wonder if the member would agree that what we really need to do is decriminalize possession of small amounts of drugs and ensure a safe supply on our streets, because that is actually how we are going to save lives.

• (1655)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, one of the positive things within the legislation is that, if passed, it would give our police forces yet another tool in their tool belt to deal with this issue. It might not necessarily cater to all the needs the NDP would like to see, but at this point I would encourage the member to at least sit down with the appropriate minister. The issues she has raised could also be dealt with through Public Safety and the Department of Health. There may be a more holistic approach with respect to what she is suggesting, but we are providing additional tools for our law enforcement officers, which is a strong and positive thing within this legislation.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Winnipeg North, particularly for his comments about the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. That was an amazing game last night.

We have talked a lot about what is in the legislation, but not about what is not in it. The member across the way for Portage—Lisgar talked about firearms and the long-gun registry. This legislation would not repeal aggravated sexual assault with a firearm, attempted murder with a firearm, manslaughter with a firearm, extortion with a firearm, robbery with a firearm that is restricted or prohibited, or the discharge of a firearm with intent. The legislation addresses public safety.

Maybe the hon. member could talk about how this legislation would maintain safety while at the same time keeping in place legislation that protects against the use of firearms in crimes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, that is a good question. One thing I have learned relatively quickly in the House is that the Conservatives grossly exaggerate on the rhetoric file at times, so if we want accurate information we should not necessarily buy into what they say or the propaganda emails they send out.

This is good, solid legislation. Canadians should feel comfortable knowing that we want our communities to be safe and we recognize the importance of positive judicial reform and legislation.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened to the member's speech and it was almost entirely a gross mischaracterization of the Conservative position, with zero relevance or comment on the bill itself. Therefore, I have two questions: Did he read the bill, and did he listen to the opposition critic when he made his speech?

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Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I am familiar with the bill and I listened to the opposition speak to the legislation, unfortunately or fortunately, depending on what side of the House one is on. I also listened to the minister who introduced the bill. I would hope the member who posed the question listened to what the minister had to say, because no doubt it would have alleviated a lot of the concerns being brought forward by the Conservative Party.

Sometimes I find the Conservatives have scripted talking points and it does not really matter what the minister has to say, because the facts go out the window and they stick to the script.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have a question for the member on the other side after listening to him. I note that he spoke ad lib on this. I am not sure he has read the bill. I am not sure he has spoken to anybody in the criminal justice system or anyone who might be affected by this legislation. Therefore, I would encourage him to take a look at and comment in this House on the concept of broken windows.

As members know, years ago several successful American cities had to revert back to rather stringent legislation in order to stop crimes from escalating, because they were not dealt with appropriately enough at certain stages. That caused a very successful outcome, where they had less crime in the city. Would he like to comment on the eventual outcome and what he would see at the end of this legislation?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, if the member wants to get a really good understanding of what the legislation is proposing, he can familiarize himself with it, as I have done. He can also listen to what the Minister of Justice has said on the legislation, as I have done. He can even listen to the Conservative critic on the legislation, who no doubt has had some role in the creation of the speaking notes provided to the Conservatives.

• (1700)

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.): Madam Speaker, when I think about the community I have been elected to represent, I think about Community Justice Initiatives, which uses restorative justice to create a just society. I think about Youth in Conflict with the Law, which is working with young people to ensure they have better interactions and better outcomes. I think about Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council.

I would like to hear from the member as to what people are doing in Winnipeg to ensure we are building leaders rather than creating criminals.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, restorative justice is a wonderful opportunity for victims meet with the individuals who victimized them. If we can get the two sides working together, we often will get a very positive outcome.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I rise to speak to Bill C-5, an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

In the six years that I have been a member of Parliament, I have never seen a greater disconnect between how a bill has been advertised and what is in the substance of the bill. The Liberals today have been doing a good job of patting themselves on the back, touting Bill C-5 as landmark progressive legislation. The bill has been

advertised as legislation that addresses systemic racism. The Liberals claim that it would help address Black, indigenous and marginalized groups that are caught up in Canada's criminal justice system. They claim that the bill would help persons who are suffering from drug addictions to stay out of jail and get the help they need. If, in fact, the substance of the bill did what the Liberals have advertised the bill to be, it would be a supportable bill and it would be a laudable bill. The problem is that the bill would do none of those things. Simply put, Bill C-5 is not as advertised.

Let us unpack that for a moment and in that regard, let us look at the issue and the claim that the bill supposedly would help persons suffering from addictions.

I could not agree more that it is important to help persons suffering from addictions to get treatment, to rehabilitate so they can become happy and contributing members of society again. I certainly agree that when it comes to minor possession, it is not appropriate in most circumstances to prosecute. Indeed, it historically has been rare for persons found with minor possession of drugs to be prosecuted solely on that minor possession.

Today, those prosecutions do not happen because of a directive issued by the Public Prosecution Service of Canada, which provides that in cases of minor possession, prosecutions shall not proceed except where there are public safety concerns. This bill would not change that. It is true that the bill would codify that in law, and that is fine. It is probably the only reasonable aspect of the bill. However, it would not change the status quo, namely that today in Canada persons are not charged and are not prosecuted for minor possession. The question then becomes this. What exactly would the bill do for persons who are suffering from issues of addictions?

When one actually reads the text of the bill, one would be surprised that the Liberal solution to helping persons suffering with addictions is to help criminals who prey on persons suffering from addictions. The bill would roll back sentences for some very serious drug offences. It would roll back mandatory sentencing for drug trafficking and it would roll back sentencing for the serious crime of importing and exporting drugs.

• (1705)

Any reasonable person can distinguish, very clearly, between drug trafficking and importing and exporting drugs compared to that of a vulnerable person who might be suffering from mental health issues or other issues who happens to be caught with a small amount of drugs. There is a world of difference, and yet for such marginalized people, the bill would do nothing to help them, but it would help drug dealers and drug pushers. Remarkably, one of the offences that is rolled back in the bill is with respect to producers, manufacturers of schedule 1 drugs, including hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin as well as fentanyl and crystal meth.

Government Orders

We have an opioid crisis in Canada today. Every day, approximately 20 Canadians lose their lives to an opioid overdose. It has increased by 88% since the onset of COVID, 7,000 Canadians a year. The Liberal government's solution is to roll back mandatory sentencing for the very people who are putting this poison on our streets, endangering lives and killing 20 Canadians a day.

If I were someone who was suffering with a drug addiction issue and that was a solution the Liberal government had to help me, I would tell it that I did not need its help, that I did not want its help because it would be completely counterproductive. It is completely the opposite of what the government claims the bill is about. When it comes to supporting persons who are suffering from drug addictions, simply put, Bill C-5 is not as advertised.

What about the claim that the bill would tackle systemic racism, that it would really help Black, indigenous and marginalized groups of Canadians? I know the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice spent some time on that topic this morning. There is absolutely nothing concrete in the bill to tackle systemic racism. There is absolutely nothing in the bill for Black, indigenous and other marginalized groups of Canadians.

What there is in this bill is the rolling back of some very serious firearms offences. What kinds of offences? We are talking about robbery with a firearm, extortion with a firearm, weapons trafficking, discharging a firearm with the intent to injure, using a firearm in the commission of a crime and many other serious offences that the bill would roll back. How does that help address systemic racism? How does that help Black, indigenous and other marginalized Canadians? The answer is that it would do nothing.

• (1710)

It is outrageous, beyond shameful, that the government has used vulnerable Canadians, marginalized Canadians, as cover for the real objective of the bill, which is to pursue a Liberal ideological agenda of going soft on criminals. It is also ironic because we heard, during the very recent federal election campaign, a lot of rhetoric from the Liberals about how firearms posed a significant threat to public safety and the security of our communities. Then, within three and a half weeks of the House reconvening following the election, what does the government do? It introduces legislation not to get tough on firearms offences, but to help people who use firearms and put the lives of people at risk to stay out of jail and in the community.

It is hardly a surprise given the record of the government. In the last Parliament, my former Conservative colleague, Bob Saroya, introduced a private member's bill, Bill C-238. That bill would have increased penalties for persons who were convicted of knowingly being in possession of a smuggled firearm. Why was that an important bill? If the government were serious about tackling firearms crime, it would recognize that 80% of firearms offences in Canada are committed with a smuggled firearm. It would logically follow that a bill like Bill C-238 would be welcome, but instead, one by one, the Liberals, with the help of the NDP, voted to defeat that bill.

It shows that when it comes to actually coming up with solutions to tackle firearms crime, the government is just simply AWOL. However, when it comes to firearms, I have to give it some credit, perhaps backhanded credit, for being consistent. The Liberals have been consistently tough on firearms, tough on law-abiding firearms

owners. That is when they really get tough. However, when it comes to people who commit crimes with firearms, it is a whole different story. The Liberals in that case are more interested in giving criminals a free pass. It really highlights what a misplaced set of priorities the government has.

We hear a lot of rhetoric over there about evidence-based decision-making. Going after law-abiding firearms owners while at the same time rolling back sentences for people who commit crimes with firearms is ideological decision-making, not evidence-based decision-making.

Again, when it comes to helping marginalized and disadvantaged Canadians, Bill C-5 is simply not as advertised.

• (1715)

The Minister of Justice, in the press release he issued announcing the introduction of Bill C-5, was noted as saying that serious criminals should face serious punishment and be separated from our communities. I could not agree more with the Minister of Justice with respect to his comment. However, consistent with a bill that is not as advertised, when one opens up Bill C-5, one learns that it does exactly the opposite of what the minister claims to be concerned about. He says that we should keep serious criminals out of our communities, but the bill drastically opens up conditional sentencing orders for serious crimes, including kidnapping, kidnapping a minor, human trafficking, arson for a fraudulent purpose and aggravated assault with a weapon. What this bill means is that those convicted of these serious offences may not have to spend a single day in jail. Instead, they will have an opportunity to serve their sentence in the community and maybe even next door to their victim.

The minister talks about the fact that serious criminals should face serious punishment, but does he not consider arsonists, kidnapers and persons convicted of sexual assault to be serious criminals? I challenge him to say that, because I think any reasonable person would say that such criminals are serious criminals. They pose a threat to public safety and they should be doing time behind bars, not out on the streets.

Despite all the ways the government has tried to sell this bill, what is completely lacking is any support for marginalized Canadians. This bill does nothing to provide training, counselling or other supports. We on this side of the House strongly believe in reducing recidivism. It was, in fact, a Conservative member of Parliament, the hon. member for Tobique—Mactaquac, who introduced Bill C-228 in the last Parliament, a framework to reduce recidivism. Bill C-5 offers nothing in that regard.

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In closing, Bill C-5 puts the rights of criminals first and the rights of victims last. It endangers public safety while doing nothing to help marginalized and vulnerable Canadians. If the Liberals were honest and advertised this bill truthfully, they would advertise it as the soft-on-crime, do-no-time bill. This bill needs to be defeated.

• (1720)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to put some facts on the table. With respect to addressing the issues of systemic racism, in 2018 and 2019 I had the opportunity to go to many communities across Canada, and one thing that came up over and over again as we developed the national anti-racism strategy was the impact of mandatory minimum penalties on racialized communities, particularly indigenous and Black communities. If we look at many of the court decisions that have resulted in this bill, we see court after court striking down many of the mandatory minimum penalty provisions in the Criminal Code.

That is why we are here today. We are responding to the facts of systemic racism within the criminal justice system. It is a very important step in ensuring that everyone is able to get justice, particularly those who are racialized and who have been impacted disproportionately by the overall criminal justice system.

I ask my friend opposite to comment on that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary spoke about court decisions. Well, perhaps he should read the Hills decision from the Alberta Court of Appeal. That decision upheld as constitutional subsection 244.2(3) on the reckless discharge of a firearm. Notwithstanding that it has been upheld by the Alberta Court of Appeal, the federal government saw fit to include it among the mandatory sentences that it is repealing.

This is not about judicial decisions. It is about an ideological agenda from an ideological government that simply believes criminals ought to be given a free pass.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the speech by my neighbour from St. Albert—Edmonton was very interesting to me. I will agree with him on many points he made, particularly around the fact that the Liberals have not done enough to stop the illegal importation of guns into this country. However, I did not hear a lot of solution building from his comments today, nor proposals on what would be done if the Conservatives were to form government. When I look back, I see that the Harper government made cuts to the CBSA of almost \$150 million. The member stood up today and talked about what the Conservatives would do to protect people from the illegal importation of guns, but when they were in government, they did not do anything. In fact, they made the situation much worse.

How can we trust that they would not make things worse if they were in government again?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, I did put forward a recommendation. It was that we would support legislation like the bill introduced by my former colleague Bob Saroya, Bill C-238, to increase penalties for gun smugglers and those who are in knowing possession of smuggled firearms. Also, we have advocated for in-

creasing funding for the CBSA. It is vital, and it was in our platform.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if Bill C-5 is implemented as currently written and applied evenly regardless of race, how would this help marginalized felons? Who do the lower penalties for illicit drug possession and crimes involving firearms really benefit?

• (1725)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that it would help dangerous criminals. It would help drug pushers and drug dealers who are killing Canadians every single day.

By contrast, the hon. member for Tobique—Mactaquac introduced legislation that would help marginalized persons, with work on a framework to reduce recidivism and pilot projects to look at best practices to establish a Canadian strategy to reduce recidivism. That is a concrete measure that can make a difference in the lives of vulnerable persons who are caught up in the criminal justice system, unlike this soft-on-crime Liberal bill.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bécancour—Nicolet—Saurel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to my colleague's speech and did not hear him talk much about border controls to stop illegal firearms, such as machine guns and handguns, from being brought across the border. There are some vulnerable areas that the government chooses not to control, for example, in some communities near Montreal.

Fewer guns and drugs could be a solution.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is absolutely right. There are significant problems along the Canada-U.S. border, problems that have been well identified and that the government has failed to solve.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the member kept saying this bill is not as advertised, when during his speech, he kept saying that we would be rolling back sentencing. He used the term "roll back" so much that I almost thought his speech was a Walmart commercial.

Can the member explain to us why his speech was not as advertised? In reality, this is not about rolling back sentencing. It is about giving more power to judges to make decisions. The member would lead people to believe that we are actually reducing sentencing when that is not the case.

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Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, is the hon. member serious? Has he read the bill? It is quite obvious that this legislation does roll back sentencing. It eliminates a whole series of firearm and drug offences, which I detailed. Perhaps he should read the bill.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, given the Supreme Court's recent decision in the last few years regarding the timing of trials, the Jordan decision, and considering information that we know, there is a high proportion of repeat offenders in Canada's criminal justice system.

Could the member comment on the potential issue that this legislation could lead to our justice system being overwhelmed by repeat offenders, basically exacerbating the situation in our trial system, which is quite overwhelmed?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, it goes without saying that when we let dangerous offenders out to do house arrest rather than putting them behind bars where they belong, there is a greater risk they are going to commit other offences. This will contribute to perpetuating the backlog in the courts. I think the member is absolutely right and raises a valid point.

• (1730)

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague talked about the opioid crisis: the tragedy of hundreds of people dying every week and every month across this country, especially in British Columbia and in my riding. He talked about the need for a solution-based attitude toward this. If we listen to the experts, the Vancouver Police Department, the City of Vancouver and the Province of British Columbia, they are all calling for the decriminalization of small amounts and safe supply, which would keep people alive, get them into the right programs and get rid of the property crime that is associated with addictions.

Would the member agree with that, as the Conservative who ran in my riding during the election did?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Speaker, in the last election, the Conservatives put forward a comprehensive plan to deal with mental health and addictions, including investing in drug treatment centres so that persons who are suffering from drug addictions can get the help they need and can be rehabilitated and re-enter society.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Oakville North—Burlington. It is a great opportunity to rise today to speak to this very important piece of legislation, a piece of legislation that the Conservatives would have us believe is making the sky fall.

In reality, Bill C-5 would remove mandatory minimum sentencing requirements for only 14 of the 67 offences that currently have them. Of course, we have not heard that figure from the other side yet today. Those 14 that would be adjusted are based on data, facts and science, and an understanding that we trust our judges to make sentencing decisions and use their discretion in certain circumstances. I say there are only 14 because Conservatives would have us believe we are completely eliminating mandatory minimum sentencing, when in fact this would have an effect on 14 of those related to firearms and six with respect to drug offences.

I have said this before in questions and comments, and I will say it again now. This really comes down to a fundamental difference between Liberals and Conservatives. I understand and know this from the experiences I have had in the riding that I come from. In the immediate area of Kingston, we used to have seven penitentiaries before the Conservatives closed Kingston Penitentiary. Now we have six. We have a great understanding of and community support for the role prisons can play in the rehabilitative process.

The basic premises, the ideas and the philosophies could not be any more starkly different between Conservatives and Liberals than they are on this particular issue. When it comes to Conservatives, the answer to people who break the law is very simple. They lock them up and throw away the key. That is the end of it. On this side of the House, we believe that there is a role for government to play in making sure individuals can be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society, so they can be productive members of that society.

I brought this up after the speech by the member for Portage—Lisgar. She took great exception, saying that Conservatives believe wholeheartedly in the idea of making sure that criminals, or potential criminals in this case, do not get to the place of breaking the law before we have to start dealing with them.

I would ask her to explain to me why Conservatives spent more money on building megaprisons during their time in power than they did on housing. That should say something. Conservatives built megaprisons at various locations, all the while claiming that they really wanted to ensure people had the opportunity to become rehabilitated. Then why were they focusing so much on building more capacity to house individuals than they were on such a fundamental need as housing? That is what this really comes down to.

It is a philosophical difference of opinion on the role corrections plays in our society. We know exactly where the Conservatives stand on this. I know it is frustrating and hard to hear this, which is why some of them have been heckling me, but it is the truth. Sometimes the truth does hurt. It is the reality of the situation. There is nothing wrong with having that philosophical ideal, but they need to stand by it and say that it is what they believe in. All of their actions have only ever been to support that.

Again, I know this from my time in municipal politics in Kingston. There was a great program that helped rehabilitate individuals in prisons, and these programs were the prison farms. We had those throughout the country. However, the Conservatives came along and decided to get rid of them.

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• (1735)

This one is even better. The main rationale of the Conservatives for getting rid of the prison farms was that inmates were not becoming farmers once they were out of prison. The Conservatives were completely unable to realize the value of what inmates were receiving through these programs, which were able to rehabilitate people. There were stories of inmates who had been in and out of prison their whole lives and then got into the prison farming program, and it completely changed who they were. They would then get out of prison and, yes, they may not have decided to become farmers, but they were completely changed individuals in how they approached life.

The fact that Conservatives chose to get rid of the prison farm program was so offensive, not only to those who had been through the program, or the guards who had seen how effective it was, but also to the general community. We had people protesting in Kingston for five years in a row. Every Monday, there would be protests on Bath Road right in front of Collins Bay Institution, protesting what the previous Conservative government had done when it closed prison farms.

The protesters knew that those programs offered meaningful opportunity for people to become rehabilitated, which brings me back to my point about the philosophical differences between the Conservatives and the Liberals. It comes down to whether we believe we have an opportunity and, more importantly, an obligation to help rehabilitate people so they can become productive members of society or whether we just lock them up and throw away the key, which is exactly what the Conservatives would like to do.

I want to talk very briefly about one last point, and that is the issue around the percentages of people who are being incarcerated, which has been brought up a number of times today.

We have to agree that when Black people represent only 3% of people in our country but 7% of people in our prisons or, even more staggering, when indigenous people represent only 5% of people in our country but 30% of people in prisons, we have a really big problem with systemic racism, and we need to address that. We need to look for opportunities.

We need to empower people who have the ability to impact lives, such as judges, to have the ability to set people off on a different course, one that could be beneficial to their life experiences and influence who they ultimately become. That is what this bill is, in my opinion. This bill is about empowering individuals, specifically the judges, to whom we have given the authority to cast judgment on those who break the law. We need to give them the ability to make sure that, if there is an opportunity to change a life, they can actually do that.

This is something that has been brought up by previous speakers today. It was also a call to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report. As was indicated so eloquently by one of my NDP colleagues, this is something that has not had the impact Conservatives, and possibly Liberals back in the day, had intended when they brought mandatory minimum sentencing legislation in at the time. We have an opportunity now to correct that, fix it and to put ourselves on the right path in terms of genuinely looking for

ways to rehabilitate people so that they can be reintroduced into society and become productive members of that society.

• (1740)

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is always a pleasure to rise on behalf of the residents of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo. The hon. member for Kingston and the Islands said that the Conservatives essentially want to lock people up and throw away the key. I would respectfully depart from that analysis and say we are seeking sentences that promote a just sanction, which is right in the Criminal Code.

That was my first point. My second point is that, if the point of rehabilitation and empowerment is the one that is trying to be made, the rehabilitation and empowerment can come when we elect to prosecute someone summarily, in which there is no mandatory minimum, or by indictment.

At the end of the day, would the member support an amendment that would allow for exceptional circumstances so that a just sanction could be levied of imprisonment in a mandatory minimum, or where there is an exceptional circumstance, as we are hearing about so many times today?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to amendments, I will not comment right now in advance of the committee being able to do the work to study it. We have members on that committee who can study that and look into it. I think that is not just good practice, but probably the best way for me to proceed on this.

I understand the member was a former prosecutor. Does he not have faith in the judges, who he used to stand before, to make the decisions that affect the lives of the individuals he brought forward to be prosecuted? Does he not believe that those judges can actually make the decisions we would empower them to make?

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not know if my hon. colleague was here earlier, but the opposition House leader read statistics in her speech on gun violence. In fact, she tried to blame Liberals for an increase in violence. However, it is actually under the very legislation Conservatives enacted on mandatory minimums that we saw an increase in crime rates.

Could the member speak about—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Let us get the question done. Let us get the answer done. Then we will have another couple of questions and another couple of answers.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. In the House, one of the most important aspects is that we are being honest and not telling falsehoods. What the member is leaning toward in her question is completely false. The legislation was brought in by a Liberal government under former prime minister—

The Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the debate, but the member for Pickering—Uxbridge has the floor and is asking a question.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Mr. Speaker, I wear it with a badge of honour, but I do not know who upsets the opposition more, me or the member for Kingston and the Islands.

The Conservatives had failed policies when it came to the criminal justice system. Could the hon. member comment on those failures?

• (1745)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Speaker, I take great exception to the member for Foothills calling my colleague from Pickering—Uxbridge a liar. He would know that, although he may not have used those words, he certainly did call her so indirectly. What we cannot do directly, we cannot do indirectly.

I apologized earlier for doing the same thing. I am sure he will rise on a point of order after I am done talking to apologize to the member for Pickering—Uxbridge.

However, she hit the nail on the head. This is what I have been saying my entire speech, which is that Conservatives are not interested in actually rehabilitating people. They just want to lock people up and throw away the key. That is what their philosophy has always been when it comes to incarceration and Corrections Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on Saturday I was in Anjou where I joined many families in a march against gun violence in the wake of the recent death of young Hani Ouahdi, who was gunned down.

People were obviously very concerned about young people accessing guns, the flow of firearms and the fact that we have to do more to limit access to guns. People also talked a lot about the lack of community infrastructure and sports and cultural activities for young people and the fact that street gangs are recruiting them.

Crime is complex, contrary to what the Conservatives think. It cannot be attributed to just one thing. I would like my colleague to share his opinion since we obviously have to address this from every angle.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Speaker, this is exactly what the Conservatives will have people believe, like the member for Portage—Lisgar did earlier, that there is this big desire within the Conservative movement to help people before they get to the point of being incarcerated, to make them better. However, when the Conservatives were in government we saw them build megaprisons throughout the country. Why did the Conservatives not use some of that money to actually do some of the things that the member from the NDP has asked me about, such as investing in youth, investing in cultural hubs and places where people can actually be productive members of society?

Ms. Pam Damoff (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate you on assuming the chair. I think you are quite enjoying yourself there.

Bill C-5 is important legislation to provide greater flexibility to the criminal justice system and support appropriate and proportionate responses to crime. In doing so, the proposed changes would

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help to reduce the overall representation of indigenous peoples, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities in the criminal justice system, including by repealing mandatory minimum sentencing laws that have shown to disproportionately impact these groups. The proposed reforms represent an important step in the government's continuing efforts to make our criminal justice system more equitable, accessible and effective.

Of course, law reform is only one way that we can do this but it is an important way and I applaud the Minister of Justice for his leadership. Systemic racism and discrimination are real problems in the criminal justice system and the consequences of leaving these problems unaddressed are significant.

The Conservative Party's sentencing reforms have posed the unconstitutional use of mandatory minimum penalties of imprisonment and additional restrictions on the availability of conditional sentence orders. These changes have limited judges' ability to impose proportionate sentences and to meaningfully consider the background or systemic factors. Everyone in this place believes Canada has one of the best judicial systems in the world.

We trust that our judges are best placed to interpret and administer the law. However, what the previous Conservative government did, by passing the number of mandatory minimum sentencing laws that it did, was take away a judge's discretion. The Conservatives' opposition to this bill today only further illustrates the belief that politicians know better than judges when it comes to administering the law.

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

Ms. Pam Damoff: Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party is wrong, and it is really sad that the Conservatives would actually say “hear, hear” to the fact that politicians know more about it than judges do.

The Conservatives implemented these reforms to be “tough on crime”, but what they really did was mean-spirited, further marginalizing indigenous peoples and Black and racialized Canadians. Their tough-on-crime measures have led to the explosion of the indigenous and Black prison population with no evidence that these measures actually reduce crime. It is past time to end these discriminatory sentencing provisions. Despite what the opposition says, we are not getting rid of these sentences but rather giving back to judges the discretion in sentencing. Where warranted, judges may even impose greater sentences than the mandatory minimum would have prescribed.

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In 1999, indigenous peoples represented approximately 2% of the Canadian population but accounted for approximately 17% of admissions to provincial, territorial and federal custody. As of 2020, indigenous adults accounted for 5% of the Canadian population but represent 30% of federally incarcerated individuals, with indigenous women accounting for over 42% of all federally incarcerated women, with these numbers approaching 70% to 80% in some western provinces. Indigenous women are the fastest-growing prison population in Canada. They are now being transferred to Ontario because we are running out of room in women's prisons out west. I recently visited Grand Valley Institution for Women, where I met indigenous women who were separated from their families and communities. The solution is not to build more prisons but rather to prevent these women from entering the criminal justice system in the first place.

Black individuals represent 7.2% of the federally incarcerated population but only 3% of the Canadian population. We also know that Black people are also more likely to be admitted to federal custody for an offence punishable by a mandatory minimum sentence than other Canadians. In fact, 43% of all federally incarcerated offenders convicted of a drug offence punishable by mandatory minimum penalties were Black adults.

Thirty-nine per cent of Black people and 20% of indigenous peoples were federally incarcerated for offences carrying a mandatory minimum penalty. Repealing these penalties is expected to reduce the overall rates of incarceration of indigenous peoples and of Black Canadians.

Bill C-5's proposed reforms are informed by extensive consultations with a broad range of justice system stakeholders from across Canada. Prior to the introduction of the former Bill C-22, I held a round table with the Minister of Justice regarding mandatory minimum penalties and the impact on Black Canadians and indigenous peoples.

Organizations in my community, like the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton and Advancement of Women Halton, made it clear that mandatory minimum sentences do not act as a deterrent for crime and cause many Black and indigenous peoples to be incarcerated. These consultations made a difference in the creation of the legislation. The president of the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton, Andrew Tyrrell, let me know how important passing this bill would be for Black Canadians and was proud of his contribution.

● (1750)

The bill also responds to the calls for reform from various commissions and inquiries, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System.

In the 42nd Parliament, when I was vice-chair of the status of women committee, we tabled a report on indigenous women in the criminal justice system and called for the repeal of mandatory minimum sentences. Many indigenous women enter the criminal justice system because of minor drug offences that come with mandatory minimum sentences. I visited the Edmonton Institution for Women and met two indigenous women who were in prison for drug of-

fences that were subject to mandatory minimums. They had been living in poverty, and each had a partner who exerted coercive control that led them to crime. This bill would prevent indigenous women from being criminalized for poverty and abuse.

Now more than ever we need to implement the TRC's calls to action. We need to focus on restorative justice, affordable housing and social supports for indigenous women instead of criminalizing them. Bill C-5 is a step in that direction. The all-party Parliamentary Black Caucus, in its June 2020 statement, called for the review and repeal of mandatory minimums and the removal of limitations on conditional sentence orders.

The common theme in all these calls for reform is the recognition that the broad and indiscriminate use of mandatory minimums, and the Criminal Code's current restrictions on the use of conditional sentence orders, have had numerous negative impacts that have been disproportionately felt by indigenous peoples, Black Canadians and members of marginalized communities. They have also made our criminal justice system less effective and less efficient, which ultimately makes Canadians less safe.

I believe this bill would help to restore the public's confidence in the criminal justice system by providing much needed discretion to sentencing judges to impose sentences that respond to the particular circumstances of the offence and of the individual before the court. I want to highlight the story of my friend, Emily O'Brien. Emily was sent to federal prison after her partner coerced her to smuggle narcotics across the Canadian border. She was sentenced to Grand Valley Institution for Women on a mandatory minimum sentence. During her sentence, she noticed that prison did not prepare women for integrating back into society. Once she was released, she created her own business: a deluxe popcorn company called Comeback Snacks that not only makes delicious popcorn but has a mission to hire women who have been sentenced to prison so they will not re-enter the criminal justice system.

Emily's story is the exception to the rule. Most women who come out of the criminal justice system because of mandatory minimums come out worse. It should not be the sole responsibility of people such as Emily to tear down the stigma and provide women with opportunities after prison.

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I have talked a lot about mandatory minimum penalties, but the bill would also lift many of the restrictions on the availability of conditional sentence orders in cases in which offenders do not pose a risk to the public safety. This would allow them to serve their sentences in the community under strict conditions, such as house arrest or curfew, while still being able to benefit from employment, educational opportunities, family, community and health-related support systems. I think most Canadians would agree that conditional sentences are appropriate sentencing tools and should be available to judges for appropriate cases. I would expect that they would be used in less serious cases, and I am confident that judges could make appropriate assessments as to their use.

Lastly, the bill would require police and prosecutors to consider alternatives to criminal charges for simple possession of drugs, such as a warning or diversion to an addiction treatment program. These measures are consistent with the government's approach to treating substance use and the opioid epidemic in Canada as health issues rather than criminal justice issues. I believe the government is on the right track with this bill, and I urge Parliament to support its swift passage.

● (1755)

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while I appreciated my colleague's speech, I find it interesting that the one element she forgot to mention was that many of these mandatory minimum sentences the Liberals are taking away were actually implemented by former Prime Minister Chrétien. That was a Liberal government, not a Conservative movement.

I have a quick question on comments the member made. She said the government wants to focus on people who do not pose a risk to public safety or do not pose a risk to reoffend: low-risk offenders or less serious consequences.

Does my colleague really believe that robbery with a firearm, kidnapping, extortion with a firearm and firing a firearm with intent are offences with low risk?

Ms. Pam Damoff: Mr. Speaker, what I believe is that judges have the ability and knowledge to sentence criminals to jail and we need to give them the discretion to do that. We are not removing penalties. We are not removing penalties from these crimes. What we are doing is promoting the judge's discretion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her fine speech, in which she mentioned the low risk of recidivism.

Bill C-5 introduces the concept of diversion for simple possession of drugs, which we support. Does my colleague feel that this measure will be effective only if health care investments are made to help health care institutions and community organizations? They really do need resources to help those who are struggling with these addictions and mental health issues.

[*English*]

Ms. Pam Damoff: Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more with the hon. member. Around 60% of people who are arrested are intoxicated at the time of their arrest. We need to be doing more about mental health and addictions. Sadly, the majority of people who end

up in our prison system are either poor or subject to abuse, and have experienced intergenerational trauma or mental health issues and addiction. We need to be putting money into the system before people are in prison, while they are in prison and when they leave prison to ensure those addictions and mental health issues are dealt with.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, would the member agree with the NDP suggestion to bring this bill before committee before the vote at second reading? We could expand the bill and make it a solutions-based piece of legislation.

We want this bill to be something that would tackle problems such as decriminalization, and make sure that addictions are a health issue and not a criminal issue. We want to make sure there is a safe supply. We want to have the records expunged of all the people who have minor criminal records for cannabis possession.

These are things we really have to tackle, and this bill would have been the perfect place to do that. We can only do that if we bring this forward before the vote at second reading so we can expand this bill and make it really worthwhile.

● (1800)

Ms. Pam Damoff: Mr. Speaker, I think the committee will have ample opportunity to amend the bill. There is more than enough opportunity when it is at committee to make a number of these changes. The member mentioned pardon reform. That is something we have committed to in our platform. We were going to bring forward legislation on that. I think it requires a multipronged approach, and I look forward to the committee studying this bill and bringing forward amendments that are appropriate.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the President of the Treasury Board, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her excellent speech. I have a simple question for her.

Minimum sentences have been in place for more than a generation now, and in that time we have seen an increase in the use of guns and in the incarceration of Black and indigenous people. Is it time for something new? Should we try a new approach to really address the problem?

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[English]

Ms. Pam Damoff: Mr. Speaker, I commend my hon. colleague for the work he has done on this issue. I agree with him. It is definitely time that we started looking at things differently and stopped dictating, as politicians, what sentences should be for crimes. We believe that judges should have that discretion within a range set by Parliament.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the always-on-point member for Trois-Rivi eres.

I feel a sense of bewilderment today as I rise to speak to Bill C-5, an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. I have many questions and concerns.

As my party's status of women critic, and having observed an increase in cases of femicide and gender-based violence, I feel confused about the strange message the government is sending with this bill. I am going to broach the sensitive issue of mandatory minimum penalties by talking a little about my proud history working with community-based services.

I will then speak to the flaws in the bill and will conclude by talking about what I would like to see in terms of combatting violence and sending a strong message against hate and discrimination. I know that my colleague from Riviere-du-Nord has addressed the bill from a legal standpoint and that my colleague from Trois-Rivi eres, as a renowned ethicist, will certainly bring an ethical perspective into this debate.

I want to mention again that I worked in community-based services, more specifically for an organization focused on alternative justice and mediation. I truly believe in alternative and restorative justice, which is why I am in complete agreement with the Bloc Qu eb cois's traditional position. With respect to mandatory minimum sentences, my party is in favour of an approach to justice that fosters rehabilitation and crime reduction.

Considering that mandatory minimums have few benefits and introduce many problems, such as the overrepresentation of indigenous and Black communities in prisons, in addition to increasing system costs and failing to deter crime, the Bloc Qu eb cois supports the idea of abolishing certain mandatory minimum sentences. However, the problem is that the Bloc Qu eb cois believes this is a bad time to abolish mandatory minimums for firearms offences, because many Quebec and Canadian cities are seeing an influx of firearms, due in particular to the Liberal government's failure to implement border controls.

Several women's groups are very concerned about this issue and would like to see better gun control, because this can even impact femicides. Abolishing mandatory minimums without strong action by the federal government to counter the illegal importation of firearms at the border sends a contradictory message. My colleague, the member for Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matap edia, the public safety critic, has asked many questions about this.

Although abolishing mandatory minimum sentences for possession of firearms is something we can get behind, abolishing them

for certain gun crimes such as the discharge of a firearm with intent, robbery or extortion with a firearm, as proposed in this bill, seems inconsistent with the government's claim of maintaining mandatory minimums for certain categories of serious crime. We will need to take a serious look at this aspect of the bill, as I am sure committee members will do.

I want to point out that the Bloc Qu eb cois spoke in favour of introducing the principle of diversion for simple possession of drugs in the last election campaign and in debates on Bill C-236. Community groups that work with the homeless and do excellent work with street outreach workers reached out to me on this subject during the last election campaign.

We in the Bloc Qu eb cois want to point out that such a measure will only be effective and truly efficient if investments are made in health care to support health systems and community organizations. They need funding to support people with addiction and mental health problems. I was also reminded of this during the last election campaign. This does not happen by itself.

On that note, we in the Bloc want to point out that the Liberal government refuses to give an answer on the issue of funding health care to cover 35% of health care system costs, despite the unanimous call from Quebec and the provinces. Obviously, without these investments, it is difficult for community organizations to respond to the growing needs resulting from rising homelessness in municipalities, even back home in Granby.

The pandemic has not helped matters, but rather has exacerbated the problem. Once again, the Bloc Qu eb cois is speaking up for Quebec, where diversion is a principle that is fully recognized and integrated into many areas of the justice system. For instance, when it comes to children's rights, extrajudicial measures have been available to young offenders since the 1970s, thanks to Claude Castonguay's reform of the Youth Protection Act. Having worked at an organization that worked with that legislation and with young people, I was able to see the concrete impacts of alternative work, which leads young people to question their actions, to prevent them from ending up in the criminal justice system.

• (1805)

There is also the Programme de mesures de rechange pour les adultes en milieu autochtone, a program that makes options other than criminal prosecution available to individuals from indigenous communities.

There is also the Programme d'accompagnement justice et sant  mentale, which gives individuals who have committed a crime and are fit to stand trial a chance to get a reduced sentence or possibly even enter a diversion program, which is very good for them.

More recently, the Programme de mesures de rechange général pour adultes, which is currently being rolled out, gives adults charged with certain offences the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions and make amends for their crimes without going through the usual judicial process set out in the Criminal Code. The organization I worked with helped to implement the program, and I think it might be a success.

Lastly, there is the Court of Quebec's drug addiction treatment program, which allows for delayed sentencing so drug offenders can get clean through court-supervised treatment. It also facilitates close collaboration between the court and addiction resources to develop a treatment plan that includes crucial therapeutic, rehabilitation and reintegration components. The program is currently available only in Montreal and Puvirnituq. How can we expand it?

As the previous examples show, the principle of diversion is not new in Quebec's judicial ecosystem.

Quebec's Bill 32 is all about diversion as well. Minister LeBel's office pushed the government to focus on adopting Bill 32, which sought to improve the efficiency of the criminal justice system. The bill introduced the concept of adapting enforcement to give municipalities more leeway when it comes to ticketing marginalized individuals, such as people experiencing homelessness and those with mental health issues or addiction.

Quebec has already committed to diversion programs in several areas, including youth, indigenous affairs and petty crime, and it is currently exploring this avenue through Bill 32.

As the critic for status of women, I have to note that year after year, we see an overrepresentation of indigenous women in the prison system. People have been sharing statistics throughout this debate. My Liberal colleagues have cited some, but I want to reiterate that indigenous women accounted for 38% of women admitted to provincial and territorial sentenced custody, and for indigenous men, that figure was 26%.

In the federal correctional services, indigenous women accounted for 31% of female admissions to sentenced custody, while indigenous men accounted for 2%.

Are mandatory minimum sentences contributing to increasing the overrepresentation of Black or indigenous people in the prison system? By all indications, they are. What is more, as critic for status of women, I have unfortunately observed that indigenous women are disproportionately affected.

I would like to add that diversion is beneficial for individuals, because the stigma attached to drugs and the barriers that come with a criminal record are sometimes disproportionate to a simple possession offence, and this can lead to a lifetime of consequences.

In closing, as someone who worked in community-based services, I am sensitive to a number of considerations connected with this bill. One thing is certain: This bill should not absolve us, as parliamentarians, of any responsibility, especially given that firearms crimes are a major concern in light of recent events, in which innocent victims have been killed with firearms.

While we agree with the repeal of mandatory minimum sentences, we must not minimize gun crime or the importance of en-

suring the public's sense of safety and looking at better gun control measures. The Bloc Québécois is asking for this. It is high time that action was taken.

• (1810)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her speech. I found her ideas to be consistent with the NDP's progressive vision.

I took part in a march last Saturday in Montreal, with families wanting to condemn gun violence on the streets. Concerned parents have said that their children hear gunshots in the neighbourhood almost daily. A 20-year-old man died recently. Street gangs are recruiting children from elementary schools to act as lookouts and do other similar tasks.

No one brought up mandatory minimum sentences. I do not believe that is the solution to improve safety. I heard mostly about access to guns and the fact that the Liberal government is not doing enough at the borders to keep guns out. I also heard about the lack of community, cultural and sports infrastructure, and the fact that young people are being neglected.

We therefore need to act in several areas to be able to reassure people and keep our neighbourhoods safe. I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie for giving me the chance to elaborate on the subject and to reiterate that firearms and drugs are not just a justice system issue, but they are also becoming a public health issue.

This issue often involves people who have mental health problems or who are in need of a program or a different type of support. The community-based approach is essential. I mentioned it in my speech. I have a background in community-based services, and I talked about all manner of alternatives. I also talked about the importance of investing more in our health care system, with more money being directed to community organizations so that they can guide young people. That is important and essential.

Mandatory minimum sentences have not proven to be effective, even in the case of firearms. As my colleague mentioned, we have to address the actual problem. For example, the Bloc Québécois suggested the joint task force as a way of truly addressing the issue of border security and firearms. It is therefore important to look at this as broadly and as comprehensively as possible. Mandatory minimum sentences are not necessarily the solution.

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[English]

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member across the way for her years of community service to the benefit of her community. There is saying that when the only tool one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Mandatory minimum sentences look like a hammer looking for a nail.

Could she comment on the need for flexibility? I know she mentioned it in her speech, but communities are all different and judges within those communities know what is best to deal with the problems in those communities. This legislation would help them to do that.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question, which gives me the opportunity to address another aspect of the issue that I was unable to mention in my speech, and that is jurisdictional flexibility.

Quebec is already looking at several measures. We do need to keep in mind how important it is to have judges who are able to render decisions, but communities must also have some leeway. As I mentioned, Quebec is looking at these issues as part of its Bill 32, which aims to give municipalities more resources.

To answer the question, I would say yes, absolutely, but above all we must remember how important it is to respect jurisdictions. Quebec also has great initiatives to address the issue and help people out of situations like this. We must let Quebec do that by respecting its jurisdiction.

• (1815)

[English]

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to a lot of debate and presentations in the chamber today and no one really has mentioned the victims in all of this. I just heard my colleague from across talk about a hammer and a nail, but what about the victims? What about the victim of a grocery store robbery where someone used a firearm and gets a lesser sentence? That victim then has to walk down the street and see the assailant all the time? Should we not take a bit of that into consideration during this debate and talk about the people who have the crimes perpetrated against them? I would like to have my colleague's comments on that.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Speaker, as my party's status of women critic, I started my speech by making a specific reference to femicide.

The member asked about victims, and last week we commemorated the  cole Polytechnique massacre, but the problem is that there is no evidence that mandatory minimum penalties actually work. The Bloc Qu b cois believes that the only way to help victims is by taking gun control seriously, which our colleagues in the Liberal government have not yet done. I think further consideration of our proposals is necessary. For example, the Bloc Qu b cois proposed a very good idea for a joint task force.

Mr. St phane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her excellent speech.

She emphasized her previous professional experience in community-based services. As I was listening to her speech, I thought of my own previous experience as Quebec public safety minister. She said that Bill C-5 sends a somewhat contradictory message and then she also pointed out that minimum penalties do not guarantee that violence will be reduced.

It is easy for the Conservatives to staunchly support law and order when they are not the ones paying to build prisons, since the provinces and Quebec are responsible for paying the bill for these decisions.

What does my colleague think about that?

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Montarville for his question, which gives me a chance to remind the House that mandatory minimum sentences are not without cost.

There is indeed a cost to all this, and it has to be paid. He put it well when he said that a prison has a cost. It costs more money to detain people in the justice system than it does to support them in other ways. They could be reintegrated, take their place in society and contribute to it, and receive more support to leave that life once and for all. There is a cost to prison sentences.

In the case of a first offence, the person will cost a lot less if they are in a restorative or alternative justice program and get out of the system rather than going to jail.

Mr. Ren  Villemure (Trois-Rivi res, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the member from Kingston and the Islands, who said earlier that the debate was philosophical in nature. I would say that that is absolutely the case and that I am ready to participate in it since my background is in philosophy.

Bill C-5 amends the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

After spending 25 years as an ethicist, I simply cannot leave ethics at the door just because I have become a politician. People associate ethics with its notions of obligation and punishment, but I would suggest that being ethically minded requires that we be flexible in our thinking so we can try to imagine a more just future. Indeed, ethics is the search for what is just.

That is really what we have to do here as legislators. We need to know that being just is an elusive target. Doing what is just is not a given. We must nonetheless attempt, with what is being proposed in Bill C-5, to find what is just knowing that it may be changed by those who come after us. Any law, any bill has an ultimate goal. Ultimately, a law or bill is the means to an end, it is a means to an ideal that transcends it.

During my career, I had the chance to see two different sides of crime. I worked with the police force, but also with correctional institutions. I will start with the latter.

I was at the Bordeaux jail as an invited guest as part of a rehabilitation program called *Souverains anonymes*, which gives a voice to inmates on radio shows. My last meeting was last December, for Christmas, and we celebrated the fact that we were in lockdown both inside and outside the walls.

Among the inmates I met addicts, hardened criminals, people who did not get it. I also met many unintentional criminals, people who might have gone down the wrong path because of tough life circumstances, but I cannot second-guess the judge.

I met a lot of people who were not where they should be; they knew it and they felt it. Of course, this was in the context of a rehabilitation program. I also saw how overrepresented some groups were, including racialized populations. We talked a lot about indigenous peoples today, but what I saw more was the racialized populations. It was shocking for me to see them with my own eyes. It was not a statistic, a simple number on a page. I could see that there was prejudice at play and we have to question that.

I also served as an advisor to the police chief of the Montreal police force. In that capacity, I had to advise him on the difficult choice of whether to go to court or not. Some cases were easier than others. However, when it comes to petty crime, when we want to promote neighbourhood policing and community living, it is tough to take legal action every time. During that period, I saw the best and the worst, including punishment, conciliation and community policing.

When we are talking about diversion and deregulation, we must bear in mind that these are powerful words. Ethics seeks to give meaning to conduct, and meaning is the direction we need to go in.

Decriminalization means removing a given offence from the Criminal Code, whereas diversion sets criminal justice proceedings aside in favour of a more restorative approach to justice. The reason we are talking about these terms today is that the world is changing, as is our understanding of what is just.

Scare tactics and a tough-on-drugs approach did not work. Public policy must strike a balance between three imperatives. The first imperative is moral order, because losing one's freedom is a big deal. It means losing one's dignity. The second is the public health imperative, because drug use is often a public health issue. The third is the public order imperative because, when it comes right down to it, this is about protecting the public. What are the values underpinning these imperatives?

● (1820)

Obviously, if we want to foster reconciliation and community living, I believe we must look beyond the offence itself. Drug use is a public health issue that must be treated as such, without ruling out criminal prosecution when it is warranted.

Diversion is one solution that Quebec has chosen to address a public health issue. I believe in rehabilitation. I have seen inmates turn over a new leaf and move forward, reducing the number of people in prison and the costs associated with their incarceration, and most of all the social costs that come with the stigma. Mandatory minimum sentences are costly and, as everyone has said today, there is no guarantee they will work.

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In the Bloc Québécois, we support eliminating certain sentences. However, no one can ignore what is happening in Montreal and in a number of Canada's major urban centres, where readily available firearms have become a scourge. For this reason, we believe that this is not the time to eliminate mandatory minimum sentences related to firearms.

Rather, we believe that, in this area, the Trudeau government has failed in its duties. It should be exercising its powers rather than delegating them to the municipalities or provinces.

To sum up, Bill C-5 has noble objectives, but I nonetheless believe that it should be sent to committee to iron out its kinks. While I do not believe that mandatory minimum sentences are a deterrent to criminals, we must move beyond partisanship and take a serious look at this bill.

In conclusion, the federal government must ensure that people feel safe or safer. Police officers often say that people do not fear being unsafe; they fear feeling unsafe. We must therefore do everything we can to ensure that people do not feel unsafe.

● (1825)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member reflected on the philosophical differences between parties. I appreciated what he and other members of the Bloc as well as the Liberals and NDP have been saying, that the data does not support the idea that mandatory minimums have the impact the Conservatives would like them to have.

I am trying to wrap my head around why the Conservatives still have this philosophical idea that there should not be a component of rehabilitating individuals to make them productive members of society. Could the member comment on why he thinks they might still be coming from the position that it is a requirement and needs to happen even though, as he indicated, the data does not support it?

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Speaker, I am new here, so maybe I can be perfectly honest.

There are ideological differences between certain parties, and I am prepared to accept this and participate in debate. However, I do not want partisan differences to taint the debate. Partisan differences, or at least partisan obsessions, muddy the waters and make it difficult to debate. Intense partisanship has no place in a discussion on feeling unsafe.

*The Address**[English]*

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Mr. Speaker, is the hon. member aware that when the Liberals removed the mandatory minimum sentences for people who transport firearms without a permit that gang violence went up in places like Toronto and Vancouver? Obviously, it is something that the members from Toronto do not realize about their own communities. He could comment on that.

As well, can the hon. member comment on whether he thinks part of sentencing is punishment and not just rehabilitation?

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Speaker, my colleague spoke about punishment, but I do not think that is relevant here.

I want to take a broader perspective on the question and point out that, notwithstanding the ideological difference I mentioned earlier, the Bloc Québécois does not support abolishing mandatory minimum penalties for firearms offences. We support maintaining these minimum penalties. It is important to understand that there is a big difference between a minor offence and a serious one.

[English]

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member from across the way. I must say it is refreshing to have a philosopher in the House who is not afraid to use his practice. One item in his speech that I wonder if we could ask for clarification on is the role of the federal government working in provincial affairs. It seemed to me that he said the federal government should take a stronger position on this in the provincial legislatures.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question.

I would just like to clarify one thing. I stated that the federal government should exercise its prerogatives in its jurisdictions. Gun control is a federal jurisdiction.

This responsibility can be delegated to a province, but I do not believe that this responsibility must be delegated to a province. It is a power of the Crown and it belongs to the federal state.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, one thing that is clear with respect to the opioid crisis is that dead people do not detox. The Conservatives talk a lot about treatment, but we first have to make sure people stay alive. The best way to do that is to decriminalize possession and provide a safe supply. Would the member agree with that?

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Mr. Speaker, I have to agree.

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

• (1830)

*[English]***RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON ADDRESS IN REPLY**

The House resumed from December 10 consideration of the motion for an address to Her Excellency the Governor General in reply to her speech at the opening of the session, and of the amendment.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 6:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the amendment to the Address in Reply to the Speech from the Throne.

Call in the members.

• (1910)

[Translation]

(The House divided on the amendment, which was negated on the following division:)

*(Division No. 16)***YEAS**

Members

Aitchison	Albas
Allison	Arnold
Baldinelli	Barlow
Barrett	Benzen
Bergen	Berthold
Bezan	Block
Bragdon	Brassard
Brock	Calkins
Caputo	Carrie
Chambers	Chong
Cooper	Dalton
Dancho	Davidson
Deltell	d'Entremont
Dowdall	Dreeshen
Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)	Ellis
Epp	Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)
Falk (Provencher)	Fast
Ferreri	Findlay
Gallant	Généreux
Genius	Gladu
Godin	Goodridge
Gourde	Gray
Hallan	Hoback
Jeneroux	Kelly
Kitchen	Kmiec
Kram	Kramp-Neuman
Kurek	Kusie
Lake	Lantsman
Lawrence	Lehoux
Lewis (Essex)	Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Liepert	Lloyd
Lobb	MacKenzie
Maguire	Martel
Mazier	McCaulley (Edmonton West)
McLean	Melillo
Moore	Morantz
Morrison	Motz
Muys	Nater
O'Toole	Patzner
Paul-Hus	Perkins
Poilievre	Rayes
Redekopp	Reid
Rempel Garner	Richards
Roberts	Rood

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Shields
Small
Steinley
Strahl
Thomas
Tolmie
Van Popta
Vidal
Viersen
Wagantall
Wagh
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Soroka
Stewart
Stubbs
Tochor
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Vien
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Williamson

Kayabaga
Khalid
Koutrakis
Kwan
Lambropoulos
Lamoureux
Larouche
Lauzon
Lebouthillier
Lightbound
Longfield
MacAulay (Cardigan)
MacGregor
Maloney
Masse
May (Cambridge)
McGuinty
McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)
McPherson
Mendicino
Michaud
Morrice
Murray
Ng
Normandin
Oliphant
Pauzé
Petitpas Taylor
Powlowski
Robillard
Rogers
Sahota
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Sarai
Scarpaleggia
Serré
Shanahan
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Singh
Spengemann
St-Onge
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MacKinnon (Gatineau)
Martinez Ferrada
Mathysen
McDonald (Avalon)
McKay
McLeod
Mendès
Miao
Miller
Morrisey
Naqvi
Noormohamed
O'Connell
O'Regan
Perron
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Zarrillo

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Aldag
Ali
Anandasangaree
Arseneault
Atwin
Badawey
Baker
Barsalou-Duval
Beaulieu
Bendayan
Bergeron
Bibeau
Blaikie
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Boissonnault
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Chabot
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Cormier
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Dong
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Fergus
Fisher
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Brière
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Gazan
Gill
Green
Hajdu
Hardie
Holland
Hughes
Hutchings
Idlout
Jaczek
Jones
Julian

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the amendment lost.**ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS**

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

Adjournment Proceedings

• (1915)

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Global News recently reported that prices for food products would go up 5% to 7% in 2022. This means a family of four will be spending \$1,000 more a year, not on restaurant meals but solely on groceries. This is in addition to the current rate of food inflation, which reached almost 4% this past October.

When I asked the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance about skyrocketing food prices in November, she said that I was too partisan and that Canadians should be proud of the government's economic accomplishments and Canada's AAA credit rating.

I posted a video of my question along with her response on my social media pages and asked my constituents what they thought about the answer she provided. This is one of the comments I received.

Rick wrote, "What does our country's credit rating have to do with inflation and higher costs to make a living?" I agree with Rick. When the government is trying to convince people that their lives have become better, there is something wrong with that analogy. No rating agencies in the world can make life more affordable and secure the future for Canadians, but the government can and must do so. Rick also asked me to keep fighting for accountability of the government. That is exactly what we as the Conservative official opposition do on a daily basis in the House.

Another one of my constituents, Cathy, said, "The [finance minister] and the [Prime Minister] are so out of touch with regular Canadians...She was disrespectful with her posturing comment." What is undeniably disrespectful is to suggest that Canadians should be proud of the fact that they will be spending \$1,000 more on food in 2022.

When I discovered that the government referred to inflation only once in the throne speech and tied it to child care and housing, I realized how deep the problem was. If these are the only two things the government is planning to implement, hoping to decrease inflation, we are all in trouble.

Often the Prime Minister likes to claim that they are going to spend even more on the programs that we already know do not work. These are exactly the talking points that the Prime Minister and his cabinet use every time we press them to update Canadians on what is being done to fight inflation. Their answer is to spend more.

Let me make a comparison to that theory. If people cannot even afford to own a vehicle and they do not change their oil regularly, or if it snows and they do not change their tires or if they are simply out of gas, it makes no difference how much they spend on auto detailing to make a vehicle look good. It will not get them too far.

Engela from my riding commented that the response I received from the Deputy Prime Minister "was not a suitable" one. "We haven't heard a satisfactory answer. [This government] is taking Canadians on a path of poverty for so many."

It is sad but it is true. Poverty in Canada is real. This November, CBC reported that food banks were recording the highest number of visits ever. Food bank representatives called the number of visits "devastating" and "horrific". What is worse, they said was that the upward trend was expected to continue.

"Just inflation" is hurting my constituents and it is hurting all Canadians. Recent polls show that 80% say the cost of living crisis is making their lives less affordable and 60% of families with kids under age 18 are concerned they might not have enough money to feed their family. What can be worse during the holiday season?

Today, I want to ask the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, without those repetitive talking points that I mentioned above, to please explain to Rick, Cathy, Engela and other Canadians how more of the same will lead us to anything different.

• (1920)

Ms. Rachel Bendayan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Brantford—Brant, congratulate him on his election and welcome him to the House of Commons. I welcome this discussion, to be quite frank. I feel that the issue the member is raising is one of the most important issues facing this country and our government. I would like to assure him that it is absolutely top of mind in the work we are doing.

In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance earlier today held a press conference alongside the Governor of the Bank of Canada, Tiff Macklem. They announced today that we would be renewing the bank's mandate to ensure price stability for Canadians, and to ensure stability in the market generally. The renewal of this mandate for the Bank of Canada means that the bank will be targeting a 2% inflation rate, at the midpoint of the 1% to 3% inflation range, showing continuity and ensuring stability.

The inflationary pressures that Canadians are feeling are a global phenomenon. We have said many times in this chamber, and I will say again, that Canada is actually faring much better than most other countries and most of our counterparts. Elsewhere in the OECD, inflation is considerably higher, including for our neighbours down south: The United States' inflation rate today is 6.8%. The latest number in Canada is 4.7%.

That being said, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that inflation and affordability are pressing challenges for Canadians. I felt it at the grocery store this weekend. I know that the constituents of my colleague opposite are feeling it and so are my constituents. I think we need to look at the root cause of this increasing inflation. All of the experts are pointing to global supply chain interruptions, to the global rise in energy prices and to the comeback of the global economy following the COVID-19 shutdown.

There are certainly other structural costs that Canadian families are feeling, including housing and child care affordability. I find it unfortunate that the member opposite is talking down the importance of affordable child care and of attacking the housing crisis here in Canada. Those are two very important factors we are taking into consideration, and we are planning on implementing policies in order to tackle them.

For example, Canadians know the \$10-a-day child care program will reduce their overall cost of living. I believe that all provinces have now signed on, save for Ontario. I certainly encourage everybody watching and hearing this debate to lobby the Ontario government in order to get that done as quickly as possible, because it will make life more affordable for families.

In addition to housing, I would like to point out that the member opposite raised the issue of food banks. I find that surprising, given that our government spent so much time over the pandemic to support Canadians, to implement programs, to support workers through the CERB, to support food banks and community organizations that were supporting our communities, and to support our small businesses with wage and rent subsidies, without which they would have shut down.

I would like to understand this. What does the member opposite mean when he says that we should not be investing in these programs going forward? We know the pandemic is still with us, we know there are hard-hit sectors and we know that we need to continue to have Canadians' backs.

• (1925)

Mr. Larry Brock: Mr. Speaker, Canada is facing devastating problems caused by the pandemic. Canadians are struggling to make ends meet. My friend says I do not pay much attention to day care costs and things of that nature. That could not be further from the truth.

What I found rather shocking was that the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development today indicated to the House that the idea of a \$10-a-day day care plan is five years down the road. How is that going to help my constituents and other Canadians who are fighting to put groceries on their tables and to deal with the rising costs of just about everything?

Charles, a senior in my riding of Brantford—Brant, contacted me about the enormous struggles his adult children are experiencing. His daughter is the single parent of a newborn. She is unable to afford rent, let alone buy a home, and care for her child without the financial support of her elderly parents. It seems the government thinks it is acceptable to saddle parents with the added burden of providing for their adult children and grandchildren because they cannot survive independently given the rising costs of just about everything.

Why is the government hiding behind talking points and not willing to share what the plan is to fight “just inflation” in Canada?

[Translation]

Ms. Rachel Bendayan: Mr. Speaker, it is pretty obvious that I answered that question already, but to keep the debate going, maybe I can share a few important facts.

Adjournment Proceedings

Right now, Canada is already at 106% of pre-pandemic employment levels. At 5.4% in the last quarter, our economic growth leads the G7, and our perfect AAA credit rating was recently renewed.

I can understand my colleague raising concerns about inflation, but the economy is doing well. We talked about the Bank of Canada's mandate this morning, and we will keep working to ensure ongoing economic growth.

[English]

HOUSING

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise this evening and take part in these Adjournment Proceedings.

When I last addressed this issue in the House, it was a question to the Prime Minister about housing affordability. We are hearing a lot about cost of living and housing affordability challenges that Canadians are facing right across our country from coast to coast to coast. We are seeing those same challenges in my community of Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes.

It is staggering to think more than 80% of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 28 worry they will not be able to afford a home in their city of choice thanks to soaring real estate prices and a skyrocketing cost of living. This cost of living crisis affects people when they are at the grocery store. We have seen the forecast for next year, with families expected to pay \$1,000 and more per year in groceries, with prices on dairy up 8%, fruit up 5%, and bread and vegetables up 7%. That is going to hurt people every time they try to feed their families.

Gasoline for people's cars is forecasted in some parts of the country to be up to \$2 per litre. Where I live, driving a car is not a luxury, it is a necessary reality for so many folks. The vast majority of my riding does not have public transit people can hop on. One cannot take the subway or the light rail from Kemptonville to Prescott. One cannot take it from Brockville to Gananoque. People are driving between those locations. They are driving to get to work, to get to medical appointments, and to take their kids to dance or hockey.

Why do we have skyrocketing increases to people's cost of living? We know there has been a half-trillion dollars of Liberal deficits that have ballooned our inflation to an 18-year high. It is currently pegged at an 18-year high. We will see what that number looks like in a couple of days.

There are a couple of things the government could do to address this instead of saying that it is bad everywhere, that we will compare outrages and that we are not as bad as some other people and better than others so it is really nothing to worry about. Folks trying to feed their families, put gas in their cars to get to work and who need to heat their homes are worried about it.

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We can produce more Canadian world-class energy and we can cancel planned payroll taxes that will hurt small businesses and their employees alike. We need to get government spending under control. We had our opposition day motion that pitched real solutions on the housing crisis to the government, which it voted against.

There are options available such as making government real estate available, banning foreign investment in Canadian properties and of course committing to Canadians that the government will never introduce a capital gains tax on their properties. The government has to take real steps today to end “just inflation”, and that is what we are calling on the government to do.

• (1930)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion (Housing), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about our government's commitment to housing. From our very first day in office, we have been clear that all Canadians deserve to live in dignity, with a roof over their heads.

We also recognize that the affordable housing shortage is one of the biggest challenges our country faces as we also work on securing an economic recovery. This issue was exacerbated by the pandemic, and we will continue to make unprecedented investments in fixing it. Our government is committed to working with its partners to deliver real results, such as increasing the number of affordable housing units and putting an end to chronic homelessness.

That is why we developed Canada's first-ever national housing strategy. It is a 10-year plan supported by investments of more than \$72 billion.

The strategy funded a housing complex located in Brockville, in the riding of my colleague from Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. Together with the provincial government, we invested \$2 million in joint funding to create 88 new affordable housing units for seniors in the community. These seniors will have stable and affordable housing, pay rent based on their income and be able to remain in their community, close to family and friends.

We have also negotiated bilateral agreements with every province and territory. As my colleague may know, Ontario was the first province to sign an agreement with us under the Canada housing benefit. This program helps low-income families pay their housing costs and is supported by a joint investment of up to \$1.4 billion over nine years. Since it was launched on April 1, 2020, more than 5,200 households have had their applications approved.

As stated in our throne speech, we are committed to continuing our efforts to make housing more affordable. Our government is making significant, sustainable investments in housing because everyone deserves a safe and affordable place to call home.

It will be a pleasure for me to work with my opposition colleague on housing, an issue that concerns us both.

• (1935)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to have this debate with the parliamentary secretary this evening, and I congratulate her on her appointment to this position.

I am pleased she mentioned the work being done in my community with respect to affordable housing, particularly the program between the federal government and the provincial government that saw affordable housing units created. That is where we see what the government can do. When the government is spending Canadians' tax dollars and we are seeing half a trillion dollars in government spending, those are the kind of results we expect to see: real results where people can see the change in their communities.

We need government to make smart choices that help the folks who work to end homelessness and work to create affordable living spaces. However, we do not want to see skyrocketing debt and deficit with no plan to bring them under control, which unfortunately has very much been a hallmark of the government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Mr. Speaker, far too many people need housing. The pandemic has only made an already difficult situation worse. Our government is committed to building a stronger, healthier housing system, especially for those in vulnerable situations. We are tabling a strong plan and making unprecedented investments.

I now call on my colleague and members of the House to work with people in their communities to ensure that they take full advantage of the many programs offered as part of the national housing strategy.

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wanted to participate in tonight's adjournment debate because I am still dissatisfied with an answer provided by the former minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, who has been the Minister of Public Safety since December 3.

My original question was about temporary foreign workers, but obviously, the immigration program is a much more complex program and has ramifications throughout the entire immigration system.

I will use the example of an applicant I spoke with just today. Nazar Mackendi, an immigrant of Haitian origin, has been in my riding for some time now. He is still waiting for approval on his application for permanent residence, which was duly submitted in August 2019, over two years and four months ago. Waiting for a bit is fine, but two years and four months is a ridiculously long time to wait. On top of that, his work permit is going to expire soon.

If Mr. Mackendi leaves the country to visit his family, which we are currently advising against, not only for this reason but also because of the pandemic, he may not be able to return. Also, since nothing is happening on his permanent residence file, he will have to pay \$438 by January 31 to renew his work permit in order to remain in Canada legally and continue working.

My question is the following: What would the minister or his parliamentary secretary do in Mr. Mackendi's place?

[English]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup on his re-election and very much look forward to working with him in the House of Commons.

Earlier this month, Statistics Canada announced that the unemployment rate had decreased to 6%, within 0.3 percentage points of February 2020 levels. As our pandemic recovery continues, employers across the country are seeking to hire in increasing numbers. Quebec, however, continues to experience workforce recruitment challenges, which predated the pandemic and have only been exacerbated over the past year.

That is why I am happy to highlight progress on the implementation of our government's pilot project with the Government of Quebec to provide the province's employers with temporary measures under the temporary foreign worker program. As part of this collaborative effort, first announced in August of this year, a measure designed to streamline advertising recruitment requirements for specific in-demand occupations was implemented on December 6. The Government of Canada has also committed to implementing additional measures as early as January 2022, including an increase in the maximum number of temporary foreign workers that employers in specific sectors can hire.

The occupations and sectors selected by Quebec for this pilot have been identified following consultations with labour market stakeholders as part of the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail. This was done to ensure that the flexibilities established under the pilot project are representative of labour market needs in the province and do not displace opportunities for Canadian workers. In addition to these measures and as part of this initiative, the governments of Canada and Quebec, in consultation with Quebec labour market partners, will also be adding to the list of occupations that are currently benefiting from a simpler process to hire TFWs. These additional flexibilities are expected to be introduced in early 2022.

The implementation of these key measures under this pilot project with the Government of Quebec signals the important

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progress the Government of Canada is making to balance flexibilities under the temporary foreign worker program with the labour needs of Quebec employers. Access to temporary foreign workers is an important element of the shorter-term labour market strategy for many employers. As Canada continues on the road to economic recovery, our government will continue to help ensure that workforce recruitment needs are being met, all while ensuring the health and safety of temporary foreign workers.

We will keep working with our Quebec counterparts and we will do what needs to be done to ensure Quebec gets the workers it needs.

• (1940)

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Speaker, I thank the parliamentary secretary for his response. However, he did not at all answer my question or Mr. Mackendi's question. The reality is that there are people in 2020-21 who have already found out about their permanent resident status. Their applications have already been approved, no problem, while his has been dragging on for two and a half years.

My question is very simple: When can Mr. Mackendi expect his file to be reviewed and approved? It is outrageous to see a file drag on for practically two and a half years. That is terrible.

[English]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Mr. Speaker, our government recognizes the importance of balancing the labour needs of employers and ensuring that workers in Canada have first access to available jobs, while protecting the rights and health and safety of temporary foreign workers. That is why our government has been working with the Government of Quebec to find ways to address its labour shortages and prevent companies from relocating or investing elsewhere, while protecting workers in the economy.

This pilot project with the Government of Quebec will allow for short-term flexibilities from employers under the TFW program to address these labour shortages. The progress of the pilot project and its impacts will be monitored to ensure the improvements made to the program work for employers, workers and the Canadian economy.

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: The motion that the House do now adjourn is deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:43 p.m.)

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