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Tuesday, February 15, 2022

Speaker: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, February 15, 2022

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1000)
[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the second report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food in relation to the motion adopted on Monday, February 14, 2022, regarding the illegal blockades at Canada's border crossings.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food calls for the immediate end of the illegal blockades at Canada's border crossings. At a time of severe strain to our supply chains, the blockades are interrupting millions of dollars of daily trade between Canada and the United States and are negatively impacting Canadian agriculture and agri-food industries, including producers, manufacturers and processors. All governments must play a leadership role in keeping these vital trade networks open for the thousands of agriculture businesses and workers who depend on them.

* * *

PETITIONS

VACCINE MANDATES

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am presenting a petition from Canadians from across the country who are opposed to and want to end the COVID-19 mandates. The petitioners state that throughout the pandemic, truckers have served Canadians and they are heroes, but now they are being subjected to a vaccine mandate, impacting the supply chain. They say the Prime Minister has politicized the vaccine and insulted Canadians who disagree with him. Moreover, petitioners comment that it is the sacred duty of the Government of Canada to guard against discrimination and guarantee the freedom of all Canadians.

The petitioners are calling on the House to immediately end all COVID vaccine mandates implemented by the federal government

regulating employees, truckers and travellers. They are calling for an end to all COVID mandates and restrictions.

• (1005)

AFGHANISTAN

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I am honoured to rise to present a petition on behalf of many Canadians, in particular, many Afghan Canadians, who are deeply concerned that the Government of Canada has failed to meet its obligations to the people of Afghanistan. Today marks six months since Kabul fell. This is six months that Afghans have struggled under a brutal Taliban regime.

The signatories to this petition call upon the Government of Canada to do more to resettle the promised 40,000 Afghan refugees. They urge the government to work with the Afghan-Canadian community to increase resettlement, remove barriers and increase channels for Afghans to come to Canada. Canada must act urgently. Six months is too long.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the day the Prime Minister called a federal election, Afghanistan's capital fell to the Taliban. In the chaos of that evacuation, many of our brave Afghan allies were left behind. My constituents call on the Government of Canada to partner with the Veterans Transition Network and others to launch an immediate evacuation effort for our remaining allies left in Afghanistan and to safeguard them from Taliban retribution.

PENSIONS

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition I am presenting today is from Canadians who also hold citizenship in the U.K.

Approximately 127,000 Canadians receive state pensions from the United Kingdom. While British expats living in some countries, notably the United States, receive annual inflationary increases, the pensions of those residing in Canada are frozen. My constituents are calling on the Government of Canada to ensure any future trade agreement between Canada and the U.K. includes a provision to unfreeze the pensions of British expats living in Canada.

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OKANAGAN RAIL TRAIL

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise today to present a petition on behalf of my constituents from Kelowna—Lake Country, including many who are employed by our largest private sector employer, KF Aerospace.

The petitioners state that the Okanagan Rail Trail serves as an important recreation and commuter path for pedestrians and cyclists across the region. Seven kilometres of the trail remaining incomplete poses a safety risk as users have no option other than to divert onto a busy highway. To summarize, the completion of the Okanagan Rail Trail will be an important link to provide a more healthy activity space for residents and visitors in the Okanagan.

The petitioners are calling upon the federal government to expeditiously complete the federal commitments to the Okanagan Indian Band and Duck Lake Indian Reserve No. 7 to complete the Okanagan Rail Trail.

The Speaker: I want to remind hon. members that in presenting petitions they are allowed to rise once, and they can present all the petitions at once, but they are not allowed to get up multiple times to present petitions.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

OLD AGE SECURITY ACT

MOTION THAT DEBATE BE NOT FURTHER ADJOURNED

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in relation to the consideration of Government Business No. 7, I move:

That debate be not further adjourned.

• (1010)

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 67.1, there will now be a 30-minute question period.

[*English*]

I invite members who wish to ask questions to rise in their places, or use the “raise hand” function, so the Chair has an idea of the number of members who wish to participate. It looks like there will be a few. I would encourage members to be as concise as possible, so we can get to the many members.

The hon. member for Calgary Shepard.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is disconcerting to see the government moving again to shut down debate in the House. I thought we were being very reasonable when we moved the amendment to have just a little more transparency and accountability at a parliamentary committee of the House so we could consider this issue. For 21 months, seniors have been dealing with this problem. There are 204,000 Canadians affected by this. All we were asking for was to be able to look at the details.

I would ask the government what the rush is to try to ram this through House now. The government is trying to get its way without our side having a chance to at least look at the details and question the minister. The Senate is not going to consider it, as it is not sitting right now. The other place would not be able to consider the bill even if we rush it through, so what is the harm in just a little more consideration, a little more introspection? Can we not all do a little better on this one?

Hon. Kamal Khara (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we all agree that the passage of this bill is so important, and we need to get it passed as soon as possible. We know how difficult this pandemic has been for those most vulnerable.

This bill is short, concise and clear. Bill C-12 would exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits in July 2022, so seniors who took pandemic benefits last year would have that security and surety that their GIS would not be impacted. In fact, this bill is the exact product of much collaboration between parliamentarians and parties already. I have spoken to all my critics, who agree on why we need to move forward with this quickly. I hope we do just that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this is a bit of a paradoxical situation. The changes for pensioners will not be in effect until June.

We wanted those changes to be implemented as quickly as possible, and we wanted to be sure. The government took its sweet time deciding to change the parameters, and the problem will not be fixed until June.

When we ask why things have been taking so long, the government says there is no time to talk about it. It says we have to get this done ASAP, which means gagging the opposition. That way, the government can say it is doing things as fast as possible, but the problem still will not be fixed until June.

We could have taken a week to better understand the reasons for this unalterable delay. That would have made absolutely no difference. Meanwhile, many, many seniors are waiting for these payments so they can buy groceries, pay rent and live with dignity.

Why muzzle the opposition when it was willing to talk about it here and in committee all week? That is unacceptable.

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Speaker, all members agree with the need to move quickly. I have personally had conversations with members from all parties on this. I know we all agree, and we understand why this is urgent. They have shared their concerns on the one-time payment as well.

I can tell the House that, when I got appointed to this role, we moved very quickly to work with officials and the Minister of Finance to make a major investment in the financial and economic update. As the hon. member knows, we announced yesterday that we will be moving forward with that two weeks earlier, in April, for those in dire need. I will have an opportunity to work with parliamentarians to get that support even sooner and earlier in March.

Let me bring colleagues back to this particular bill. Ensuring that this does not happen again is what Bill C-12 is about. I really hope we can put aside partisanship just for one second and ensure that those most vulnerable seniors have that security moving forward.

• (1015)

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I just have to ask this, and it is very similar to other questions that have been asked in the House today: Why did it take the government so long?

What do I say to the seniors in my riding who raised this with us in August? I know the NDP brought this to the minister in August. In August, the government knew that it had made a mistake and that there were serious problems. My staff has had to deal with seniors who have lost their homes, who no longer can pay for their medication and who are at risk of losing their lives because of the government's mismanagement of this. To say that it is acting with speed and as fast as possible just seems so incorrect.

We brought this to the government in August. Why did it take so long? Why are we sitting here in February and dealing with this?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, let me just first assure the hon. member that the day I got appointed was the day we started moving, actually very quickly, on this. We worked extremely hard and quickly with our officials and, of course, the Minister of Finance, to move quickly on putting forward a major, significant investment in the fiscal update.

Of course, as I shared with the hon member, we are making this investment. It will be delivered actually ahead of schedule, as soon as possible, on April 19. Service Canada will have an opportunity to work with members of Parliament to help constituents in dire need to get the support even sooner. Let me again point to the urgency of this particular bill. Bill C-12 focuses on making sure that this issue does not happen again.

I hope we can all work together. We disagree on many things in this House, but I think we have an opportunity to showcase to Canadians how we can work together and move this quickly to ensure those most vulnerable seniors have the support moving forward as well.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Madam Speaker, thank you very much.

Minister, back on December 16—

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The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Members are to address questions and comments through the Speaker and not directly to the minister.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Madam Speaker, on December 16, the minister received her mandate letter. I remember thinking it was a very aggressive letter, and the minister said to me, "I am going to accomplish this". There is an awful lot to accomplish. I have to say that the minister has accomplished a great deal in a very, very short period of time.

Some members are suggesting that they want time to study this at committee. Minister, this is a five-line bill that is very, very simple. It speaks to exactly what has been asked by all opposition parties in the House. Maybe, minister, you could just outline how little is actually in this bill and why this is something that does not necessarily need to be studied.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. parliamentary secretary has been around for some time, and he knows that he is not to address questions directly to the minister.

The hon. Minister of Seniors.

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for all of his hard work on this file as well, and the work that we have been able to do, indeed, with all parliamentarians to move very quickly.

When it comes to Bill C-12, it is a very short, concise and clear bill. What this bill would do is to exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits, so seniors who took pandemic benefits last year will have the security and surety that their GIS will not be impacted.

It is a short bill. Indeed, it was done in collaboration with all parties. I have spoken personally with all of my critics on this from different parties. They all agree and know the urgency in moving forward. That is exactly what we are doing.

I was at committee yesterday, and we spent a fair amount of time speaking specifically on this, but I look forward to answering members' questions to make sure we can move forward as quickly as possible.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am very disheartened to see that the Liberals are continually trying to avoid parliamentary process. The Conservatives brought a reasoned amendment that said we recognized this was an important issue, and we would be willing to amend it at committee. I have been calling for a resolution since March of 2021.

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The government knows the bank accounts of the people who got GIS and the bank accounts of the people who got CERB. It can certainly put the money in the accounts and reconcile it later, as it has done for 800,000 people who received benefits illegally and for people who lived in foreign countries who received benefits. It is ridiculous that when it is not going to be paid out until June of 2022, the government would be forcing Parliament to avoid due process once again.

Can the minister tell me why?

• (1020)

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, I first want to correct the record because the member is talking about two different things.

Folks got pandemic benefits in 2020. That is why in 2021, as we know, we put in a major investment in the financial and economic update to make sure we could fully compensate those seniors, and that is exactly what we are doing. In fact, we are moving forward on it as we speak, as I announced yesterday. Bill C-12 would ensure that this does not happen again, and that is exactly why we are moving quickly on this. I have spoken with all senior critics in all parties, and they know the urgency of this.

It is important to remember that this is a very short, simple and clear bill. We have held all-MP briefings on this bill in both English and French, and of course I have had discussions. I was at committee yesterday and spoke at length about this particular issue.

We can spend time on issues that we disagree with and on the approach, but this is something that we all agree on. Seniors are worried. They deserve us putting aside our differences and focusing on taking away their worries about their GIS reductions moving forward. I hope that we can work on this and move as quickly as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoulu, BQ): Madam Speaker, no one is disputing the urgency of passing Bill C-12. Everyone across party lines has been warning the government about the plight of seniors since 2021, so the need for the bill is well known.

Two weeks ago, we were told that the bill could not be pushed forward and that its measures could not be implemented before July because of IT problems. Now we are hearing that some people may be reimbursed, or at least get some help, as early as April.

Nevertheless, the use of this closure motion hurts. We all would have agreed to proceed quickly, without the gag order, and the bill would have passed quickly.

Why shut down the democratic process and discussions that were going very well?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, I think the hon. member answered her own question.

It is about moving forward quickly to make sure that seniors have security and surety moving forward. We have been very clear and transparent with members in the House on this matter. I appeared before the committee yesterday, along with my officials, and

laid out why this bill needs to be passed in the upcoming weeks to make sure we get the best outcome for seniors.

We, of course, began working extremely hard and very quickly on this issue as soon as I was appointed. Officials have made huge strides to solve these financial challenges for seniors in an evidenced way. We cannot risk not delivering for seniors by playing politics, and I really hope that we can put that aside and move forward very quickly to ensure that the most vulnerable seniors have support.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Madam Speaker, in this corner of the House, we see NDP MPs as the effective opposition. We pushed for Bill C-12, and certainly support these absolutely important measures that need to be put in place, but that is not sufficient in itself.

Before the vote, I would like the minister to confirm that the government has accepted two key NDP demands: first, that the clawback is completely repaid to the nearly 200,000 Canadian seniors who need it by mid-April; and second, that the government is putting into place an emergency lane for seniors who are in great difficulty, so that by mid-March they would get a lump sum payment that would allow them to pay their rent until we get to the full reimbursement in mid-April.

Can the minister confirm that the government has accepted those two key and important NDP demands on behalf of Canadian seniors?

• (1025)

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank the NDP, but indeed all members who have raised this issue and who have spoken to me directly. This is a real opportunity for all of us to show Canadians how a minority Parliament can actually work.

There are a lot of things we can disagree on in the House that are fundamental issues. This is something we all agree on, including the urgency to get this out soon as possible. When I was appointed, we worked with officials and the Minister of Finance to put in a major investment and to move very quickly.

As the hon. member very well knows, we are making this major investment through a one-time payment to seniors whose benefits were affected in 2020. I also shared yesterday with the hon. member that we would be delivering ahead of schedule and as soon as possible, on April 19. Service Canada would be working with members of Parliament to help constituents who are in dire need to get that support even sooner, in March.

Bill C-12 focuses on making sure this issue does not occur again, and I hope all members will move very quickly to make sure we put this in place so seniors are not impacted this year.

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Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. minister for her work on this file and the agreement in the House of Commons. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the fact that we are only here today debating a motion of closure because the government screwed up. It is because the government did not allow for the due process of committee. We rushed through legislation, and now we have to make up for the mistakes of the government to protect seniors.

Will the member acknowledge that we are here today because the government screwed up and tried to do too much too quickly, while restraining the rights and duties of parliamentarians to effectively review parliamentary legislation in a parliamentary committee?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, unlike the party opposite, let me remind the hon. member we moved very quickly on providing support for seniors, students, workers and businesses during this unprecedented time that called for unprecedented measures to be put in place. We of course moved very quickly to ensure Canadians had the support they needed at that time.

I also remind the hon. member that, from the very beginning, our party has always meant to support those most vulnerable seniors. We worked extremely hard to strengthen income security for seniors, including with the guaranteed income supplement, which has helped over 900,000 low-income seniors. Let me also remind the hon. member we restored the age of eligibility for seniors to 65, which the Conservatives wanted to move to 67.

On this side of the House, we are going to continue to make sure we support seniors, and that is exactly what Bill C-12 would be doing. I really hope we can put aside our partisanship and move quickly to move this forward.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am a little stunned to hear the minister admit so freely that she made a deal with the third party in opposition to adopt this closure motion on Bill C-12. In exchange, the government will move up payments to seniors who have been unfairly ripped off and had their GIS payments reduced.

Is the minister now telling us that if there had been no deal, if the third party of opposition had stayed true to its roots and refused to support the gag order, she would not have moved up the payments?

Did she use vulnerable seniors' incomes as a bargaining chip?

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, from the very beginning, we have been moving very quickly on this issue. As the member very well knows, since I was appointed to this role we have worked extremely hard with officials and the Minister of Finance to put a major investment in the fiscal update. Of course, we are moving very quickly to ensure seniors have all the support they need.

Let me also remind the hon. member that Bill C-12 is about ensuring that this does not happen again. I worked with the Bloc critic to ensure we moved this quickly. Its members all agreed with this, and I really hope we can move to ensure that seniors have support going forward.

• (1030)

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, it really concerns me that the minister is talking about how quickly the Liberals got this done. I just want to give a shout-out to my colleague for North Island—Powell River, and all the work she did in pushing the government to speed up. I know that it actually has not gone quickly and, in fact, we know that the impact of the clawbacks on poor working seniors has been devastating.

I know seniors in my riding who literally lost their homes and went from income supplements of \$600 to \$60. They were also supporting their kids. Not only did our party push for justice for seniors, we also continue to push for a guaranteed livable income for seniors.

Where is the government on that? Why are we not providing seniors with what they need to thrive, not just survive? It is not even enough to survive.

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, our government's priority has always been to be there to support those most vulnerable seniors. Let me remind the hon. member that one of the very first things that we did as a government was to restore the age of eligibility for OAS and GIS to 65. We then moved forward and actually increased the guaranteed income supplement. That has helped over 900,000 low-income single seniors. That has actually lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty.

Of course we have an ambitious agenda for seniors. As the hon. member may know, it is in my mandate letter to make sure that we continue to move forward.

This summer, we are going to be increasing the OAS for those 75 and older by 10%. In my mandate letter, I have a commitment to increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples. We have an ambitious agenda, and I really hope we can work together, if that is what we are talking about. I think we have a real opportunity to do just that, and I hope we can move forward to make sure that those seniors have the supports they need.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Rural Economic Development, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is rather ironic to hear the Conservatives lecture us today about not going fast enough, when they were the ones who raised the age of eligibility from 65 to 67.

I would like to hear the Minister of Seniors talk about the importance of collaboration among all parties in the House to provide help and support and send a clear message to seniors. Let us support our seniors and act quickly.

Can the Minister of Seniors help us provide this collaboration of the House of Commons?

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[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, let me thank my hon. colleague for the excellent work he did when he was the parliamentary secretary to the minister of seniors in the previous mandate. He certainly has done quite a lot of work. As the hon. member rightfully said, I think this a real opportunity for all of us to work together to ensure that seniors are supported.

The hon. member will know that I have had conversations with all different parties to ensure that we can move quickly on this. They all agree with the fact that this is a very simple and quick, but significant, fix to ensure seniors have that security and that surety.

I really hope we can put aside our partisanship for this, and move forward to help those seniors.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Madam Speaker, I just want to remind the minister that it is the official opposition, the Conservatives, who have been calling for this for many months. It was even in our election platform. Even the government's coalition partner, the NDP, has been asking for this, too.

I heard just a few moments ago the minister and the parliamentary secretary both talking about how, when they were first appointed, they started working very hard, which I believe implies that the previous minister was not working hard and was not doing as much as they should have.

I just wonder if the minister could comment on some of the mistakes that were made by the previous minister. What things is she doing to correct them?

• (1035)

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, I always find it rich when I hear the Conservative opposition members talk about this. It was actually their government that wanted to increase the age of retirement to 67. One of the very first things we did as a government was to restore that age back to 65. We moved very quickly on enhancing the guaranteed income supplement, which they, by the way—

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, we are debating in the House the closure of a bill. We are debating whether we are going to move forward with this legislation or not, yet the minister, in all of her responses, continually refers to a policy decision made over six years—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): That is debate, not a point of order. Also, I remind members that if they are not speaking right now, they should have their masks on while in the House.

I will ask the hon. minister to wrap up. We have other individuals who want to ask questions.

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, I will go back to the point that Bill C-12 is a very short, simple and clear bill. It is something we can all agree with. There are many things we disagree with in this place, but I really think we have an opportunity to showcase to all Canadians and seniors that this is a very significant fix for those who are most vulnerable. We can work together to fix this.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Madam Speaker, the debate is on the closure motion. This measure should

be used sparingly on the important debates we have in the Chamber.

Today, we are being invited to collaborate, to act urgently, when the government has been dragging its feet for months while being pressured and facing demands. It is getting late to fix this situation.

I would like the minister to give us her definition of urgency. Did they have to wait until the last minute to ask us to collaborate or should they have been proactive?

You had the time to correct this.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The member should address her questions and comments to the Chair and not directly to the minister.

The hon. minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khera: Madam Speaker, Bill C-12 is exactly that. It is a proactive measure to ensure that seniors who got pandemic benefits last year are not impacted by any reduction or affected by their GIS and income tax.

I appeared at committee yesterday regarding my mandate letter and spoke to this very issue a number of times. The member opposite had the opportunity to ask me questions. I was available to all committee members to speak about this issue, and it is included in my mandate letter. The motion is to expedite this matter to reflect both the urgent nature of the bill to support needs and the ongoing collaboration and agreement between all parties on this. There is a simplicity in the policy content.

Nothing about this pandemic has been normal, and I argue that neither should this be. I hope we can move forward to make sure the most vulnerable people have support moving forward.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Madam Speaker, the sense of urgency is so real. These are the lowest-income seniors in our country who have had clawbacks because of the failure of the Liberal government.

As the New Democrats, we are here to get help for seniors now. I want to give a shout-out to my colleague, the MP for North Island—Powell River, for being vigilant and pressing the government to fix this problem. We are here to help Canadians and seniors right now. We have been fighting this fight since the get-go. We want some certainty from the government and the minister that they are going to roll out immediate supports for those who need help now, in March, which is just weeks away, so that in April, all of the clawbacks will be repaid to the seniors who are struggling right now.

Will the minister listen to the New Democrats, who are calling for a guaranteed livable basic income, brought forward by my colleague from Winnipeg Centre, so that no seniors are living in poverty? I hope the minister will really listen to the New Democrats' proposal to do that because we should all agree in the House that no senior and no person living with a disability should be living below the poverty line. They need a guaranteed livable annual income.

• (1040)

Hon. Kamal Khara: Madam Speaker, our government's priority is to be there to support seniors, particularly those who are the most vulnerable. We have worked extremely hard to strengthen income security for them by increasing the GIS, which has helped over 900,000 single, low-income seniors. It has lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. During this pandemic, as members know, we were able to quickly provide direct and immediate support to seniors.

When it comes to supporting seniors, we have done a number of things, such as restoring the age of eligibility to 65, enhancing the OAS and the GIS, enhancing the CPP and making significant investments in community services and home care. For seniors affected by the 2020 GIS reduction, we have moved very quickly with a one-time payment, which I announced yesterday. We will be able to give it ahead of schedule and even quicker for those in dire need. Bill C-12 is also going to exclude any pandemic benefits for the purposes of calculating the GIS moving forward.

We have an opportunity to work together to showcase to Canadians how this place can work in collaboration and help those who are most vulnerable. I really hope the member opposite, and indeed all members, will help us move quickly to make sure those seniors are helped.

[*Translation*]

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

The question is on the motion.

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I would request a recorded vote.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Call in the members.

• (1125)

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

(*Division No. 27*)

YEAS

Members

Aldag	Alghabra
Ali	Anandasangaree
Angus	Arseneault
Arya	Ashton

Atwin	Bachrach
Badawey	Bains
Baker	Barron
Battiste	Beech
Bendayan	Bennett
Bibeau	Bittle
Blaikie	Blair
Blaney	Blois
Boissonnault	Boulerice
Bradford	Brière
Cannings	Carr
Casey	Chagger
Chahal	Champagne
Chatel	Chen
Chiang	Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)
Collins (Victoria)	Cormier
Coteau	Dabrusin
Damoff	Davies
Desjarlais	Dhaliwal
Dhillon	Diab
Dong	Drouin
Dubourg	Duclos
Duguid	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dzerowicz	Ehsassi
El-Khoury	Erskine-Smith
Fergus	Fillmore
Fisher	Fonseca
Fortier	Fragiskatos
Fraser	Freeland
Fry	Gaheer
Garneau	Garrison
Gazan	Gerretsen
Gould	Green
Guilbeault	Hajdu
Hanley	Hardie
Hepfner	Holland
Housefather	Hughes
Hutchings	Iacono
Idlout	Ien
Jaczek	Johns
Joly	Jones
Jowhari	Julian
Kayabaga	Kelloway
Khalid	Khara
Koutrakis	Kusmierczyk
Kwan	Lalonde
Lambropoulos	Lametti
Lamoureux	Lapointe
Lattanzio	Lauzon
LeBlanc	Lebouthillier
Lightbound	Long
Longfield	Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)
MacAulay (Cardigan)	MacDonald (Malpeque)
MacGregor	MacKinnon (Gatineau)
Maloney	Martinez Ferrada
Masse	Mathysen
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McLeod	McPherson
Mendès	Mendicino
Miao	Miller
Morrice	Morrissey
Murray	Naqvi
Ng	Noormohamed
O'Connell	Oliphant
O'Regan	Powlowski
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Arnold
Barlow
Barsalou-Duval
Benzen
Bergeron
Bérubé
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PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Speaker, I had technical issues and I wanted to register my vote as yea.

The Speaker: Minister Hussen, I am afraid your hand went up after the vote was compiled, and it is too late. Your vote cannot be counted.

* * *

● (1130)

**GOVERNMENT BUSINESS NO. 7—PROCEEDINGS ON
BILL C-12**

The House resumed from February 11 consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I got more applause this time, so we should do this more often.

Is it something I said? The government moved to shut down debate on this bill, and I had only two minutes to speak to it last Friday. I know I did not have a Yiddish proverb ready to go then, and that must be why we must rush this bill through the House now.

I do have a Yiddish proverb today, though, just to show that I am not angry and do not hold things personally. I am told there someone named Trevor on the opposite side who loves Yiddish proverbs, and I was going to say that anger is like a thorn in the heart, so I am not angry. I do not want to be angry at the government for the next 18 minutes for shutting down debate on this bill and on our very reasonable amendment to the programming motion that the Liberals have put forward.

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When I briefly spoke to this bill when we were considering it in the last sitting last week, I mentioned that this is a big issue in my riding. There are 204,000 seniors all across Canada who would be affected by these rule changes, obviously to their detriment. It would impact their financial situation, and many of them are in dire straits because they are on a fixed income. We have seen the cost of living explode. It is very difficult for seniors on a fixed income to make ends meet, especially when the government has programs that do not address their concerns. When this issue was identified 21 months ago, the government dragged its feet, so it has taken all this time to get to the point where there is now a fix in place for something that the government had introduced. Now we are being told that we have to rush it through the House without even having the minister before a committee so we can discuss the contents of the bill.

I want to draw attention to a few things that the minister said during the debate that we just had on whether debate would be not further adjourned, meaning debate will be shut down on the consideration of the matter before the House, which is the GIS change. In French, it is *bâillon*.

The minister said that this is a simple bill and a simple fix. That is great, but why will she not come to committee, then, to address it? That would be my response to the minister, because the amendment that forward by the member for Cumberland—Colchester was that we would consider this thing and make sure that the minister would have the rest of the time. Until 11 p.m., she would have to defend it before a committee, and we could actually go into the details.

I think it is a huge benefit. There are many members of the House of Commons who are here for the first time, while some others have been here for several Parliaments now. I think many would say that the work we do at the committee level is valuable. It teaches us how government services work, about the actual operations of government and the mechanics of how things are done. I have found several times that it has been useful when I go back to my constituency. When I am trying to solve a constituent's problem, I then have those details in mind. I have met the person responsible for the program or I have met the deputy minister who is responsible for administering the program, and there is a touch point that we can lean on in order to get more information. We can then use that knowledge to help our constituents on case files.

In my constituency office, apart from immigration case files, seniors' issues are probably in the top two or top three in the ranking of how often per week I have to look at case files that are being managed by my constituency. What we are proposing here are very reasonable amendments to have greater accountability and transparency. It is an opportunity for members of the opposition to ask a minister questions.

I do not know why the government does not like this. During this whole pandemic, we have seen at every juncture and opportunity that the government has tried as much as possible to avoid any type of ministerial accountability for the legislation that it is putting forward. We have seen this with many of the pandemic bills that the government has put forward. The Liberals try to rush them through in a few days. We met in committee of the whole at different times. While we have longer question periods, at the end of those typical

days, legislation would be passed. We would ask very technical questions and there would be no response, or sometimes we would just hear talking points or a promise that things would work out later on, but time and again we have seen that they have not worked out.

If we look at the Public Accounts of Canada reporting on how different funds have been spent and at the different Auditor General performance reports on some of the programs that were used during the pandemic, time and again we see that things have not gone according to plan. The criteria were not followed. People got different types of benefit programs that they were not eligible for.

• (1135)

Can we remember situations when it was on the opposite side? Here we have a situation in which the government wanted to help seniors, wanted to provide them with additional support, wanted to ensure they were looked after, but it failed to do that, even though it was warned by opposition parties and stakeholder organizations at the time that there was a problem in the way it was approaching the legislation and the regulations. It is not as if it was not warned at the time.

What we are talking about here, as shown by the government's own 2021 fall economic statement and fiscal update, is \$742.4 million. That is what has been allocated. I would say to my constituents that this is not chump change. It is quite a bit of money. Three-quarters of a billion dollars is an incredible amount of money to be rushed through the House in order to patch a mistake that the government made.

As I said, I am not personally angry that debate was shut down. It was probably something I said, but hopefully not. However, I marvel at the fact that the minister says she appeared before the committee to talk about her mandate letter, but she will not go to the committee to talk about \$750 million that her department will be responsible for spending or at least the actual execution of the mandate letter. She would not be willing to speak to the committee and answer questions from parliamentarians.

It is perfectly reasonable. We see it in question period, which is a much shorter period of time, but committee is where we really get to drill into the details, get down deep into how the departments function, on which dates people will be paid, what the mechanics are, how the government will ensure that people do not get missed, what will happen with single seniors between 60 and 64 and how they will be treated in the system.

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Time and again, constituents who have fallen through the cracks come to my office. I think all of us in this House have this experience. People do not go to their MPs' offices if there is a simple solution, because there is so much information available online and seniors lean on their kids to help them out if they are not comfortable using the Internet. I find a lot of them are very comfortable doing it, but they go to their MPs because they have fallen through the cracks. There are layer upon layer of government programs, and they just happen to be in unique situations. Life circumstances are involved, and every single time, it is not something that can be resolved in an hour. It is a multi-day affair. The MP's office becomes like an ombudsman's office essentially, trying to touch base with every single department to try to sort out the problem.

Sometimes the constituent, though well-meaning, has made mistakes on the file. In this situation, we have an opportunity to get it right, to make sure there is no clawback, and we set things right for the future. Conservatives support it, which is what we have said all along. We just want that extra bit of accountability and transparency from the minister so that we can do the right thing from the beginning and get the details. I have often gone back to a parliamentary committee transcript to read the questions that were asked when I knew there were technical civil servants at the table being asked very technical questions so I could pass the information they provided on to a constituent who was interested in a particular issue.

I remember being at the OGGO committee, which is the government operations parliamentary committee of this House, on issues involving Canada Post. I travelled with that committee all over eastern Canada, the Maritimes and Atlantic Canada as part of a review. I read through the whole transcript, and it really got me ready so that when community mailboxes were being set up in some of the northern communities in my riding, I was able to explain to constituents how the system worked, why they were doing it and what the logic of it was.

I do not see why the minister cannot appear at committee. That is really what it comes down to. All Conservatives have been asking for is greater ministerial accountability on government spending. As I said, it is \$740 million-plus that will be spent.

The government is trying to rush this motion through. The only reason I can imagine is that it wants to score some points, maybe win some favourable public opinion for seemingly doing something, but the Senate is not even going to be considering this bill because it is not sitting. The other place, as we are supposed to call it, will not be considering this bill, so speeding the bill through the House of Commons will not resolve anything.

These things can be negotiated among the different sides. We Conservatives have shown ourselves to be fairly reasonable and we have shown that at times we support legislation. We say we support the principle and the content, but we would like to see accountability from ministers. I do not think it is a lot to ask of a minister to appear before a committee, for whatever length of time, and answer the questions that parliamentarians have. There are perfectly logical things we could do to address both the individual concerns we are hearing from our ridings and then the more operational, structural concerns with the government programs.

• (1140)

Between old age security and the guaranteed income supplement, these programs are some of the most expensive government programs that we operate right now on behalf of our seniors, especially lower-income seniors. They form the basis of the retirement system in Canada. When a person goes to a financial planner at a bank or an independent broker, they will avidly and strongly advise them to set up their finances so that they can access old age security. For some seniors who wind up in the lowest-income tier, they will completely rely on the guaranteed income supplement, which is why this clawback is so punishing for them.

Old security is the most expensive government program. However, during the debate that we had on whether we should shut down debate, the minister crowed about how good it is that we had this CPP supplementary kind of benefit that was being added on. The way she talked, it implied that all seniors across Canada are getting this benefit today, but that is not how the CPP works, and I am pretty sure the minister knows this. People accrue benefits as they pay into the Canada pension plan, and when they retire at the end of 30 or 40 years of working, they get to draw from that pension, but they have to accrue the benefit before they get it. I do not think it is right to give people the wrong impression that they would instantly have these benefits provided to them because the government made some changes.

However, this would actually impact geriatric millennials, or people in my age group. People, like those on my staff, who are much younger than I am are the ones who are paying more into the Canada pension plan, which is an awful return on investment for their generation, because there are so many benefits that have to be paid out. They lose control of that asset, of their income, when they could decide on what they want to save into for the future return they are supposed to get. I mean, potentially 30 or 40 years from now, they will be drawing a higher CPP than the same person with the same number of years of work would today.

Oftentimes when I hear this type of debate, with the Liberals trying to explain everything they have done for seniors, there is a lot of misleading going on. We have to be fair with people. Do not give people false hope. We have to be straight and up front with them, which is why we have parliamentary committees. That is where the opportunity comes to study the questions that our constituents are asking. I also get very technical questions from people who spend an incredible amount of time looking at OAS and GIS eligibility. They are trying to figure out their finances, because maybe they do not have a financial adviser, and are kind of relying on the office of their member of Parliament to fill some of that gap. Again, this is why I think it is perfectly reasonable to ask for this type of work to be done.

Look at the context that we are debating this in. Our side is saying that we support the bill, but some of our members would like to raise individual case files and individual issues. I know the New Democrats did this too. When I was going through the transcript to see what the New Democrats had mentioned, they actually raised case files of individuals in their ridings who had been affected by this particular change. I give them credit for that, but I do not give them credit for voting with the government on this one and shutting down debate in the House.

The role of a parliamentarian in this place is to raise issues and represent our ridings in Ottawa, not to represent Ottawa to our ridings. I think there is a huge distinction between the two. When I think about the work we do and the context that we are in right now, we are debating a bill to fix an error the government made months and months ago. I think everybody recognizes that, but some of us admit it more readily than others.

Yesterday, the government basically said that it was going to invoke the Emergencies Act. This is the context in which we are debating a bill that we essentially agree on. All the opposition has asked for is just a little more accountability from one government minister, not all government ministers, but let us have that one minister appear at one committee of the House of Commons to answer some questions for an extended period of time. It would not grind this place to halt. We could all come to an amicable agreement on how long it would take to be done, and it is in our amendment that we proposed.

We are infinitely reasonable and trying to be constructive here on how we go about this, but let us look at the situation we find ourselves in. Our country is more divided than it has ever been before. We have some of the worst finances this country has ever seen. We have a situation where people have taken on more personal debt than at any other time, and the lower they go into the income tiers the more debt they have taken on. The people who have done the best are in the highest income tiers. For them, this pandemic almost did not directly impact their bottom line.

• (1145)

We can look at some of the commentary from the member for Louis-Hébert on how the government was handling this pandemic. This program is in answer to some of the harm that has been done to the economic situation of many seniors. The member for Louis-Hébert noted, and this is almost a direct quote from him, that not everybody can work from their cottage on a MacBook, and he is right. There are many people at the lower income scale. I have a lot of construction workers in my riding, a lot of general labourers in my riding and a lot of people who used to work in oil and gas and who are out of work because of the government's harsh anti-energy worker policies. These people are just looking for a way out, just to make some income, just to get through. I have a lot of seniors who have gone back into the workforce with a lot of experience and they are competing with people who are entering the workforce for the same jobs. It is making it difficult.

The city of Calgary has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country right now because of the economic policies, because of the pandemic, and now we have a lot of seniors returning to work, some part time. When they are looking at their finances and at ac-

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cessing old age security and the guaranteed income supplement in some situations, this all has an impact. These are very complex government programs and I think we owe it to them to have the minister before a committee, with her officials, to explain how this is supposed to work. I would like an explanation as to how they could have ever made the mistake in the first place so that we find ourselves here.

Since this happened, about 21 months ago, we had a federal election. It was not even fixed before then. They knew this was going to happen, and it could have been fixed then.

To remind us of the Yiddish proverb, I am not angry that the government has now decided to and won the vote to shut down debate. It is a thorn in the heart to be angry. It is allowing someone to live rent-free in one's head. For our seniors in this country, this should not be how government functions. We should be putting accountability and transparency first, at the very front end. Asking one government minister out of 40 to appear before a committee is not asking too much. It is not asking too much to have 11 parliamentarians sit down and ask them pointed, direct questions about how this is going to fix this and if there is anything else we need to know.

In the minister's own words, this is a simple bill. This is simple legislation. If it is so simple, why can it not go to a parliamentary committee to be reviewed? I hope the government will reconsider its position and will vote with us to have a committee and to have the minister appear with her officials to answer our questions.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, listening to the member opposite, I am getting the opinion that he is actually in favour of the legislation and I do appreciate that. What I am a bit concerned about he made reference to indirectly when he talked about the Emergencies Act. Yesterday, we had another very important piece of legislation on rapid tests that was being debated. It is a very short week before the break week.

I am wondering if the member believes that, if we did not attempt to rush through these things, we would not be able to get it done before the break week. Is that a concern on his or the Conservative Party's part?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, the government runs the agenda of the House of Commons. They are responsible for the agenda. They could have tabled this bill before. They also could have not called an election in August. They could have had us return to the House to consider legislation right away.

It is not as if they did not know this was a problem. This is simple legislation. Why did it take so much time to recall Parliament? Why did it take so much time to consider this bill? Why did they not do evening sittings? Why will they not agree to a parliamentary review? All of these things could have been done.

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It is not on the opposition to simply acquiesce and accept the fact that the government is on a timetable. It is for them to run the business of the House better and they have not been doing that. This is not the first time. Six years of this I have seen so far. For six years, they have been mishandling business of the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague.

I agree with him that it would be more appropriate to study the Liberals' bill in committee.

He mentioned the importance of talking about the \$750 million in additional expenditures. My biggest concern is figuring out how we can speed up the process. The Bloc Québécois has already proposed moving the date from June to March. These are things we could discuss in committee. My colleague referred quite often to all the seniors who are falling through the cracks and who are the most vulnerable. I wonder if there are ways to provide seniors with assistance more quickly.

I would really like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

• (1150)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, the GIS is definitely important to seniors in my riding.

I believe that our amendment provides a potential solution that would ensure that the problem has been dealt with once and for all. I would not want us to quickly pass Bill C-12 only to realize six months later that it is flawed and that some seniors are still falling through the cracks. There are 204,000 seniors who are affected by these changes. I want a parliamentary committee to ensure that this bill resolves the problems of each and every one of them.

[*English*]

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Madam Speaker, I first want to thank my colleague whom I have a great respect for. However, my concern is the lack of urgency from the Conservative bench. These are the lowest-income seniors in our country who have had their GIS clawed back. They cannot afford their rent, food or medicine. Some of them are cutting their pills in half. That is unacceptable. Today, we are talking about an urgent situation so that those people who have been cut off get help now.

Does my colleague support our call for a guaranteed livable income so that no seniors in this country are living in poverty and have to go through a situation like this ever again?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member. He is one of the few members of the New Democrats, as are you as well, Madam Speaker, whom I quite appreciate as very reasonable members of the House.

I want to address the first part of the member's question with respect to the urgency of the matter. The government is claiming there is urgency. The Senate is not even going to sit to consider this matter and pass it expeditiously. The government created the need for urgency. This is the government's problem. It created this entire situation by calling an election that was not necessary after promising it would not do so, recalling Parliament late and then putting this legislation before the House so late in the hour. I do not under-

stand why the New Democrats feel that they need to keep correcting the Liberals' mistakes.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for his fantastic speech today. In my riding of Simcoe—Grey, even prior to the pandemic, the number one issue for me was seniors falling behind. We are certainly not in a better situation now with COVID and the rising inflation. I can say that there is a lot of frustration.

We have seen a lot of rollouts from the current Liberal government during the pandemic, for example, the rent subsidy, where it had to change it in middle of the road. All that does is create confusion. Therefore, I would ask the member what his thoughts are on this. Should we not make sure that we are doing things right?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, the member is absolutely correct. Oftentimes during this pandemic, we have seen the government approve a program, rush it through the House and tell us not to worry as it is going to work. Then we constantly hear from our constituents saying they cannot apply for it, their particular situation does not count or they use their personal chequing account for their business so they cannot get the CEBA. There are all these government programs, one after another, where we are fixing the mistakes of the government after the fact, because we return to the House saying that this person, that person or this business could not get it.

The member is correct. The reason his office is so overwhelmed with seniors complaining that the programs are not working is that the government keeps getting it wrong time and time again.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limouilou, BQ): Madam Speaker, we all agree that we need to make things right for seniors and get them their money.

My colleague spoke about how the government has struggled to plan and manage its calendar. However, the situation we are in right now is urgent and it has been going on for months. All of the opposition parties have been sounding the alarm since June and July 2021, before the election.

What does that tell us about the government's real motivation for doing the right thing for Quebecers and Canadians before the election?

• (1155)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, the member for Beauport—Limouilou's comments about the government's motivation was spot on. The Liberals are using the seniors file to score political points, to boast they have rescued seniors from a problem the Liberals themselves admit they created in the first place.

As my colleague mentioned, the opposition parties had said that they were in agreement. All we want is for the government to be accountable in parliamentary committee and to members of Parliament. We are not asking for a lot. We just want the details of this very simple bill.

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[English]

Mr. Gord Johns: Madam Speaker, I want to go back to my colleague for the question about a guaranteed annual livable income. He did not answer it. We know that seniors are living in poverty, and I want to know if the Conservatives support ensuring that no seniors are living below the poverty line. A guaranteed livable income would ensure that will not happen. We are all disappointed about the Liberals dropping the ball on this clawback and why we are having this debate today, but I want to hear about long-term solutions and I want to hear if my colleague supports them.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Speaker, it is a policy question he is asking, and I do not have a definitive answer. However, I worry about this. Why would we trust the Liberal government to create another government program when the Liberals have screwed up so many of them? They have rushed them through the House and tried to make it up through regulations or cabinet orders to patch programs incessantly. We can look at the procurement of aircraft, the procurement in the military in general and the very slow rollout of the rare disease strategy, which is off and on and off and on.

The government does not have a record of delivering anything except press releases on websites. It makes announcements, it makes a press release and nothing happens afterward. Why would we trust it to develop and execute another program?

I do not understand why the New Democrats keep supporting the government in its failed execution of whatever the heck is in the mandate letters. I do not understand this. The New Democrats have voted with the Liberals repeatedly over the past few weeks, supporting the continued failures of the Liberals. They do this time and time again. I do not understand how the New Democrats think they are serving the people of their ridings by trying to prop up a government that keeps failing to deliver the most basic government programs.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Respectfully, I wonder if you could help enforce the requirement for all members to be wearing a mask in this place at all times.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): This was raised earlier today, and I do not have the document in front of me because I gave it to the Speaker so he could get back to the House on it. The wording in the directive from the Board of Internal Economy is that members are being encouraged to wear their masks in the House. However, it does indicate that if they are in their seat, they are able to not have their mask on as long as they stay in their seat. I know the Speaker has ruled on a number of occasions that individuals should have their masks on if they do not have the floor. However, the directive seems to indicate otherwise, and I am sure the Speaker will get back to the House shortly on that.

Resuming debate, the hon. parliamentary secretary to the government House leader.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise to address a few points that the member across the way has raised and, at the same time, share some thoughts that not only I have, but all members of the House have, in regard to seniors in general. This is a very important and hot topic among my Liberal colleagues as we continue to strive and

improve the lifestyle of our seniors and be there for them in a very real and tangible way. I am going to highlight a number of things we have been able to do for seniors over the last six years.

First, I will address the issue of how the Conservative Party wants to twist this issue of process and why the government is where we are today with what is a very important piece of legislation.

The legislation we have before us today is here because of the pandemic. During the pandemic, the Government of Canada, with support and encouragement from different levels of government, from Canadians in general and from MPs who were advocating, came up with a series of brand new programs that virtually started from nothing. They were a direct response to the pandemic. When we brought in programs virtually from nothing, there were, no doubt, issues that would arise. This is one of those issues, and it is an issue that today the government is addressing through legislation because of the impact it has had on our seniors. Some are trying to give the impression that the government is trying to fix a problem it created and that somehow the government has been negligent. However, this is unfortunate given the consistent supports and actions of the government for seniors since 2015 when we were first elected, let alone during the pandemic.

Yes, there have been some issues to deal with, but I suspect, after hearing comments from the opposition, that they will be supporting the legislation. I am encouraged to hear that. However, on the other hand, they are critical of the manner in which this is being processed and of not only the government but also the New Democratic Party. It is interesting that when the New Democrats do something the Conservatives do not like, they say there is a coalition between the New Democrats and the government. I think Canadians would rather see a coalition between the New Democrats and the Liberals than a coalition between the Conservatives and the Bloc. At the end of the day, the Conservatives have this default position: For anything the government wants, just say no. They know full well that they need their coalition to continue to frustrate the government's agenda. They know they can often count on the Bloc, but they get all upset if the NDP does not follow their recommendations. They get upset with the NDP because the NDP will not listen to the Conservative agenda, and then they say it is a coalition.

I can tell colleagues that the government has operated with all three opposition parties, collectively together. At times we have operated with the New Democrats separately, like today, and at times we have operated with the Bloc separately. We appreciate the mandate that we have been given by Canadians, and it is a very clear message: Canadians want us to work together.

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● (1200)

We saw a very good example of that back in December with conversion therapy. Members will recall that the entire House recognized the importance of conversion therapy and the legislation before the House. The Conservative Party members were the ones who recommended that we do not have second reading, committee stage, report stage and third reading, the whole process. They wanted to go right to royal assent, and the bill was passed unanimously. This shows that when it is convenient for the Conservatives and they feel it is important, it is okay and debate and committees are not necessary.

It is not the first time they have done that. They even attempted to get unanimous consent when there was no unanimous consent for getting what they believe is priority legislation through the House of Commons. If they disagree, it is anti-democratic, and the government is wrong because they want to see something. There seems to be a bit of a double standard being applied. On the one hand, the Conservative Party now says this is important legislation and recognizes it is important legislation. After all, its members are going to be voting for the legislation. I understand the Bloc is going to be voting for the legislation too. However, the Conservative-Bloc coalition does not like the manner in which we are trying to get it through. The NDP supports the legislation and has been advocating for significant changes to take place regarding the compensation issue. It also recognizes that it is important to get this legislation through as quickly as possible.

The Conservatives say that the Senate is not sitting this week. As I pointed out yesterday, let us take a look at the legislative agenda. In the number of weeks we sat, we brought in legislation dealing with the coronavirus. The number one issue of Canadians for the last two years has been taking on the coronavirus. We can talk about Bill C-2, Bill C-3, Bill C-8, Bill C-10 and now Bill C-12, which are all legislative measures that deal directly with supporting Canadians and that deal specifically with the coronavirus, whether it is through programs that have been brought in, programs we are trying to extend to continue supports or the bulk-buying of things like rapid tests, which we debated yesterday. All of this stuff is important legislation.

We all know there is a finite amount of time to deal with legislation. It is not like we can debate a bill for 10 days and have it go to committee for two weeks. If it were up to the Conservatives, for anything they disagreed with, and even for things they agreed with, they would try to speak things out in order to frustrate the government. They would want to bring bills to committee for indefinite periods of time, with no commitment to get them through.

We are still in the pandemic. There is still a sense of urgency, even this week alone. Yesterday, we debated \$2 billion-plus for rapid tests to ensure the provinces, territories and businesses in our communities have the necessary tests. Today is about seniors and making sure we are there to support them by putting money in their pockets. We still have other important pieces of legislation that have to be dealt with this week, if at all possible. I am thinking of the Emergencies Act. We also still have the opposition day motion from the Bloc party that has to be dealt with, and we have two short days this week.

● (1205)

Are the Conservatives saying that debate on our seniors, the rapid tests or the Emergencies Act should all just be postponed by 10 days or a couple of weeks because it is convenient for the Conservative opposition party? Ten days from now they can come back and ask why it has taken the government so long.

On the issue of the Standing Orders, I approach them not just as a member of government. I spent many years in opposition. I understand the importance of accountability, transparency and the process inside the House. I hope to engage with members in regard to our Standing Orders. We need to modernize them. We have plans and processes in place to accommodate debates, committees and votes. We see that. As I cited yesterday, whether it is on emergency debates in the chamber, opposition day motions, private members' bills or private members' motions, there are all sorts of limits.

What we have seen in the past 10 years, because we have to factor in the era of former prime minister Stephen Harper, is that we need tools to ensure that government bills can also get through in a timely fashion. That is why we are debating this motion today. If members believe it is important to support our seniors by getting money in their pockets, this is a piece of legislation members urgently need to support. The timing is very important.

The Minister of Seniors has met with opposition members and has been before committee. At committee, members can ask whatever questions they want of the minister. She is not shy to answer questions. We saw that earlier today, when the motion was brought forward. The department has provided information for members. Yes, we are making modifications today in order to get the money out more quickly to support our seniors. The department is working overtime to make sure we are there for our seniors in a real and tangible way.

The process we are going into today would have been preventable if, in fact, we could have had support from all opposition parties in saying that we could pass this legislation. In an ideal situation, it would be something that would be negotiated. However, the government is not in a position in which it can hold back on getting this legislation passed. With the support of one opposition party, we were able to ensure that our seniors would get the legislation they needed through the House of Commons. For that, I am grateful.

After 30 years of being a parliamentarian, there are some issues I hold near and dear to my heart, as I know many of us do. Our seniors, and the needs of our seniors, are of utmost importance. We often talk about the fact that where we are today as a society is all due to the seniors who were there before us, and we recognize there are needs that seniors have. I have made reference to the fact that I used to be a health critic in the province of Manitoba. I understand what those needs often require.

• (1210)

That is why it was so important for me personally, when I came to Ottawa, to be a strong advocate for our seniors. I remember one day when I was sitting in opposition. Former prime minister Stephen Harper was in Europe, and there was an announcement that the government was going to increase the age of eligibility for collecting OAS from 65 to 67. We opposed it, and we indicated we would get rid of it.

I remember advocating for the needs of the poorest seniors in Canada and for the importance of our social programs. I use those two examples because in 2015, when we were elected to government, two of the very first initiatives we took were, first, to reduce the age of eligibility for OAS back to 65 from 67. That was one of the very first initiatives taken. The second was to increase the guaranteed income supplement.

For those who understand the issue of poverty in Canada and want to help put more money in the pockets of our seniors, just as this bill does, in 2016 we talked about increasing, and then implemented a substantial increase to, the guaranteed income supplement. That one initiative lifted hundreds of seniors in Winnipeg North alone out of poverty, and tens of thousands across the country.

We will all become seniors, if we are not already. We ensured that the contributions to CPP would be enhanced with an agreement between provinces and the federal government, something that Stephen Harper was unable to do, to ensure that there would be more retirement money for our seniors.

In terms of the pandemic itself, and how the government stepped up to provide, that is why we have the legislation today. In our urgency to support people of Canada through developing programs such as CERB, there were some mistakes. It was not perfect, but it was important to get those programs out as quickly as possible. Now we are making a modification that is necessary to ensure that our seniors would in fact be getting money that they would have normally been receiving, but other benefit programs during the pandemic ultimately caused a problem. This would fix it. That is why it is good legislation for us to support.

During the pandemic, we brought in direct support for seniors, with a special focus on the GIS, again, and the OAS. We did it directly and we did it through other programs, such as the CERB, which is more of an indirect way. Another indirect way we did it was through supporting non-profit organizations that provide support for our seniors. We are talking about hundreds of millions, going into billions, of dollars.

The Government of Canada has been there to support our seniors because it is the right thing to do. From virtually day one, in 2015, until today, we continue to bring in budgetary and legislative measures to facilitate and support our seniors, whether with long-term care, direct money into pockets, mental health or so many other areas.

• (1215)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the things I find really troubling is that, in the length of time that it has taken to address this issue, we know many seniors have

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been losing their homes. They cannot afford to eat. We know that with all of the many programs that were introduced by the government, with lots of little failures and things, they managed to put money into 800,000 people's accounts who really were not eligible to receive the benefits.

I really do not understand. Why could the Liberals not have just put the money into the accounts of seniors who were getting the GIS? They got the CERB, so they would be topped up and they would not have to wait until July of next year. They will probably have lost their houses by then.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I have confidence in our civil servants who are providing the direction and have the desire to get the money as quickly as possible to the seniors who need it. The minister responsible for seniors has even developed a program that will hopefully get seniors in certain situations the money even more quickly. I am very optimistic that we will be resolving this issue. This legislation will prevent it, hopefully, from reoccurring.

At the end of the day, we have a civil service that is doing an outstanding job of being able to meet the needs of our seniors in the short term and the long term.

• (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I really like my colleague from Winnipeg North. Unfortunately, he has been known to engage in overblown rhetoric. I think he has a reputation for that in the House.

In his speech, he admonished the opposition at length by saying that our Conservative colleagues often engage in political partisanship, and he presented himself as a great defender of seniors.

However, since I arrived here in 2019, my political party has repeatedly made three very simple proposals, as follows: increasing the old age security benefit by \$110; increasing the guaranteed income supplement by \$50 for single people and by \$70 for couples; and, most importantly, increasing health transfers, because seniors are the ones who have paid the price for the underfunding of health care during the crisis.

The government has never paid any attention to us. That is the perfect example of partisanship. Why? The government cannot seem to handle acting on a good idea from an opposition member because it would have to give that member the credit.

If the Liberals care about seniors, why have they never increased the old age security benefit? Why have they never increased the GIS and why did they wait so long to address the issue before us today?

I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

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Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, we have increased the GIS. We have increased OAS. We have record transfers for health care. Historic amounts of real dollars are going toward health care. When we factor in issues such as long-term care, additional hundreds of millions of dollars are being invested. When we talk about the issue of pharmaceuticals, again substantial tax dollars are being invested.

I would challenge the member to reflect on the 10 years before we came into government, and I would contrast our record and our investments any day. The member says I tend to talk a lot about how good things are. Much as the opposition will be very critical of the government, I am very proud of the manner in which we provided supports for our seniors. We will continue to do so, because they are important to all of us.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Winnipeg North often defers to provincial NDP politics to deflect his government's failures, including with seniors. I would like to read a story from one senior, who wrote, "Our GIS has been cut off and the \$1,300 per month that we receive from the government is not enough to keep the shelter over our heads. I feel weak and depressed. Having no energy, I spend many sleepless nights crying."

In the last session, the member's government voted against the NDP's universal pharmacare bill, when seniors are literally choosing between medication and rent. There are people in my riding who, as a result of the government's callous choice, have had their GIS cut from \$600 a month to \$60 a month. My party fought for a guaranteed livable basic income for seniors, not a guaranteed income supplement, but one that is livable, to lift people out of poverty. His party is nowhere on the map on that. I am proud of my colleague from North Island—Powell River, who fought really hard to get the Liberals to pull back on their brutal clawbacks on seniors.

I am wondering if my hon. colleague can respond to these concerns and not deflect.

• (1225)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, as the member pointed out, one of the greatest challenges for seniors is housing. That is why the federal government works with provincial governments. It is the provinces that take the lead on social housing.

We invest, on an annual basis, in operating costs in the Province of Manitoba. We are talking about tens of millions to hundreds of millions of dollars in rent subsidies and non-profit housing. We are talking about thousands of non-profit housing units in the province of Manitoba alone, and it is often the federal government that gives the largest percentage. That deals with trying to make housing more affordable.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I would invite my friend to stand and ask a question, as opposed to heckling.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, earlier, my colleague from Winnipeg North talked about the money his

government has invested in health care in recent years. I would like to remind him that the bulk of the money invested in recent years was for COVID-19 programs.

If the roof is leaking, the shingles can be changed from time to time, but eventually, the whole roof needs redoing. That takes on-going funding and long-term commitments, such as boosting health transfers to 35% of total system costs, which is what the premiers of Quebec and the provinces have unanimously called for. COVID-19 made it clear that what they are asking for is legitimate and absolutely necessary.

We do not want to hear the member for Winnipeg North talk about how much the government invested during COVID-19. We know that, but all that money is from COVID-related programs. He actually admitted that there may have been some mistakes along the way, but we do not hold that against him because that is to be expected considering how quickly they had to react.

In May 2021, the Bloc Québécois raised concerns about financial assistance provided through CERB to seniors receiving the GIS. We pointed out that their eligibility for the GIS would be compromised if they received CERB. It was at that point, last spring, that the Liberals decided to move up the payment; however, the problem would not be solved before June 2022.

I realize that the Liberals are always slow to implement recommendations made by the Bloc Québécois. That is fine. Still, I would like to know when the Liberals will finally take action on health transfers. Does my colleague have any idea? He can criticize us all he wants, and we will listen—that does not bother us. I want to know when the Liberals plan to respond to the unanimous demand from the provinces and Quebec and increase health transfers to 35%.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, in my years serving in the Manitoba legislature, I believe that every year, for almost 20 years, if a province were asked if it wanted more money for this or that, it was always going to say yes. Provinces always want more money for health care. That is a given. Am I surprised that it is unanimous among the provinces that they want more money for health care? It does not surprise me at all.

What is important is that, since we have been in government, we have negotiated accords with all of the provinces and territories, which are indexed. We are giving record amounts in annual allotments of equalization and health transfers to provinces. It is a historical amount of money. Along with that, we continue to support other aspects of health care, which Canadians want us to do, such as additional money for things like mental health and long-term care.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to talk about one of my favourite topics, seniors, and I have now become one.

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I think it is really important that we have this discussion today. This is an opportunity for us to pull what I would call an ugly scab off of the issue of affordability for seniors, especially those living on a fixed income. This is a wound that has been festering for some time, and I want to start off by taking a look at the actual numbers and the situation that many Canadians are finding themselves in.

There are single seniors living on a fixed income getting OAS, GIS and CPP. For those who would get OAS, depending on the work that they did in their career, they might get as much as \$7,700 a year. They might get, from GIS, if they received the maximum, about \$11,500. If they had worked a long time and they had maximized their CPP, they might be getting around \$9800.

What that works out to every month is somewhere between \$2000 and \$2400, depending on where they are on the scale. That is it.

These are people, if they are getting GIS, that do not have huge nest eggs. They do not have huge savings to draw upon to get them out of a bad situation. Today, the folks who define the Canadian poverty line define that line as 50% of the median income. For a single person, they are saying anybody who makes less than \$3600 a month is actually living at or below the poverty line. All of these seniors we are talking about are already living below the poverty line, after they have worked their whole lives and after they have built the nation.

All this rhetoric coming from the other side is ironic. Even in the 2020 throne speech, we heard the words, "Elders deserve to be safe, respected and live in dignity." Well, if they deserve to be respected, and if they deserve to live in dignity, that is certainly not what we are seeing today.

I want to start by describing the situation before the pandemic. I will then talk about what happened during the pandemic and where the need for Bill C-12 comes from. I want to then talk about the lack of government action when all of these issues were being raised, and make a few comments to follow up based on that.

Initially during the pandemic, recognizing that people were struggling and many people had lost their jobs, the government did make an effort and the Conservatives did support many programs to replace the income that people had been making.

Sadly, many of the people we are talking about, who are on fixed incomes, had to go out and take on other jobs just to make ends meet, just to heat their homes and have groceries on the table. In my view, that is totally unacceptable for the seniors who built the country. However, that was the reality.

What did the Liberals do during the pandemic? They decided to increase the carbon tax twice. Not just once, but twice. This put up the cost of groceries, home heating and basically all goods. At the same time, we have seen inflation increasing to where we are today at nearly 5%. People on a fixed income have zero ability to adapt to that.

We know that the lack of action we have seen in the affordable housing crisis has also just gotten worse during this pandemic. Even in a riding like mine, which is not a metropolitan riding, a person cannot find something to rent for less than \$1000 a month.

If someone is on a fixed income, and they are only getting \$2000 a month, there will not be a lot left over for food, groceries and heating.

To get seniors living at what we are calling the poverty line might take as much as \$1000 or \$1500 a month, depending on the location they are living in. The government is great to talk about the increases they have made to GIS in the past that raised them \$60 a month. However, at the same time, Kathleen Wynne and the Ontario Liberals raised electricity prices, so people were paying \$130 more a month. They were even further behind. That is not the kind of action we need from government.

● (1230)

Then we saw the government come with a plan to give seniors, but only those over the age of 75, a one-time payment of \$500 in August, just as it was calling an election, to remind those seniors over the age of 75 to not forget about it. Those between the ages of 65 and 75 who were living on a fixed income got nothing. As well, the government is promising a raise for those over the age of 75 for the summer of 2022.

I am happy to see the mandate letter of the minister now includes all seniors over 65. What she will actually do is another story, because we always see a lot of talk and not much action. I do not know why those aged 65 to 75 were excluded. I heard all the time at the doors in my riding about how they were finding it just as tough to live as those over the age of 75.

If we keep in mind that these people do not have any other income to draw on, we can see the government was aware of the problem very early on. In March of 2020, at the start of the pandemic, I was already emailing the then minister of seniors to say that we had a problem. The people who took CERB who were also on GIS would have their GIS impacted the next year. This was raised in March of 2020. In March of 2020 the government was aware that it was a problem, and nothing was done at that time.

One of the issues I have with the government bringing this bill here today, and deciding that it needs to be rushed through, after over a year of inaction, is that there was a fix for these seniors who had their GIS reduced, who cannot pay their rent or buy food to eat. Some in my riding lost their homes and have become homeless, and they needed that money immediately.

The government had the ability to put the money in their accounts immediately. How do I know this? Let us think about it. The government knows who gets the GIS. It is deposited in the accounts of those seniors every month. It knows who got the CERB, because it deposited that into their accounts as well. It certainly knew how to put in that \$500 "do not forget to vote for us" payment for the people over age 75 in August.

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Therefore, it could have just as easily recognized the impact this was going to have, put that money into their accounts and reconciled it later. It did that with the 800,000 Canadians who received a benefit to which they were not entitled, and which it is now trying to reconcile.

With the hardships that Canadian have faced, these seniors who call my office are crying. They are losing their homes. They cannot afford to eat. Something has gone wrong, perhaps with their car, and they now have no ability and no mobility. It is unfortunate that the Liberals could not, at the very least, address the problem and then come back to fill in any gaps in the legislation. They have not had any issue in the past doing things through orders in council and using various tricks, which do not involve coming to Parliament, to get whatever it is they want to spend. However, when it comes to seniors, they just forgot about them.

After I flagged the problem in March, the minister said the government would deal with it. Then it paid out benefits to people who lived in other countries. It paid out benefits to people who were ineligible. When the new minister came in in October, I asked her if there was something that could be done about it, because I had people in my riding who were writing me stories that were enough to make one cry. I could certainly read out their testimonies.

• (1235)

In May of 2020, the Minister of Seniors was before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and was given a prepared binder by the department officials. In that binder, under section 7.2, under the heading of “Questions and Answers: COVID-19 Economic Response Plan”, the question in the book reads, “Will income from the Canadian emergency response benefit be used in the calculation of guaranteed income supplement benefits?” The answer was “It is considered to be taxable income and must be considered when determining entitlement to the guaranteed income supplement, GIS, and the allowances”. Therefore, the government actually knew then that the problem existed, but it has done nothing for a year, and here we are.

The Conservatives brought a very reasonable amendment. We understand, and we want to see seniors get their money. However, not to make this point too many times, the government could do that today if it really had the political will, but it does not. We said that we have to respect the parliamentary process. We see, too many times, the Liberals wanting to avoid parliamentary process and wanting to push things through the House. We see that they have already limited debate on the bill, as they do on many other bills, after saying they would never do that.

Here we are. We need time to debate the bill and time to amend it, because of some of the things that happened over the course of the pandemic where programs were put in place that had shortcomings, which were pointed out immediately and were never repaired. We can think of the many small businesses that were impacted at the beginning of the pandemic when they were not eligible if they were sole proprietorships. They were not eligible if the business had just started up and did not have a full year of revenue and business statements to show. There were quite a number of people who were impacted because the programs that were rolled out were

flawed. Why were they flawed? It was because the Liberals tried to rush them through Parliament.

I would argue that it is worth taking some time, and I think the Conservatives brought quite a measured little amendment to this motion that would give us the time that we need to look into making sure that everything is as it should be. In our amendment, we are saying to send it to committee, get the Minister of Seniors there so that we can hear everything from her and her departmental officials, ask all the questions, identify those things that need to be repaired and fix them. We could then immediately do the clause-by-clause, make the amendments that need to be made, bring it back to the House and then get in the express lane and not use any amendments at report stage or anything like that but go right to third reading and off to the Senate.

Keep in mind that the Senate is not even sitting in the next week. We can say “emergency”, but due process is that it goes through the stages of this House and then it goes to the other place, which is not even sitting. We can hurry up here, but they will not be there to receive it and process it.

We need to correct the problem because seniors are already in a bad place. I talked about the small amount of money that seniors are making. I talked about how dire it is getting, and it is only going to get worse as we see the supply-chain issues that are currently being impacted by the trucker mandates and the lack of action on the part of the Prime Minister to address this.

As a sidebar, I think it is unbelievable that the Prime Minister has called for the Emergencies Act to be put in place when he was not even using the actions he already had the power to take in order to end the supply-chain issues that are driving up the cost of everything and making this problem even worse.

Seniors are going to have a very difficult time waiting another six months before they receive their payments, so I encourage the government to do what it can to make sure that seniors receive their payments as soon as possible after we have the discussion on the bill. At the same time, I must say that we have to look ahead to the future. We have one in six seniors in the country right now, and it will be one in four in just a few years. We cannot allow them to be this far away from living, at least, at the poverty line.

• (1240)

Some of the measures that can be taken would be to accelerate the OAS and GIS payments. I know the Bloc and the Conservatives supported a motion in the last Parliament that did not go ahead because of the present government. I encourage the government to try to get seniors back to where they need to be, and I am going to do my part.

There are seniors who thought they were going to be able to retire with a pension and are unfortunately not able to do that or have less pension than they expected because their employer went bankrupt. I am bringing a private member's bill forward, Bill C-228, the pension protection act, which would cause businesses to every year table a report on the solvency of their fund so that we have transparency to see whether those funds are in good shape. If they are not, it would provide a mechanism for funds to be transferred in without tax implications. Then, if the organization cannot transfer and top up the fund immediately, they would have the ability to get insurance while they are able to, over a series of years, restore the fund to solvency. In the case of bankruptcy, pensions would be paid out to seniors and they would be paid out before large bonuses to executives and large creditors.

This would solve the problems of many seniors, including those who have lost their employment due to the bankruptcies of Eatons, Sears, Algoma, Caterpillar, Nortel and numerous other companies that have left employees in that situation. We can see from the information I read at the beginning of my speech that if seniors have to rely on OAS, GIS and maybe CPP, they are still living below the level that Canadians would consider acceptable. We cannot have that for our seniors. It is very hard for our seniors when they see new people coming into the country who are receiving more money than they are making, when they helped build the country. I think we can agree that we want all Canadians to be living with a reasonable standard of living.

The last thing I am going to say on this topic of Bill C-12 is that I do need to commend the new Minister of Seniors for at least bringing the legislation forth in reasonable time. She is not the one who knew about it last year and did nothing, so at least we have the bill before us today. As has been said, the Conservatives will support this to go to committee, but we will have our eyes on the legislation to ensure it is solid and we are not going to see more loopholes that would cause further issues for our seniors.

At the same time, I could not get up and speak about seniors in this place without talking about some of the other advocacy I have done on behalf of seniors. As members know, I brought forward a palliative care bill in the first session of Parliament, and I would say there has never been more of a need to continue the work done on that. Now, with the pandemic, we have been distracted from that. I would encourage the government to come up with a plan to exit the pandemic and restore the economy, so that we can then start talking about some of the other issues that are facing seniors. They certainly need to have good options at end of life to get the dignity the throne speech indicated. They certainly need to be able to get the drugs and essential medicines they require.

Certainly, I want to see the government do something on that, but today the call is for the government to listen to the Conservatives and take our advice. Let us support the motion my colleague brought forward, which says, let us get this to committee, all sit down, roll up our sleeves, get the amendments that are needed and then get this done. Let us not make seniors wait until July 2022 to receive the payments they desperately need today in order to keep them from becoming, in some cases, homeless.

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• (1245)

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the member opposite speak about the importance of protecting the dignity of seniors and supporting their quality of life. That is an objective we all share. One of the things I and a number of MP colleagues have advocated for over the past year is national standards for long-term care. We have advocated for that, and the government has committed to it. The reason we advocated for it was that we saw, especially during the pandemic, the Canadian Armed Forces expose the reprehensible quality of care some seniors experience in some of our long-term care homes. Our belief is that national standards would ensure that seniors achieve the quality of care that seniors deserve.

I wonder if the member opposite could comment on whether she supports national standards for long-term care.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, that is an extremely important point. Certainly we studied this when I was at the health committee and talked about what would go into national standards. In fact, there have been numerous reports written about what is required. At the end of the day, I support the best practices being leveraged across the country, but that is not where the limitation is. It is not that we do not know what needs to be done.

When it comes to the ratios of staff to clients who are in long-term care, more funding is needed. When we see some of the conditions there, more funding is needed. We know that the provinces, although they have that under their jurisdiction, do not have the wherewithal to do everything that is needed. Therefore, it is important that the government work with provinces and territories to leverage those best practices in long-term care but also to identify how we can get the funding there and how we can actually get the workers there. As members know, we have seen a drop-off in the number of personal support workers, nurses and all of these kinds of careers.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question is simple and yet not so simple.

Most seniors who live the longest are women. Many women who receive OAS and GIS benefits were stay-at-home moms first and later stay-at-home grandmothers, although this is not true of all of them, fortunately. Many set their careers aside, so their incomes were substantially reduced, which affected their pensions. Some have part-time jobs to try to make ends meet.

Would it be fair to say that most of the seniors affected by these pension cuts are, once again, women?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, that is a great question.

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Absolutely, single senior women are the poorest. It is important to have a policy that recognizes that more money is needed for senior women living in poverty, because they are struggling to put a roof over their heads.

More funding may be needed and pensions may have to increase to ensure that women can be properly housed.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, like my colleague, I am deeply frustrated that we are in a situation that has taken us so long to get to.

I do not want to go back to seniors in my riding of Edmonton Strathcona and say that we delayed this any longer than we had to. Of course the Liberals took too long to fix this mistake. Of course seniors are in such desperate straits right now that we have to act as fast as we possibly can.

Fixing this problem and looking forward, I did appreciate how the member talked in her intervention about the things we need to do for seniors. The things that would make seniors' lives better are investments in making our long-term health care centres public, in having a guaranteed livable basic income and in having things like pharmacare. Things like this would help seniors, but they would also help so many Canadians. Would the member be supportive of these calls that the New Democratic Party has put forward for things like a guaranteed livable basic income, like public long-term care centres and like pharmacare?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, my colleague has always been a strong advocate on these issues. We do need immediate action from the current government. As I pointed out in my speech, the Liberals know the bank account numbers. They made 800,000 other mistakes where they gave people money who did not deserve it and are trying to get it back now. Certainly with seniors who are on GIS, they could immediately take action to put that money in their accounts and that is what they need to do.

Longer term, there is no doubt that, with an increase in the number of seniors from one in six right now to one in four in the future, we are going to have to do something to address the fact that seniors are not living decently and that they are not receiving essential medications and items that they need. I look forward to working with that member to solve those issues.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saarnich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated my hon. colleague from Sarnia—Lambton's speech. Of course, I do not agree. This is one of the few times that I actually want to see a bill passed through this place without going to committee first, but I want to follow up on something that we do agree on. I would like to hear more about her private member's bill to deal with the long-standing problem of corporate pensions that are not secure for our seniors.

With your permission, Mr. Speaker, because I do not get to intervene during private members' business and ask questions of the mover of a bill, I would love to hear more about it now.

• (1255)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, I am definitely always happy to talk about my private member's bill. The problem is that we have seen seniors work their whole lives and expect to have a pension to

retire on, and then the company goes bankrupt, pays big bonuses out to their executives and leaves the seniors with either no pension or pennies on the dollar.

What got me going on this was a neighbour of mine, who worked for Sears for 30 years and ended up getting 70 cents on the dollar after 30 years of working. My bill is going to keep that from happening, first of all by giving transparency to see whether there is solvency in the fund; second, by creating a mechanism to top up that fund if it is not solvent; and third, by making sure that if companies do go bankrupt, the people who have worked all their lives and paid into their pensions receive their pensions before big bonuses are paid out or large corporations are paid out.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to point out to my colleague that we also introduced a bill to ensure that retirees are the first creditors in line. We support my colleague.

However, I have a question about something else. Earlier, a Liberal colleague asked her a question about national standards for senior care. She responded that the thing that matters most is the health transfers, which need to be made quickly. I would just like her to refine her answer and clarify whether she agrees that health is a provincial jurisdiction.

I do not see why the federal government would impose such standards. That would be as absurd as having a province impose standards for national defence. I would like my colleague's opinion on that.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his excellent question.

I completely agree. Health is a provincial jurisdiction. However, I think there is not enough funding for the provinces to provide excellent care.

What is more, while some provinces have very good practices, I would like everyone to be able to benefit from those best practices and for funding to be accessible to put those practices in place. I think that the federal government has a role to play in that.

[*English*]

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague talked passionately about the need to support seniors. Clearly this is an urgent situation. These are the most vulnerable seniors in our country that the government has gone after with claw-backs. I really want to thank the member for North Island—Powell River for the important work she did on pressuring the government to respond to this situation.

Does my colleague agree that the government is paying for the pandemic off the backs of poor Canadians by going after seniors in this circumstance? Does she agree that instead it should be going after the billionaires and the big corporations that have profited from the pandemic?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Speaker, certainly I think that everybody needs to pay their fair share, but it is outrageous that 12 months has gone by. The government has known that this problem exists and has done nothing. If someone did not pay their rent for 12 months, would they have a place to live? If someone did not have their heating bill paid for 12 months, would they still have heat? That is the situation Canadians are in. That is why it is urgent, and it needs to be addressed.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is nice to be back in the House debating an important bill.

[*Translation*]

Bill C-12 is aligned with all the measures that the government has implemented since 2015.

It is important that we go over everything that we have done because we know that Canadians watching us may not tune in every day. It is important that we be there for them. However—

[*English*]

The Deputy Speaker: We have a point of order.

The hon. member for Fredericton.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Speaker, I hate to interrupt my colleague, but I was just wondering if he was going to split his time with someone.

• (1300)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time today with my friend and colleague from Fredericton in the wonderful province of New Brunswick.

[*Translation*]

However, I would like to speak about what we have put in place from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to speak about this because it is also part of the support that we are providing to older Canadians.

[*English*]

I think it will show that our approach to the seniors issue, since day one in 2015, is one that has been consistent. It is one that comes from a trend of support for low-income seniors for a very long time, a rapid approach to putting in place needed supports, especially when emergencies face our vulnerable populations, including seniors.

It is vitally important to pass Bill C-12 quickly. This motion today has been well defended. I think that will be clear once we understand how a low-income senior faces so many challenges. After a lifetime of hard work, Canadian seniors have earned a secure and dignified retirement. Pandemic or not, they deserve a retirement without financial worries. Allow me to briefly touch on the many of things we have done for seniors since forming government in 2015.

The Liberal government has strengthened Canada's public pension system. We are helping Canadians with their higher costs later in life. For short-term support, we issued a one-time \$500 payment in August 2021 to OAS pensioners 75 years and older. We are permanently increasing the old age security pension by 10% this July

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2022 for those seniors aged 75 and older, providing over \$766 for the first year for pensioners receiving the benefit. We must remember this benefit is indexed to inflation, so seniors will continue to receive an increase.

We restored the age of eligibility for old age security and GIS to 65 from 67 years of age. The age for eligibility had been increased by the Conservatives prior to our winning a majority government. That is something I am very proud of in the six years I have been here in the House. We are putting literally thousands of dollars back into the pockets of seniors.

As promised, our government increased the GIS by 10% for individual seniors, improving the financial security of about 900,000 vulnerable seniors. To help working seniors keep more of their benefits, we increased the GIS earnings exemption to allow seniors to earn up to \$5,000 without any reduction in benefits and we provided a partial exemption for the next \$10,000. It now includes self-employment income.

When our increase to the basic personal amount is fully implemented in 2023, 4.3 million seniors will benefit, including 465,000 whose federal income tax will be reduced to zero. This is something I fully championed, and it was wonderful to see it in our platform in 2019. It means up to \$300 for individuals and \$600 for couples. I am so glad that this was part of our 2019 platform. This is literally billions and billions of dollars in tax reductions every year for our Canadian seniors, Canadian workers, Canadian students, and it is wonderful policy.

Our middle-class tax cut in 2016 reduced the second personal income tax rate by 7%, saving middle-class Canadians an average of \$330 and couples an average of \$540 a year. Again, it is real change, and that goes with our mandate of helping the middle class and those working hard to join the middle class.

Seniors have also benefited from this. Tax reductions, benefit increases and policy revisions implemented by our government have reduced the number of seniors living in poverty in Canada by 11% since 2015. Our plan to improve support for seniors is working, but yes, there is still more work to do. As seniors ensure their safety by staying home during the COVID-19 pandemic, financial and other supports were and are still here. They are critical to help them access the goods and services they need and to reduce the social isolation that can take a toll on their mental health and well-being.

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As the government, it was our responsibility to help, especially with those extra costs. First, we provided a one-time tax repayment of \$300 to eligible OAS recipients, plus another \$200 to eligible GIS recipients. We also provided a special top-up payment for the GST credit in April 2020. More than four million low- and middle-income seniors benefited from this top-up.

In addition, we announced a one-time payment for persons with disabilities, including seniors. These individuals received a total of \$600 in special payments. Of course, we know we had the backs of all Canadians during the pandemic and we continue to do so. We created various income supports, such as the Canada emergency response benefit, which helped millions of Canadians, including seniors, by delivering direct payments quickly to seniors and families.

• (1305)

[*Translation*]

Our government was concerned not just about financial security, but also about seniors' isolation, which has real consequences. In fact, research shows that the isolation of older people can have health consequences. That is why we made it our mission to promote social participation and inclusion.

We helped connect seniors with essential services and supplies. We invested \$9 million in the United Way to support more than 876 organizations across the country that offer more than 936 programs. We invested an additional \$20 million in the New Horizons for Seniors program. We also funded more than 1,000 community projects to reduce the isolation and improve the well-being of seniors during the pandemic.

With regard to safety in long-term care institutions, we introduced important measures even though long-term care is a provincial and territorial jurisdiction. In addition, the safe restart agreement signed with the provinces and territories includes \$740 million for support to Canadians.

[*English*]

Yes, we have the backs of all Canadians, and, of course, the seniors.

[*Translation*]

We want to support those who are receiving long-term care, home care and palliative care and who are the most likely to get seriously ill from COVID-19.

On top of all that, we also created a \$350-million emergency community support fund to help charities and non-profit organizations adapt the services they provide to vulnerable groups, including seniors, in response to COVID-19.

[*English*]

The pandemic is still ongoing. That will not stop us from putting forward additional measures to benefit seniors' financial ability. I want to give a shout-out to the 25,000 or so seniors in my riding of Vaughan—Woodbridge. I get to see them again. I have missed them over the last two years. I know they have suffered from social isolation by staying home. I am going to see them in the community centre on my break week and maybe play a little bocce or play cards.

These seniors represent the best of what Canada is about. They come from various backgrounds. They have built this country. We have to respect them. We owe them so much gratitude and appreciation for the sacrifices they have made. They have not asked for a lot. They ask to be respected and they ask us to make sure, in their golden years, that they have a secure and dignified retirement. That is what our government has done since day one.

Looking to the future, we know Canada needs to better address older seniors' needs. Seniors in Canada are living longer, which is great, and I think a key indicator of our progress as a country on all scales. As seniors age, they are more likely to outlive their savings, have disabilities, be unable to work and be widowed, all while their health care costs are rising. As mentioned before, we are responding to that need with a major OAS increase for older seniors as their needs increase.

Least but not last, we have proposed \$742 million to support vulnerable seniors who have experienced reductions in the guaranteed income supplement as a result of accessing pandemic benefits.

[*Translation*]

In closing, the pandemic has not always been easy, particularly for seniors, and people are still struggling. Pandemic or not, our government is committed to giving all Canadians the opportunity to build a better life, contribute to our nation's prosperity and benefit from it. That is why we have made every effort to support all Canadians, including seniors.

[*English*]

We recognize the remarkable contribution Canadian seniors have made to our society and economy over the years. They can count on our Liberal government to continue to take steps to make sure they can live with dignity. Let us all come together and pass Bill C-12 expeditiously.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, seniors 75 and older are supposed to be getting an increase to their old age security, and of course there was the pre-election lump sum that was encouraging them to vote a certain way.

There are seniors who wanted to top up their incomes with part-time jobs, but when they applied for CERB, they could not apply for a partial CERB, so they got the whole \$500, and some of those people took money out of RSPs to pay the taxman, who wanted all the CERB back.

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Would the people who already paid the CERB money back be reimbursed? Are they going to continually be behind the eight ball because, having taken money out of their RSPs, that again props up their income so that they qualify for less of the supplement?

• (1310)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Speaker, of course, I would advise any senior or individual here in Canada to seek financial advice on how they manage their affairs. With Bill C-12, we want to ensure that for the literally hundreds of thousands of seniors who may have been affected by any sort of clawback on their GIS, the income they received from CERB and other benefits is not included in their taxable income for determination of benefits going forward.

For an individual in Canada, it is correct that if they pull money out of their RRSP, it is taxable income and they would pay taxes on it. When we make an RRSP contribution, we receive a nice deduction for it, and I encourage Canadians to make an RRSP contribution if they have the ability to do so.

All individual cases should be looked at by the member and should be brought to the attention of the minister and the parliamentary secretary.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member for his speech, even if it seemed as though he was giving an abridged version of the speaking points from the last election campaign.

The government has known since May 2021 that seniors collecting CERB have been receiving reduced guaranteed income supplement payments, and seniors have said that it has been catastrophic for them.

If the government has done so much good for seniors, why did it not anticipate this problem and take immediate action to remedy it?

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her question.

I am very proud of our government and of all the measures we have put in place for seniors.

[English]

We helped seniors with these benefits during the lockdown, and they were included in taxable income. We have gone back and are making a fix, and rightly so. We do not want to penalize seniors going forward. That would not have been a regular amount of income they received.

I encourage all seniors to look at the number of measures we have put in place since 2015.

[Translation]

Seniors are most important to me because they are the ones who built our country and our future.

[English]

Our future is very dependent on what seniors have done in the past.

[Translation]

I am proud that we have put many measures in place for them.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in all of Hamilton, 2,020 seniors saw a reduction in their GIS benefits because of the CERB clawbacks. Residents in Hamilton Centre bore the brunt, with almost 660 having their GIS clawed back. This has been an attack, and it has been devastating on working poor seniors in my community.

In a time of such uncertainty and despair, that the Liberals would plunge seniors further into poverty can only be described as cruel and unusual. They have known about this for quite some time. I ask the hon. member, who knew this was an issue for seniors, why he and the Liberals waited so long to fix it.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Mr. Speaker, it is great to see the member for Hamilton Centre, whom I had the chance to work with at the public accounts committee.

We have always had the backs of seniors. We are putting in place \$742 million, which will represent a one-time payment for thousands of seniors who were impacted in this instance by how taxable income was calculated.

Going forward, there will be no impact on seniors. Seniors can rest assured that we will continue to have their backs and that they will be able to retire today and tomorrow with a secure and dignified retirement.

• (1315)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Vaughan—Woodbridge for sharing his time with me today and thank all members for engaging in this important debate.

We know how difficult this pandemic has been on seniors and how it has impacted them, their livelihoods, their quality of life, their mental health and even their safety. We all agree in the House that we need to do more to help seniors and their communities. As announced in the fiscal update, we will be delivering a one-time payment to fully compensate those affected in 2020, and today we introduced Bill C-12 to exclude any pandemic benefits for the purposes of calculating the guaranteed income supplement going forward.

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I had many conversations at the doorsteps with individuals who were affected. Bill C-12 would go a long way in demonstrating that as parliamentarians we are listening and our government is responding. The fact remains that far too many seniors in Canada have been living in poverty. It was an issue long before this pandemic, but COVID, an unprecedented global health crisis, has made matters worse. Seniors who lost income and were financially struggling accessed emergency support to help them get by. Bill C-12 would protect seniors from losing their income-tested GIS payments going forward and would rectify any loss of GIS as a result of receiving COVID benefits. This would protect struggling seniors from falling deeper into poverty and rectify the unintended consequences of pandemic benefits that were designed to help.

Many seniors have been trying to survive paycheque to paycheque, and in New Brunswick the situation is worse. One in five seniors in my province lives below the poverty line and many more are just at the cusp. This is well above the Canadian average. These seniors depend on GIS to pay their rent, heat their homes and buy groceries, particularly at a time when the cost of living continues to rise. In Fredericton, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is now close to \$1,000. Seniors desperately need the action our government is proposing.

Passing Bill C-12 also matters for our commitment to advancing gender equality, furthering reconciliation and combatting systemic discrimination. The loss of GIS payments would disproportionately impact women, indigenous people and racialized Canadians, demographics that statistically experience higher rates of poverty. It is urgent that we pass this bill and help the estimated 90,000 seniors across the country who have been impacted. Failing to pass this bill would further threaten the economic security of thousands.

I am optimistic that through the leadership of the Minister of Seniors, real and tangible change will be felt across the country. This government is committed to building a better future for seniors. As a member from Atlantic Canada, this positive change cannot come soon enough. By 2036, Canada's senior population could be close to 11 million. As the Canadian population continues to age, so does the number of older adults expecting to be living in subsidized housing. We need to look at the future and take measures now to avoid having seniors, who spent their lives building this beautiful country, reach their golden years and live under the poverty line.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to suggest that we can go further to support seniors and many others facing poverty. I am proud that this government is seriously looking to implement pilot projects on a guaranteed livable income and is moving forward on its objective to reach agreements with provincial and territorial partners to implement national universal pharmacare. I truly feel these measures, in particular, could usher in deep and lasting systemic change.

Simply put, to improve the lives of senior citizens, we must make life more affordable. I am proud to say that this government is doing just that by investing in better public transportation, affordable housing and creative programs, such as the multi-generational home renovation tax credit to help families add a secondary unit to their homes for an immediate or extended family member. This government is also working to establish an aging at home benefit so that seniors can afford to stay in their homes longer, while increas-

ing the quality of long-term care for those who need it. We are also creating opportunities for seniors to be more connected, supported and active members of their communities through the New Horizons for Seniors program. These initiatives will help to enhance the quality of life for all Canadian seniors, and we should not stop there. It is long overdue that we return elders in our communities to their positions of honour and respect.

I want to acknowledge the organizations in my community that have been working hard to support older adults. They are making a real difference in my riding. The Stepping Stone Senior Centre and the Senior Wellness Action Group are but two great examples of those working to help connect hundreds of seniors in the greater Fredericton area to work collaboratively to develop and deliver affordable and accessible activities to meet physical, mental and social needs. They provide volunteer matching, assist with emergency preparedness, support food security and much more. They are providing opportunities for seniors to meet, to learn, to develop new skills, to socialize, to entertain, to be entertained and to be entrepreneurs, and they are serving as an information source for seniors and those who work with them, like me, while promoting the growth and development of seniors in our community.

● (1320)

There are important lessons that we must take forward from this pandemic, and providing adequate supports for seniors must be at the top of our priority list. We must invest in seniors and ensure that people can live in dignity and safety in their older years. We have seen many examples of Canadians being there for each other throughout this pandemic, and this must continue. In many communities around the world, elders are celebrated, they are seen as the head of their family and their knowledge is precious. We need to do more to cherish them here in Canada.

The best classroom in the world is at the feet of an elder. Let us listen to what they have been telling us. Let us pass Bill C-12 without delay.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for the seniors who live in long-term care or in publicly funded seniors residences, generally speaking, their entire old age security and GIS go right to the facility. In what ways are seniors going to benefit from having more of the income that is given to them forwarded to the facilities? Is there any assurance that it will happen, or will it just go into the general coffers and not really provide a positive impact for residents?

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Speaker, this is a specific example. There are many other ways that people can continue to live their lives at home as well, so we are also hoping that this will support their lives so they can do what they need to and have resources to do that. Certainly there is a conversation to be had about what that looks like for those in long-term care, and I look forward to continuing that conversation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today, I have heard a number of Liberals talk about standards for long-term care. If they want to create care standards, they are going to have to put their money where their mouth is at some point.

I am not sure if my colleague realizes that the federal government covers just 22% of health care costs. The government wants to set standards, but it never increases funding. On top of all that, health care is not a federal jurisdiction.

Do the Liberals not agree that the best way to help seniors is to increase health transfers to 35%?

[*English*]

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Speaker, it is important that we have these conversations in the House. We talk about jurisdiction a lot, and we have seen that there is a role for the federal government to play in ensuring that we have standards across this country that can ensure quality services for seniors no matter where they live. It is incumbent on us to work together with our provincial counterparts to ensure that the lessons learned from this pandemic specifically around long-term care are not soon forgotten.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague spoke about giving seniors the opportunity to age with dignity. I have met with many seniors in Edmonton Strathcona who speak about that very thing. They speak about wanting to age in place and wanting to ensure that the care they get when they do transition into long-term care is adequate. However, what we have seen in Alberta is a real problem with for-profit centres, which basically use a profit mandate rather than a care mandate.

Would the member support making sure that there are no dollars in long-term care and that it is, in fact, a public service that is provided? What steps would she see the government taking to ensure that seniors have the opportunity to age in place longer before they go into long-term care?

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Edmonton Strathcona. I know she cares deeply about seniors across this country and has worked very hard to see this particular bill come to fruition.

This again speaks to jurisdictional issues. When it comes to long-term care, each province and territory has its own version. In New Brunswick, we have a mix of private and public care.

I get it. We have to make sure that every dollar being spent is being used in the best capacity to really support seniors with their needs in their older years. I will use this time to give a shout-out to the Pine Grove Nursing Home in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where my grandmother is in palliative care right now. There are good examples we can point to as far as best practices go, and that

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needs to be part of the conversation with the provinces and territories as we look to ensure that standards of care are upheld across the country in long-term care.

• (1325)

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate the comments from the hon. member for Fredericton. In particular, I appreciate that she mentioned a guaranteed livable income.

I appreciate the member's advocacy for a guaranteed livable income, and would love to hear her comments on the impact of a guaranteed livable income for seniors.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Speaker, any time I can talk about a guaranteed livable income, I certainly will take the chance to. I see it a safety net that could help so many across this country, including seniors, in a really big way, as well those with disabilities. The list could go on and on.

This is something we could do. Again, I talked about the kind of collective sigh of relief across the nation for protecting our most vulnerable. We need to do that for seniors as soon as possible, and I am committed to continuing that conversation with my colleagues.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this bill, which is another case of the Liberal government trying to clean up after itself.

I will be splitting my time with the member for Elgin—Middlesex—London.

I come from the beautiful city of Abbotsford, which is nestled between majestic Mount Baker and the mighty Fraser River. We are very grateful to live in that community, but it is a community that has many seniors. In fact, my own office is in a tower that houses seniors.

Another element of Abbotsford that I am very proud of is the fact that Abbotsford is the most generous census metropolitan area in the country. Of all the 27 census metropolitan areas in this country, we are the most generous by a country mile. That is a good thing. It is a great model for other communities to emulate.

The reason I share this is that much of the generosity actually comes from the seniors in Abbotsford. These are seniors who contributed to building our country. These are seniors who today still contribute to the fabric of our nation, yet here we are. Some of these very seniors are well-to-do and live comfortable lives, but many are living on the edge of poverty. I know my Liberal colleagues are mocking us today. It is a shame that something as serious as this would be treated with such contempt by our Liberal friends across the way.

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I will say this. The seniors in my community, many of whom are on the edge of poverty, took an incredible hit from the incompetence of the current government. This is actually a story of what was intended to be something good, which was a response to the COVID pandemic. The government, stepping up and hoping to invest in the lives of Canadians and make sure that Canadians did not slip through the cracks during the pandemic, invested heavily in support programs.

When the government invested in these support programs to help Canadians through the COVID pandemic, they forgot a few things. First, they forgot that these support programs that helped Canadians had to be properly designed to make sure that Canadians who truly needed the support received the support, that fraudsters who may have wanted to apply for these benefits did not get away with it, and that people who lived outside of our country and who did not need these benefits did not qualify for them. Unfortunately, many of the programs that our Liberal friends across the way implemented had none of those safeguards. They did not have the oversight, and they did not have the scrutiny. The Liberals rammed the stuff through the House of Commons.

Again, my Liberal colleagues across the aisle are laughing. They are laughing at seniors across our country for the pain that these Liberals have caused them.

In delivering these support programs, there were design flaws. There were oversight and scrutiny problems along the way, so that people received benefits who should not have received those benefits. There were hundreds of millions of dollars going outside of our country to people who did not even have a connection to Canada, but applied and somehow qualified for these programs.

There was a second problem. The Liberals forgot that some of the most critical programs that seniors rely on in this country, such as old age security and the guaranteed income supplement, are means-tested and depend on taxable income from the previous year. Some of these seniors applied for the government support programs. They qualified for them and they received the support. After the fact, they were told that the amounts that the government had just sent them were fully taxable, and they were going to have to include them in their taxable income.

• (1330)

Of course, what happened was that vulnerable seniors who trusted the Liberal government realized they would no longer qualify for the GIS. They realized that the funds they received from the government so generously were now going to be clawed back by that very same Liberal government. Therein lies the rub. The Liberals made a mistake. In the vernacular, they screwed up.

It gets worse. The Liberal government has known for almost a year that this was a problem, and that seniors were distressed in the knowledge that this money was going to be clawed back and their ability to qualify for seniors' benefits, such as the GIS, was going to be compromised. Can colleagues imagine the distress of someone living on the poverty line who is then told they have to repay thousands of dollars to the government? These were thousands of dollars that seniors did not actually have. For a year, the government has known this and failed to act.

The Liberals failed to act for a number of reasons. First, there was the situation where Parliament could have been recalled in the fall of 2021 to deal with legislation that would fix this problem. Instead, what did they do? They called an unnecessary and expensive election that changed absolutely nothing. They still are in a minority government. Over half a billion dollars was spent on an unnecessary election, and they delayed their response to a problem they had created for seniors. The election was held. Nothing has changed. The Prime Minister could not recall Parliament right away. He took many months before he recalled Parliament.

In the meantime, seniors have been calling my office saying, "Ed, what am I going to do? How am I going to get through this? I don't have the money to repay these benefits that they are now clawing back from me. How am I going to survive? How am I going to put food on the table? How am I going to pay rent?"

This is a problem of the Liberal government's making. Here we are now, almost a year later, and what we see are government MPs giving speeches in the House, talking about how great they are and how they love seniors, and saying that this legislation is going to provide certainty for seniors across our country. The minister herself, in her responses in question period, was pretending that this was not a problem. In fact, the Liberals are doing seniors a favour with this legislation. The minister's responses have been nothing short of a word salad. I think she was hoping to create some kind of a fog that seniors in this country would not see through.

The fact is that this is a problem of the Liberal government's making. Now it is asking us, as Parliament, to fix and clean up its mess. This is symptomatic of the Liberal government: It is constantly asking Parliament to clean up after it. They ask us to get out the shovels and clean up the mess.

Canadians are getting very tired of this. I hope that Canadians who are watching today understand that the problem in the House is the Liberal government and its leader. It is the most divisive, incompetent and unethical government this country has ever seen. It is incompetent even when it comes to our seniors, of all people.

I will leave those thoughts with members and the Canadian people. I hope the Liberals learn a lesson from this. They are constantly doing this: screwing up time and again. This has to stop.

• (1335)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I assure you and the member that nobody was laughing at his comments. What we were trying to do was actually reminding the member that he voted in favour of all the measures that he is now criticizing. As a matter of fact, he did it through unanimous consent.

Government Orders

The member talked about not remembering what happened, and being surprised. Does the member not remember, back in March of 2020, when the government helped 5.4 million Canadians by putting money in their bank accounts within four and a half weeks of the WHO declaring a global pandemic? Hindsight is 20/20. Is it not great to be able to look back and be so critical? The irony in all of it is that the member voted in favour of everything he is now criticizing.

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Speaker, it is very interesting. They are mocking again. After denying it, they are mocking seniors across our country.

At no time has our Conservative—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, absolutely nobody on this side of the House is mocking seniors, and the member should—

The Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the input, but that is getting back into debate.

The hon. member for Abbotsford, please finish up the answer.

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the House, I would never mock that individual. I have great respect for him, but he is incorrect in suggesting that we did not support these benefits and then voted in favour of them. I never, in my speech, suggested that these benefits were not necessary for Canadians. In fact, I gave a speech in the House supporting these COVID benefits because they were necessary to keep Canadians afloat.

Seniors never expected that they would be betrayed and told after the fact that these benefits would be taxable, especially when they were on the cusp of poverty.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I commend my colleague from Abbotsford for his speech.

I think it is wonderful that the Conservatives are stepping up for seniors. Finally. The Bloc Québécois was starting to feel a bit lonely in calling on the government to do something for seniors.

The member for Abbotsford was a member of the government in 2012 when Prime Minister Harper decided that only seniors aged 67 and older would be eligible for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. Now, the Conservatives are criticizing the Liberal government for creating two classes of seniors by supporting only seniors aged 75 and older.

Have my colleague's opinions evolved over the years and does he now think that seniors need their pension and, possibly, the GIS, once they turn 65? Does he also agree that it is unfair for the Liberal government to create two classes of seniors by supporting only seniors aged 75 and over?

[*English*]

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Speaker, I am going to have to take issue with the suggestion by the member that somehow Conservatives do not support seniors.

In fact, I would remind that member that it was a Conservative member of Parliament, the member for Sarnia—Lambton, who brought forward a bill to protect seniors' pensions against insolven-

cy, against bankruptcy, against the big corporate raiders coming along, bankrupting a company and then leaving seniors out to dry. It is the Conservative opposition in this House that is stepping up and standing up for seniors to make sure that they have the pensions they deserve and have paid into.

• (1340)

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also want to echo how great it is to hear Conservatives talk about supporting seniors, particularly those who live on and below the poverty line, which is an absolute shame in a country as wealthy as Canada.

However, when this member was in government, it was the former Conservative government that engaged in a full war on seniors, pushing back benefits like the OAS and GIS to the age of 67, truly a shocking reproach towards our seniors who have helped build this country. We judge by what they did in power rather than by the words we are hearing right now.

Is it not time to urgently support seniors? When will the Conservatives get with the program on that?

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what the member meant when she said, “get with the program on that,” whatever “that” is.

We have been consistent on this side of the House in supporting seniors and speaking up on behalf of seniors. Throughout this whole pandemic, it has been Conservatives that have been pushing the Liberal government to step into the breach and to support the seniors who are vulnerable across our country. We will continue to do that.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am so glad to be in the House today to talk about this important motion. We are talking about the guaranteed income supplement and what we need to do to ensure that seniors can make it through life in Canada right now. One of the greatest jobs I had before becoming a member of Parliament was being a constituency assistant for 11 years for Joe Preston, the member for Parliament for Elgin—Middlesex—London. He was a nice guy.

For 11 years, I was able to work with him and some of the things I worked on were cases for the Canada Revenue Agency, Service Canada, foreign affairs, Passport Canada and all of those things. One of the most important things I did with the customer service we provided was to sit down with the constituents who would come into our office. They would tell us they needed to apply for something, they were only bringing in \$700 for their pension and they got a little top-up from their old age security pension, but they did not have any money and their cost of living was much higher than what they received. I had the opportunity to work with seniors in my community in Elgin—Middlesex—London before entering this place for 11 years and to understand the struggles that our seniors are going through.

I look at the experience that I had from 2004 to 2015 and recognize that times have changed greatly.

Government Orders

I want to go back to looking at why people get the guaranteed income supplement in the first place. These are our seniors who are over the age of 65 and are not making enough money to pay their bills. They are looking for a little extra because the cost of living continues to rise. They are, in many cases, on fixed incomes. They may have some annuities and they may have things like that. Many times they know that, at the end of the month, on the third day, on the last business day of the month, they are going to receive their old age security, their CPP and the top-up of their GIS, if they are low-income.

I know at the beginning of this pandemic, like all of the members in the House, we had phone calls from everybody. There were phone calls coming from small businesses. There were parents calling, who needed to go to work and there was no place to put their child. There were a lot of things happening at that time. It was important that we worked along with the government to find resolutions and to find solutions for seniors who were having a very difficult time and for people across the country who were having a very difficult time.

Just last year, of course, the government continued to talk about how they gave every senior \$500. Well, it was great, because on behalf of my campaign, I would like to thank the many people who said they did not need that money. This was a universal input. They said they did not need the money and they gave it to my campaign or gave it to charities.

However, what is important here is that there are seniors who, from cheque to cheque, from month to month, know what their incomes are going to be but they do not know what to expect from their costs. A lot of this comes from the cost of inflation.

Anyone who knows me, they know I am a mom of five, and they know I love my mom and dad. My dad is one of the most inspirational people I have in my life. The thing I talk about with my dad is the cost of groceries. My dad will go through the flyer, each and every week, and will say to me, "No Frills has a ham on sale and the eye of round is on sale at A&P." This is what my dad does. When I know the prices have gone up, I know this because my dad, my mister shopper guy, my 85-year-old senior father who goes out for groceries, tells me that things have changed.

I want to share with the House, before I get into my dad's grocery bill, a couple of scenarios that were brought into my office. Jenna in my office has been there since 2015 and has worked with seniors for years, so when she calls me, panicking, that means that there is a problem. She calls panicking because she knows there are seniors who are not paying their mortgage, seniors who are not able to pay their rent that month and seniors who cannot afford their bills or their medications. That is because of what has happened today with GIS.

I have heard a lot of this conversation and I will let everyone know, as a constituency assistant, I always believe there is a solution.

Last year, when we were talking about this, my solution was to call the Minister of Seniors, where I was truly scuffed off. I explained to her my experience. I explained to her what I had seen.

Basically, I was told that it would all work out. It has not worked out and I want to read these scenarios to the House.

Scenario one is a lady in her seventies who never retired and continued to work until the pandemic hit and her place of employment closed permanently. She went on CERB through Service Canada and collected the full amount. She continuously looked for work and switched from CERB to CRB, but due to her age she was unable to find employment. She thought she was being responsible and used the CRB to pay down her line of credit that she has. She was officially retired, as it looked like she was going to have to be. She also had fewer monthly expenses. Because she was unable to option off her CRB, she was no longer entitled to the GIS and her monthly income was approximately \$1,100 a month.

● (1345)

Let us talk about \$1,100 a month. I can tell everyone that if they want to rent an apartment in my town, it is \$1,200 a month. If they want to rent one in London, it is \$1,200 a month. If they want to rent a bedroom where people are sharing amenities, maybe it is \$700. However, most seniors do not have that flexibility. We are asking a senior who is making \$1,100 a month to feed themselves, to pay rent and everything else, and it is all okay. The Minister of Seniors knew this last year when I was talking to her and now, seven months later, a person making \$1,100 is still making \$1,100.

It is great that we are pushing through this legislation and I know we need to do this, but we have to reflect on how we got here in the first place. The government was not listening when it knew this problem was going on last year. The member for Abbotsford talked about that. He talked about our bringing this up for a year. That means the seniors I am talking about in my scenarios, each and every month, are having to choose between food or electricity. That is what seniors are having to do.

The second scenario I would like to mention is a gentleman who was not entitled to CRB and received \$14,000 in 2020. He is now trying to live on approximately \$1,100. The province is now trying to assist him as he can barely pay for his rent with that income. We have looked at some different scenarios. Let us say someone is working at Walmart and they made \$500. They were being given a \$2,000 CRB payment; we know that. Do people really expect these seniors were thinking that the government was going to turn around and say, "Hey, we are cutting off the GIS and this is taxable."

Yes, all the parliamentarians here, the 338 people who would have voted to ensure that seniors and Canadians had these benefits were going to do that. We knew that there was going to be mistakes, but it has been almost two years and the mistake has not been fixed. That is the problem here. When the member for Abbotsford is talking about the mistakes that are being made and what the Liberals did, let us reflect on the fact that they had time to change what they were doing and for months they sat on their hands while seniors were going without. That is the bottom line.

Let us now talk about that \$1,100 and what it can actually afford. I want to talk to members about the fact that seniors really do not have a lot of money to pay for these expenses. The cost of living continues to go up.

I want to talk about my dad. My dad is probably watching today because that is what he does when he is 85 years old. He sits in his house with my mom, who is 81. They go out, they get groceries, they go for a drive and they do simple things like that, and, especially during COVID, they have not had a lot of opportunities to go and enjoy life. What my parents do enjoy is grocery shopping. What they do enjoy is looking at the prices of food. What I did was I looked at the cost of living and I looked at the costs that were being given by Stats Canada. I want to talk about my parents' shopping list, comparing it from March 2020 to December 31, 2021.

Corn Flakes have gone up from \$5.88 to \$6.67. It is a dollar and that does not seem like a big deal, but a dollar makes a big difference when someone does not have a lot of dollars. Bacon has gone from \$6.96 to \$8.66. To all of those out there, I will be honest, I love listening to Liberals talk about bacon. If people want to eat bacon, then go for it. They have the right to do so. It is their choice.

Gas is the one thing that really concerns me. Gas was \$0.91 going into this pandemic in March 2020. In December, it was \$1.41. Today, in the city of St. Thomas and in the city of London, it is \$1.57. If my father wanted to take my mom out for a drive to go get a bacon sandwich, they cannot afford to do it very much anymore.

I think of my parents as being frugal and safe with their money. They are brilliant when it comes to finances. I think of the seniors who are living alone, who are looking for help and who are living in isolation. I think of those seniors who may not have someone else's income to help them. I think of the seniors who need somebody to come and clean their house or who need extra things like PPE. None of that is available to them.

I would like to say to the government that of course I am going to support the change to the GIS. Of course, I supported these things coming out, but the government should have fixed it last year. Please get back on track so the future generation is not lost like the Liberals have done to this generation.

• (1350)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I see a consensus forming. The member talks about our seniors in a manner in which I often talk about our seniors. We value their contributions from the past and the many contributions yet to come. One of the issues is ensuring they have disposable income. That is why we created many of the programs we put in place, many of which were supported by the Conservatives. Yes, at times, there are mistakes that do need to be corrected and that is what this legislation does. It is an important piece of legislation.

To be clear, the member supports the legislation, but she would also like to see it pass this week too, I would think.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, I would have liked to see that passed last year.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, from my Conservative colleague's speech, it is clear she is sincere and sensitive to the needs of seniors. She described their financial struggles in great detail.

Government Orders

There is ample evidence that seniors are getting poorer, which is appalling to the Bloc Québécois. That is why we have repeatedly urged the government to significantly increase old age security and the guaranteed income supplement for seniors 65 and up. This is the federal government's most important social safety net program.

Does my colleague agree with our proposal to be proactive and increase old age security at 65?

[English]

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, this is one of the strongest programs that we have in our social safety net. When we know that the cost of living has gone up to 5% but seniors are only getting an increase of 2.8%, of course it has to be increased. They cannot pay their bills. Until this government gets inflation under control, I think that we need to look at all of this.

When we are talking about seniors' programs, we need to look at the important bill put forward by the member for Sarnia—Lambton. We need to look at RIFs and RSPs. There are a lot of things that we need to look at, because every senior has individual needs, and that program needs to be solid.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, the member for Elgin—Middlesex—London talked about her parents watching, and she must be very proud. They have a wonderful daughter, and I always appreciate her interventions.

However, I have an issue the member's party when it comes to seniors. Conservative members voted against really important NDP proposals, such as pharmacare to help seniors make sure they get access to medicine, dental care for those who cannot afford it and a guaranteed annual livable income so that no senior is living in poverty. They even voted against taxing CEOs and closing tax loopholes or tax havens for the super-wealthy, measures that would pay for those programs.

Eleanor Joy, from Parksville, is telling me that the clawback has made it impossible for her to be able to buy food plus pay for medicine plus pay her rent. I ask the member if she would agree that the government should be paying for the pandemic recovery off the backs of billionaires and not off the poorest of Canadians, especially our seniors.

• (1355)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, there are so many parts to that question that I would like to answer.

However, the member talked about taxing the wealthy more. I believe that through this pandemic, we did see a recovery take shape. We did see the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. That is absolutely what we have seen today, but I think that right now what we need to do is give greater opportunities.

Statements by Members

We also need to look at our health care system and recognize that what we thought was a great system failed us, so what can we do to ensure that we have a universal health care system that works for all Canadians from coast to coast to coast?

Mr. Chris Bittle (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am looking forward to taking us into question period and being here today to talk about Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act.

It is interesting that the hon. member for Abbotsford used most of his speech to criticize what he called mocking, none of which was happening on this side, but is using this opportunity to heckle me. It is just shameful. It is unbelievable.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Chris Bittle: Mr. Speaker, it seems I am very popular today with respect to the warm welcome I am receiving from the opposition. I thank my hon. colleagues. It is wonderful.

This bill would exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement or allowance benefits beginning in July 2022.

Allow me to explain. The Canada emergency response benefit was put into place very quickly in 2020, voted in by unanimous consent from the members here, to help people avoid the catastrophic income loss of COVID-19. The unprecedented pandemic required an unprecedented response. The CERB and the Canadian recovery benefit did just that. They allowed Canadians who did not know what was next to not have to worry or choose between a roof over their head or putting food on their table. These benefits are now having an impact on some vulnerable seniors.

I forgot to say that I would like to share my time with the hon. member for Kitchener Centre.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Chris Bittle: Mr. Speaker, it is heartening to hear the members of the opposition wanting me to go the full 20 minutes, but I will share my time.

The GIS is an income-tested benefit for low-income seniors who receive the old age security pension. Every July, an individual's entitlement to the GIS or the allowance is reassessed, based on the individual's income, or the combined income if it is a couple, as reported on their income tax return. The Income Tax Act defines pandemic relief benefits as taxable income, which means they are also considered as income when someone's entitlement to the GIS or allowance benefits is being determined. Unfortunately, that means that some GIS or allowance recipients may be facing lower benefit payments because of the income they received from these pandemic benefits. This is the unprecedented aftermath of an unprecedented response to an unprecedented crisis. We need to move quickly to resolve this situation.

It seems my time is up for the moment. I hope to come back to finish my speech after question period.

Some hon. members: No, no. More, more.

The Speaker: “For the moment” being the operative words, the hon. member will have seven minutes and 30 seconds remaining when we resume debate.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

ERNA PARIS

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I am speaking in memory of Erna Paris. I did not know her, but I can continue to learn from her writing and her inspiration even after she has passed away. Today we celebrate her life.

She was a mother and she was dearly loved. She was a writer and a thinker. She did not just educate people; she also inspired. In fact, one of her proudest moments was that her book *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History* was cited as the inspiration for a motion brought in this place to have an apology to indigenous people for the residential schools history. She was a member of the Order of Canada. She passed away recently, but we can all continue to learn and be inspired by her voice.

Rest in peace, Erna Paris.

* * *

● (1400)

TERRY MUISE

Mr. Chris d'Entremont (West Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Wednesday the community of Yarmouth in the riding of West Nova lost a beloved citizen, our friend Terry Muise, at the young age of 62.

On the day of his passing, EHS paramedics, Yarmouth Regional Hospital ER and hospital staff, police officers, firefighters, friends and family gathered outside his home to pay tribute and honour his memory.

Terry was a father, a husband, a brother, a friend, a colleague and a well-respected paramedic who went above and beyond his passion to serve his community for well over 44 years.

Those who had the opportunity to meet Terry would agree with me that he was such a kind-hearted soul that he had a heart at least 10 times larger than Nova Scotia itself.

Whether he was talking about his visits to Graceland as Elvis Presley's biggest fan or about a Red Sox game, he was truly a generous and enjoyable person one would want to be around.

One minute is way too short to honour Terry's memory, but I still wanted to honour him one last time.

To his friends, to his wife Sandra, and to his two sons, Luke and Matt, I would like to once again offer my deepest sympathy and condolences. Terry will be greatly missed. May he rest in peace.

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN NEWMARKET— AURORA

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in honour of Black History Month, I am proud to rise today to speak on two principled and influential groups in my community of Newmarket—Aurora.

Throughout the last two years, we have seen how COVID-19 has exposed systemic barriers for the Black and racialized community across Newmarket—Aurora and indeed throughout Canada. Both the Aurora Black Community, or ABC, and the Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association, or NACCA, are leaders for both educating and sharing while creating an inclusive and connected community.

This month, as we rejoice in their virtues as allies and leaders, I want to thank ABC and NACCA for their continued and ongoing contributions to our community of Newmarket—Aurora. From each corner of our community, ABC and NACCA have been trailblazers for enacting real and permanent change in Newmarket and Aurora.

* * *

[Translation]

RESOURCE CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eyou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, La Ressource is an organization in my riding that does amazing work helping people with disabilities maintain everything they have achieved and take full advantage of the financial resources available to them.

To keep providing these services, La Ressource needs money and relies on various funding sources, including donations. All year long, it organizes fundraisers and events. Fortunately, the organization can count on people like Pierre Tremblay to help reach its goal.

A few weeks ago, Mr. Tremblay kicked off an event in collaboration with Domaine du Lac Parent, a virtual fishing tournament to raise money for La Ressource's telethon. People from all over Abitibi—Témiscamingue and elsewhere were invited to send in a photo of their catch for a chance to win a prize.

In closing, I am appealing to the generosity of people in my region. I invite them to donate to La Ressource in honour of its 25th anniversary so it can help as many people as possible.

* * *

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison after 27 years of incarceration.

We all know why he was robbed of much of his life. We all know that he sacrificed so much so that millions of people oppressed by a

Statements by Members

deeply racist and inhumane regime could enjoy the same rights as the minority that was crushing them.

[English]

What Nelson Mandela accomplished for his country, on an international level as well, was monumental. However, his work is not finished. Now, more than ever, when misinformed explanations try to muffle reality and when some look away from the truth because it makes them uncomfortable, we should actively continue our work to combat racism and discrimination in its various forms.

Precious moments of our lives pass us by. The hours turn into days, weeks and months, and opportunities to seek one another out pass us by as well. We lose that possibility to love one another, to get to know each other and maybe create a lifetime of beautiful memories. In the end, when we have lived our lives, these are the only things that will matter.

* * *

● (1405)

NEW BLUEBERRY RIVER FIRST NATION CHIEF

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, I congratulate a very dedicated member of northern B.C., Judy Desjarlais. Last month, Judy was elected chief of the Blueberry River First Nation and just yesterday served her very first day as chief. Judy said she is dedicated to “bringing unity back” and “building a prosperous future for her nation”.

For almost two decades, Judy and her husband Boomer have owned Top Notch Oilfield Contracting, providing good jobs and opportunities throughout our area. Judy has been a very vocal advocate for her community and for developing our abundant natural resources in northern B.C. She is a busy mom to Trinity, Angel and Dawson, and deeply loves and respects her 81-year-old granny, Elder May Dominic.

We all congratulate Judy on her election, and I look forward to working with her. May God continue to bless Judy and guide her, as the mantle of leadership at the Blueberry is placed on her very capable shoulders. May Judy lead on.

* * *

EMERGENCIES ACT

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the past few weeks have made clear that our democracy can be, and is being, threatened. Constituents are rightly asking what the federal government is doing on their behalf.

Statements by Members

The invocation of the Emergencies Act is an extraordinary measure, but one that is justified by the current circumstances. Certain extra powers will be given to the federal government so that it can help bring the crisis to an end. These powers will be time-limited and subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Crucially, the military will not play an enforcement role.

I know that constituents want to help counter extremism because the government cannot solve this on its own. To them, I say do not despair. They could volunteer for a local non-profit focused on a cause they care about, condemn hate and the mistreatment of journalists, speak up against misinformation, join a political party that best reflects their values, volunteer for a political candidate they believe in and, most of all, show kindness. Kindness builds trust, and trust between citizens is what ultimately holds democracy together.

* * *

COVID-19 PROTESTS

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to address something that is affecting all Canadians. My riding of Kitchener South—Hespeler is home to two Toyota plants that directly employ over 5,000 employees. The situation at the Ambassador Bridge had a direct impact on the many constituents in my riding who work in the auto sector, when the plants were forced to close for several days.

Blockades in cities and at border crossings have disrupted the lives of families across the country. I have heard from constituents in my riding of Kitchener South—Hespeler, thousands of whom were sent home from work as a direct result of the blockades. This is hurting our neighbours, crippling the manufacturing industry, disrupting the supply chain and making life even harder for all Canadians, who have already gone through so much.

I encourage and ask that all levels of government continue to work together on the current situation at our border crossings and allow Canadians to return to work.

* * *

LYTTON DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, almost eight months ago, Canadians watched in horror as a devastating wildfire destroyed Lytton. Sadly, there are still no permits issued to rebuild homes or businesses. We are still waiting on debris removal. Residents are still waiting to hear if the land they once called home is ready to rebuild on. Many are worried that the living expenses covered by their insurance companies and the Red Cross will run out before construction begins.

The municipality itself faces the onerous task of replacing its records lost in the fire. Today, it is still lacking electricity, water, wastewater, telecommunications and even a reliable post office.

I would like to recognize the B.C. government's \$8.3 million in funding, but more needs to be done. Lytton needs help. The village cannot wait any longer. My constituents cannot wait any longer. We need to return the community to the people who made Lytton what it was.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the 34th anniversary of the Sumgait pogrom, which took place in February, 1988, when a large number of Armenians were subjected to mass killings and persecution by Azerbaijani forces as a result of their aspiration to live freely and with dignity.

• (1410)

[Translation]

Many residents of Laval—Les Îles remember these horrific acts and are disheartened that the same politics of hate and perception continue to haunt the Armenian people to this day. Armenia and Artsakh continue to face endless aggression from Azerbaijan, and many of their military members remain illegally detained as prisoners of war.

[English]

I am confident that through multilateralism, Canada will continue to bring its constructive input to the peaceful and fair resolution of this conflict, while ensuring that Armenians and other minorities live peacefully, free of hate and discrimination.

* * *

CANADIAN OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY

Mr. Len Webber (Calgary Confederation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, hard-working Canadians are frustrated with the Liberal government, and rightfully so. We see full oil tankers coming in on the east coast from dictatorships, from human rights abusers and from those who have no respect for the environment. However, our ethically produced, environmentally responsible, job-creating Alberta oil is blocked from getting to a market.

Canada is blessed with the third-largest proven oil reserves on the planet. We have among the toughest environmental standards and employment standards. We have the foundation to be an energy-independent country, with enough left over to export. That is why it is so unacceptable that Canada imports energy from 114 other countries.

It is time for the Liberal government to end energy imports. It is time for the Liberal government to support Canada's energy independence. It is time for the Liberal government to support Canadians. Annabelle, loud and proud.

SASKATCHEWAN ACT

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, my Conservative caucus colleagues and I had the distinct privilege of carrying through our motion to review and amend our Canadian Constitution.

By unanimously removing a long-standing tax provision that granted special treatment to a large corporation, all members of the House played a critical role in opening up and fixing that error in our Constitution. Although not necessarily a headline-grabbing initiative, removing red tape and unfair provisions of our Constitution is an important task, and part of the responsibility our constituents have entrusted us with in sending us all here.

Tensions have been running high in the House for weeks as we debate issues that are important and have a direct impact on the future of all Canadians. Given the fraught environment we currently find ourselves in, the rarity of finding unanimous consent on any issue is not lost on me. I thank members of the House, especially my 13 Saskatchewan Conservative colleagues, for the show of unity in getting this important work done.

We will always be on Saskatchewan's side. After all, if we do not respect the Constitution, do we have respect for anything?

* * *

NATIONAL FLAG OF CANADA DAY

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I proudly salute the national flag of Canada. It was 57 years ago that our beloved flag was raised on Parliament Hill for the first time. This enduring symbol represents our core national values of democracy and justice.

In my life, and in my time in public service, I have seen the high regard Canadians and people around the globe have for our flag. I have had the honour of joining countless citizenship ceremonies over the years, where new and born Canadians took immense pride both in our flag and in being part of our broader Canadian family.

Today, I encourage all Canadians to proudly display the flag: the iconic and internationally recognizable maple leaf that symbolizes Canada, the land and its people.

[Translation]

Canada's national flag symbolizes hope and prosperity, as well as peace, tranquillity and neutrality.

I wish all Canadians a happy Flag Day.

* * *

[English]

WILLARD GALLIC SR.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Nuu-chah-nulth people lost a hero last fall. Willard Gallic Sr. was a respected elder of the Tseshaht First Nation. He passed at the age of 81, following a life of joy and accomplishment.

He dedicated his life to standing up for Nuu-chah-nulth rights, treaty negotiations and language and culture. He worked on the docks and was an active member of Local 503 of the International

Statements by Members

Longshoremen's Union, becoming the first indigenous person to be elected as president of their local and eventually international vice-president.

I met Willard when he invited me to a reclaiming lost souls for residential school survivors ceremony in 2019. On that day, he told us the residential school was put on Tseshaht land without the permission of his people, but he called for a new beginning. "We want to set souls free. We want to send them home," he said. The Indian agent had come for six-year-old Willard in 1946, but his dad stood firm and Willard was not taken. "'You are not taking him!'" Willard said as he told the story of his dad confronting the agent, "and my mom backed him up." It was an act of courage that shaped the life of *qiiqiiqiy'a*, a hero to his people. May he rest in peace.

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● (1415)

[Translation]

THE PATRIOTES

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today we mark a sad anniversary. On February 15, 1839, the last six of the 12 leaders of the Patriotes, a national liberation movement, were hanged at the Pied-du-Courant prison. The Patriotes were fighting for collective rights, democracy and equality of peoples.

I believe it is our duty to defend the legacy of the Patriotes, a legacy that also belongs to my political family and all Quebeckers, because their history is closely linked to the history of my riding, Terrebonne.

It was in Terrebonne that the first demonstration for the 92 resolutions was held. It was in Terrebonne that a peace treaty was signed in November 1838 between the Loyalists and the Frères Chasseurs, a peace treaty that was later broken by the British authorities. The Patriote flag that I am proudly wearing is not just a symbol of rebellion. It symbolizes the wish of a people to choose their own destiny. To be a Patriote is not just to be a rebel, but to believe in democracy.

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OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last night, an Olympic record was broken at the Beijing Olympics when the Canadian long track speed skating team won the gold medal.

I would like to congratulate Valérie Maltais, Isabelle Weidemann and Ivanie Blondin for this spectacular performance. This trio has great chemistry, and they are fun to watch.

In particular, I would like to congratulate Valérie Maltais, the pride of La Baie. Her Olympic career has been extraordinary: She has participated in four Olympics, won two medals in two different disciplines, and was the third athlete in the world to win Olympic medals in two speed skating disciplines.

Oral Questions

That is impressive. This golden prize is the result of all the sacrifices she and her family have made over the past 15 years. Her perseverance and determination have made her the athlete she is today. She is a role model for youth across the country.

I again congratulate Valérie and her parents, Martine and Gérard. The entire region is proud of her. Long live the Saguenay speed skating tradition.

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[English]

WENDELL WIGLE

Mr. James Maloney (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honour Wendell Wigle, who sadly passed in January. He proudly hailed from Windsor, graduated from Osgoode Hall in 1959 and began a career in law that he dearly loved. I met him and had the honour of working with him at Hughes Amys.

The man, or “W”, as he was known, was a giant. He was an icon: intimidating and inspirational at the same time. Most of all, he was a true gentleman of the profession. He was a mentor to several generations of lawyers, myself included. A top litigation lawyer appointed Queen's Counsel in 1972, Wendell was respected by all. He generously shared his knowledge and wisdom both in teaching and serving as president of the Advocates' Society and many other organizations.

Wendell was kind and giving. He was a loving husband, stepfather, grandpa and friend. Wendell will be deeply missed, but not forgotten. Rest in peace, Mr. Wigle.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Prime Minister invoked the Emergencies Act. Twenty-four hours in, and there are more questions than answers. There are questions about whether this is justified, questions around if the criteria has been met, and questions around what this means to Canadians' rights and freedoms.

Parliamentary approval is required in order for the Prime Minister to use this unprecedented sledgehammer. Can the Prime Minister tell us when Parliament will be debating this? Will it be coming to us on Friday? Does he expect that we will look at it Friday, but then rise, take a week off and not actually deal with this until March?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, after discussions with cabinet and caucus, consultations with the premiers of all provinces and territories, and conversations with opposition leaders, we decided to invoke the Emergencies Act to supplement provincial and territorial capacity to address the blockades and occupations.

I want to be very clear. The scope of these measures are time-limited and geographically targeted. They are reasonable and proportionate to the threats they are meant to address. They are to be

fully compliant with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to reassure all Canadians that this is the right thing to move forward with.

● (1420)

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I had a very simple question for the Prime Minister, and he was not able to answer it.

It would appear this could be more political drama for the Prime Minister. He name-calls people he disagrees with. He wedges; he divides; he stigmatizes. In spite of all of his failures, Coutts border has cleared. Windsor has opened up. Provinces and police are doing their jobs, and blockades are starting to come down.

However, the Prime Minister thinks that now is the time to use this extreme measure and invoke the Emergencies Act. Is it not true that the Prime Minister's actions could serve to actually make things worse and not make things better?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is about keeping Canadians safe, protecting their communities and neighbourhoods, and ensuring jobs and our economy—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: I am afraid I am going to have to interrupt the Right Hon. Prime Minister. I am trying to hear the answer, and I am having a very difficult time. There is some shouting going on.

I am going to have to ask hon. members to keep it down. If you hear something you do not agree with, talk amongst yourselves, with someone next to you. You do not have to shout it out to the person across the floor.

The Right Hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Speaker, you are absolutely right, this is a time for responsible leadership, not crass partisanship.

The situation requires additional tools not held by other federal, provincial or territorial law. It is what responsible leadership requires. These measures must be, and will be, compliant with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We will always defend the rights of Canadians to peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression, but these blockades need to end. Unfortunately Conservative politicians continue to encourage the leaders of these blockades.

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HEALTH

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us get down to the basics of what this is really about.

Oral Questions

This is about the Prime Minister's ideological attachment to keeping COVID restrictions and mandates. Sixty-three percent of Canadians want the restrictions and mandates to end. Conservatives presented a motion yesterday simply asking for a plan, but the Prime Minister is in denial and is ignoring the science. He might as well be back at the cottage, because he is doing nothing productive or constructive to help this situation.

Can the Prime Minister tell Canadians when he will end the divisive, outdated and unscientific mandates and restrictions?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, like I said, this is a time for responsible leadership to end these blockades. Unfortunately, the Conservatives continue to play partisan games.

The Conservative member for Provencher, just yesterday—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: I am sorry, but I am going to have to interrupt the Prime Minister for a second. Heckling is usually throwing one comment out, and hopefully it is a clever one, although not necessarily. However, what I am hearing is someone bullying and trying to drown someone out. That is not heckling. I would like everyone to take a deep breath.

I will let the Prime Minister start from the top, please.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, we see that even in a moment of extremely challenging times, when people are moving forward with responsible leadership and responsible tools, the Conservatives themselves cannot help but play crass political games and divide.

The Conservative member for Provencher, just yesterday, embraced the leaders of this blockade and amplified their cause. The Conservative member for Yorkton—Melville said this weekend that the blockaders who ripped down the fencing around our National War Memorial are patriots. The Conservative leadership contender from Carleton continues to say he is proud—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Louis-Saint-Laurent.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for 17 days, the Prime Minister did not lift a finger to help with what was happening here in Ottawa. At one point, he insulted those who were not listening to him and who did not share his point of view. As a result, yesterday, the Prime Minister invoked a law that has not been used in 50 years.

He said that he consulted the premiers. That is not true. He actually just informed the premiers of what was going to happen, because half of them are against this course of action. Premier François Legault made that very clear when he said that the Prime Minister of Canada was adding fuel to the fire.

Why does the Prime Minister always try to cover up his inaction?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on the contrary, from the start, we have been working responsibly with local authorities and the various levels of government to deal with these illegal blockades.

We will continue to ensure that local police have all the tools they need. That is exactly what we did yesterday, by providing additional tools that the police can use to deal with blockades and barricades.

Unfortunately, I know that Conservative politicians tend to support those who are blocking our economy and communities. We do not.

● (1425)

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the past few days, Canadians have all seen situations improve without the need for the Emergencies Act.

It happened in Ontario and in Alberta, and it could have happened here in Ottawa. Instead, the Prime Minister chose to invoke an act that has not been used in 50 years. He continues to stigmatize, divide and insult people who disagree with him, instead of trying to find a compromise.

Why does the Prime Minister refuse to listen to the Canadians who agree with his Liberal MP from Louis-Hébert and want a prime minister who can bring people together?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are tired of COVID-19 and the restrictions. They are also tired of having people blockading their streets and restricting their access to goods and services and their jobs.

That is why we had to take responsible action to enable the provinces and local authorities to keep our supply chains and streets free from illegal protests.

We will continue to be there to support law enforcement with tools that are compliant with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to protect the values and—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Beloeil—Chambly.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil—Chambly, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Ottawa has lost control over Ottawa.

Interestingly, the situation at the Ambassador Bridge was resolved without the Emergencies Act. The situation in Coutts and the weapons seizure happened without the Emergencies Act. The situation in Quebec was managed just fine without the Emergencies Act.

Yesterday the Prime Minister pledged that the measures would be geographically targeted, but that is not what the order says. Will the Prime Minister make it clear that this order does not apply to Quebec?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Emergencies Act gives police forces nation-wide more tools to respond to emergency situations like the ones we have seen across the country.

Oral Questions

True, many of the barricades in many parts of the country have been handled effectively. However, the risk remains. Local police services in Quebec and elsewhere will have additional tools if they need them.

These are responsible, proportionate measures that local police services can use if necessary.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil—Chambly, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the parties at the Quebec National Assembly do not want it. The Government of Quebec does not want it. The Bloc Québécois does not want it. I am hearing from the neighbouring benches that the people of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba do not want it.

Is the Prime Minister shopping around his “just watch me” moment by imposing a law in Quebec against Quebec?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Emergencies Act applies to illegal blockades and occupations that may arise anywhere across the country.

It is a response that we have brought forward that is reasonable, proportionate, time-limited and geographically targeted, and still protects the values and freedoms in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

We are reacting in a responsible manner, and we will continue to be there for Canadians who are suffering.

[*English*]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sadly, we are in this crisis because we have seen a failure to take the crisis seriously at all levels of government. Now we are seeing indigenous and racialized people look at the double standard of how the convoy is being treated compared to those protestors. We also have deeply disturbing reports of military and police personnel who have expressed sympathy and support for the convoy.

Will the Prime Minister provide assurances in the House that the police will use the powers given to protect people and not support the occupation?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the measured and reasonable use of the Emergencies Act that we announced yesterday gives specific, time-limited, proportional tools to police of local jurisdictions, and their partners, to ensure these illegal blockades end, and make sure that people, who have now been fully heard by all Canadians, choose to go home. These are the things that Canadians expect from their orders of government.

I can say that we have worked extremely closely across orders of government with all the different police of jurisdictions to ensure that Canadians get their streets and their lives back.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is a national crisis, and we have seen the impact it is having. Weapons were found in Coutts, and the situation in Ottawa is deteriorating. It has become quite clear that it is time to put an end to the occupation. It is also clear that there is no occupation in Quebec.

Is the Prime Minister prepared to make the commitment that the emergency measures will not be applied where they are not needed?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Emergencies Act provides additional tools for governments and local police forces supported by the RCMP if needed.

We will not impose measures anywhere in the country where they are not needed. These are tools that local police are free to use at their discretion, but it is a matter of ensuring that everyone has the tools they need to end these illegal blockades.

[*English*]

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the invocation of the Emergencies Act for the first time in Canadian history is a damning indictment on the failure of the Prime Minister to address the situation. The Prime Minister once said, “when a government asks its citizens to give up even a small portion of their liberty...it is not [simply] enough...to say: ‘trust us.’ That trust must be earned. It must be checked. And it must be renewed.” Those were his words.

Canadians do not trust the Prime Minister. When will he stop undermining Canadians’ rights and start renewing Canadians’ trust?

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians can trust that this government will always follow the science and the best evidence to get us out of this pandemic. That includes getting vaccinated.

Contrary to what my colleague says, this is an illegal blockade. This illegal blockade is not about the vaccines or the mandates. It is about a very small, organized group that is trying to upend our way of life. Now, we have made progress. We have seen the Ambassador Bridge reopen, we have seen Coutts reopen and we have seen Surrey reopen. Yes, yesterday, we invoked the Emergencies Act so we can secure that progress and give law enforcement all the tools they need.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we shall see if the Prime Minister answers this one. At every opportunity he has had to de-escalate the situation in Ottawa and around Canada, he has chosen to hide, confront and escalate. His divisive conduct has been a lesson in abject failure. Blockades should come down. They are already coming down across this country, but now the Prime Minister has invoked the Emergencies Act to punish Canadians who, in his words, hold “unacceptable views”.

Why is the Prime Minister punishing Canadians for their political views?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was not long ago that the former Conservative leader, the member for Regina—Qu’Appelle with the Conservative Party, said:

These protesters, these activists, may have the luxury of spending days at a time at a blockade, but they need to check their privilege.... They need to check their privilege, and let people whose jobs depend on the railway system, small businesses and farmers do their jobs.

What have they said now, in this context, from the beginning, as swastikas and Confederate flags flew? They went out and they gave out coffee. They took pictures. They have been absolutely the opposite of responsible leadership. Instead of de-escalating, they escalated at every turn.

• (1435)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we all want to resolve the impasse in front of Parliament in Ottawa, and we want it to end quickly and peacefully. Because this government failed to act earlier, now it has to play catch-up and is invoking the Emergencies Act. The government should have emulated the provincial premiers, who managed to control the protests without any special legislation.

Will the Prime Minister commit to not using any powers under the Emergencies Act in the many provinces that oppose it?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was the former leader of the Conservative Party, currently the member for Regina—Qu'Appelle, who once said that it was completely unacceptable for protests to block essential infrastructure. What is the Conservative Party doing today? It is out there taking photos, tweeting and encouraging protesters, which is irresponsible, considering the protests are costing billions of dollars. It is completely irresponsible.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is the government that is being irresponsible. I will repeat my question, and I invite the leader to listen.

Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Alberta and Quebec no longer want health measures. What is the government waiting for? It must commit to not forcing the provinces to impose health measures.

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are all responsible. Each member is responsible for protecting the law and Canadians. This responsibility belongs to each member, not just to the Government of Canada and not just to this side of the House of Commons. I want to clearly state that it is time to stop tweeting and supporting the people protesting outside. The protests must come to an end. It is time to be reasonable, and it is time for the Conservative Party to act responsibly.

[*English*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Are you done now?

For two years, the Prime Minister has insisted he is making decisions—

The Speaker: I want to remind hon. members to place their questions through the Speaker.

Oral Questions

I will let the hon. member restart her question.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, you have my apologies.

For two years, the Prime Minister has insisted he is making decisions based on science. Canadians sacrificed, isolated, closed businesses and got vaccinated because experts advised that it was the safest way forward. Now those same experts say it is time to ease restrictions. Premiers are listening, but the Prime Minister believes he knows better and has invoked the emergency measures act.

Does the Prime Minister intend to force the provinces to implement measures they, and science, disagree with?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will tell members what I am done with. I am done with seeing this protest continue and these illegal actions continue, which have cost billions of dollars for businesses and have terrorized downtown residents. I am tired of seeing Conservative tweets. The member for Provencher is saying he supports it, and the member for Yorkton—Melville is saying that ripping down barricades in front of a war memorial is a patriotic act. I am watching somebody who aspires to be the leader of the Conservative Party say that what is happening outside is something he stands by.

That is enough. Please, it is time to end this. Stop supporting what is going on outside.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the rest of the world is opening up and returning to normal. Where the science supports it, the provinces are providing Canadians with hope for the first time in two years, contrary to the Prime Minister, whose lack of leadership has brought him to invoke the emergency measures act, traumatizing Canadians. He is well aware that many provinces are opposed to these measures. He is also well aware that the science says they are not needed.

Will the Prime Minister force the provinces to implement measures that they independently decided to remove?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada has one of the lowest death rates in the world and one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. It has met the challenge of this pandemic. However, what has not been met in this hour of history is that as chaos descended outside and protesters began to shut down critical infrastructure, we had lawmakers, people of the House, going out and encouraging their activity. I have to ask: If they did not have lawmakers, who are elected by constituents, encouraging their illegal actions, when would this have been over? I think it would have been over a lot sooner.

Oral Questions

• (1440)

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the Emergencies Act was not something to take lightly.

The act has in fact never been invoked since it was passed in 1988, which is before I was even born. It is the absolute last resort.

The Prime Minister said himself, and I quote: “It’s not the first thing you turn to, nor the second or the third.”

However, he did not turn to a first thing, nor a second, nor a third. He did absolutely nothing before choosing the most extreme option.

Is that truly reasonable?

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

Much progress has been made at the Surrey and Coutts border crossings, and even in Windsor, where the Ambassador Bridge is now open again. That is good for trade.

Yesterday, we invoked the Emergencies Act to be able to offer new, innovative tools to help the police put an end to this illegal blockade. That is what our government is focusing on.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will tell the House what the government did not do.

The Prime Minister has not been in contact with the occupiers on Parliament Hill since they arrived 19 days ago.

He did not send his share of the 1,800 law enforcement officers requested by the City of Ottawa.

He did not set up a crisis task force comprising all levels of government and all police forces.

He did not consult his Quebec and provincial partners before informing them of his decision to invoke the Emergencies Act.

Does the Prime Minister really believe that invoking this law should be the first real step the government takes to respond to the siege in Ottawa?

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with all due respect for my colleague, perhaps she has not been watching the news.

There are three installments of police reinforcements helping the police here in Ottawa. In addition, members of the RCMP have done a lot of good work, not just here in Ottawa but also in Windsor, where the Ambassador Bridge has now reopened.

That is good for the economy and good for everyone, but we also need to look at new tools to help the police put an end to this illegal blockade and convoy.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Premier of Quebec has been clear: Quebec does not need the Emergencies Act.

The Government of Quebec wants nothing to do with it. The Quebec National Assembly unanimously opposed having this act enforced in Quebec.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister, who said yesterday that the act would be geographically targeted, issued a decree that applies to all of Canada, including Quebec.

Why does the Prime Minister claim to consult but then decide to ignore Quebec’s demands once again? Why does the Emergencies Act apply to Quebec?

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I assure my colleague that we will continue to provide resources in accordance with the powers set out in the act.

However, yesterday we invoked the Emergencies Act. This act provides for time-limited, geographically targeted measures. These measures will be implemented with the provinces and territories, even in Quebec.

[English]

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, during a press conference, the Prime Minister said, “Some people will say that we moved too quickly. Other people will say no, we should have acted weeks ago. The reality is this: The Emergencies Act is not something to take lightly. It’s not the first thing you turn to, nor the second, nor the third.”

Can the Prime Minister please tell Canadians what first, second and third actions he took before invoking the Emergencies Act?

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, right from the outset of the blockades and the disruptions that were taking place in Ottawa, and then the blockades at our critical infrastructure at our ports of entry, our government has worked with municipal and provincial partners right across the country to ensure that they had the resources and the support they needed to keep Canadians safe—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: I am sorry, but I am going to ask the minister to repeat his answer. I am right next to the hon. member and I cannot hear because of the shouting.

I would ask the hon. minister to start from the top so that at least I can hear and hopefully the hon. member for Peterborough—Kawartha can hear the answer.

*Oral Questions***HEALTH**

● (1445)

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Speaker, I am very glad to see that the Conservatives have once again changed their position on something important. First they supported these blockades, and now that this has been recognized as a largely foreign-funded, targeted and coordinated attack on Canadian critical infrastructure, they have flip-flopped. Good for them. We are all getting used to it.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think the party that has flip-flopped is the Liberals. Last week, they said they had all the tools they needed to do this, and now we have the Emergencies Act. We were told we would never need federal vaccine mandates, but that changed. Now they are saying it is just jurisdiction. How can we trust the government?

How much authority does the Prime Minister need from the unprecedented emergency measures act? How much authority does he need?

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the evidence is clear. A largely foreign-funded, targeted and coordinated attack on critical Canadian infrastructure at our borders is hurting Canada and harming Canadians. It was equally clear that we needed to do more and would have to do what was required.

We have introduced measures that will create greater financial scrutiny and financial consequences for the people who are engaged in this criminal behaviour. The evidence of firearms at Coutts elevates the risk to Canadian security and safety, and we will do what is required to keep Canadians safe.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Friday, the Prime Minister said that the Ottawa police had enough resources to deal with the protesters, and on Monday he calls for emergency measures. Boy, that escalated quickly. He had 17 days to act, and after hiding in his cottage on his MacBook for the first week, he did nothing but divide and stigmatize.

My constituents in Saskatoon West want to know this: What changed in the Prime Minister's mind over the weekend to justify such drastic measures?

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to assure my colleague that the RCMP has been supporting and aiding the Ottawa Police Service to enforce public safety not only here in Ottawa but in Windsor, where we have reopened the Ambassador Bridge; in Coutts, where the border is reopened; and in Surrey, where the border is reopened. That is good. It is good for the economy and it is good for Canadians, who can get back to work. Yesterday's invocation of the Emergencies Act is meant to secure those gains so that we give the police all the tools they need for declaring certain zones that are adjacent to our borders and our national symbols.

It is important for the Conservatives to ask those participating in the illegal blockades to now go home.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for too long the Conservatives have been calling on the government to remove the mandatory PCR test requirements for those entering Canada. In my riding of Niagara Falls, this policy has had a devastating impact on the economy. Visits from the U.S. are nowhere near the record levels reached in 2019, and these expensive costs put on our visitors and Canadians travelling prevent them from visiting their families and loved ones.

My residents want to know this: When will all federal travel mandates be ended?

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for giving me the opportunity to share with him, all members of the House and all Canadians the great announcement that my colleagues and I made today. Today, based on the science and the public health advice we received, we eased our travel measures, including allowing incoming travellers to use an antigen test instead of the PCR test for the predeparture test.

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COVID-19 PROTESTS

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, unlawful blockades at the borders across the country, including in Windsor and Coutts, have shown that the Liberals have not done the proper, serious work necessary to ensure that our borders are protected and that the citizens who live nearby are safe. These illegal blockades have hurt every Canadian and have stopped thousands of people from getting to work and supporting their families. We have long been calling for a safe border task force. Let us reinstate cuts from CBSA intelligence and make sure that municipalities are reimbursed for their costs.

Will the Prime Minister finally listen to our calls to ensure that safe borders are going to happen, or is he going to continue to listen to extremists? The bridge might be open now, but the threat has not stopped. Will he act?

Oral Questions

• (1450)

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I share my hon. colleague's concern, and I can inform the House that I have been in routine contact with him and the municipal leaders in Windsor, including the mayor of Windsor. I have assured him that the government will continue to provide all the resources that the community of Windsor needs to keep the bridge open. That means, yes, making sure that police have the assets they need, be it tow trucks, barriers or whatever resources, so that we can keep the economy rolling and the bridge open and get Canadians back to work.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what about Alberta? Yesterday the RCMP arrested 13 extremists blockading the border at Coutts. They seized guns, ammunition and body armour, including assault weapons with thousands of rounds. This comes after convoy leaders raised millions of dollars from foreign donors, with a stated goal of overthrowing the government. While I am happy to see that the blockade appears to be ending in Alberta, the fact remains that we had an armed militia active in Alberta. This is unthinkable.

Why did it take 18 days and proof of an armed threat to make the government act and protect Albertans and Canadians?

Hon. Bill Blair (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for that very important question. I think it does reveal, and we agree, that what we have seen in Coutts, Alberta, and in a number of these illegal blockades across the country is that the threat is not yet gone. That is precisely why these measures in the Emergencies Act that we introduced yesterday will increase, for example, the financial scrutiny and consequences for these illegal acts and will also make available equipment and authorities that our law enforcement officials need to maintain and restore public safety and to protect Canada's interests.

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CHILD CARE

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since the Government of Canada announced its ambitious plan for a \$10-a-day early learning and child care system across the country, we have signed agreements with nine provinces and three territories. Already in some provinces, families are seeing a reduction in their child care fees that is making life more affordable, while those in my riding of Davenport in downtown Toronto are left wondering when Ontario is going to sign on and when they too will be able to benefit from our national child care program.

Can the minister provide any updates on the federal government's efforts to reach a child care agreement with Ontario?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from Davenport for that important question. We have now signed agreements with 12 provinces and territories across the country. That means that families from coast to coast to coast, except for in Ontario at this point in time, will have access to a 50% reduction in fees by the end of this calendar year.

I remain very optimistic that we will sign an agreement with Ontario. There is a fair deal on the table, with \$10.2 billion that will go to helping families decrease the costs of child care and make life more affordable—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Abbotsford.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are stressed. Paycheques do not buy what they used to. In fact, the costs of everything, including gasoline, groceries and housing, are at all-time highs. Families are getting left behind. Last April, I wrote to the minister to warn her of exactly that. I highlighted the dangers of uncontrolled borrowing and how excessive stimulus spending would stoke inflationary pressures. She either does not care or did not read my letter.

To the minister, what specifically is she doing to get inflation under control?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives continue, in all aspects of Canadian life, to put forward a false narrative, and the latest false narrative we have been hearing today is about the economy.

The reality is that the Canadian economy is recovering strongly from the COVID recession. In the third quarter, our GDP grew by 5.4%. That is higher than the U.S., Japan, the U.K. and Australia. When it comes to our debt-to-GDP ratio, our AAA credit rating was reaffirmed in the fall by S&P and Moody's.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we will never get inflation under control as long as the minister keeps borrowing and spending like there is no tomorrow. Not only did the minister ignore our concerns, but she also ignored the warnings of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, who questioned the wisdom of her stimulus spending, pumping more money into the economy when the cost of living is skyrocketing.

The minister is making the crisis worse. The problem is not transitory. Month by month, the inflation numbers are going up. When will the minister finally do something to protect Canadians against the skyrocketing cost of living?

• (1455)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the real question is, when will the Conservatives stick with a policy or stick with a leader?

I was on the campaign trail in the summer, and so were the members opposite. They actually campaigned on proposed government spending that was higher than our own proposal. We proposed a deficit for 2021-22 of \$156.9 billion; the Conservatives campaigned on a proposed deficit of \$168 billion. I wonder if the party of flip-flops can tell Canadians where they stand today?

* * *

TAXATION

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the excise escalator tax increase will crush the bottom line of wineries, breweries, cideries and distilleries. The excise escalator tax is automatic, and here is the kicker: It is based on the CPI index, meaning that because inflation is so high, the tax will be even higher than ever before, starting April 1.

This tax is based on inflation. It is taxing inflation, which will make inflation go up even more on these important value-added agricultural products. Will the Liberals commit to cancelling this inflationary excise tax increase?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a bit rich for the Conservatives to be talking about supporting small businesses of any kind in this country. After all, before Christmas, when we proposed absolutely essential support for small businesses to help them get through omicron, what did the Conservatives do at that crucial moment? They voted against our measures. We will take no lessons about supporting business from them.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that was not an answer to my question at all.

When Canadian winery, brewery, cidery and distillery workers and owners wake up on April 1, they will be hit with this automatic tax increase on excise, thanks to the Liberals. Of these producers, 95% are small businesses that have already been hit with payroll tax increases, labour shortages, increases in debt and slower sales due to perpetual lockdowns. Now is not the time to be increasing any taxes on small businesses, so will the Liberals cancel this bad April Fool's Day tax increase?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me tell members what hurts Canadian small businesses. What hurts Canadian small businesses is when, solely for the sake of partisan posturing, people who were elected to this House to support the small businesses in their communities oppose the small business support that small businesses themselves are calling for.

Do members know what else has hurt Canadian businesses, whether small or large? It is the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge. Members on that side of the House were giving supper and encouragement to those causing the blockade. That is unacceptable.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today, February 15, is the day Canada celebrates its maple leaf flag.

Oral Questions

What a way to celebrate. The flag is flying everywhere, more flags than ever before, in the streets of downtown Ottawa. It is being flown in demonstrations in the United States, in France, in New Zealand. The Canadian flag has literally become an international symbol of movements so unhinged as to seek the overthrow of democratically elected governments.

Does the Prime Minister realize that his reaction to the occupation of—

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for commenting on the anniversary of the maple leaf, the flag that unites every one of us, especially the proud government members from Quebec, who are also proud Canadians, but also the proud Canadians across the way. It think it is important to take this time.

I really want to express my deep gratitude to my colleague for bringing this to our attention so we can all celebrate the anniversary of the maple leaf together.

• (1500)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the government's lacklustre response so far has made it not only an international laughingstock, but also a global incitement to disorder.

When questioned yesterday about how the crisis is affecting Canada's international reputation, the Prime Minister said he thought the turning point was the blockade at the Ambassador Bridge. The actual turning point, however, was when occupiers besieged his country's capital city, eliciting no response whatsoever from him.

After 19 days of inaction, he announced plans to deploy the statutory equivalent of a nuclear weapon: the Emergencies Act.

How can he possibly be that—

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since we are still talking about the maple leaf, I think it is important to emphasize what it represents and symbolizes around the world.

It symbolizes pride, not only in being Canadian, but also in the role that Canada has played throughout history in conflict resolution and official development assistance. It represents the helping hand that all Canadians, including Quebeckers, are known for.

I thank my hon. colleague once again for reminding us that it is important to highlight and celebrate the maple leaf.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Mr. Ryan Williams (Bay of Quinte, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for weeks, Canadians looking for hope have been looking for the Prime Minister to listen to their concerns and listen to their needs as the rest of the world opens up. Instead, they heard from a Prime Minister with an escalating tone that left them feeling traumatized, stigmatized and divided. Even today he is calling out and blaming other parties, which have been listening and showing real leadership instead of pitting Canadian versus Canadian.

Why do Canadians have to pay with their freedoms to cover up for the government's failed leadership?

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think we have different definitions of "division". To me, when critical infrastructure is being blocked, when illegal protesters are outside and when we see swastikas and Confederate flags, going out and taking photographs and giving coffee is not healthy for the country.

Instead, what would be healthy is to say to those who would seek to divide us and those who would seek to exploit our differences that those kinds of radical views do not have a place in this country. It is time to go home, it is time to end this illegal activity and it is time to come together as a country.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I sent out a survey last month asking my constituents what their biggest concerns were. The cost of living was the number one issue. Rick, one of my constituents, wrote to me and stated, "food prices are out of my pay range". Inflation is at record highs due to the Liberal government's spending.

What does the Prime Minister have to say to Rick, who cannot afford to put food on his table?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government absolutely understands that affordability matters for Canadian families, and that is why we are there for them. We lowered taxes for the middle class and raised them on the wealthiest 1%. We created the Canada child benefit, which is indexed to inflation, and now a single mother with two children can receive up to \$13,600 from the CCB. The climate action incentive gives the average family in Alberta \$981 and in Saskatchewan \$961.

Mr. Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at the beginning of COVID, all the parties came together to support relief programs for Canadians and businesses. Now the economy is opening up, but the government's money printing press is still humming. Experts are now warning the government what members of this side of the House have been warning for some time: that the government's future spending plans will lead to more inflation.

Let us give the minister one last chance. When will the government rein in its out-of-control spending?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out a moment ago, it is actually the members opposite, the members of the party of

flip-flops, who campaigned on a platform that proposed higher spending in this fiscal year than we proposed. Let us remind Canadians of that. In fact, when it comes to supporting small business, it was his party, contrary to what the member just asserted, that opposed the essential supports small businesses needed that we proposed before Christmas.

* * *

*[Translation]***OFFICIAL LANGUAGES**

Mr. Taleeb Noormohamed (Vancouver Granville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, parents in my riding understand that enrolling their children in French immersion programs enriches them culturally and gives them an advantage later in life. However, because of teacher shortages and long wait lists, it is often difficult for parents to enrol their kids in French immersion.

Could the Minister of Official Languages tell the House how our government is providing more children with the opportunity to learn French?

● (1505)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Official Languages and Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my friend and colleague from Vancouver Granville for his excellent question.

Our government recognizes that providing students with the opportunity to learn French today means having more bilingual adults in the future. Budget 2021 includes investments to eliminate wait lists and to find ways to work with our provincial and territorial partners to continue to improve access to the French language.

We will continue working with communities.

* * *

*[English]***FISHERIES AND OCEANS**

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today more fishermen have been lost at sea, and our hearts go out to them.

Captains know the risk of sinking while fishing. What Adam Newell was not counting on was losing his vessel while tied up at the DFO wharf. Adam saw his vessel smash into the rocks tied to that wharf. DFO wharfs are falling into the ocean. Adam would not have lost his vessel if the government had not ignored four fishery committee reports to this House.

When will the government act so more vessels are not lost tied up at the wharf? Without wharves, we cannot fish.

Hon. Joyce Murray (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 90% of Canadian seafood goes through small craft harbours, and Canada's fish harvesters depend on these facilities to support their livelihoods.

That is why, in budget 2021, we allocated \$300 million to repair and replace these wharves over the next two years. We are working to make sure that communities have the harbours they need and that they are in good repair.

* * *

[Translation]

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Mr. Speaker, members of the Furbacco family, three future citizens of my riding, have been waiting for months to get their permanent resident cards.

While other applicants have skipped ahead of them in line, the Furbaccos have experienced unending delays now exceeding 180 days. As a result, they have been unable to renew their health insurance cards in Quebec, despite the fact that they are working and paying taxes here.

Does the government think that is right? What will it do to resolve the problem?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question. I would like to point out some of the progress that has already been made.

We are back down to a 12-month wait for spousal sponsorship applications. We have processed more than 500,000 new applications for study permits, which represents a 32% increase in our production.

It is no secret that pandemic-related closures in the world have had repercussions on our immigration system, but we will continue to invest in modernizing our system so that we have a more resilient system that continues to support our objectives to welcome more new residents—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Chatham-Kent—Leamington.

[English]

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on Friday, I asked the government if it was their intent to place public health policy in direct conflict with immigration legislation. Once their working permits expire after February 28, some guest workers are trapped in Canada without status, separated from their families and separated from work.

The Minister of Immigration's response made it clear that the government had no apparent idea of this policy conflict. When will the Liberal government treat innocent people fairly and humanely, respect them and fix this Liberal fiasco?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as always, our commitment to modernizing our immigration system is relevant.

Oral Questions

I was very happy to see that our government invested \$85 million in improving our immigration system. We are more than happy to say, as we talk about some of the success of 2021, that we welcomed more than 405,000 new permanent residents last year. We are welcoming more skilled workers and international students.

We need to do better, and we are continuing to do—

• (1510)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Northwest Territories.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Mr. Speaker, the Gladue principles, in part, recognize that there is overrepresentation of indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system and that there are complex issues based on systemic discrimination that should be considered in sentencing.

They now have been used in the courts in sentencing for quite some time. However, in the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls—

[Translation]

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Manicouagan on a point of order.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Speaker, the interpreter is saying that the sound quality is not good enough for her to interpret.

[English]

The Speaker: I am sorry, but we are not getting the interpretation. It is a technical issue. What I will do is go to the next question, and we will see if we can get that resolved.

The hon. member for Vancouver East.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Major-General Fraser said Canada pulled out of Afghanistan way too early, and 10,000 Afghan interpreters and their families have been left behind. He also said the Liberals failed to provide a whole-of-government plan to help resettle them. While our allies are on the ground helping Afghans get to safety, the current government is sending emails telling Afghans to somehow get to a third country on their own. As the situation gets worse, the government still has not provided exemptions so that NGOs can get aid to starving children.

When will the Liberals act with the urgency that the situation demands to help bring Afghans to safety?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada remains firm in its commitment to welcome 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada. We are sparing no effort to resettle Afghan refugees as quickly as we can, and I am happy to report that more than 7,500 Afghan refugees have begun their new lives here in Canada, while overcoming extreme challenges. We are welcoming new arrivals every week. We will continue to do everything we can to show leadership in the face of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

*Government Orders***CLIMATE CHANGE**

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to assessing the Prime Minister's credibility on the climate crisis, the truth is found in the lobbying registry. Over the last two years, his government rolled out the red carpet for big oil with over 370 meetings. No wonder big oil is not sweating his promise of a tough emissions cap. In fact, representatives told our committee they plan to vastly increase production, and that position is backed by the energy regulator.

This is for the environment minister. What kind of credible cap is there that includes massive increases in oil exports?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have asked my hon. colleague this before, and he still has not answered. I would like him to show me a country in the world that has done more in the last four or five years than we have to fight climate change. There have been more than 100 measures, \$100 billion of investment, regulations on methane, clean-fuel standards and electricity. These are all things we are doing, and we have so much more to do.

* * *

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Gladue principles, in part, recognize that there is an overrepresentation of indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system and that there are complex issues based on systemic discrimination that should be considered in sentencing. They now have had to be used in courts in sentencing for quite some time.

However, in the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, many participants expressed concerns about overly lenient sentences in cases of violence against indigenous women and girls.

Does the Minister of Justice have an answer to those who are worried about the Gladue principles negatively impacting the safety of and justice for indigenous women and girls?

● (1515)

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for asking that question in the stead of the hon. member for Northwest Territories. I thank him for his leadership and his wisdom.

The Gladue principles, just like the revitalization of indigenous justice systems, calls to action from the TRC and the implementation plan for the MMIWG, are concrete steps toward making our justice system fairer. However, we understand there are still systemic issues in our criminal justice system that we need to address. It is impossible to undo centuries of colonialism in only a few short years. Far too many women and girls endure serious injustice, including discrimination and disproportionately high rates of violence. We are going to work on this with indigenous leadership to get—

The Speaker: I am afraid that is all the time we have for today.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order arising out of question period.

I would like to seek unanimous consent to table the four House of Commons fisheries committee reports that the Liberal government has not responded to on small-craft harbours.

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

Some hon. members: Nay.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

AN ACT RESPECTING CERTAIN MEASURES RELATED TO COVID-19

The House resumed from February 14 consideration of the motion that Bill C-10, An Act respecting certain measures related to COVID-19, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: It being 3:16 p.m., pursuant to an order made on Monday, February 14, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at the second reading stage of Bill C-10.

Call in the members.

● (1530)

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

(*Division No. 28*)

YEAS

Members

Aboultaif	Aitchison
Albas	Aldag
Alghabra	Ali
Allison	Anandasangaree
Angus	Arnold
Arseneault	Arya
Ashton	Atwin
Bachrach	Badawey
Bains	Baker
Baldinelli	Barlow
Barrett	Barron
Barsalou-Duval	Battiste
Beaulieu	Beech
Bendayan	Bennett
Benzen	Bergen
Bergeron	Berthold
Bérubé	Bezan
Bibeau	Bittle
Blaikie	Blair
Blanchet	Blanchette-Joncas
Blaney	Block
Blois	Boissonnault
Boulerice	Bradford
Bragdon	Brassard

Government Orders

Brière	Brock	Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)	MacAulay (Cardigan)
Brunelle-Duceppe	Calkins	MacGregor	MacKenzie
Cannings	Caputo	MacKinnon (Gatineau)	Maguire
Carr	Carrie	Maloney	Martel
Casey	Chabot	Martinez Ferrada	Masse
Chagger	Chahal	Mathysen	May (Cambridge)
Chambers	Champagne	May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)	Mazier
Champoux	Chatel	McCauley (Edmonton West)	McDonald (Avalon)
Chiang	Chong	McGuinty	McKay
Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)	Collins (Victoria)	McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)	McLean
Cooper	Cormier	McLeod	McPherson
Coteau	Dabrusin	Melillo	Mendès
Dalton	Damoff	Mendicino	Miao
Dancho	Davidson	Michaud	Miller
Davies	DeBellefeuille	Moore	Morantz
Deltell	d'Entremont	Morrice	Morrison
Desbiens	Desilets	Morrissey	Motz
Desjarlais	Dhaliwal	Murray	Muys
Dhillon	Diab	Naqvi	Nater
Doherty	Dong	Ng	Noormohamed
Dowdall	Dreeshen	Normandin	O'Connell
Drouin	Dubourg	Oliphant	O'Regan
Duclos	Duguid	O'Toole	Patzger
Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)	Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Paul-Hus	Pauzé
Dzerowicz	Ehsassi	Perkins	Perron
El-Khoury	Ellis	Petitpas Taylor	Plamondon
Epp	Erskine-Smith	Poilievre	Powlowski
Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)	Falk (Provencher)	Qualtrough	Rayes
Fast	Fergus	Redekopp	Reid
Ferreri	Fillmore	Rempel Garner	Richards
Findlay	Fisher	Roberts	Robillard
Fonseca	Fortier	Rodriguez	Rogers
Fortin	Fragiskatos	Romanado	Rood
Fraser	Freeland	Ruff	Sahota
Fry	Gaheer	Sajjan	Saks
Gallant	Garneau	Samson	Sarai
Garon	Garrison	Savard-Tremblay	Scarpaleggia
Gaudreau	Gazan	Scheer	Schiefke
Généreux	Genuis	Schmale	Seeback
Gerretsen	Gill	Serré	Sgro
Gladu	Godin	Shanahan	Sheehan
Goodridge	Gould	Shields	Shipley
Gourde	Gray	Sidhu (Brampton East)	Sidhu (Brampton South)
Green	Guilbeault	Simard	Sinclair-Desgagné
Hajdu	Hallan	Small	Sorbara
Hanley	Hardie	Soroka	Spengemann
Hepfner	Hoback	Steinley	Ste-Marie
Holland	Housefather	Stewart	St-Onge
Hughes	Hussen	Strahl	Stubbs
Hutchings	Iacono	Sudds	Tassi
Idlout	Ien	Taylor Roy	Thériault
Jaczek	Jeneroux	Therrien	Thomas
Johns	Joly	Thompson	Tochor
Jones	Jowhari	Tolmie	Trudeau
Julian	Kayabaga	Trudel	Turnbull
Kelloway	Kelly	Uppal	Valdez
Khalid	Khera	Van Bynen	van Koeverden
Kitchen	Kmiec	Van Popta	Vandal
Koutrakis	Kram	Vandenbeld	Vandall
Kramp-Neuman	Kurek	Vidal	Vecchio
Kusie	Kusmierczyk	Viersen	Vien
Kwan	Lake	Villemure	Vignola
Lalonde	Lambropoulos	Vis	Virani
Lametti	Lamoureux	Wagantall	Vuong
Lantsman	Lapointe	Waugh	Warkentin
Larouche	Lattanzio	Weiler	Webber
Lauzon	Lawrence	Williams	Wilkinson
LeBlanc	Lebouthillier	Yip	Williams
Lehoux	Lemire	Zarillo	Zahid
Lewis (Essex)	Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Zuberi — 333	Zimmer
Liepert	Lightbound		
Lloyd	Lobb		
Long	Longfield	Nil	

NAYS

Government Orders

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to a committee of the whole.

Pursuant to the order made on Monday, February 14, 2022, Bill C-10, an act respecting certain measures related to COVID-19, is deemed considered in the committee of the whole, deemed reported without amendment, deemed concurred in at report stage, deemed read a third time and passed.

(Bill read the second time, considered in committee of the whole, reported without amendment, concurred in, read the third time and passed)

* * *

WEARING OF MASKS IN THE CHAMBER

The Speaker: Earlier today, questions were raised in the House about the wearing of masks in the chamber. I note that all members are certainly wearing their masks, and I applaud them for that.

As members will know, since the beginning of the pandemic, my fellow Chair occupants and I have consistently reminded members to wear their masks in the House when they are not speaking in debate. This is in keeping with public health advice that states masks should be worn, especially when social distancing is not possible, as is often the case in the chamber. In fact, as soon as one leaves the chamber, the wearing of masks is mandatory, further to measures adopted by the Board of Internal Economy. This is for the safety and security of members and staff.

[*Translation*]

That said, further to the Speaker's ruling of December 2, 2021, only the House can determine the rules that it will apply to itself and its committees. While the Board of Internal Economy has strongly recommended that members wear a mask when they are at their place during parliamentary proceedings, it cannot impose such a requirement. Ultimately, the House has sole authority to determine how it conducts its proceedings.

As Speaker, I am the servant of the House. To date, all parties have supported the Chair's efforts to encourage the wearing of face masks when not speaking and have raised points of order when this practice has not been followed.

[*English*]

This being Tuesday, I understand the House leaders will be meeting later today, and I would encourage them to discuss this issue so that there can be clarity for all members.

I thank all members for their attention.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order. When you were reading things out, you said that we had to have our masks on once we leave the chamber. Does that mean we can have them off when we are in the chamber?

The Speaker: Yes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Yes, we do not have to wear them in the chamber, but we have to put them on as we leave the chamber?

The Speaker: Exactly.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order. Just to be clear, it is highly recommended that we wear the masks inside the chamber. On that note, I would ask if there is unanimous consent of the House to have members wear their masks unless they are actually speaking.

The Speaker: Do we have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: No.

* * *

● (1535)

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS NO. 7—PROCEEDINGS ON BILL C-12

The House resumed consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

The Speaker: The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage has seven minutes and 30 seconds remaining in his elocution.

Mr. Chris Bittle (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in regard to your ruling with respect to masks, we have been hearing, from the opposition, a lot of shouting about science. They say, "Listen to the science."

However, the number of MPs who removed their masks as soon as your order was issued is rather shocking. The science is clear on masks, and I truly hope that the hon. members on the other side who are heckling me, maskless—

The Speaker: Order. I want to make sure individuals and MPs recognize that whoever has the floor should have the respect of the House. I also want to remind the hon. member that the decision from the Speaker clarified what the policy was, and I would hope that everybody would respect that.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I also hope that the opposition respects what the Speaker said, which was that he highly encouraged the use of masks. We were being lectured on science and that we should listen to the science, and the science is clear on mask usage. I am seeing a lot of unmasked faces on the other side, and that is disappointing because, as we are talking about vaccinations—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Order. Again, I think that matter has been dealt with, and I would ask the parliamentary secretary to speak to the issue that is before the House, which is Bill C-12.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I was just moving on to seniors, who are looking forward to us listening to science and listening to public health. I will move on to the debate at hand.

I had already given some of my remarks before the break, but as a first step, our government is providing \$742.4 million for one-time payments. These payments would help alleviate the financial hardship faced by GIS and allowance recipients who received pandemic relief benefits in 2020, but who also faced a reduction or loss of their GIS or allowance benefits in July, 2021.

As the payments would be automatic, seniors would not need to take any action to receive the one-time payments. These payments would also fully compensate affected seniors. They would be non-taxable, too. We estimate that the 183,000 GIS clients who qualified to receive CERB or similar benefits in 2020 would benefit.

We did not want to just provide a quick fix. We also wanted to ensure that seniors would not be facing such a loss—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Order. The hon. member has the floor. There are a lot of discussions being had here, and I know that they are side discussions.

I would just ask members to please step outside the chamber if they wish to have side discussions. I am sure that they want to attentively hear what the hon. parliamentary secretary has to say, because I am sure they are going to have questions and comments for him.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I am sure they are just excited to hear the rest of my speech. The buzz on the other side is encouraging for me to keep going and defend our seniors.

As I said, we did not want to provide a quick fix. That is why we introduced this bill. Bill C-12 would permanently exempt federal pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits, beginning in July, 2020, and would prevent this from ever happening again.

To be clear, the following benefits would be exempt: the Canadian emergency response benefit, including any CERB amounts paid under the Employment Insurance Act, the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit, the Canada recovery caregiving benefit and the Canada worker lockdown benefit. Once again, we are proposing this change to the OAS act to ensure that this problem never happens again.

Bill C-12 would make an important legislative change that would provide seniors with certainty and peace of mind in the future if they receive GIS and allowance benefits to which they are entitled, without the need for a one-time payment.

To strengthen Canadians' financial security later in life, we provided one-time payments of \$500 in August, 2021, to OAS pensioners who would be age 75 or older on June 30, 2022. We are also permanently increasing OAS pensions for seniors 75 and over, beginning in July, 2022. We have taken these steps because seniors face increased financial pressures and vulnerability as they age, but the well-being of seniors has been a priority for our government since 2015.

Before COVID, we had already improved the Canada pension plan, reduced income tax for seniors and moved to enhance the GIS. We increased the GIS for nearly 900,000 low-income seniors. As a result of this and other measures, an estimated 45,000 seniors were lifted out of poverty. We put thousands of dollars back in the

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pockets of future Canadian seniors by restoring the age of eligibility for OAS and the GIS to 65 from 67. Many of the members on the other side voted in favour of actually increasing the retirement age, not for their own pensions but for other seniors in Canada.

We enhanced the GIS earning exemption for working low-income seniors to help them keep more of their benefits and more of their hard-earned money. This means that seniors could earn up to \$5,000 without a reduction of their GIS benefit. Our government is moving forward with its plan to increase the OAS pension by 10% for seniors 75 and over, and will start in July of this year to provide people receiving the full OAS pension with an extra \$766 in the first year. This will be the first permanent increase to the OAS pension, above and beyond inflation adjustments, since 1973.

We reduced income taxes for seniors by increasing the basic personal amount. Once we have fully implemented this measure in 2023, 4.3 million seniors will benefit, and 465,000 of them will see their income tax reduced to zero.

Our government has helped seniors in myriad ways beyond direct emergency payments and tax relief. We recognize the sad reality that the COVID pandemic has brought isolation to many seniors, and to our most vulnerable seniors. The sense of isolation and vulnerability cannot be overstated, so our government continues to find ways to address those issues.

The pandemic has tragically highlighted the challenges to long-term care homes. It has exposed gaps in infection prevention and control and staffing. That is why, in the fall economic statement, our government committed up to \$1 billion to the safe long-term care fund to help provinces and territories support infection prevention and control, make improvements to ventilation, hire additional staff and top up wages. We are also committed to affordable housing, and we are working to improve palliative care, end-of-life care, and to supporting Canadians' mental health through the Public Health Agency of Canada.

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In conclusion, I am proud of the measures we have developed and are still developing on all aspects of senior care, but this must not simply be a stopgap measure. We are constantly working hard to find permanent solutions that will bring ongoing comfort and relief to the men and women who have worked hard, who have contributed to Canada and who are proud and privileged to call it home. Seniors deserve nothing less than the best care and consideration that we can provide. We acted quickly to resolve this issue. I hope my hon. colleagues will agree that this bill deserves swift passage.

• (1540)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member opposite is from my former hometown of St. Catharines. I heard him talk about the increased OAS, and the \$500 bonus that those over age 75 were going to get. I had been critical before that the government disenfranchised seniors between the ages of 65 and 75, but I noticed that the mandate letter of the minister says that she is supposed to increase the OAS and the GIS for seniors over 65.

Would the member opposite not admit that this recognizes the huge failure of the government, when it disenfranchised seniors between the ages of 65 and 75?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I know the hon. member for Sarnia—Lambton speaks to many residents and seniors in her community, as I do and as all members do. We have to recognize that seniors 75 and older have challenges that are greater, in many cases, than those who are ages 65 to 75, as retirement savings dwindle or as there may not be the resources that were once available. It is the government recognizing that there are additional challenges. This was a campaign commitment that was made in 2019, and it is one that the government delivered upon.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Madam Speaker, my colleague listed all the wonderful things that his government has done for seniors. I will repeat for him the headline of an article published this morning in the *Journal de Montréal*: “Seniors starved by Ottawa”. It is not the most complimentary headline I have seen.

This article mentions two of my constituents: Bob Petit, of Saint-Jean-de-Matha, whose GIS was cut by \$350 a month, and Jacques Rhéault, of Louiseville, whose GIS was cut by \$400 a month.

Can my colleague explain why the government did this deliberately? The Bloc Québécois sounded the alarm last summer in July 2021. Today, we are seeing a bill that will come into force only in July, yet people are going hungry right now. That is disgusting.

• (1545)

[*English*]

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I would like to remind the hon. member that these supports, and this legislation, passed with the unanimous consent of the House. The minister has acted swiftly since her appointment last fall to correct the situation. This bill is part of that. I am happy that most of my colleagues in the opposi-

tion are seeking swift approval of this legislation to get it through as quickly as we can. Hopefully we can see that done rapidly.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have a gender question for the member. We know that women were limited in the work that they could do. There were only a few roles that were considered to be women's roles back in the thirties, the forties and the fifties. We know that wage gaps continue to be discriminatory. Getting a mortgage without a man as cosigner was not possible for many women in the 20th century.

My question to the member is about the GIS clawback. How did it affect women?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, I am not going to disagree with the member. I know that her party is supportive of the speedy passage of this legislation. I thank her and her party for that support. I look forward to seeing this bill pass.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, today is a special day because it is flag day. Just out the window, we can see the national maple leaf flying on top of the Peace Tower.

Can the member provide his thoughts on how wonderful and important our flag is to our country?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, our seniors love our flag. I will bring it back to the bill. It is important to recognize that it was an MP for Kingston and the Islands who brought this flag, and this design, forward. It is a renowned symbol. It is something that not only seniors, but all Canadians can appreciate.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We have a point of order.

The hon. member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, it was actually a member for Leeds, which is just east of Kingston.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I appreciate the additional information; however, that was not a point of order.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Kitchener Centre.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to rise this afternoon to speak about Bill C-12 and the needs low-income seniors are facing across the country.

Over the last three years I have had many opportunities to speak with hundreds of seniors in Kitchener. I often knocked on doors in the daytime and who is home in the daytime? It is seniors. I would joke that it was seniors I spoke with most. In those conversations, I would ask them what was most important to them and hear their stories about rent going up, as well as the cost of groceries, transit, in fact the cost of everything. The reality is that the cost of living for seniors is going up much faster than the guaranteed income supplement or old age security. I would hear their anxiety, sometimes their anger, and I promised that as their MP, I would advocate for their interests in this place.

We have to recognize that the maximum amount for a single senior who is eligible for both GIS and OAS is just over \$1,600 a month. I would encourage other parliamentarians to reflect on financial planners who might advise that people spend 30% of their income on housing and start doing the math on what it looks like for seniors on low incomes, living on GIS and OAS.

That brings me to what I appreciate in this bill. To me, what the governing party is doing in this bill is admitting that a mistake was made. There never should have been any clawbacks whatsoever on the lowest-income seniors across the country. It is just not right and this legislation addresses that.

I also really appreciate both the Bloc and the NDP, in particular the member for North Island—Powell River and the member for Elmwood—Transcona, for their advocacy in ensuring that these funds are provided as soon as possible, recognizing the situation in which low-income seniors find themselves in Kitchener and across the country as a result of the clawbacks that were made and recognizing that this legislation would only really address this mistake not happening again going forward. The fact that we are addressing it not happening again and that there is a retroactive reimbursement being applied in the last fiscal update is really important.

It is also important for us to step back and notice when there is wild agreement in this place. That certainly was not the case in question period. In fact it is usually not the case in question period, but all day I have heard different parliamentarians tripping over themselves to share how much they are advocating for low-income seniors in their communities, which is quite rare in this place. It does not matter which party. I heard a parliamentarian advocating from every region and part of the country. This, to me, is encouraging and gives me the sense that it is possible, when there is obvious good policy in front of members here, for us to move ahead and get it done.

I will also share where I think we could be going further and faster. The first is with respect to the funds flowing. There was a really wonderful line of questioning, in particular, from the MP for Salaberry—Suroît in committee yesterday, who said the reason that funds are not flowing for all low-income seniors until April 19 is that we have not been investing in the computer systems that our public service relies on to deliver these funds.

I can appreciate that it might not always be politically attractive to be investing in IT, but I feel this is an opportunity for us to recognize that this is how seniors' lives are being affected. There is not a fancy ribbon-cutting, but when those investments are not being made, it directly affects the lives of seniors across the country. To

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my understanding, it is not for a lack of interest by the governing party in flowing money sooner, or the advocacy of others across the floor, but rather because we have not invested in the IT that we should have invested in years ago. I would encourage all parliamentarians to consider supporting our public service, so it is able to follow through on these important investments.

● (1550)

Second, I want to call out how important it is that we actually have a private member's bill in support of a guaranteed livable income for all. While I wish it were a government bill, the fact that we have Bill C-223, put forward by the member for Winnipeg Centre, gives us an opportunity to have a larger conversation recognizing that even seniors who will not have GIS and OAS clawed back are still living in poverty in most regions across the country.

We should be doing so much more to ensure that every senior in the country is at a dignified level of income. These are the folks who have been building the economy and these are our elders. With the guaranteed livable income we would not even be having the conversation we are in the midst of now. I encourage other parliamentarians to consider their support for that private member's bill and their support for moving toward a guaranteed livable income across the country.

I also want to point out the need for us to make more progress on housing. We cannot talk about seniors on low incomes and the importance of addressing the clawbacks if we are not going to be honest that it is housing that is climbing the fastest, which at least is something else that I have heard parliamentarians from every party talk about. Maybe there might be different solutions that are being offered, but at least it is a place for us to start having good, respectful conversations. In Kitchener, there is a 35% increase in the cost of housing and rent.

I think about seniors in Kitchener who are not just seeing the cost of housing go up, but they are seeing a lack of access to dignified housing and also the proximity of that housing to the amenities that they need the most, such as transit stations they need to access. We need to move forward far more quickly when it comes to addressing the rising cost of housing, which means addressing the supply as well as the policies to ensure that homes are for people, for seniors, to live in and not commodities for investors to trade.

The last thing I will mention is the importance for us also to address long-term care. While not the main focus of this piece of legislation, if we are going to be talking about the need to be taking better care of our seniors, we have all recognized the gaps in long-term care. There is the opportunity for the federal government to step in to improve the standards in long-term care, to address the wait times and to address the pay for personal support workers.

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In closing, I would encourage all parliamentarians to continue to support this important bill and to get this done, but not to stop here. We must ensure that we move forward quicker, whether it is on the cost of housing, a guaranteed income or ensuring that these reimbursements are provided at the earliest opportunity.

• (1555)

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Madam Speaker, as the member for the Green Party mentioned in his comments today, there has been support for this legislation going through. There have been some issues of process, which have been the challenge and making sure that Parliament has the appropriate time to discuss and debate exactly what he spoke about today. This is to fix a problem we should have fixed a very long time ago. I think of my constituency office where we saw some of these programs announced at the beginning of the pandemic and how red flags were raised then. Here we are now two years later correcting a problem and the government is saying we need to do this right away.

I agree with the member completely that housing for seniors and rent is a big issue as well as the cost of living. Having the proper time for these bills and to discuss the issues that seniors face in general is something we need to do. I wonder if the member could comment on the process and why we need to rush these things all the time as opposed to having debates on the substantive issues that people in Kitchener and the country are facing.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Madam Speaker, I appreciate the question on process and I have heard the concerns raised by members across the way with respect to the speed of the passage. I would have liked to have more time. However, recognizing that there are other priorities to continue to move toward, recognizing the bill in this case is literally one page, in my view this is an example where it may not be ideal but my interest is in ensuring that seniors get as much support as quickly as possible. My interest is in continuing to move ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, my colleague spoke about both housing and seniors. It is impossible to talk about poverty among seniors without also talking about housing.

Housing is a huge issue in my riding. Some 2,000 people are on a wait list for low-income housing.

My colleague is familiar with the rapid housing initiative because I believe we already talked about it at a Zoom meeting. The federal government launched this program two years ago during the pandemic. It is not a bad program for creating social housing, but it is unfortunately very underfunded. The program had a budget of just \$1 billion, but it received applications for projects totalling \$4 billion.

Given that the federal government's existing affordability programs are creating so-called affordable units costing \$2,000 a month in Montreal, does my colleague agree that this makes absolutely no sense? Should the federal government not be investing more in social housing?

Mr. Mike Morrice: Madam Speaker, I completely agree with my colleague.

[*English*]

I want to thank the member for the conversations we have had and for his shared advocacy.

We need far more significant investment into a mix of community, public and co-op housing across the country. We know this has been done in the past. Back in the early eighties, I believe around 8% of newly constructed rental units were co-op housing, whereas now we are down to less than 1%. Therefore, we have that example of when the federal government stepped up to the pace and scale required. I look forward to working with the member and others in the House to move back toward the scale and pace we had in the past.

• (1600)

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for his speech and for sharing our desire to quickly address the mistake the government made. It knew about this back in May of 2021, and seniors have suffered because of the delay. I also thank him for his comments on how seniors need supports more broadly and his support for the member for Winnipeg Centre's bill on a guaranteed basic income.

Seniors are living in poverty. Could the member speak to what a guaranteed basic income would mean for the residents in his riding?

Mr. Mike Morrice: Madam Speaker, it means they would not be waiting the amount of time they have been to get to this legislation. It means it would not be piecemeal. It means they would know that the government truly does have their backs, as it would for every other Canadian across the country. That is why I think we need to rally around not only this private member's bill but any effort in this place to ensure that every Canadian, seniors included, have access to a dignified life.

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AN ACT RESPECTING CERTAIN MEASURES RELATED TO COVID-19

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I would ask for the unanimous consent of the House to change my vote in the vote that took place after question period. I had technical difficulties that prevented me from changing my vote to yea and from joining Zoom, so I would ask for the indulgence of the House to have my vote recorded as having voted in favour of Bill C-10 in that vote.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): In order to allow the hon. member to change his vote, we need the unanimous consent of the House.

All those opposed to the hon. member's request will please say nay.

Hearing no dissent, it is agreed.

* * *

[*Translation*]

**GOVERNMENT BUSINESS NO. 7—PROCEEDINGS ON
BILL C-12**

The House resumed consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to inform you that I will be sharing my time with the brilliant, fantastic and magnificent member from Thérèse-De Blainville.

I am happy to be able to discuss and debate the motion concerning Bill C-12 with my colleagues, because I have devoted my life to seniors since I was 23. I spent my career serving seniors, both providing home care in local community service centres and working in long-term care homes as a social worker and health care network manager. It is therefore an honour for me to contribute to the debate we are having today.

First of all, I would like to say that the Bloc Québécois agrees with Bill C-12. There is no doubt about that. We know that this bill is very important and that it is urgent.

However, we disagree with today's motion, which is disrupting the legislative process. It is important to point out that the bill has only one clause. It amends the Old Age Security Act to prevent a deplorable situation, where 183,000 vulnerable seniors had their guaranteed income supplement cut, from happening again after July 1, 2022. That is the purpose of Bill C-12.

All of the opposition parties proposed legislative work to the government for this week, because we could have managed without the closure motion, which should only be used in exceptional and urgent situations. We could have finished our work properly, in accordance with the legislative process, because this bill has not garnered much opposition. On the contrary, we are pretty unanimous about it in the House.

The bill is important, but let us be clear: It does nothing to change the situation of seniors whose GIS has been slashed every month for the past eight months. It changes nothing at all. When we saw the bill, we wondered why the date was set at July 1, 2022. Why not March? That way, those whose GIS is currently being cut would not have their benefits reduced.

Based on the minister's announcement, we know that there will be a one-time payment. Initially, this payment was to have been made in May, but after the questions we asked the minister and with the pressure she was under, she succeeded in convincing her officials to move the one-time payment up to April 19.

In my opinion, that is still unacceptable. It is two weeks earlier, and some will say that is better than nothing, but it is unacceptable that computer issues can prevent us from returning the money that was taken from vulnerable seniors before April 19. It seems to me that that could have been done by March, or even early April.

This week, the minister appeared before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Sta-

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tus of Persons with Disabilities, where she answered a question from my colleagues in the third opposition party. She said that it would be done by April 19 and she was proud of that. Honestly, I would not be so proud in her shoes, because that is shameful. On April 19 it will be almost 10 months that people have had their GIS benefits cut month after month.

Today, in an article in the Journal de Montréal, two seniors who had their benefits cut described their situation to Canadians. Bob Petit, an 82-year-old senior, had his GIS benefits reduced by \$350 a month, while Jacques Rhéault, a pensioner in Louiseville who worked hard all his life in a factory in Contrecoeur, lost his GIS benefit.

These two people are the luckiest people in the world, because they have the support and assistance of a very active MP who has been championing their cause from the start. Let us keep in mind that these people's benefits have been cut since July 2021. The hon. member for Berthier—Maskinongé represents and supports them through all of the system's bureaucratic procedures.

• (1605)

However, regardless of how good an MP he is, we have learned that, although the Minister of Seniors appears to have a good heart and to listen to seniors, she cannot do more because of the technical and technological limitations of the tools she will be using to issue a nice cheque to each senior who was unfairly affected by the cuts. That is quite a long time.

I cannot help but make connections with other people's problems. Consider sick workers. They are entitled to just 15 weeks of employment insurance in case of illness. The Bloc would like to see that increase to 50 weeks. The minister said that that was too much, that the government was looking at 26 weeks, but that computer problems were preventing it from doing anything right now.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration is telling us that they want to accelerate the processing of work visa and permanent residence applications, but that there are computer issues. I am starting to wonder whether the government's key departments, which are there to serve Canadians, are paralyzed by their computer systems.

That makes me think there has been considerable negligence in maintaining our infrastructure. As a result, vulnerable Canadians are finding it difficult to pay their rent and buy their medications and are grappling with anxiety and stress every month. We are talking about seniors who are vulnerable and who will be affected by Bill C-12.

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I do not know if it is possible to paint an accurate portrait of these people. These are seniors who, very often, have worked all their lives. These people, who may not have been unionized and who did not necessarily earn a big salary, are now retired, and tired, at age 65. Tired and without much income, they are entitled to the guaranteed income supplement. For the past eight months, since July 2021, these people have received less money because the CERB was calculated as income. That is what Bill C-12 is intended to correct, to prevent other seniors from being penalized next year.

Honestly, I am offended and angry to see how the government's limitations are getting in the way of the assistance these seniors require. When questioned, the minister says that the government invested so many million dollars in this and so many million dollars in that. What seniors need is a decent monthly income so they can pay their bills, meet their responsibilities and live with dignity.

Right now, seniors are calling my office saying that they feel like beggars, if I can put it that way. It is a blow to their dignity, because these are people who worked, who earned an honest living and who have felt completely forgotten and abandoned since July 2021.

Members will understand why I am emotional talking about this. I live in a riding where a quarter of the population is aged 65 or over. Today, I think it is clear that the hon. member for Salaberry—Suroît is an unconditional ally of the seniors in her riding, that the Bloc Québécois is an ally of seniors, and that it will do everything it can to convince the minister to issue the one-time payment before April 19.

• (1610)

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I was watching the member's speech on the TV in the lobby, and she was commenting on the unanimous consent motion the Bloc brought forward in the previous Parliament. I think it was in May of last year.

The Bloc wants to set this up as though it somehow introduced a unanimous consent motion that would have solved everything, but the reality is that the motion had a number of problems in it. It did not indicate whether things would be indexed over time or whether people who had a higher income would receive a clawback. It did not indicate anything about how long somebody had been in Canada. The motion did not address how it would handle somebody who had been in Canada for 10 years versus 40 years. It is very disingenuous for the Bloc to suggest it brought forward a motion that somehow would have rectified all this.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, we now know that the Senate, whose participation in the process is required, will not be sitting this week, and that it was really not necessary to pass Bill C-12 under closure. I am convinced that the legislative process could have taken its normal course and that we could have managed to pass Bill C-12 without a closure motion this week if there had been good will and if we had worked as a team and without partisanship.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Salaberry—Suroît for her excellent speech.

I worry when I hear the government say that it needs another computer system to pay seniors. I remember Phoenix, which did not work for five years. Why does the government need another system when the funds are usually deposited directly in Canadians' bank accounts every month?

• (1615)

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, in a former life, I was the chief of staff to a minister. Every time we were asked to tighten the budget, IT infrastructure was cut because it has less of an impact in the short term.

I do not know if that is why all infrastructure has been neglected. I have noticed this with EI sickness benefits and immigration. I know it is complicated, and I am not saying otherwise.

However, I cannot understand how CERB cheques were issued within ten days because it was urgent, but we are unable to issue cheques for seniors who are currently in such great need and who have been experiencing stress and anxiety since July 2021. I just cannot wrap my head around the fact that the government of a rich country cannot quickly issue a cheque to help the most vulnerable seniors in Quebec and Canada.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, as we know, many seniors are caught in this predicament because they are the lowest income seniors.

Single seniors on GIS make a little over \$19,000 a year. Those who are partnered get about \$25,000 a year. The only reason they had to go to work was to supplement their income, and during COVID many of them lost their jobs. That is why they are caught in this predicament.

With this in mind, is the real issue, aside from restoring and making whole the seniors support, that we need to bring in a guaranteed livable basic income?

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, I believe that the member and I agree that the government must increase seniors' monthly income and give them tax concessions that will let them work to make ends meet, pay their bills and socialize without being penalized by the taxman.

The Bloc Québécois has made plenty of suggestions to help seniors contribute without being penalized. I believe that the solution is to increase old age security for seniors 65 and over. I think that is the most important measure right now.

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Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from Salaberry—Suroît for her excellent speech. It was very heartfelt and compelling. I do not know whether I will be as brilliant, but I will try to clearly outline the Bloc Québécois's motivations when it comes to seniors. We want to take care of them, look after them and listen to their needs.

I would like to remind the many people who are watching us on ParlVu that we are talking about Bill C-12, which would exclude any emergency benefits from a person's income for the purposes of calculating the amount of the guaranteed income supplement and allowances payable in respect of any month after June 2022.

I think the bill is simple. It attempts to correct a problem as of June 2022. However, it is one year too late. Need I remind the House that it was in May 2021 that the trouble started and the issue was raised? Some seniors lost some or all of their GIS because they had received emergency benefits related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which they were entitled to.

No one in the government warned them that this would happen. Worse still, no one in the government had even calculated or foreseen this consequence, which is frankly ludicrous, considering old age security is a program that is entirely under federal jurisdiction.

It is terrible that the government showed such a lack of foresight by failing to anticipate the effect of these measures under a program that it is supposed to be responsible for. More importantly, it is terrible for the seniors who have missed out on a large portion of their retirement income for the past year. I could name several women and men in my riding who, for several months now, have been receiving \$300, \$400 or \$500 less a month.

Those figures are significant, since only the lowest-income seniors receive the GIS. In all, OAS and GIS benefits represent almost \$18,000 a year. My colleagues can surely imagine how much that comes to per month, so cutting even \$100 from that monthly income is totally unacceptable.

On Monday, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities had the pleasure of receiving the Minister of Seniors. She came to tell us about her mandate letter and how much she cares about seniors. We believe her. She mentioned that she used to be a nurse, and she spoke about how seniors are faring in our health and social services networks, highlighting their vulnerability. I agree with her.

• (1620)

She underlined all kinds of consequences, but focused on measures this government will introduce to reduce seniors' vulnerability, such as national standards in long-term care homes, aging in place and so on. The government is devoting tremendous energy to overtly encroaching on provincial jurisdiction and so little energy to fixing a problem we are all very aware of and that is that seniors are economically vulnerable, and they are getting poorer.

I would like the Minister of Seniors to know that I, too, am a nurse by trade and that I was a nurses' union representative in Quebec for many long years and the leader of a major public service

labour union. My professional and union experience gave me opportunities to advocate for better working conditions in Quebec and reforms to improve the systems we have in place to care for seniors and the rest of the population.

We have fought hard on these issues in order to push ahead and improve the quality of care and services, but at no point throughout my career would it ever have occurred to us to knock on Ottawa's door to ask for help, because it is none of Ottawa's business. This does not fall under Ottawa's jurisdiction. The only battle we have fought together with civil society and the government of our province is to demand that the federal government make a contribution through the Canada health transfers that is commensurate with the health and social services needs in Quebec and the provinces. This has been our struggle. I have been on the front lines for a long time on the issues that relate to the feds. However, our working conditions, living conditions for seniors and care conditions all come under our jurisdiction.

I have a suggestion for the government. It should drop those mandates, focus on what it needs to focus on and give the provinces health transfers covering 35% of costs. We could have asked for 50%, as was agreed to in the 1950s, but we did not. We have asked for 35% because we have been starving ever since. The government is starving the health care systems and making them vulnerable. To top it off, the government has appropriated the right to spend. However, it does not grasp the urgency of spending money in areas of exclusive federal jurisdiction, such as the GIS, which is one of the most important social safety nets for our retirees and seniors.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, pressure had to be applied for seniors to be recognized, and this earned them a meagre cheque of \$500. On this issue, the government came in for more criticism than accolades.

The Bloc Québécois had to fight, apply pressure, write letters and come to the House to sound the alarm a year ago about the totally unfair situation of seniors whose GIS was reduced because they had received emergency benefits. The government said it had other things to do. Managing its own affairs must not be part of its responsibilities.

Now, here we are, almost a year later, with a bill that we will pass but that will only remedy the situation going forward to ensure this does not happen again. A bird in the hand is worth—

• (1625)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Order. I tried to indicate to the member earlier that she had only two minutes left. Her time is now up. She will be able to continue during the period for questions and comments.

The hon. parliamentary secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

*Government Orders**[English]*

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, if the Bloc members are nothing else, they are consistent in regard to the health care issue.

The Government of Canada is not an ATM that just distributes money. We have the Canada Health Act, and Canadians from all regions of the country recognize that the national government has an important role to play in health care. Whether the Bloc members agree or disagree, quite frankly, is irrelevant. We are here to support a healthy health care system where we can, looking, for example, at long-term care and at issues around mental health. These are important issues to people, no matter where they are in Canada.

Why is my friend teaming up, once again, in that coalition with the Conservatives and the Bloc to try to get things done here in the House? I am glad she is supporting the bill, but why does she not support the actual motion to see it come to a conclusion today?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, I will answer the first part of the question.

Mind your own business. Your business is providing funding for provincial health care systems. Your business is looking after retirees and seniors. You have programs and it is up to you to support them. That is your responsibility.

I would, in turn, ask you why you are in such a rush to interfere in our business and in less of a rush to take care of your own?

- (1630)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I remind the hon. member that she must address her questions and comments through the Chair and not directly to the government or a member. I have already reminded her of that today.

The hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, I agree very much with my hon. colleague about the importance of the Canada Health Act and federal spending. I also worked for a union for 16 years, so I appreciate her contributions to working people.

However, I must take issue with the member's inaccurate statement that health care is provincial. I am going to read from the Library of Parliament paper on the jurisdiction. It states that "...the Constitution Act, 1867 does not expressly include "health" as a legislative power assigned either to Parliament...or to the provincial legislatures...." The Supreme Court of Canada has not interpreted section 92 as giving provincial legislatures exclusive jurisdiction over health care.

The Supreme Court of Canada, in *Schneider v. The Queen*, stated:

..."health" is not a matter which is subject to specific constitutional assignment but instead is an amorphous topic which can be addressed by valid federal or provincial legislation, depending in the circumstances of each case on the nature or scope of the health problem in question.

The *Schneider* decision also says that the national concern doctrine is a basis for a federal health jurisdiction, saying:

...federal legislation in relation to "health" can be supported where the dimension of the problem is national rather than local in nature...

Therefore, when my hon. colleague says that it is not the federal government's business to be in health care, she is constitutionally wrong. Is the member aware that the phrase "health care" does not occur in the Constitution and that the Supreme Court of Canada has said that health care is federal—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I do have to allow the hon. member to respond.

The hon. member for Thérèse-De Blainville.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, in response, I would tell him to go read everything that might be constitutional on the issue.

I am perfectly comfortable with the idea that the provinces and Quebec have jurisdiction over organizing services and care, and that the role of the federal government is limited to paying its fair share to support the provinces and Quebec.

What is more, it is also the responsibility of the federal government to support our seniors by significantly increasing old age security and never again denying seniors their guaranteed income supplement.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would have liked my colleague, who delivered a very fine speech, to remind the House that the Bloc has also made proposals to support seniors, such as increasing the earnings ceiling for the GIS from \$5,000 to \$6,000 in order to avoid penalizing seniors who want or have to work. Can she explain why this is so important?

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, it is very important, especially in the context of a labour shortage, because this will allow our seniors to earn a comfortable retirement income so they can continue their substantial contribution to society. This will also allow them to rise above the poverty line.

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, today is a great opportunity to rise in the House on this flag day. I want to note the importance and significance of today being the day we mark and recognize the Canadian flag, a flag we have seen on various people's knapsacks and backpacks throughout the world. It is a symbol people proudly wear to show where their home is. Unlike some other countries in the world, we are incredibly proud to show that flag as we travel in other parts of the world.

Government Orders

I would be remiss if I did not mention that it was MP John Matheson, who was from the riding just east of Kingston, the riding of Leeds, as it was called at the time, who played a key role in the development of the flag we now recognize as being the Canadian flag. I encourage those who are listening to look into the history of it a little. They will see the committee he led, and some of the different examples of flags that were brought forward. Ultimately, they settled on the one we have now come to cherish as the Canadian flag. I wish everybody a happy flag day. It certainly is an honour to come from the part of the country that was, at the time, led by an MP who gave a tremendous amount to the pride we now have and show through that flag.

It is an honour to rise today to talk about such an important issue. Right now we are debating the motion that would set the programming of how we will deal with this particular bill, which relates to the Old Age Security Act, and how we would make amendments to it in order to ensure those who experienced these clawbacks are properly taken care of.

I am concerned to see some of the posturing going on in the House today. We heard MPs from the Conservatives and the Bloc saying that they are supportive of the bill but not of this motion. Once again, I want to thank my colleagues in the NDP for recognizing the importance of this. The truth is we knew the Conservatives would be against it, which was a default, but the Bloc, quite frankly, is using this as an opportunity. It knows it has the luxury of voting against this motion because the NDP will be there to carry the weight the Bloc is unwilling to carry today. That is the reality of the situation.

We saw it with another equally important motion yesterday, where the NDP had to carry the weight of the Bloc, and now it is doing it again. I just want to thank my colleagues in the NDP for helping us get through this very important motion, and we know at the end of the day all members of the House will vote in favour of the bill because of the importance all members place on this issue.

This motion basically says that we would proceed moving forward with this bill in a very expeditious fashion, because it is very important to get it through. I can understand some of the need for rigorous studying of bills from time to time as they come to committee. I know members of the Conservative Party have said today that we need to study this bill and properly go through all of the details.

These are the same members who have been raising this issue time and time again and asking why something was not done yesterday. Now they have in front of them a programming motion that would basically expedite this and fast-track it, and they literally want to put on the brakes. They say that we need to hold on, study, give a lot of consideration in committee, and go through various procedural elements back and forth from committee and the House on what is an extremely simple bill.

The bill states:

for the purpose of determining benefits payable in respect of any month after June 2022, there shall be deducted from the person's income for the year the amount of any payment under

It then goes on to list the four articles. That is literally the entire bill. I do not understand what could be studied in committee that

would bring about some revelation of how an amendment should be made with respect to this.

• (1635)

This is an issue that all members of the House know about. I am happy to get into how we got to this point, which I will shortly, but it is an issue that all members of this House know about so well. They understand the content of it and exactly what this bill would do. To suggest that we should ensure that the proper, thorough, democratic process through the parliamentary system is maintained for a bill that is so direct in its nature of addressing a very specific issue is absolutely remarkable to me.

However, the Bloc has the luxury of not having to vote in favour of this motion so it can somehow stand on principle, but it only has that luxury because the NDP is once again creating a scenario for the Bloc to be able to do that. I again want to thank my NDP colleagues for staying above the partisanship of this and making sure we can move forward with this as quickly as possible.

I want to take a few minutes to congratulate the new Minister of Seniors on tackling this issue. She had not been a minister prior to this session of Parliament. She is the member for Brampton West. When she was appointed, she tackled this issue head-on, along with her parliamentary secretary, the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

As she indicated in her comments earlier today, she made sure she consulted with various parties. She made sure she went to committee and answered the questions of committee members. She made sure she communicated with various seniors groups and groups that represent seniors' interests and that when she did this, she would get this right, in line with her mandate letter from the Prime Minister and in line with the very reasonable requests being made by seniors throughout the country.

I want to thank the minister for the work she has done to get us to this point, so we can ensure that seniors who experienced clawbacks relating to the CERB and other programs indicated in the bill are properly taken care of. Her mandate letter specifically says that she will, "Ensure seniors' eligibility for the Guaranteed Income Supplement is not negatively impacted by receipt of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit...and the Canada Recovery Benefit", and that is exactly what this bill would do.

Bill C-12 builds on our commitment to old age security, to increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples starting at the age of 65. Bill C-12 would also ensure that GIS cutbacks due to collective COVID supports will not happen again in future tax years. All parties, as I indicated, have raised this issue for sometime, so it is very odd to see that our Conservative friends across the way and the Bloc wanting to drag the parliamentary process down with this motion as opposed to just passing it so we can eventually vote on the bill.

Government Orders

I would like to go back to the creation of these particular programs and how we got to the position we are in. I found it very fascinating and quite perplexing, while listening to the member for Abbotsford this morning, when he pointed the finger at the government, as though the government is solely responsible for the issue that has been created. I would remind all members that these programs were passed by unanimous consent, by all members of this House.

Unanimous consent, for those watching, is when all members of the House agree to bypass a number of parliamentary procedures in order to get programs into place immediately. That is the manner in which unanimous consent was used back in March of 2020 and a few times afterward. Unanimous consent basically means that everybody agrees.

● (1640)

If one person disagrees with unanimous consent, it would shut it down, right there in its tracks, and the various pieces of legislation would have to go through the regular parliamentary process. However, we agreed to unanimous consent at the time because we recognized the incredible need that was out there for Canadians at the time.

Not only that, the minister at the time, Minister Morneau, went to great lengths when we heard the complaints about various different pieces of the supports from the other side of the House, and they were improved upon. I can remember, for example, that the original proposal by the government on the wage subsidy fell short, quite frankly, of what was really needed. The Conservatives were there to highlight that issue and to say that this particular support was not good enough and that we needed to do better. As a result, by working with the minister behind the scenes and outside of this chamber and fixing the legislation, we saw much better wage subsidy legislation end up coming forward.

If the member for Abbotsford is somehow saying that the government completely botched this legislation, well, he and the Conservatives had the opportunity to try to improve upon the programs at the time. In some instances they did, and in some instances issues were missed, but let us remember where we were at the beginning of this pandemic. At that time it was absolutely critical to get supports to Canadians as quickly as possible to support those in need, those who were affected.

Let us remember that at the beginning of the pandemic, nobody had any idea what was happening. We were shutting down businesses throughout the country. Provinces were bringing in lockdowns. We did not have the luxury of knowing what a lockdown is, as we do now. If a lockdown was brought in now, we would know what to expect. Back in March 2020, we had no idea what it meant, what the short-term, mid-term or long-term impacts of a lockdown would be. We have that luxury now, because hindsight is 20-20, but back then we did not. We did not understand what was happening.

The government—with the incredible support of the public service, I might add—developed these programs, working day and night, with the objective of helping as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Perfection was not an issue at the time. It was not seen, in my opinion, as a priority at the time. The priority was getting the supports out to people who needed them the most. That

is what happened. That is what the government was able to deliver on, again with the incredible support of the public service.

I have said it a number of times in this House, and I will said it again: 5.4 million Canadians had money in their bank accounts within five weeks of the World Health Organization declaring a global pandemic. Let us compare that to the United States or any other jurisdiction in the world. It was regarded as the gold standard for taking care of Canadians in their absolute dire moment of need. That is what the public service was able to deliver for Canadians. That is what we were dealing with at the time.

Issues are going to come up, as the member for Abbotsford has indicated now that he has luxury of looking back on it 24 months later. Issues are going to pop up. The key is how we deal with those issues now to make sure that people are treated in a fair manner. That is exactly what we are seeing now. We are not only fixing some of those problems that existed before but also putting safeguards in to make sure that they do not continue to happen. It is the reasonable and responsible thing to do. It is the thing the minister was tasked to do in her mandate letter from the Prime Minister, and she has moved very quickly on it with her department.

I also find it extremely rich when I hear my Conservative colleagues across the way in particular trying to position themselves as the champions of seniors. It is absolutely remarkable when I hear the rhetoric that comes from across the way.

● (1645)

This is the party that in the last government sought to increase the age of retirement to 67 from 65. What grounds they think they have to stand on this issue as it relates to seniors I do not understand. I do not know where they are coming from. That is their record. They increased the age of retirement from 65 to 67. That is their record.

Our record is this: We enhanced the CPP. The QPP followed suit. We strengthened old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. We increased in general the number of services available to seniors. We provided a one-time \$500 payment to seniors. This year we are increasing old age security by 10% for those seniors over the age of 75 because we know that once they get into that age category, they need more support. The data shows that as they reach the age of 75 and older, seniors have burned through more of their savings, their medical expenses are higher, and as such they need more resources in order to support themselves. We want seniors to support themselves. That is the objective, so increasing the old age security benefit for those who are over the age of 75 is an investment.

I am absolutely perplexed by the position of the Conservatives when they try to tout they are the champions of seniors, but I am equally concerned about what I hear coming from the Bloc. The last two Bloc members who spoke made reference to a unanimous consent motion when I asked a question. Let us understand this. Eight months ago, the Bloc members brought forward a unanimous consent motion. At the time, they were willing to deal with this problem through unanimous consent, as I described earlier, but now they are not even willing to vote in favour of this motion that expedites the process.

That is the hypocrisy. They referred to a unanimous consent motion to fix the entire problem through that one quick motion back in May, which they felt was fine to do then, and they chastised us for not agreeing to it; now we have a programming motion that would allow us to do this quickly, but they are totally unwilling to vote in favour of it. Again, this goes back to the luxury of not having to do it because the NDP is picking up the slack for the Bloc, as we are seeing.

I have already talked about the unanimous consent motion that the Bloc brought forward and the problems that existed with it. It was not indexed over time. It did not take into account the length of time that people had been in Canada. It did not have any kind of clawback based on income so that higher-income individuals would get less than those who really needed it. It was extremely problematic, yet they were willing to do that through a UC motion. Unfortunately, that just comes down to the politics of this place that we see time and again.

Quite frankly, we see it more often from the Conservatives. They bring forward these unanimous consent motions not because they think they will pass and fix the problem, but so the Bloc members can then go back to their constituents and tell them that they tried to help them but nobody wanted to agree with them and help them out. That is what we are seeing. Quite frankly, that is what the Bloc Québécois is doing in partnering up with the Conservatives. We saw it yesterday and we see it today. The Bloc and the Conservatives are continually partnering up together, and it makes me wonder why. I thought the Bloc was more concerned about seniors, as opposed to playing politics in this place in dealing with this bill.

I see that my time is coming to an end. I appreciate the opportunity to have provided some comments on this process and I look forward to any questions my colleagues might have.

• (1650)

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would encourage the member across the way to not be so dismissive of the role and functioning of Parliament. The rules of Parliament do not exist to protect just members of the opposition but also members of the government, who will one day be in opposition.

The member did not at all address the actual issue we are debating right now, which is the Conservative amendment to the government motion. It is important to underline that the Conservative amendment would still involve this bill being expedited, but also involve, for instance, the minister testifying before the health committee tomorrow in a context where amendments could be made to the bill, but all of that would have to be wrapped up by 11 o'clock.

Government Orders

Our amendment involves an extremely expedited process but still involves the possibility of the minister testifying. It involves the possibility of amendments coming forward. It involves a genuine look at the bill. Why will the member not support this reasonable amendment that still involves expediting the bill, recognizing that it will not fundamentally change the timelines for the bill, as the Senate is not back until next week?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I take exception to the fact that the member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan would suggest that I do not appreciate, value or see the benefit of various members' input in this House. As a matter of fact, if he listened to my speech, I actually gave credit to the Conservatives for helping to make the wage subsidy program better. I am totally and absolutely willing to do that when I see it coming from across the way. They made that particular program better as a result of their interventions.

My issue was with respect to the fact that the member for Abbotsford was somehow very critical of this particular program, but at the same time, he knows full well that he helped pass that through unanimous consent and had input into those programs at the time.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, my colleague talked a little earlier about the Canadian flag. I would like to take this opportunity to say that in Quebec, on February 15, we celebrate Patriots' Day and their tricolour flag.

My colleague may not be aware of this, but on February 15, 1839, five freedom fighters in Quebec were hanged by the British authorities. Just before he was hanged, Chevalier de Lorimier cried out, "Long live freedom, long live independence!" That is what we are celebrating today in Quebec.

Getting back to the motion before us, my colleague is accusing us, the Bloc Québécois, of delaying the process. That is rather fascinating. Vulnerable seniors have been waiting for a cheque for a year, but it is the Bloc Québécois that is delaying the process.

Let us talk about employment insurance. There are 90,000 households in Quebec waiting for a cheque because the government is paralyzed, but we are the ones delaying the process.

Let us talk about immigration. There are hundreds of thousands of family reunification cases. There are some in my riding, including families from Haiti. The mother is here, the father is over there and there is no reunification. There have been delays for the past year or two because the government is paralyzed, but it is the Bloc Québécois that is delaying the process.

Is my colleague not a little embarrassed today to hear about all these vulnerable people who are unable to get their due because the government is paralyzed?

*Government Orders**[English]*

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I am not saying that the Bloc is delaying the process. What I am saying is that it is because of the NDP that the Bloc members have the luxury of being able to vote against this motion. The Bloc members know full well that if they were not in this position and the NDP was not voting in favour of this motion, they would have a lot more pressure to vote in favour of it.

Where I am identifying the hypocrisy is that the Bloc members were willing to deal with this issue through a unanimous consent motion that they raised on a number of occasions today, to deal with it swiftly in one quick motion, in less than 15 seconds, yet they will not vote in favour of this motion to move it along just as quickly. That is the hypocrisy.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Madam Speaker, my thanks to my colleague, the hon. parliamentary secretary, for acknowledging that it is the NDP that has done the heavy lifting, not just on this motion but on this whole issue. I want to assure him that if at some point governing becomes simply too difficult for his party, we are prepared to take over at a moment's notice.

I see he is talking to his friend. Perhaps he can help me square this circle. The part of his speech that I was particularly interested in was the part that outlined how simple this bill is. It is merely a few lines and addresses a major flaw in the way the government has rolled out pandemic supports. This is an issue the NDP has been raising for over a year. With a solution that is so simple and so elegant, how did it take an entire year or more to get to this place? Why are we rushing at this moment to get this through, when the government had so much time to fix this problem from the very start or to avoid the problem altogether?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, the member knows just as well as I and every other member in this House about the challenges of the legislative calendar.

I am not going to say that this could not have been done sooner; I would have loved to have seen this done sooner as well. What I will say is that this particular minister was clearly seized with this file on day one after being appointed. She moved as quickly on it as she could, in addition to dealing with other obligations that she had to bring up to date in her files, and introduced this piece of legislation. We have been able to fit it into the legislative agenda.

The mere fact that we are debating this closure motion all day long makes it obvious that we have a problem with moving legislation through this House. We have dealt with obstacle after obstacle in order to get to this place. I wish we could have done this motion that we are debating all afternoon as a unanimous consent motion, but clearly the Bloc and the Conservatives would rather play games, so we are in this position.

● (1700)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, I enjoy listening to my colleague, but he is really pushing it when he blames the opposition parties for all of the government's own sins with respect to seniors. He has some nerve.

Since 2019, we have been constantly telling the government that it needs to increase OAS and the GIS. We even held opposition days on the topic. We have talked about health transfers. If anyone has been affected during the pandemic, it is seniors.

Our health system is falling apart because of a lack of support from his government, and now he is blaming the opposition parties for not acting quickly enough.

The member has a lot of nerve.

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, he clearly understands the problem that we are in, yet he is not willing to be part of the solution. That just proves what I have been saying all along, which is that this weird coalition between the Bloc and the Conservatives to somehow slow down the legislative agenda is impacting legislation. He literally just told us that he understands what the problem is, so he should vote in favour of this. Let us get moving on it. Instead, they have the luxury of being able to be against the government on this motion, but for the bill. It is a luxury that unfortunately the NDP does not have, but to their credit they have seen the importance of this. They are willing to see beyond that partisanship, and are actually helping to move this forward.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, I am very fond of the member for Kingston and the Islands, so it almost seems unfair to point out that one of the obstacles we have all faced in this place was an unnecessary election called on August 15, which stopped the work of the House from the end of June until the end of January.

I know it is not his personal responsibility to explain it, but can he perhaps cast some light on it?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I can cast light on that. As one of the only Liberals in the House, I physically sat in the House for five months last winter and spring. I saw the games being played in order to prevent legislation from going through. That was coupled with everything that had happened during the pandemic. I have no problem saying that I felt that it was time for Canadians to weigh in on this and see where they were with it.

I would never accuse the member in particular of doing this, but I understand that it is a very easy political argument to make. That is why we hear it from the Conservatives so much. I actually do not have a problem with letting the electorate weigh in and tell us how they think we are doing, especially after the amount of money that had been spent on the pandemic and what had happened during the pandemic. To let the public weigh in is to give them their voice. I think they told us what they thought through their votes, and we are back here in the House to continue acting on their behalf as a result of that.

Government Orders

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to join the debate on Government Motion No. 7, particularly the amendment from my colleague for Cumberland—Colchester.

Toward the end of my speech, I will make some comments on Bill C-12, a bill with respect to seniors. It is a bill that Conservatives support. It is a bill that would address long-standing gaps in government support for seniors: perverse outcomes of some of the measures that came in during the pandemic. It is important to speak to those.

The specific issue that we need to discuss in Motion No. 7 is a programming motion by which the government seeks to set the agenda of the House and dramatically change the normal operating procedures for passing legislation. It is important that we talk about this, because this is one in a long list of things that we see from the government that really is an attack on the normal, proper functioning of our democratic institution.

To see the nature of that attack, one only needs to listen to what the government members are saying. We can listen to the member, for instance, for Kingston and the Islands, who spoke before me. He was so dismissive of alleged games being played. It is the expectation of members of some opposition parties, at least, that they have an opportunity to debate legislation and to see that legislation studied in committee, to see opportunities for amendments to be brought to that legislation, and then to see follow-up debate and a final vote.

This is the process we have for legislation. It is not a game. It is the way the process is supposed to work. Since the beginning of our country, we have had this process in place for how legislation has operated through Parliament.

When Conservatives were in power, from time to time we used mechanisms of closure to limit the time spent on debate at a particular stage of a particular bill. However, the government has gone so much further than that. It promised, in the 2015 election, to do away with the closure mechanism and not use closure. The Liberals were very critical of Conservatives for that closure mechanism, which limits the time spent in debate on a bill at a particular stage without limiting the study that can take place at committee and without trying to combine a bunch of stages into one.

In 2015, the Liberals were still very critical of the use of that procedure. However, now not only have they been using closure themselves, but they have gone further. They are putting forward motions that essentially wrap together all of those stages of legislative study and, for all intents and purposes, entirely skip the process of committee study.

This is a serious attack on the functioning of our democratic institutions. It is important to say that it fundamentally does not matter whether one agrees with the bill or not. We could be talking about a programming motion on a great bill, a terrible bill or a bill somewhere in between. The reason we have a legislative process for studying bills, and for understanding whether they work, is to be able to determine through that process of study how the bill would apply and what was missed in the bill.

It is possible that a bill could be motivated by an intention that everybody agrees is good, but then the process of committee study could reveal that there were some legal technicalities that lead to the bill having a perverse outcome. It is possible that there are some unintended consequences of the bill that are just not considered.

When I was a high school student, I remember that we spent some time at the Alberta legislature learning about the legislative process. One of the students asked about second reading, committee studies and third reading, and asked if it was possible to skip over this process as it seemed to take so long. The legislator who was speaking at the time said, I think wisely, that there were processes by which things could be skipped over, but there was a history of very bad outcomes associated with it.

He pointed out at the time that a terrible piece of legislation, a blight on our history, was passed at the beginning of the 20th century. It was a mandatory sterilization act that existed in Alberta for a number of decades. It passed extremely rapidly without the normal process of legislative study, because it seemed like a good idea to the people who were there at the time.

The lesson I learned, as a young student, and one that I have carried with me, is that one might be in a place in a moment in time when something seems like a good idea. That does not take away the importance of a process to study, and to reflect on, the value of the legislation.

• (1705)

On this point, I am often drawn to reflect on a particular exchange from the great play, *A Man for All Seasons*. The character representing Sir Thomas More is in dialogue with his son-in-law, William Roper, and Roper says, “So now you give the devil the benefit of the law,” and More says, “Yes! What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?” His son-in-law replies, “Yes, I’d cut down every law in England to do that!”, and Sir Thomas More replies:

Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down, and you're just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!

The point is valid, even if we feel very strongly about a particular piece of legislation, or even if we feel very strongly that our cause is just and that our opponents are on the wrong side.

I understand the member for Kingston and the Islands is very critical and partisan in his tone about Conservatives. I am not that enthusiastic about the Liberal government either, but respect for Parliament and respect for the process of studying legislation, even when we disagree, is how we ensure we leave in place what More's character in *A Man for All Seasons* calls “Man's laws”, which protect all of us from the perverse outcomes that come when we start to cut corners and say we do not need committee study, we do not need third reading, we do not need substantial debate at second reading, or that we all basically agree with an idea, so let us just rip it through quickly.

Government Orders

What happens then, when we have established that precedent, is that we start to do that more and more, and pass bills that are maybe still motivated by good intentions, but we start to miss more things, and we find out we have more problems because we are not doing the analysis work that our legislature is supposed to do.

The other thing I was struck by, in the comments of the previous member, was that he spoke about how, at the beginning of this pandemic, all parties worked together to very quickly pass, by unanimous consent, a number of measures that were urgently needed in the context of the pandemic. Let us recall that was at a time before we knew much of anything about the operation of the virus, and before we were set up to do any kind of virtual Parliament. This was even before there was the same awareness there is now about the impacts of masks.

There was no viable way for all members of Parliament, or most members of Parliament, to get together in Ottawa. There was not that awareness about masks, and we did not have the tools to meet virtually, so in an extremely exceptional circumstance, we worked with the government with unanimous consent to adopt some pandemic measures. I think, importantly, that those of us at least on the Conservative side saw this as a very exceptional situation and believed that it should not, under any circumstances, be precedent-setting.

However, members of the government are now invoking some of these past precedents, as if to say, “We did it in extraordinary times, so why can we not just do it in normal times?” This is the problem. When we suspend normal rules, even in extraordinary circumstances, we get people such as members of the government saying, “If we could do it in that situation when we really needed to, why do we not have these kinds of programming motions skipping committee study and analysis, even when we do not need them?”

We do so much better as a legislature, and we do our jobs as legislators, when we actually study and analyze bills. This means voting on the principle of second reading, sending bills to committee where they can be studied and where questions can be asked and answered, and experts can weigh in, and amendments can be sent back for a final decision at third reading.

That would be the right way of proceeding. Instead, we have this draconian programming motion from the government that says we would have a limited number of speakers from each party, and then after those speakers were finished speaking the vote on the bill would take place, and then it would immediately be deemed to have gone through all of the remaining stages without any of the consideration that normally takes place at committee.

We are under the general terms of the debate on the government motion, but in particular what we are debating is an amendment from the Conservative Party caucus. We have tried to meet the government partway here, in terms of saying we understand there is value in passing this bill quickly, and we understand that bills on which there is general agreement do not require the same level of debate as bills on which there is substantive philosophical disagreement that has to be worked through. We accept that it is reasonable for different bills to be debated for different amounts of time.

• (1710)

What we are trying to do to meet the government halfway here is say that we will have the debate and then the bill will be quickly referred to the Standing Committee on Health, where the Minister of Health will be ordered to appear as a witness. That committee hearing will occur the day after the bill is passed, and clause-by-clause consideration will have to be completed effectively by 11 p.m. that night. If it is not completed by then, all remaining amendments and clauses will be considered immediately without further debate. We would put in place a mechanism that is extraordinary anyway, and it would involve the bill being able to progress very quickly. However, it would still involve the committee looking at the bill, hearing from witnesses, hearing from the minister responsible, considering possible improvements or amendments and then referring the bill back to the House.

We hear members say that it is a simple bill and they ask, “What possible amendments?” However, that is really not the point. Regardless of the particulars of the bill, the committee and the members of Parliament who are responsible for being experts on the bill should have the opportunity to weigh in on it. We have put forward a reasonable amendment to a very draconian programming motion, and I hope members will look at it and consider it.

Frankly, we see many ways in which the governing Liberals have been willing to attack and weaken our democratic institutions. I am particularly disappointed that the federal NDP is joining arm in arm with the government. This is, I suppose, consistent with what we have been seeing in this Parliament, which is a de facto coalition between the federal NDP and the Liberals. In the past, NDP members have generally always opposed even closure motions, yet they have gone from opposing closure motions across the board to joining in with the government on a programming motion that skips all of the stages, not just limiting time at a particular stage. It skips through all of the subsequent stages of the bill. It is disappointing to see these two parties standing together in this attack on our democratic institutions.

It is important to remind my colleagues that the use of these programming motions is not happening in isolation. It is part of a broader pattern of behaviour. We have seen the government's refusal to hand over documents ordered by Parliament in the Winnipeg lab affair. The Speaker ordered the government to hand over the documents and said that Parliament had a right to request them, and in defiance of the legal and constitutional authority of Parliament, the government refused to hand over those documents.

We saw the attempt initially, at the start of the pandemic, to effectively shut down Parliament and give the government the power to make laws, introduce new taxes and raise taxes without consultation with Parliament, effectively trying, for a relatively extended period of time, to negate the basic principles of parliamentary supremacy. Of course, the Conservatives stood against that and were able to stop it at the time. However, it shows the government's horrific ambition to weaken our parliamentary institution.

Now we are in a context where the government has decided, for the first time in history, to use this legislative instrument called the Emergencies Act, and I think the trust that many Canadians had in the government prior to the invocation of the Emergencies Act impacts how they view its use. We have a government with a long-running pattern of disrespect for Parliament in refusing to hand over documents ordered by Parliament and trying to shut down Parliament and give itself the power to rule by fiat. The government has done all of these things. It does not think its bills deserve to be studied by committee and it thinks that trying to spend more than a single day on a piece of legislation is playing games. However, now they want to use the Emergencies Act and tell us not to worry because they are going to be very cautious and measured in how they apply it. There is a lot of broken trust between Canadians and the government when it comes to whether we can have confidence in its ability to use very severe and potentially dangerous instruments in that way.

This is on the minds of many Canadians. It is a lack of regard for the democratic process, and it is kind of a precursor to the step the government has now taken of using the Emergencies Act. We have to be very careful. I think it is important that we do not take our democratic institutions for granted and preserve the functioning of Parliament as the people's House, as a democratic institution that studies legislation. It does not just exist as a group of spokespeople for government legislation. It exists to challenge, to question, to reflect, to analyze and to make laws better. We need to protect our democracy by protecting our democratic institutions, Parliament foremost among them.

• (1715)

In the time I have remaining, I want to make some brief comments on Bill C-12.

[*Translation*]

I support this bill. We need to do more to help and protect seniors, especially during the pandemic.

However, the Liberal government has done too little, too late. The Liberals were well aware of the problems caused by the claw-back of the GIS and CERB almost two years ago, and yet it took them nearly eight months to come up with any solutions and fix these problems. That is simply unacceptable.

I have heard from many seniors in my riding who are still waiting for their payment from the government. They are expecting it to be tax-free. What took so long, and why are seniors being arbitrarily penalized by the government's mistakes?

Furthermore, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has stated that the cost of clawing back the GIS and CERB is \$400 million, but we know that the government has set aside \$742 million for the claw-back. The Liberals need to explain the huge discrepancy between those two numbers.

This reminds me of the net versus gross income issue when it comes to CERB. The Liberals made the mistake, but Canadians have suffered the consequences. The Liberals need to explain how they are going to get this money to the right people and make sure there is no fraud.

Government Orders

That is why I support this proposal to amend the Old Age Security Act. Bill C-12 will help correct one of the many mistakes made by this government during the pandemic, especially with regard to seniors.

• (1720)

[*English*]

Essentially, the need for this bill demonstrates the importance of careful study of legislation. The reason we need Bill C-12, the reason we support Bill C-12, is that it corrects an error in previous legislation, an error that effectively would limit seniors' ability to access their regular benefits based on support they received during the pandemic. We need this bill to protect seniors from facing claw-backs to their regular benefits as a result of what they received during the pandemic.

Here is the point. This bill underlines the fact that governments, hopefully with the best of intentions, make mistakes in the legislation they put before Parliament. That is why we have Parliament. The government, with all its access to information and experts, puts forward a bill in good faith before Parliament, and then it is critiqued and analyzed by opposition parties and hopefully by back-bench members of the governing party. It then goes to committee, where experts outside of government can testify and raise concerns, and amendments can be put forward. Problems with the bill can be identified and then perhaps the bill moves forward in the same or amended form. There are many cases, actually, where government members have moved amendments to government legislation at committee. This is an important part of the process.

We have this bill before us because the government failed to take important issues into consideration in its previous pandemic benefits. It is ironic: On a bill that corrects an error existing in previous benefits because of insufficient attention to detail, we are being told we need to pass it without attention to detail. Some members of the government say they have a problem and they want to be able to pass more bills. They say the opposition wants to spend all this time talking about bills and it slows down the ability to pass bills. Well, if we did not have to pass bills correcting errors in previous bills, then maybe the government would not have a problem in moving forward aspects of its legislative agenda. However, I still say that if we spent two or three days on this bill instead of just one, we would be doing Parliament a great deal more credit than we are doing it right now.

Government Orders

I encourage members to take into consideration the reasonable amendment from the Conservatives, which still involves dramatically expediting the bill, but also creates some mechanism and some opportunity for committee study on the bill. I think that is the least we can do to show Canadians that we have a real job as members of Parliament. We are not just here to provide a rubber stamp. We are here to make Parliament function and do a service on behalf of Canadians, which is to study legislation that comes before us, to understand it, to analyze it and to make it as good as possible so that we can then assure Canadians that the bills we are passing have gone through the due diligence they deserve.

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BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Hon. Mark Holland (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on a point of order, I wish to undesignate the opposition day scheduled for Thursday, February 17.

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GOVERNMENT BUSINESS NO. 7—PROCEEDINGS ON BILL C-12

The House resumed consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I find the member is somewhat cherry-picking the way he wants to apply rules and tradition. He made reference to former prime minister Stephen Harper. In four years, he brought in different forms of time allocation and closure over 100 times. All one needs to do is take a look. We can even consider the Conservatives when they are in opposition. To their credit, in December, they requested unanimous consent for the conversion therapy legislation. There was no debate whatsoever, and we are very grateful for it.

Today we have a programming motion that is supported by one of the opposition parties. We have a programming motion dealing with putting money in the pockets of seniors, and it is as simple as that.

Does the member not see the difference, and maybe even realize there might be a bit of hypocrisy in his comments?

• (1725)

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have been entirely consistent on this, as have many of my colleagues. Having a bill like this, or any other bill, pass at all stages without study does not make sense. We need to be studying bills to understand their provisions, understand the application and make sure that whatever is intended by the bill is actually being done by the bill. That is where, critically, the role of committee study comes in.

The member mentioned Stephen Harper seven years ago and closure. He is going to be using Stephen Harper's name for the next 50 years to try to justify what he is doing. There is a difference between using closure to limit debate at a particular stage and using a programming motion to skip over multiple stages of a bill without

any opportunity for committee study or amendment. I would say there is a dramatic difference between those things.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Madam Speaker, if I understood correctly, earlier, our Liberal colleague chastised the Bloc Québécois and the Conservatives for voting against the motion.

We are not against the motion. What we were against was closure. I think my colleague explained it well. Bloc Québécois members sent letters to the Minister of Seniors before the election because we saw this coming. As of July 2021, seniors' GIS was reduced. These are the most vulnerable seniors, those who need the money the most, and they have not been reimbursed yet.

The Liberals themselves created this emergency. Seniors should be reimbursed as soon as possible, and the law needs to say that CERB is no longer part of the GIS calculation.

What are my colleague's thoughts on that?

I think it is deplorable that the Liberals are giving us a hard time for saying no to closure when they are the ones who caused the problem.

[*English*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Speaker, my colleague from the Bloc makes some good points. The Liberals will consistently attack and criticize anyone who disagrees with them.

The fact is that this is a problem of their own making, but it is also a problem that is more likely to happen when they are not carefully going through the legislative process and ensuring that everything is carefully analyzed along the way. What we are saying is to not only let us correct the error that was made by passing this bill, but let us correct the error that was made by not taking the due time and consideration with legislation. Let us, going forward, ensure that bills are properly studied at committee before they are advanced to ensure that the good intentions behind them are actually reflected in the law and that there are no other unintended consequences.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, many of man's laws have had some perverse outcomes, indeed. That is why it is material that all laws are informed in gender balance, both in their making and their adoption.

I spoke about this earlier on the gender front, and I worry about women over the age of 65 who have disproportionately less access to pensions, property and wealth due to past discriminations.

Could the member tell me if he recognizes how delays would affect women disproportionately?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Speaker, I do, but the member for the NDP, who I assume is going to, sadly, vote with her party on this issue, is also making the case for why it is important to study these issues at committee, to consider gendered impacts and other issues that the government may not have fully considered in the context of drafting.

Government Orders

Committees have the expertise to understand these issues, to identify them and to refine legislation in response to broader impacts that may not have been considered. Historically, disadvantaged groups are more likely to be negatively impacted by legislation if its expedited and if there is not a proper study of the bill along the way.

● (1730)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that my colleague does have a head for specific details, and that is something that we need when we look at these bills.

I think there is also a trust issue going on here. When we rapidly passed all the COVID protections and supports at the beginning of the pandemic, with the understanding that we would fine-tune them as we went, we saw a lot of gaps and lots of people falling through the cracks. We pointed those things out early, and no action was taken on the government side. That is another reason why we really want to take a look at the parliamentary process and make sure we follow it. Could the member comment on that?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Speaker, it is important to understand what was particular about that moment in March and April of 2020. We did not have many of the tools that we now have.

Our view as a party is that we should be moving beyond a virtual Parliament and having these debates in person. Nonetheless, we have these tools available to us. These tools were not even available at the beginning of the pandemic.

We had to do some exceptional things with the hope and understanding that we would correct any mistakes that were made, and that they would not be setting any precedents. The government has been reluctant to correct errors, but it has also tried to use a very limited set of circumstances to justify extending that precedent and using draconian programming motions whenever it wants to, going forward. That is unacceptable. That is a permanent undermining of the effectiveness of our democratic institutions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech and for what I felt was a very clear explanation of why we really do not need a closure motion.

Could he comment on the irony of the Liberals' insistence that this bill be passed immediately, of them shoving it down our throats when this measure will not even come into effect until July even though we wanted it for March? It is just sickening.

The Liberals rejected our proposal. It is disgusting. Back in July 2021, we condemned these clawbacks, and I am sure my colleague did so too. Nothing happened, and we were told the cheques would not go out until May, or April at the earliest. For such an urgent bill, this sure does not look like a priority.

[*English*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Speaker, my colleague makes excellent points. I think what the government is trying to do here is simply widen the precedent that it thinks has already been established. It wants to do more and more of this legislating by programming motion, instead of having bills properly studied as they should be.

Initially, maybe the government is looking at legislation that people generally agree is required, but maybe it is expediting legislation now, even though it would not be taking effect for a number of months. Maybe later on we will see it try programming motions on bills that a substantial number of members disagree with, and it will use programming motions to actually prevent members from being able to debate those things in a fulsome way or propose amendments at committee.

This is what happens, sadly, when we have so many members who just fail to understand why we have a Parliament and what Parliament is here for. Parliament is here to provide that challenge on legislation, to review it critically, and to bring in outside experts to help with that review. With that role eroding, it is worrisome to think about just where the government wants us to end up.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Mississauga—Erin Mills.

I have the privilege of rising today to speak to Bill C-12, which seeks to support low-income seniors whose guaranteed income supplement was affected by pandemic benefits.

I will use my time today to speak about the measures in the bill and the reasons why the government has introduced them to support vulnerable seniors. I will also speak about other measures that our government has taken to assist seniors. I am proud of these measures, which are making a difference in the lives of seniors in my riding of Kings—Hants.

My colleagues and, of course, all Canadians are aware of what we have been dealing with over the past two years. Our government has been there to support all Canadians, including seniors. We made a one-time \$300 payment to seniors who were receiving old age security benefits and a \$500 payment to those who were receiving the guaranteed income supplement.

These benefits were not considered income for the purposes of calculating old age security or the guaranteed income supplement. Of course we had work-related benefits, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit and now the Canada worker lockdown benefit to support workers whose jobs were directly affected by COVID-19.

Sometimes these measures created a situation where low-income seniors who were working before the pandemic lost access to the guaranteed income supplement because their income exceeded the eligibility threshold. Given the circumstances, it seems that all members support the principle of eliminating repercussions on the vulnerable seniors we are trying to support.

Government Orders

I think it is also important to talk about the measures that the government has introduced since 2015, measures that have made a difference in the lives of seniors across the country, including a positive difference in the lives of seniors in my riding of Kings—Hants.

First, it is sometimes easy to forget that it was the Conservatives who increased the age of eligibility for old age security. We restored the age of eligibility for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement from 67 to 65, putting thousands of dollars back in the pockets of seniors.

Our government increased the GIS by 10% for seniors, improving the financial security of roughly 900,000 vulnerable seniors. We are permanently increasing the old age security pension by 10% for people 75 and older in July, which means that those who receive the full pension will receive roughly \$766 the first year.

● (1735)

[English]

It is also important to recognize the platform commitment we made to increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for individuals who qualify, and up to \$750 for couples. I want to give an example. The Speaker and I both reside in and represent rural Nova Scotian ridings. There are individuals, particularly single senior women in my riding, who are sometimes vulnerable in the sense that these programs are extremely important for them to keep the lights on and stay in their homes. I am really proud this is something our government is committing to.

We are in the middle of a pandemic. We are working our way through it, of course, and challenges abound, but this is something I know all parliamentarians will be working toward to help support affordability measures for lower income seniors.

Let us talk about New Horizons for Seniors. For Canadians who might not know, New Horizons is a program run through the federal department of seniors that is supporting either infrastructure upgrades to communal buildings or programming that support seniors' activities.

I can speak positively about this program in my own riding of Kings—Hants. For example, the Glooscap Curling Club in Kentville, Nova Scotia, had a \$25,000 investment provided by the Government of Canada to help keep that facility in top shape. It serves not just seniors but residents across Kings—Hants. It is particularly important for the seniors' programming that goes on. There are many examples of how this program is making a real difference in keeping seniors active and on the move.

We have also increased the basic personal amount, which is something that perhaps is not always talked about to the extent that it should be. That is increasing the threshold before individuals are required to pay federal tax. We have done that, which is certainly helping low-income seniors to the tune of about \$300 to \$400 a year. I recognize that might not solve all issues, but it is moving the yard sticks in the right direction. It is a making a difference for Canadians across the country.

What have all these measures resulted in? What has the government actually done, and what are the results? I laid out some of the

measures the government has undertaken, but what are the results all members of the House can take in? It has resulted in an 11% reduction in seniors poverty since this government formed office in 2015.

I do not say that lightly. I know there will remain challenges. Indeed, many members of the House talk about instances where individuals continue to face challenges, and I am not naive to that, but the fact is 11% is not just a number in the House. That 11% represents the lives of individuals who have been supported and aided by the government programs we put in place, and I am certainly proud to stand on this side of the House, which has been part of making that happen.

I will now compare and contrast. I mentioned earlier that it was the Conservative Party that had increased the old age security threshold to 67. We, of course, brought that back down to age 65. I had the privilege of sitting in the House in the 43rd Parliament. I had the opportunity to hear a unanimous consent motion that came from the Bloc Québécois, perhaps an opposition day motion, that talked about increasing old age security by \$110 across the board for every senior.

I voted against the motion, not on the idea that we should not be supporting seniors, but sometimes it is easy for opposition members in the House to say things and not really give a full reflection of the cost of the programs. I had the opportunity to tell the Bloc members what they did not say in that motion, which is that it would be an \$8-billion expense per year, at a time when the fiscal framework is under duress.

I offered to my Bloc colleagues that, if they want to make those types of suggestions in the House, I hope it is also coming with concrete measures on how to grow the economy and increase government revenue to pay for it.

On the Conservative side of the House, the Conservative Party will often say this government is spending too much money. As someone who identifies as a business Liberal, that is fair by me. If we want to be able to rein in spending, it is important we remain fiscally prudent, but at the same time, how do we make sure we support those individuals who are vulnerable?

We are talking about programs. We are talking about a \$700-million measure. How do Conservative members square the fact that they want less spending, but they also want us to do more in certain areas? Perhaps it is do more for seniors and do less elsewhere. I do not know, but those are some of the legitimate challenges we, as parliamentarians, face. How do we balance fiscal prudence versus also supporting lower-income individuals who could use help?

Those are my thoughts. I am happy to take questions from my hon. colleagues.

Government Orders

• (1740)

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a very common theme throughout my hon. colleague's speech was concern for seniors, particularly low-income seniors and seniors living in poverty. It is now widely regarded in Canadian society that one of the best ways to deal with poverty is with strong, universal programs, including our public health care system, which means everybody gets access to quality health care regardless of the size of their wallet.

I was quite disturbed to hear the hon. member, on February 7 in the emergency debate on COVID-19, endorse the concept of “opportunities for private delivery” in health care in this country. Does he not agree with me that the last thing anybody in this country needs, including poor seniors, is private health care, which would make health care dependent on the size of their wallet?

• (1745)

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Speaker, it is a great opportunity for me to differentiate in what he just said.

I said in those remarks, and of course he has the Hansard in front of him, that it is an opportunity to look at private delivery while keeping it under a first-payer model, which means that the government, the public system, continues to pay for the cost. However, how do we look at innovative ways to use the private sector to create efficiencies in the actual delivery of services?

It is not about the size of one's wallet; it is about how we can use the ingenuity of the private sector in concert with the public service to deliver services to low-income seniors, to people who need them. It would not be on the basis of their wallet. It would be under a first-payer system, but using that ingenuity to deliver services.

I think it is quite clear.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member mentioned he was a business Liberal, which I think might be an endangered species within the Liberal Party, but I will take him at his word on that.

My question to him is this. Here we are debating a programming motion, one that does not allow for a full study of this bill. It does not allow for committee study. It does not allow for the minister to appear before the committee and it does not allow for meaningful conversation and amendments at the committee.

As a business Liberal, would he not agree that we should do our due diligence, have the minister come to committee to explore and debate this bill, and then move along quickly to report stage and third reading, rather than rushing it through in a single night of debate?

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Speaker, although my hon. colleague might not have it on the record, I understand that he might identify as a progressive Conservative, and I may too suggest that those are rare on this side of the House as well. That is certainly what I have heard through the grapevine. I applaud him if he is and I hope he will continue to try to keep his party near the middle of the spectrum.

With regard to his question about efficiency and how we move forward in our work, speaking as a business Liberal, I hope my

hon. colleague would also understand that there are five lines to this legislation. All parliamentarians agree that we have a busy legislative schedule. The Prime Minister just announced that we are invoking the Emergencies Act. We need to create room in the legislative schedule to tackle meaningful issues. This is important, but it is not really that controversial. Let us move it forward. Let us make a difference for seniors.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am going to take this opportunity to put a question to a colleague for whom I have a great deal of respect. I hope he will provide a better answer than the very disappointing one given earlier by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

I would like my colleague to explain to me what the motivation is for moving a motion to limit debate on a bill that will come into force in July. I remind members that it is February.

We proposed that cuts to the GIS stop in March, but the Liberals refused. They are not in that much of a hurry and will only do so in July.

However, the government is in too much of a hurry to let us debate the bill and reveal the Liberals' shortcomings. I would like my colleague to explain that to me.

Mr. Kody Blois: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question. Once again, I want to say that I am proud to work with him on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

As I said in my answer to the previous question, I believe that it is important to move this bill forward and to create space on the parliamentary calendar for other bills.

The measure will go into effect in July, but it is also retroactive for those whose benefits were cut because of the pandemic. They will receive a payment, which will help them cope.

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, supporting our seniors is one issue I think all parliamentarians have been quite unanimous on. We saw our seniors throughout all communities, rural and urban, struggle so much during this pandemic. We as the Liberal government put in those measures to provide extra support, and now seniors should not be penalized for taking that extra support. That is really what the crux of this debate is all about.

I do not think that any member in this House disagrees with what we are trying to do as a government here, but we have heard throughout the day from the opposition. They do not disagree with the merits of this bill, Bill C-12, but rather with the process. We are here to debate the process of passing this bill and how we spend our time here before having the final vote on this bill.

Government Orders

The amendment that was moved by the Conservatives proposes that we should try to scramble committee resources to have a meeting on this when they know that committees' technical capacities are pushed each week to the max in order for them to meet. Committees have set agendas and have a lot to achieve on behalf of Canadians. If the amendment passed, they would be sent a motion by this House saying that the Minister of Seniors should be available to appear before them.

Hon. members opposite may know that the motion, if passed, would both not be binding and possibly obstructed, as the Conservatives did on Bill C-3, when the Minister of Labour made himself immediately available to deal with another urgent matter. Conservatives played politics and risked not getting the bill passed quickly, despite the importance of the matter. I worry that they would again play games like this if they were given that opportunity at committee. Having chaired a committee in the past, I have seen those games.

Further, they are ignoring what has been identified already, which is that the Minister of Seniors has been at committee. She was there yesterday. She has answered questions on this and on other issues that were in her mandate letter. Under the Conservatives' proposal, the same committee members would reconvene to debate a bill that I could read in this speech and still have six to seven minutes left over. They would reconvene to ask questions when they had an hour to ask but decided not to.

To me, any technical question could be asked and answered on this short bill through other means, given the importance of passing it through the House with expediency. The government has also offered time with civil servants in an all-MP briefing on this bill. It was held last week, after introduction. I would note that the English briefing only had two questions, that neither was from a Conservative MP, and that it ended in 10 minutes, as opposition members clearly did not see fit to take the opportunity to speak to the officials and the minister's office staff directly.

It seems convenient when certain opposition members say that they do not get answers, as they do not seem to ask a lot of real questions when the time comes. It seems quite disingenuous. They could have asked those real questions that they have, but it is clear that they would rather complain about not having that opportunity, an opportunity that I have identified just now that they had. I will leave Canadians at home to decide why that might be.

As identified as well by the member for Winnipeg North during his remarks, it is ironic to see the Conservatives dispute the process so inconsistently. At times the process matters and at times it does not. Why is that? The member well identified that the Conservatives and the Bloc would rather spend the full time debating and going into the details of a five-line bill just to delay the government. This amendment would only serve to delay these payments to seniors, although I suppose the Conservatives are no strangers to delaying payments to seniors, as we saw that they used their powers to push back the retirement age to 67 to keep Canadian seniors working. To quote most parents at some point or another, and I know my mom says this all the time, "I am not mad; I am just disappointed".

• (1750)

The debate on how we debate does not make much sense to our constituents, especially on such a simple bill. As an important reminder, we all agree on the merits of this bill. Our constituents want to see Parliament do things, not debate about debating or about how much longer we should all agree with each other on this bill. We agree, so let us move forward. There are many other urgent and pressing things on our government's agenda that we must get to as parliamentarians.

I note for hon. members that we are still in a global pandemic. There are still seniors who are isolated and facing challenges to their mental health and to their well-being. There are still seniors in long-term care environments who are at a higher health risk of pandemic outbreaks and infection. They have hopefully been better protected through our government's rapid response and monumental work to get vaccines available for provinces and territories, and to distribute them.

There are still high costs to stay at home and to stay safe. There are working seniors who still cannot go back to their workplace to supplement their pension benefits with work income. We have continued to make pandemic benefits available to eligible seniors who cannot get to work. It is exactly for that reason that we introduced Bill C-12 in the first place. We know there are seniors who took benefits in 2021. There are seniors who are taking them now. We never know what the future is going to hold. These benefits will count as income this year and affect GIS and allowances if we do not pass Bill C-12.

We obviously hope that we do not need to continue pandemic benefits through to future years, but we want to assure people that they would be covered through this legislation. We said we would be there for seniors for as long as it takes, and that is what this bill is going to help us do. In order to get to this place, we need to let our officials get to work to make the changes needed in the system. As we know, the CRA is really busy through this time of year. ES-DC is renewing GIS for 2.2 million seniors at this time as well. They are doing all this while doing a lot of other things too.

We have to respect the work of public servants and not play political games with technical measures that would help them support Canadians in a way that we have all asked them to. It is about respect for their time and their work, and I do not think that the Conservatives remember how important the work is that public servants do. They did not show respect to public servants when they were in power, and that is not really a big surprise.

I think hon. members opposite should consider focusing on what is really important here, which is low-income seniors who are working. These people rely on month-to-month income from pension programs, combined with these benefits. These people want to work, but they cannot. This pandemic benefit income is not normal income, because these are not normal times.

The Conservatives want to spend this debate telling us that process matters while also agreeing that it is an emergency. They cannot have it both ways. The merits of this short, simple matter are clear. It does one thing, and only one thing: It exempts pandemic benefit income going forward for the purposes of calculating GIS and allowances for seniors. If we agree on this matter, we should move forward quickly. Seniors are worried now, but are seeing politicians squabble over the most agreed-upon, simple bills that have ever been presented in this place.

Call me idealistic, but I hope the Conservatives and the Bloc will join the rest of the members in this House to recognize that this is an urgent matter. We need to get that support to our seniors. I hope they can join with us and work together, as we have been able to do in the past, and make sure that this support gets to seniors as soon as possible.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are the ones politicizing this issue. They could have taken action last year. We saw this coming, and we wrote to them in May, but they did nothing. Instead, they called a pointless election, and seniors paid the price. The Liberals are blaming us and invoking closure.

We asked them to send the payment to seniors sooner, in March. The Liberals did not want to, so the payment will not go out until July. We will see if any payments and reimbursements go through before that. The sooner the better.

Would my colleague comment on the fact that the Liberals are about to create two classes of seniors: those 75 and over and those aged 65 to 74? That second group gets nothing. We want pensions for all seniors increased by \$110 per month, which can happen over two or three years.

• (1800)

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly the point. If we are trying to move this legislation forward and if the member opposite agrees that seniors need that support, then why is he not supporting the expedient passage of the bill?

Over the past six years, we have lowered the threshold for people to qualify for benefits from 67 to 65, we have increased GIS by

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10% and we fixed CPP for future seniors. We have programs like the New Horizons for Seniors to help support seniors organizations in my riding, like the Fenghua Senior Association or the Shubh Helping Hands organization. There is a lot more to do. Can we get on with it already?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I share the concerns of the member from the Bloc who just talked about the government not being in a hurry. I started flagging this problem in March of last year, yet the government took six months off, called an election that no one wanted in a pandemic and followed that by taking its time to resume Parliament and bring this forward.

Does the member not understand that trust has been eroded and people are thinking that, if the government is allowed to just pass over all the steps and expedite this when it is convenient, it will do it again and again?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Speaker, I have been in the House for six years representing the wonderful people of Mississauga—Erin Mills. Over the past year I listened to the parties opposite rant and rave about how they have no faith in this government and that they do not support it. The government put the test to Canadians and Canadians told us that we had to work together in this place as a minority in a co-operative way. I ask members opposite if we can please do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, New Democrats support expediting this bill. In fact we called for action even before the election last year and it all fell on deaf ears. The one thing I do regret is the slowness of the government's reaction because many seniors have already been impacted.

That being said, one thing we have learned from the pandemic is that low-income seniors, those who rely on the GIS, cannot make ends meet. That is why they have to supplement their incomes with additional work in retirement. To that end, will the member support the NDP's proposal for a guaranteed livable basic income so that seniors will never have to suffer the indignity they had to endure during the pandemic?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Speaker, in the past six years, the member has done phenomenal work for her community and in this House. I look forward to engaging in conversation with her about a guaranteed livable income as we continue to do better to support seniors and all Canadians through these difficult times.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before I get started, I just wanted to let members know I will be splitting my time with the member for Victoria.

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Everyone deserves to be able to live and age with dignity as a valued member of their community, but for more and more Canadians the prospect of retirement is a cause for anxiety. As costs keep rising and wages fail to keep up, people are struggling to save for their retirements during their working years. Seniors across the country were shocked to learn that the benefits they rely on, such as the guaranteed income supplement, had been cut because they received pandemic supports like the CERB.

For months now, the Liberal government has ignored calls to address the intensifying financial crisis for many of Canada's poorest seniors. Over 183,000 seniors across this country were impacted, 610 in my riding of London—Fanshawe. This crisis is a direct result of the government choosing to count emergency pandemic income support in the calculation of eligibility for the guaranteed income supplement. I, along with my New Democrat colleagues, have heard from seniors from across the country who were being evicted just as winter was setting in. This situation, created by the government's own mismanagement, has left many seniors worried they will not be able to afford their rent, food or medications.

I am supporting this motion, because I have heard from so many seniors who are desperately looking for a solution to this problem. Many do not know where to turn now, and they have lost a vital part of their incomes. In the House, I have repeatedly asked for the government to show more compassion for people who find themselves in this desperate circumstance. On December 7, I asked the government to take action. I spoke of Emanuel Benjamin, a 71-year-old senior from my riding, and his GIS benefit that was clawed back by the government because he accessed the CERB in good faith. Before the pandemic, because of the abhorrent way we treat our seniors, Emanuel was living below the poverty line. Now, because of more abhorrent treatment by the government, his income was reduced from \$1,500 a month to just \$600 a month. Emanuel cannot afford his rent, his food or his medication, and it was only through the generosity of strangers in London, who were able to pool some money, that he could continue to hold on. Emanuel needs a legislative fix for this situation, a situation created by the government, which we must now fix immediately.

Every day I see such selfless acts in London, like the one that helped Emanuel. We are a community that truly stands up for each other, but Emanuel's story is not a unique one, and it certainly is not a happy one. It is the story of a government that is so out of touch with the struggles of Canadians that it ignored the pleas for help for so long that, in some cases, the damage is irreparable. My colleague, the MP for North Island—Powell River, has brought to our attention many stories from seniors in dire need. One example of the personal devastation wrought by the government was of a senior who committed suicide because he could not face the stress of losing his home and living on the street.

There is a restaurant near my constituency office on Dundas Street where the server noted they have a huge rush every morning for breakfast, and it is often the only meal community members, seniors, can afford. That breakfast is \$5.99, and it is the only meal they will have that day. A breakfast special at a local restaurant is not an acceptable substitute for a social safety net, a safety net that was already full of massive holes, which were made even larger by consecutive government cuts and clawbacks.

I had one senior reach out to my constituency office, and they wanted me to know how expensive life had become. This constituent buys the same items from the grocery store every week, and she wanted me to know that those same items that she relies on weekly have increased by \$8. To many that does not seem like a lot, but to someone who is living on a fixed income, it can mean the world.

Last Parliament, the Liberals voted in favour of a motion that said, “those who have applied in good faith for and received benefits through CERB or other programs to support them through this crisis will not be unjustly penalized”, yet the government did just that. It is penalizing people who can barely make ends meet.

These seniors were not told that accepting emergency benefits would disentitle them to their regular income supports the following year. Among the seniors I have talked to are some who used that bit of extra income to pay bills that were long overdue. They got dental work they had not been able to afford for years, and they had been living in constant pain. They spent the money to restock their pantry, because it was empty and they could not afford to fill it before.

● (1805)

In addition to the sudden reduction in their GIS benefit amount, they are now being denied other services and supports from various levels of government that tie their eligibility to the GIS.

We have also heard from people who believe that these seniors should not have received the CERB benefit or somehow should have known better than to apply for it in the first place. New Democrats disagree. Canada's cash-strapped seniors should not be punished for legitimately receiving emergency pandemic supports. These are elderly Canadians who already live below the poverty level who were working to supplement their meagre incomes. They were eligible for pandemic income support, just like any other working Canadian, and the GIS clawback was cruel, unnecessary and is still having deep impacts on the poorest of seniors.

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While we view this bill as a step in the right direction because it capitulates to our demand to fix the GIS problem moving forward, it does not address the urgent need to provide immediate greater financial support to seniors. These seniors cannot continue to wait for the government to figure itself out. New Democrats will work to ensure the government issues the immediate emergency payments to affected seniors to help them bridge the gap until the budgeted one-time payment is released in May of 2022, but we will also fight for permanent supports. That is why I am proud to have seconded my colleague from Winnipeg Centre's private member's bill with respect to the provision of a guaranteed livable income, to ensure they no longer have to live below that poverty line. Too many seniors who have gone hungry, missed or split their medications or faced eviction because they live in poverty need a permanent solution and it is the responsibility of the government to provide that.

I support this motion because we have to fix this problem, but I certainly hope the next time the government receives a warning that its policies will cause serious hardship to Canadian seniors it acts immediately, without months of political pressure to convince it to do the right thing.

In closing, I have a quick message for those seniors in London—Fanshawe. Both I and my amazing team in the constituency office, without whom I could not do the work that I try to do here, are here to help them. We might not be able to get them everything they need, but we will fight as hard as we possibly can to make sure they get as many supports as we can find. In this House, I will continue to make sure their voices are heard. Please know that Canadians will always be able to count on New Democrats to fight for them.

• (1810)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I genuinely appreciate the fact that in order to be able to pass this legislation through as quickly as we want to get it through we are very much dependent on getting support from an opposition party. I want to commend the New Democrats for recognizing its importance. Even though they may still have some difficulty with the government on a wide variety of issues, I want to recognize that very important fact.

In the future, to what degree does she feel, as we continue to try to support seniors in whatever way we can, that legislation of this nature would prevent the types of stories we have heard so much about?

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Mr. Speaker, I agree to support this motion, but unfortunately the problem was created by the government and that I cannot support. On an ongoing basis, in the future, when these issues are brought forward by New Democrats, I would hope it would listen. I know that to react in such an emergency situation is not always easy and we constantly learn from those mistakes. I certainly hope that will be something that the member and his government colleagues will learn from in the future and will craft legislation that would think about everyone who would be impacted with equality and concern.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member opposite for her speech. I so enjoyed working with her when we were on the status of women committee together. I know she has a heart for her community.

One of things I find troubling about the amount of time the government has delayed this is the number of people in my riding who have fallen into homelessness and have not been able to get any kind of help from it. Even those who had worked, paid into EI and met the criteria were refused. Does the member feel the government will come with a payment in time or does she think that waiting until July of next year is going to cause more of those kinds of negative consequences?

• (1815)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Mr. Speaker, I, too, enjoyed working with my hon. colleague along the way. She was an excellent Chair, and very fair. We certainly learned a great deal about how women have had to endure through this pandemic in extraordinary ways.

The delays in these payments have absolutely been so incredibly hard. Specifically, I know of a woman in my riding who was eligible for supports. She was struggling with the government to get those supports. The day after she was evicted from her home and living in her car, we were able to get them for her, but that was too late. So many things are lost at that point. We need a far more reactive government that will listen to the people who need the help that they deserve.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I was listening very closely to my hon. colleague who pointed out that the government has been slow to respond.

As everyone knows, because the Bloc Québécois members have repeated it about 12 times today, we warned the government last March of the impact this was going to have on people receiving both GIS and CERB payments.

Throughout the day, I have heard the Liberals say that we are simply trying to delay the problem because we did not support closure. I think that is a bit rich coming from the Liberals, after they have been putting off the problem since last March and now they are introducing closure, especially since closure is not the normal way of proceeding in the House. Members are generally allowed to speak.

The NDP members supported closure, but I do not hold it against them. I do not know whether my colleague could balance the rhetoric from my Liberal friends and point out that the delay is their fault. We have been telling them since March that they should have done something.

[*English*]

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely agree with my hon. colleague.

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I am not here to make excuses for government mismanagement, for the Liberals' inability to manage their calendar, or for calling an election that certainly stood in the way of seniors receiving the money that they desperately need. If I had a time machine, there are things I would do. Certainly, if New Democrats were in government, things would look very different. I wait for that day and work very hard for it.

By no means do I make any excuses for this government. The Liberals have to live up to their obligations to seniors, especially, and to the people who need their support.

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are here because Canada's poorest working seniors have been cruelly punished by the government simply for receiving legitimate pandemic supports, as any other working Canadian received.

My New Democrat colleagues and I have been tirelessly raising this issue in the House. I am grateful that the government is finally beginning to address this issue, but it is important to acknowledge the impact that the government's inaction over the past year has had, and the dire circumstances that seniors are currently facing because of the government's mistake and because of its inaction following it.

We have heard stories from across the country. I have spoken to many seniors in my riding of Victoria who have been impacted. I have shared a number of their stories in the House about the struggles they have faced. They have been unable to afford rent. Seniors have been living in motels or living in their cars and experiencing homelessness, hunger and the inability to pay for essential medication because the government spent months knowing that this problem existed but refusing to take urgently needed action.

The Liberal government has known about the GIS-CERB conflict since May, 2021, but it did not bother fixing it until New Democrats raised the issue, again and again, for months. Even before the government called an unnecessary election, we raised the urgency of this issue. We kept raising it, week after week and month after month. With each passing week, and each passing month, more seniors in our ridings were unable to meet their basic needs.

Seniors have shared that this is not just a financial issue. It is also a health issue. When seniors have to choose between medication and food, when they are forced to sleep out in the cold, when they cannot afford transportation to appointments or when they are living with the ever-present threat of eviction, they experience financial hardship, but they also experience medical and mental health crises, depression and suicide.

I support this bill because it finally begins to address the issue, but I am compelled to speak for the seniors who have suffered over the past year.

I think it is also important to acknowledge the fact that the government is not addressing the same conflict that exists with the Canada child benefit. Bill C-12 fixes the GIS clawback for vulnerable seniors, but for low-income families who received pandemic income supports, such as CERB or CRB, the Canada child benefit will still be clawed back next year because Bill C-12 is specific to GIS and not for income-tested benefits.

We are going to have to spend months pushing the government to address how this impacts families. We need a similar solution to the clawback for low-income families. I am glad this bill will be moving forward, because it is going to support seniors. However, it is important to also acknowledge that the guaranteed income supplement does not lift seniors out of poverty. Seniors receiving the GIS are still considered to be living below the poverty line. The GIS, except in some very rare cases, does not actually bring income above the poverty level.

This is why my NDP colleagues and I are pushing for a guaranteed livable basic income. It is why the member for Winnipeg Centre introduced Bill C-223, which, if passed, would establish the first national framework for a guaranteed livable basic income. I want to give a shout-out to Basic Income Victoria BC and UBI Works for their advocacy on this critical issue. We have a responsibility to lift people out of poverty and to ensure that seniors, people with disabilities and single parents can meet their basic needs and live in dignity.

We need a basic guaranteed livable income that would make a world of difference for seniors on fixed incomes. We should also create a pension advocacy commission to increase and enhance CPP, OAS and GIS.

I want to take a moment, also, to talk about an organization in my riding. Fateh Care started operating during the pandemic. It provides support for seniors, those living with disabilities, people quarantining and people who are looking for a helping hand when they do not know where else to go. Fateh Care was founded by an incredible family, Harjas and Dr. Navneet Popli. It is one of a kind in Canada. It is a free mobile food bank, and it is available to all those who are struggling to afford or access food, who often do not have transportation to go out and buy it.

● (1820)

I went with Harjas to help deliver food in the mobile food bank, and it was so clear that people in our community are struggling. I want to thank Fateh Care for all the support it gives to seniors in need.

I also want to call on the government to address the underlying causes of food insecurity for seniors, and to commit to a guaranteed livable basic income. Earlier today, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons mentioned the need to move this expeditiously through Parliament, and this is what we are debating right now. He said he wished this had been done earlier. Wow. I wish that he had felt that urgency months ago.

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The government knew about this issue a year ago. The Liberals failed to address it. We raised this issue many times in the House. After learning about the problem, and after hearing from the NDP advocating for seniors and hearing about the impacts on seniors across the country, the government called an unnecessary election. When we came back to the House, we raised it again and again.

There is a senior in my riding who lost their apartment because of this delay. There is a senior who lost their provincial rental assistance because of this mistake. It requires them to be on the GIS to receive these benefits. There are seniors struggling to pay for essential medication. How can the government explain the delay when speaking to these seniors?

The need for this bill underlines the fact that the government made a mistake. I understand that mistakes happen, but what I do not understand is why the government waited this long to correct its mistake. Why was the government okay letting seniors suffer for a year? More than that, why is the government okay letting seniors suffer year after year?

Even with this fix, too many seniors are living below the poverty line. There is a solution: Ensure they have a guaranteed livable basic income. Close loopholes in offshore tax havens. Ensure multi-millionaires are paying their fair share, and ensure seniors and all members of our communities can live in dignity.

• (1825)

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague touched upon the idea of a guaranteed basic income. At the end of the day, I will put my own thoughts on the table and then ask the question. I think the idea of looking at the variety of social safety net programs, both provincially and federally, and consolidating those programs to have one guaranteed payment that would be available, as well as to get administrative savings from some of the delivery of these programs from the bureaucracy to augment those programs, is an idea worth exploring.

I am wondering where her thoughts are. Sometimes every parliamentarian has a different view on whether we are adding this program on top of the existing social safety net. The Parliamentary Budget Officer said that it could be close to \$90 billion per year to do something of that nature.

Could the member describe to the House exactly the parameters? Would it be adding to the safety net, or trying to solidify and make efficiencies in our existing system?

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for his interest in a guaranteed basic livable income. It is heartening to hear that he is interested in exploring this idea.

I believe that we need to consolidate and create efficiencies, absolutely. The Parliamentary Budget Officer showed that would be the case, if we were to put forward some kind of guaranteed livable income. There are efficiencies to be found. More than that, we need to increase the income of people living below the poverty line.

People are struggling. People in my community are struggling to access food and medication. It is beyond time that we provide the support necessary for people to live in dignity. I encourage the member to move beyond wanting to explore the idea. Whether it is

universal dental care or universal basic income, the government speaks about wanting to explore or talk about this. Let us get it done.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when we talk about seniors, we are talking about the segment of the population that has been hardest hit by the pandemic. Seniors were more likely to get seriously ill from COVID-19, more likely to die and most affected by isolation.

Canada and Quebec have one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, and Quebecers and Canadians have been among the most compliant with health guidelines. Despite all of that, we are one of the last countries to ease restrictions, in large part because our health care system is so weak.

The Bloc Québécois has long been calling for an increase in health transfers. We saw this coming. The federal government has been underfunding provincial health care systems for years, and now these systems need fixing. If the government had done so a few years ago, we would no doubt already be out of lockdown. We would probably already be freer, and what is going on in Ottawa right now might never have happened.

Does my colleague agree that the government could have better funded provincial health care systems and that it must do so now to prevent other tragedies like what we have been going through recently?

[*English*]

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Speaker, it is so essential that we increase health transfers to the provinces. It is something premiers across the country have been asking for. In my home province of British Columbia, we are experiencing critical health care shortages and critical staffing shortages. In Victoria, we have lost three walk-in clinics in the past few weeks. People are struggling to find a family doctor. We need to make sure the provinces have the funding from the federal government. It is their responsibility to provide the resources so we do not see the crisis that we are currently seeing in our health care system.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think my hon. colleague will agree that one of the most of the important aspects of this debate is that it has shed light on the meagre amount so many seniors are living on every month. I am sitting here tonight listening to her and reflecting on this. I am astounded that we have gotten to a place where we have a government that is comfortable with the OAS and GIS being so meagre and comfortable with so many people in our country living below the poverty line, particularly seniors, and that as a society and a country, there is not more outcry.

Perhaps she could offer her reflections on where we go next. How do we take this debate and ensure that, in a very short amount of time, we get to a place where every senior is living with dignity and has enough income every month to meet basic needs?

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• (1830)

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Speaker, I think the first step is a guaranteed livable basic income, having the government start actually ensuring the wealthiest pay their fair share and investing that money into supporting seniors and supporting everyone in our communities who is struggling.

Mr. George Chahal (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Brampton South.

Today, we have a very important question before the House, and I am here to join in this debate about what we can do for seniors, particularly low-income seniors, who have a greater need of government support. Bill C-12 would amend the Old Age Security Act around the guaranteed income supplement, and we have a very tight timeline to do so. This crucial legislation would amend the Old Age Security Act to ensure that pandemic relief benefits are exempt from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement or allowance benefits, starting in July 2022. We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has made life more expensive for seniors. This was especially the case for vulnerable seniors who had followed public health advice and made the right choice to protect themselves and their loved ones by staying home from their jobs to avoid the risk of infection.

I think back to June 2020 and the devastating impacts of the hailstorm in my community of Calgary Skyview. It had a huge impact on our community. It devastated the homes of many Calgary Skyview residents and many seniors during the time of the COVID pandemic. I am thinking of the many seniors I have spoken to from Calgary Skyview, such as Maureen, Sunil and the president of the Dashmesh Seniors Society, Mr. Bhatti. It was for individuals like them that we quickly responded and introduced pandemic benefits, like the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada recovery benefit.

As we all know, these benefits have resulted in some negative impacts for some of our most vulnerable seniors. This was not our government's intention, and we have worked closely with officials to come up with a rapid and targeted response. I would like to thank the officials who have delivered these immensely valuable benefits to Canadians and who thought to make sure they were compassionate and available throughout the pandemic.

Currently, the Old Age Security Act outlines that GIS is an income-tested, payable benefit to low-income seniors who receive the old age security pension. At the start of every July, eligible Canadian seniors have their entitlement for the GIS or the allowance reassessed based on their income or the combined income of a couple, as reported on their annual tax return in April. The purpose of this is to ensure that the most in-need seniors receive the benefit and that appropriate recalculations take place.

The Income Tax Act defines the newly created pandemic relief benefits as taxable income. This has, in turn, meant that they are also considered as income for the purpose of determining entitlement to the GIS or allowance benefits. Responding to this while respecting the tax season is why Bill C-12 is so important and required a more tailored approach to quickly receive royal assent.

In the economic fiscal update of last December, we announced our first step in addressing the broader issue of GIS benefits being

impacted. Our government committed \$742.4 million for a one-time payment to fully compensate eligible recipients who were impacted. Through close collaboration with other parties and our officials, we have worked hard on a timeline to deliver this payment as soon as possible. As the Minister of Seniors announced yesterday, we are on target to get these payments out to most individuals on April 19 to fully compensate the total amount in benefits lost for the year.

• (1835)

As I spoke about collaboration, I must acknowledge the great recent announcement in Calgary to support seniors. The government, the City of Calgary and Silvera for Seniors are partnering to deliver affordable housing with the Vista seniors housing project, which is located right across from Akram Jomaa Islamic Centre. This is significant work that was done by officials and our Liberal government in the spirit of co-operation, all the while focused on seniors, not the politics we see here. We recognize government is not always perfect, but we strive every day to be there for Canadians in the right ways to help them in their day-to-day lives. Here, we are doing that.

The motion before us has been thoroughly debated in the House, and rightfully so. I hope that after hearing from my colleagues, all members will recognize this is not about rushing, it is not about avoid procedure and it is not about the minister avoiding a committee appearance. Bill C-12 is about fixing a situation we all decried and moving forward for seniors.

The reason this motion was introduced was so that Bill C-12 could be passed expeditiously and the proper calculations could take place in July 2022. This is not an arbitrary date or a politically motivated false urgency to avoid process. The Minister of Seniors and her office have hosted technical briefings on this matter and offered a clear picture into the challenges that departmental officials face. Simply put, to avoid this issue arising a second time in July 2022, we must amend the Old Age Security Act no later than March 4. We heard concerns and support regarding the need to prevent a similar situation down the road. Seniors in all ridings have been impacted by this, and more seniors will be impacted if we do not move quickly. For that reason, we urge all members to do the right thing and what is best for Canada's most vulnerable seniors.

Bill C-12 would allow for thousands of seniors to file their 2021 taxes with peace of mind knowing that the benefits they are entitled to will not be negatively impacted. To be clear, the following benefits would be exempt: the Canada emergency response benefit, including any CERB amounts paid under the Employment Insurance Act; the Canada recovery benefit; the Canada recovery sickness benefit; the Canada recovery caregiving benefit; and the Canada worker lockdown benefit.

As it is tax season, I want to thank the many organizations that are helping seniors in Calgary Skyview, like the Inca Senior Citizens Society and The Immigrant Education Society. They are partnering with us under the volunteer tax program.

Having listened closely to today's discussion, there appears to be a great deal of confusion on the part of some members opposite on exactly what Bill C-12 would do and why we need it. I repeat: Bill C-12 does not have anything to do with the one-time payment we committed to in the economic fiscal update. That is a separate matter and is something the minister is closely focused on with all involved. The members opposite who are insisting that more debate needs to be held on Bill C-12 should remember that this is a very simple five-line piece of legislation. It is not complicated and is designed with the sole purpose of exempting pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS and allowance when recalculations take place in July 2022.

My colleagues and I on this side of the House are extremely proud of the measures we have put forward over the course of this extremely difficult pandemic. We will continue to put seniors at the forefront of our government's response to COVID-19, and Bill C-12 plays an important role in that. We will remain focused on finding solutions to the challenges faced by Canada's seniors to allow for safe and comfortable retirements. Seniors deserve the finest quality of care and support after decades of building this country.

• (1840)

Bill C-12 is not something that can afford to be delayed. We must all act as fast as we possibly can. I hope my hon. colleagues can all agree on the need for swift passage of this bill.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, throughout the member for Calgary Skyview's speech, he said that the minister held a consultation. During the minister's remarks throughout the debate, she talked frequently about the previous Conservative policies. The first policy she failed to mention was that fixing this mistake was actually in her platform.

It is the second time this week that the government has invoked closure on legislation, and we all agree that this needs to pass quickly. However, the member opposite says that the minister held a consultation. We often think the legislation could be simple, but there is something that could be missed. The more we avoid parliamentary scrutiny through the committee process, which gives members time, in detail, to do a clause-by-clause analysis, we do not have that extra scrutiny and oversight. Therefore, I find it a little rich that the government is saying we are playing politics. The Liberals delayed the return of Parliament. We know this needed to be acted upon.

Government Orders

First, can the member outline that the government made a mistake but it is trying to rectify it now? Second, why do we need to rush this today when the Senate is not even sitting? Even if it is passed tonight in a bill, the Senate is not going to debate it until next week.

Mr. George Chahal: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the hon. colleague's assessment and question.

The previous Conservative government did actually increase the age of retirement for seniors, which we rolled back. Our minister has been open to having conversations and discussions on this. The most important thing on this issue is to get money back to those seniors. It is tax season. They have to file their taxes and we want to make sure that those seniors who were impacted get support, ongoing and through this pandemic.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I tried to stay calm while my colleague from Calgary Skyview was delivering his speech, but it certainly was not easy.

I keep hearing people talk about how hard they worked to fix things for seniors as fast as possible. Are the Liberals seriously trying to make us believe that, when we sounded the alarm in July 2021?

Right in the middle of the election campaign, I took action. I wrote to ministers. I was told that, because of the election, it was a transitional period and there was nothing they could do. They were not too worried about it during the campaign because they were all having a great time with their pointless election.

Now they keep telling us how great the government is because it is acting fast to save seniors. They keep telling us how great this bill is, this bill they are going to make us vote on a few hours from now even though it will not come into force until July. This is February. At this very moment, seniors are cutting how much they spend on food.

I hope the member is embarrassed to be handing us those lines. I hope he can explain why it is so urgent that we vote on this now when it will not come into effect until July because their computer system is not functional.

[*English*]

Mr. George Chahal: Mr. Speaker, I did not hear a question from the hon. member but I will answer some of the comments.

Our government stepped up. In my riding of Calgary Skyview, we stepped up to support seniors with the Vista seniors housing project across from Akram Jomaa Islamic Centre. That is government working in collaboration and partnership with other orders of government and community organizations to provide seniors with critical supports like affordable housing, so I am proud of my government's work.

Government Orders

● (1845)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, can I get clarity from the member on when the first payments will go out to seniors, based on this bill?

Mr. George Chahal: Mr. Speaker, our government has committed to quick passage of the bill and to provide supports for seniors as soon as possible. It is important, as this legislation is passed, that we can move forward and be able to do that.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Calgary Skyview for sharing his time with me. I am pleased to rise today virtually to support Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act, a bill to support seniors in Canada presented by my colleague from Brampton West, the Minister of Seniors.

The issues the bill raises are some that I have heard about from my constituents. Last year and earlier this year, I had a number of important meetings with many different organizations that serve seniors in Brampton, such as members of Brampton's local CARP, United Achievers' Club, Young at Heart, Roots Community Services and some seniors clubs.

Most importantly, I spoke with hundreds of seniors at their doors in my riding of Brampton South. All of them spoke to me about the importance of supporting seniors and recognizing that they were hit hard by this pandemic. They know very well how we can play a positive role in their lives through supporting the physical, social, financial, health and well-being of seniors.

That is why today I will be happy to share my perspective on why we need to pass this bill as soon as we can so that we can continue to support seniors across the country. Bill C-12 excludes income received from the recovery benefits, the caregiving benefit, the sickness benefits and the lockdown benefits from being included in the calculated amount of the guaranteed income supplement, an allowance that will be coming to seniors at their set monthly rate starting this July.

From the beginning, it was made clear to Canadians that these pandemic programs were meant as income replacement for people who had lost their jobs or who had their hours reduced because of the pandemic. It was also clear that this would be considered as income. As a result, some seniors who got these benefits saw a reduction in the GIS allowance benefit. We recognize that this came as unexpected to some seniors.

We have heard their concerns and this bill will help resolve this issue by exempting pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits. We will ensure we do not penalize seniors for taking the pandemic benefits they needed to help make ends meet. We know that our government's compassionate approach has helped seniors and all Canadians get through some very tough times.

Some working, low-income seniors still need pandemic support from the government. This is why, as a first step, the government committed in this economic and fiscal update to provide a one-time payment to compensate for the full amount of the reduction. It will be automatic, tax-free and come in the same way seniors normally receive their benefits.

Coming even earlier than planned in April, this will prevent financial hardship for these seniors. Eligible seniors will not need to take any action. This targeted, one-time payment will go to over 200,000 GIS and allowance recipients who received pandemic benefits in 2020 and who faced a reduction or loss of GIS benefits. We are determined to make this right. As a next step, this bill is making a simple adjustment to the Old Age Security Act that will prevent this GIS reduction from happening again.

The substance of this bill is shorter than 100 words. It does not need any further delay, study or analysis, so let us pass the bill quickly to take away the worries of low-income seniors.

We are proud of our record when it comes to supporting seniors. One of the first actions this government took was to restore the age of eligibility for OAS to age 65 after it was raised by the Conservatives. That move tried to push seniors into staying in the workforce longer, which seniors did not appreciate or ask for. What they actually asked for was a secure retirement.

● (1850)

When the pandemic began, we invested an additional \$9 million into the New Horizons for Seniors program, supporting local projects that serve seniors. Later, seniors received an additional \$20 million from this program. Some of these projects, including those in our community, reduce social isolation, improve digital literacy and help seniors maintain a social support network.

We have also implemented changes that will specifically help low-income seniors, like raising the basic personal amount for taxes when this measure is fully implemented next year. It will benefit 4.3 million seniors, almost half a million of whom will see their federal taxes reduced to zero. That will benefit many seniors.

The government has provided one-time payments to help get seniors through the pandemic, and we will see a permanent 10% increase for those over the age of 75 coming this summer. This is the first real adjustment since 1973. This helped nearly 900,000 low-income seniors and has lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. The government has worked hard to ensure income security for seniors who have spent their lives helping to build this country. We enhanced the CPP by 50% for future retirees. We are the party that created OAS, the CPP, the RRSP and the GIS, which serve as the cornerstones of the Canadian retirement system.

Government Orders

We know that we have more to do as well. We are working with the provinces to improve the quality and availability of long-term care homes. This one is especially important to me. Some members may remember that one of the first long-term care homes in the country that needed support from the armed forces was in my riding of Brampton South. The Health Standards Organization and the Canadian Standards Association have both released their draft reports for recommendations on this issue. Like many Canadians, I am eager to see the final results later this year.

Our government is also exploring the establishment of an aging at home benefit as well as assisting other community-based organizations that help seniors to age in place.

If we ask seniors in any community, they will tell us that they want to stay in their homes with their families longer. We are working to provide seniors with a single point of access for government services, as well as working to define elder abuse and make the appropriate adjustments to the Criminal Code. We know that elder abuse, including in care homes, needs to be called out and addressed.

I remember the night before the omicron wave, I visited the Flower City Seniors Centre together with the Minister of Seniors. I remember speaking with Christine, the facility manager, about the support we are providing for seniors. I asked her about the feedback she is hearing from seniors in Brampton. Seniors want this pandemic to be over and while they want issues like the one we discussed today to be addressed quickly, they are grateful for the support we have given them.

Together, I look forward to continuing the work with the minister, locally and nationally, on supporting seniors. We all have to continue this work.

This bill is essential. Seniors across the country need this support urgently and there is no reason for delay. I encourage all colleagues to support the bill.

• (1855)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague is modest, so she did not point out the incredibly important work she has done to advance diabetes research in Canada. London is home to Sir Frederick Banting. Of course, those who know anything about the history of diabetes will know the important work that he did to advance insulin. So many have benefited from that.

Where I am going with this is that I wonder if the member could outline for us the way that a measure like this will help not just seniors but the seniors living with diabetes whom she has helped for so long.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is very passionate about the diabetes issue too. I thank him for this passion. He is a great member of his riding.

We can all agree with how challenging this pandemic has been for seniors and we know that we are always there for our respectable seniors. We are helping seniors by issuing a one-time payment to those on GIS allowance to reduce the loss due to pandemic benefits. We all want Bill C-12 to be passed.

I am also grateful to all members of the House for supporting this bill and I am hoping we will pass the bill quickly, so our seniors can get—

The Deputy Speaker: Questions and comments, the hon. member for Kelowna—Lake Country.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government says this is really important. It is clear that this legislation is to fix errors from former legislation that the government put forth. I know it is something I have heard about extensively in my riding of Kelowna—Lake Country from seniors, who were affected by the errors made in the legislation. They said how they affected them.

My question to the hon. member is this. If this was so important for the government to fix, why did we have an election in the summer? Why did it take the government two months to be recalled, and why did it wait so long for this legislation, Bill C-12? Why did it wait so long? Why was it not one of the most important pieces of legislation that was brought forth as soon as the House resumed?

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Mr. Speaker, to the contrary, our government did not wait to provide support to seniors. That is why one of the first things the government did in this Parliament, as part of the fall economic statement, was to announce that funds would be given to compensate for the full amount of the reduction. A one-time support for seniors was announced before, for example.

I also know that the Minister of Seniors began working on this the very day she was appointed to her position.

I just want to talk about this bill so that we can help our vulnerable seniors. With this bill, individuals would receive a \$1,200 one-time payment from when the GIS was reduced by \$100. We want to get back on track and make sure that seniors get that payment, so let us pass this bill. It is urgent to make sure this issue is resolved and that seniors get the benefit.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I agree with my colleague from Berthier—Maskinongé. I found it frustrating listening to my Liberal colleagues earlier as they told us that we need to rush this through, that they are there for seniors, that they are going to take care of seniors and that they are going to solve the problem. We warned the Liberals about this a year ago.

When it comes to the vulnerability of seniors, housing is a major challenge and one of the biggest indicators of poverty. Right now in Quebec there is a shortage of 50,000 social housing units to deal with this crisis. This shortage is a direct result of the federal government's withdrawal from social housing for the past 30 years.

Government Orders

I often rise in the House to talk about this issue. I asked the minister about it on Monday and told him that major investments are needed. The province, as well as cities like Montreal and Quebec City, are waiting for investments. This is affecting thousands of people, and our seniors are the most vulnerable when it comes to housing.

When will the government tackle the housing crisis head-on, as it has done with the current health crisis, and fix the problem?

• (1900)

[*English*]

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Mr. Speaker, we take housing seriously. During the campaign last summer, our government introduced an ambitious plan to increase home ownership, as well as to make the overall housing market more affordable. That included helping cities to increase supply, building affordable housing and converting office spaces into housing, as well as stopping excessive profits from the housing market. These will not only help seniors, but all Canadians. We are looking forward to continuing this work.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Kenora.

[*English*]

I cannot start my speech today without giving some recognition. On this side of the House, we have talked about a plan forward out of this pandemic. We have talked about ending the mandates, so I cannot start today without recognizing my hometown, which I am so proud of: Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Calgary City Council, led by Dan McLean, today announced an end to the mask mandate on March 1 in alignment with the Province of Alberta, so I thank Dan McLean. Dan, of course, is the councillor for Ward 13. It is a ward in my riding, and I am so very pleased and proud of him and city council today for taking that brave action toward advancing Canadians and ending this mandate. I thank them so very much.

As the shadow minister for employment, future workforce development, disability and inclusion, a key portfolio in ESDC, and along with the incredible critic for seniors in my party, the member for Hastings—Lennox and Addington, I feel completely obliged and compelled to speak about the matter before us today, Bill C-12, and the reason we are having this debate.

When I heard about Bill C-12, it seemed to me that the situation was familiar and I gave it a bit of thought. When the pandemic hit, the government issued a series of benefits: the CERB and the CRB. Lo and behold, unfortunately when the GIS payments were issued there was a necessity to claw them back. This was a result of the government's lack of competency with the administration and overpayment of the CRB and the CERB, by giving funds to those who were not entitled to them. This is no small matter. It affects 90,000 low-income seniors across the country who are struggling to put food on the table and to heat their homes. They certainly do not need this problem at this time.

I understand that the government has allocated a large sum of funds to this: around \$700 million. Yesterday in the House, it actually released the date on which these low-income seniors could start to see these funds. It is April 19. The Liberals were not willing to

release that information to me at committee, so I am glad they have finally come forward with it in the House, and have announced a date when seniors can expect to see these funds. They would not give me a date when I pressed them at committee.

As I reflected upon this situation, it occurred to me that this was not the first time we had seen this. In fact, oops, they did it again. Where has this happened before? Where have we seen this lack of administration and competency before? I am going to go all the way back to the beginning of the pandemic and Bill C-2, where we as an opposition tried very hard to work with the government to get Canadians the benefits they deserved.

Our current interim Leader of the Opposition was involved in those negotiations, as was the member for Carleton, who was acting in the capacity of shadow minister for finance at the time. He had the good measure to recognize the lack of oversight that was occurring with the government asking for unlimited spending. I am very fortunate that he saw that and pointed it out.

What happened after that was that we had to come back to the House and amend Bill C-2 as a result of the government's incompetence and mismanagement again. We saw that the Canada emergency wage subsidy came too late. The Canada emergency commercial rent assistance did not work, because it required the approval of landlords as well as a 70% revenue reduction. As well, not a single business received funds from the government's large employer emergency financing facility. We saw it there with Bill C-2.

We saw it again in May of 2020, when the CBC reported that Canadians who did not qualify for CERB were getting it anyway and could face consequences, such as the ones we saw with the GIS, which thank goodness are finally being addressed today.

• (1905)

However, it does not end there. We saw it again with maternity benefits, whereby Canadian women who were pregnant could not receive the CERB or the CRB, again as a result of government error and an oversight. We saw the errors of the government once again having a significant impact on Canadians who needed those benefits at that time.

Government Orders

I wish I could say it ends there, but it does not. In fact, it goes on to Bill C-24, where we had to come back and close loopholes that allowed international leisure and other non-essential travellers to claim the Canada recovery benefit, but that made individuals required to quarantine or self-isolate under the Quarantine Act during the two-week benefit period ineligible to submit a claim.

Do we see the trend here that I am referring to? It is the incompetence of the government again and again. Here we are again with Bill C-12, referring to the errors of the government that deeply impacted Canadians. I wish I could say it ends there. It does not.

In November, 2021, we found out that organized crime knowingly and actively exploited federal pandemic benefits. Where did these funds potentially go? I will tell you. They went to illegal firearms. Check the borders, boys. They also went to human trafficking and prostitution. Once again, the errors and mismanagement of the government caused problems for the House. They caused delays to those who needed benefits, resulting in new legislation. The House had to consider taking the time of everyone here, taking us away from other important issues and away from work for our constituents, to come back here and fix the government's errors once again.

I know members know what I am going to say. It does not end there. Now, we are finding out that there are problems with the auditing. Even though the government was aware in June, 2020, and by July 2020, it recognized \$442 million in double payments, we will not see this auditing be completely done and rectified until 2023. That is three years after the Liberals first recognized that this problem existed.

Again and again, we are seeing the government's incompetence have a significant effect on the lives of Canadians and on everyone who works in the House and wants to focus on other legislation. Unfortunately, we are called back again and again to fix the errors of the government.

It does not end there. Just five days ago, we found out that the federal government sent nearly \$12 million in Canada emergency response benefit payments to people with foreign addresses in the first seven months of the pandemic. It is overwhelming the number of—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1910)

The Deputy Speaker: I know there are questions and answers coming up after. I know we are really waiting to ask those questions. I cannot wait to hear the bit that is going to go on. If we can just finish up on this one, there is a minute or so for the member to finish her speech.

The hon. member for Calgary Midnapore.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, they are just excited about the turkey meatballs, and I do not blame them. I do not know which part of that they are more excited about.

My point is that these are significant problems that have had serious consequences for individuals, never mind leaving cold, hungry seniors sitting in their basements alone by themselves. This incompetence has had far greater effects, which we are seeing here today

in the direction of this nation, that I do not have the time to get into, such as Ukraine, as a result of not having a clear, coherent foreign policy, and such as the problems we have seen with the truckers and the convoys, which have resulted in the necessity for the Prime Minister to believe that he has to invoke the Emergencies Act rather than take a number of steps before.

In conclusion, Bill C-12 is unfortunately not the first time Canadians have been made to suffer the incompetence of the Liberal government. Sadly, I do not think it will be the last.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, toward the end of the member's speech, in the last few sentences, she referenced the need for the Prime Minister to invoke the Emergencies Act. I am curious if she agrees with that as a proper measure and if she plans to vote for it. There will be a debate on that, as required by the legislation, in the House. Is she planning to vote in favour of it? Is it the right action to take, or does she agree with the protests that are going on outside?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, I believe in diplomacy. I believe in engagement, and I believe in having the courage to have conversations with Canadians, something the Prime Minister does not. It should have never been brought to this place, and it is absolutely squarely on the shoulders of the Liberal government and its leader, the Prime Minister.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is always passionate, and when she talks about diplomacy, she has the credentials to go with it because she worked in diplomacy for years.

I am interested in hearing what the member has to say about the incompetence of the government in terms of the number of times it brought legislation forward that was in error or needed fixing. In many cases, it was not fixed, and people were falling through the cracks. I am interested to hear her comment on that.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, I am so grateful to be on the same team as the member for Sarnia—Lambton.

Canada has not had a foreign policy strategy direction in six years and it is the result of simple values and principles that the previous administration had at the top, from which everything flowed: democracy, justice and the rule of law. These things have been forgotten under the government. Unfortunately, how one does something is how one does everything, and we are seeing the same lack of planning, direction, values and principles at the top in this situation as well.

Government Orders

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the word that comes to my mind is “wow”. It is truly incredible. I was in opposition when Stephen Harper was prime minister. He increased the age of retirement from 65 to 67 and introduced closure over 100 times in four years in a majority government.

On this legislation, it is not only the government but also an opposition party saying that the bill is really good, and that it is important and we should pass it. The Conservatives, in its coalition with the Bloc, say we should hold back and wait until next week. Who knows how long they want to wait?

Does the member not recognize that this bill would ensure that seniors get money in their pockets? Why is she trying to deny seniors hard cash in their pockets and purses?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, the reason we are here is because the government took money from seniors. Had it not taken money from seniors, we would not be in the House debating this bill today.

• (1915)

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there is some lively back-and-forth this evening.

Bill C-12 has its merits, obviously. However, there are two categories of seniors whose fate has not been clarified.

When it comes to inflation, seniors in my riding of Trois-Rivières are telling me every day that the money is coming a bit late. What I want to know is whether we are going to treat these people fairly, meaning with equity, or whether we are just going to treat everyone the same, meaning with equality, by which I mean mistreat them equally.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question.

I think that the most important thing is that the government continues to ignore the biggest problem Canada is facing. I think that my colleague from the Bloc and I agree on that point. I am talking about inflation.

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Calgary Midnapore for splitting her time with me today and giving me the opportunity to join this debate.

I would like to say that it is a pleasure to join the debate today, and to some degree it is, but, unfortunately, it is also a bit frustrating to be here debating the bill before us considering the two years that have gone by since this issue was first brought to light for the Liberal government, which is now taking action to try to rectify it. However, there is some frustration there with the timeline. Of course, we are talking about seniors applying for CERB, reaching out for pandemic benefits and having their GIS clawed back as a result.

I will talk more about the direct issue at hand in just a moment, but I would like to lay out the groundwork a bit more and talk about

why this is so important, especially right now with inflation rising at the rate that it is.

The cost of everything is going up. Everyday essentials such as gas and groceries are growing, especially in regions like mine in northwestern Ontario and across the Kenora riding, where the costs are usually higher than in many other regions in the country. It is getting harder for everyone to get by, particularly seniors, who are on fixed incomes and who have worked their whole lives to help build a country. They have paid into the system, but they are now not properly supported. They do not have the support they need in order to keep up with the rising costs of living.

Of course, throughout the pandemic, the government had great, new spending programs, and printed a lot of money for them, which added to inflation and caused the crisis we are seeing right now. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has confirmed that. The PBO has also said that the rationale for stimulus no longer exists, but that is a bit of a different discussion.

I would like to share what I have been hearing in my riding and across the country. When we look at groceries, food prices overall have increased by about 4%. I believe beef is up nearly 12% and bacon is up more than 19%. As I mentioned, it is not just groceries.

For home heating, natural gas is up 20%. In Canada and northern Ontario, home heating is certainly not a luxury. It is a necessity for seniors to be able to heat their homes. Just last week, the price of gas in Red Lake in my riding was hovering just below \$1.70 a litre. Of course, this is in a region that is northern and rural, and many communities are considered remote. The people in Red Lake do not have the option to take other modes of transportation. They need to pay that cost.

A constituent of mine in Sioux Lookout recently shared his home heating bill with me, which showed that he was paying \$70 a week in carbon taxes alone. In Sioux Lookout, heating is something that is not a choice, as we have to heat our homes, especially in the winter months when it gets much colder.

We have this cost of living crisis, this economic crisis, coupled with the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is something that has hit seniors particularly hard. Many seniors are at an increased health risk and are more vulnerable to the virus than other Canadians, and for that reason, many seniors had to withdraw from some of their activities that they previously enjoyed.

Many seniors were not comfortable going to the grocery store or doing simple tasks with the threat of the pandemic out there, not to mention the fact that there is an emotional toll to all of this, which I think everyone has felt to some degree. I think every family has been touched with mental health challenges throughout the course of this pandemic because of isolation and not being able to see loved ones. Seniors in my riding have mentioned to me that it has been particularly difficult for them.

Government Orders

• (1920)

We have these two crises that have come to a head at the same time, and that is why many seniors reached out to the government. They looked to the government for support, applying for programs like the CERB to help get them through this difficult time with the rising cost of living and all the challenges COVID brought on.

Of course, these seniors were not expecting the government to claw back their GIS or have it eliminated entirely, and that is the heart of the concern that we are dealing with right now. It is why I am pleased to see the government is now taking some action to rectify that issue, but it has come frustratingly too late for many seniors across the Kenora district and across the country.

I do not have the numbers right in front of me, but there are not many issues that I hear about more in my constituency office, or in my Ottawa office, than seniors' issues with the cost of living and not being able to get by. I have been on the phone with many seniors in my riding.

I know many of my staff members have as well. Two in particular are Jordyn Ham and Madison McSweeney, who are working in the Ottawa office. I hope they do not mind me mentioning them here in the House. They have done an amazing job reaching out to those constituents, having conversations with them and helping them try to get through these difficult times.

It has been tough. It has been tough for us. We have had seniors come into our office in tears. They are frustrated. They are not sure how they are going to heat their homes or if they are going to be able to put food on the table, and it is clearly an issue that is of the government's creation. That is why the government must act to prevent another clawback, and that is why I am pleased to see the Liberals are moving forward on this.

However, I think it was the critic for seniors, the member for Hastings—Lennox and Addington, who noted that this has been an issue for two years, and we are now just getting to the debate. That should be frustrating to everybody in the House, and everyone should take issue with that.

Another thing I have been hearing from seniors in my riding is that they need a guarantee. Seniors need to know that this payment will not be taxable. They need to know that further changes and solutions the government actually comes up with are going to have the effect they need. I think there is a bit of distrust, given what has happened previously, and I have been heartened by what I have heard here today in the debate. I think most people in the House tend to be on the same page, and I hope that will give some level of comfort to the seniors in the Kenora riding as well.

With the limited time I have, I just want to make it incredibly clear that these seniors are not tax cheats. They are not people trying to game the system. They are struggling and facing such a hard time in their lives, after paying into the system and doing everything right to try to provide for themselves. It is incredibly important that we move forward to give them the support they rightly need.

To seniors who may be watching or following the debate, I want them to know that the Conservative Party has not forgotten them.

The Conservative party is going to have their backs, and we are going to be continuing to advocate for them to ensure that the government follows through and that the government does not claw back any further benefits.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the debate today, and I am looking forward to any questions or comments that my colleagues might have.

• (1925)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke well, as he always does. He is one of the youngest members in this House, if I am not mistaken, but he is also one of the most thoughtful I have had the chance to work with.

That is why I was surprised, when he spoke about inflation, that there was no reference made to the global situation and putting inflation in a global context, the way the pandemic, for example, has impacted supply chains around the world and the effect that has had for countries like Canada, in terms of inflation. I know the member will make reference to quantitative easing and the impact that has had, but at best, according to most economists, that impact has been minimal, in terms of inflation in Canada.

Why not focus on the global reality, in terms of its impact on inflation?

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Speaker, it is an important question. There is no question that what is happening globally is to a degree playing out here in Canada as well. I think everyone can agree with that. However, as the Parliamentary Budget Officer confirmed, the stimulus spending that the government carried out contributed drastically to the inflation we are seeing in Canada, and the greatest rise in inflation that we are seeing is in items that we produce right here in Canada, such as natural gas, beef and pork.

I understand the member is coming from the global perspective, but I do think it is important to note that in a lot of ways the cost of living crisis is very much a homegrown problem.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the things that I was concerned about from a process point of view was that the Liberals wanted to just whiz through all the parliamentary processes to get this thing done. The Conservatives brought forward quite a reasoned amendment through the member for Hastings—Lennox and Addington to say that we agree and that we want to see the seniors get this money as soon as possible, so let us get to committee, have the Minister of Seniors there to answer all the questions and then move forward right away. Does the member agree that this would have been a reasonable compromise for all of us to agree to?

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Speaker, that is an important question. The short answer is yes, absolutely, that would be a reasonable compromise.

In my view, it is not the job of the opposition or any members of this House to prioritize the government's legislation. That is the government's job, and unfortunately, despite having this issue brought to its attention two years ago, the government was quite slow to act to address it. It had time to call an election in between, and unfortunately that is why we are still debating it here today.

Government Orders

To the member's question, I absolutely would agree that the amendment that was brought forward would be very positive and strong, and I hope that we will see all members in the House support that reasonable proposal.

• (1930)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member referenced how his riding is specifically in the north and is remote and rural. I imagine that this GIS clawback on seniors in his riding would have had even more significant impact on these Canadians, who are really left to obtain their necessities in their local communities. I am hoping the member can elaborate on that and even provide more context as to the struggles that his citizens, seniors in particular, have faced throughout this pandemic.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that question from my colleague because it is something I was hoping to mention in my speech, but I neglected to do so.

It was very difficult for seniors in my riding. Given that we are living in a rural northern area, there are limited services. It was more difficult for many seniors to be able to connect to government sites through the Internet. Of course, CRA phone lines were jammed with calls from many seniors across the country, so it was quite difficult, and being in the northern remote region of the Kenora district made it that much more difficult.

[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 inform you that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt.

I am very pleased to participate in this debate, but I must admit that I am wondering why we are debating this motion tonight when we could quickly take action. If there is one time when members should be unanimous, it is this evening on this bill.

We are here to debate Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act to provide a guaranteed income supplement exemption. I would like to explain this to the Canadians who are watching at home. Usually when we study a bill, it involves a rather complex process. To make amendments to a law, often many changes are needed here and there. We must be certain of the changes to be made. In this case, it is very simple.

In the French version of the bill, only five lines were changed. Those five lines will change our tax system to eliminate a problem for seniors. All political parties in the House of Commons recognize that this problem must be fixed.

My wonderful colleague from northern Ontario just expressed his approval. Earlier today there were speeches by Bloc Québécois members who indicated their support. The NDP members have said they support it. I cannot figure out why we are still debating this motion. We may even end up straying from the topic because some of the parties like playing political games.

We really have to meet the needs of Canada's seniors. That is why I am urging my opposition party colleagues, especially the Conservative and Bloc Québécois members, to approve this. I hope

that, once they have read these five lines, they will give their approval so we can get on with it.

We know how we got to this point. The pandemic hit. Unfortunately, some seniors who had been working part time or full time to earn extra money had to stop working. The pandemic caused problems for everyone in Canada. People lost their jobs overnight. Everyone did their part to stop the spread of the virus.

• (1935)

They had access to some substantial programs that we created to support Canadians and our businesses. They received money from the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB.

As my colleagues know, our public pension benefits and the guaranteed income supplement are calculated every year based on income received the previous year. These people will unfortunately be affected by this change, but amendments will solve this problem.

I want to take a moment to explain exactly how it works. As many of my colleagues have already pointed out, these people will be penalized for this tax year, and we do not want that to happen, as we have heard from many people who have contacted our offices. We need to address this issue, and that is exactly what we are proposing to do.

That is why I think it is important for us to take swift action, and that is what I am prepared to do. It is almost 7:40 p.m. eastern time. If everyone were to agree right now that no one else will speak to this bill, we could proceed directly to the vote. That would be a good thing for Canadians and would reassure them that we are finally going to fix this issue. The bill is a short one, with just five lines.

That is why I think we need to take action, and I hope to convince my colleagues to join me.

I want to be clear and remind everyone what Bill C-12 will do. The bill will prevent the guaranteed income supplement and allowances from being reduced come July. That is it. This bill will stop a problem from happening. We all agree that pandemic-related benefits should not be considered income for the purposes of calculating the guaranteed income supplement. If we all agree, that is what Bill C-12, a bill that is five lines long, will do. It is short, simple and clear. Let us get moving.

• (1940)

[English]

We are moving quickly because we know that these supports need to be put into place quickly. As I have already mentioned, the system changes that are needed would be put into place by our incredible public servants, who are going to make sure that this happens in time.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Seniors who have had to access these benefits to make ends meet during a public health crisis might be penalized because their Conservative and Bloc representatives are incapable of setting partisanship aside and are trying to thwart the process. That would be unfair.

Once again, this should not surprise my colleagues. Unfortunately, the Conservatives have shown every step of the way that they are not there for Canadians, despite what the member who rose before me said:

[*English*]

“We have your backs.”

[*Translation*]

That is something the Prime Minister often says. If the Conservatives want to borrow our words, I encourage them to also get on board with how quickly we want to take action.

On behalf of seniors, I hope my Conservative and Bloc Québécois friends will join us in supporting this motion without amendment, so we can deliver for seniors who need this support, seniors who have given so much throughout their lives.

I know my colleagues support seniors. I encourage them to join us in getting this bill passed quickly so we can be there for Canadians.

[*English*]

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague down the way for asking the right questions. Why are we doing this tonight? Why are we having this debate when we know what the right thing to do is? It is to support our seniors as quickly as possible.

How did we get here? When we think of the CERB being put into place, it is because of the tools we had as a federal government through employment insurance. Some of the characteristics of the employment insurance programs, such as income testing, found their way into the program that we delivered at rapid, lightning speed through our departments, and now we are doing the right thing. That test did not work for seniors who were supplementing income, so we have to do the right thing by seniors.

I agree with the hon. member that we should be getting to the vote now. We should not be delaying this on behalf of our seniors.

Could the hon. member reflect on how quickly we did what we did using the tools we had through employment insurance to create a new program? Now we are pulling that back since it was not exactly employment insurance, but the CERB emergency response we did.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Speaker, we are not perfect, but we try our best. We came up with many innovative ways to help support Canadians. I would like to thank the opposition parties, because during the beginning of the crisis, they were also there and Parliament did its best in supporting Canadians. I am very pleased to be part of a government that proposed these ideas and took on the best ideas of the opposition.

We are, I hope, coming near the end of this pandemic. We all hope that. However, we are not quite there yet; we are still in it. We have an opportunity to help seniors right now, and I ask my hon. colleagues across the way to once again join hands and do what we did at the front end of this pandemic and support our seniors. There are five simple lines that we can adopt to make this happen.

• (1945)

[*Translation*]

This is very important. I hope my colleagues will be there to support this bill.

[*English*]

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member referenced that some people in the House only want to play political games, to use his words. It sounds like he feels the parliamentary process is a political game or that legislation going to committee is a political game.

Does he feel that no legislation should be going to committee or only some legislation should be going to committee? What does he base that opinion on and what is the rationale for his thoughts on what should be going to committee?

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Speaker, I am a really big believer in the parliamentary process. Usually, when we come to this place, we examine very complex pieces of legislation. It makes sense that we cannot always consider things as 338 people, so we send them to committee to be looked at. Those 12 people look very carefully at legislation.

The bill is just five lines. It is not going to take us a long time to figure this out. I am certain the members across the way have come to an assessment of where they are, because all their speeches have said they are going to support it. Why not get ahead of the game and bring security to our seniors to show them we all have their backs and want to get this passed right away?

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I commend my colleague from Hull—Aylmer.

Even though we sometimes agree in principle, and even though we all agree that seniors need to be helped, I have the following question for him: Does he believe that an agreement, even in principle, precludes critical thinking? Should speed replace due diligence?

I am curious.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend from Trois-Rivières for his question. We work together at the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, and it is a pleasure for me.

Government Orders

I agree, we must be very diligent. However, we are talking about five lines here. It is not complex. It is very simple. Not only do we all agree on the principle, but I am sure that we all agree on the text itself.

That is why I think that in this case, we can all unite to pass this bill immediately and provide reassurance to our seniors.

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure to join the debate in the House today on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people to discuss proceedings on Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act. The bill would exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement, or the GIS, and allowance benefits, beginning in July 2022.

As members know, our government acted swiftly to be there for Canadians when the pandemic first hit our communities. Our number one priority was to make sure that all Canadians were protected. The Canada emergency response benefit was put in place very quickly in 2020 to help people avoid catastrophic income loss during COVID. The CERB and then the Canada recovery benefit did just that. It helped millions of Canadians. Some low-income working seniors relied on pandemic relief benefits, as they too were eligible and could not continue working. These are the people we are focused on today, like the seniors in my riding of Scarborough—Agincourt who have called my office with questions. This is the answer for them.

The Minister of Seniors heard all seniors across the country and she brought forward a bill, but these benefits are now, unfortunately, having an impact on some vulnerable seniors. We therefore introduced Bill C-12 to mitigate those impacts going forward. This is a simple yet very significant amendment. Bill C-12 understands that when this unpredictable global public health crisis hit and we rolled out pandemic benefits quickly, the benefits were not intended to impact monthly low-income benefits. We explained that they would be taxable income. However, low-income seniors were trying to make ends meet at the time of crisis.

I would say this is a non-partisan cause, and it is proactive, automatic and has spinoff benefits. This would help keep more GIS recipients on the provincial benefits they rely on as well. This is a point that means a great deal to seniors regarding dental and housing benefits in some provinces, like Ontario.

While we have committed to fully compensating those affected seniors with a one-time, automatic, non-taxable payment, the pandemic is not over. Seniors' livelihoods were affected in 2021 and now even into 2022. Seniors depended on the Canada recovery benefit, Canada worker lockdown benefit, Canada recovery sickness benefit and many other pandemic supports. Bill C-12 gives a chance to the parties opposite to help us restore some hope for seniors. This is a matter that we can all get behind. This is an opportunity for all members of the House to show that they do in fact care for the most vulnerable and for Canada's seniors who built this country.

Seniors want to see government respond to the issues raised by stakeholders and those who are affected. Some affected seniors on-

ly lost a small amount of GIS, while some were taken off entirely. There is a range of situations. That is why evidence-based targeted approaches are the right solution to compensating affected seniors.

Let us remind ourselves that every July, an individual's entitlement for the GIS or the allowance is reassessed based on the individual's income or the combined income of a couple, as reported on their tax return. July is fast approaching, so the timing on this is very important. Tax season has once again begun and the GIS will be recalculated this July. That is why we need to ensure the bill is passed immediately so that low-income seniors, like the ones in Scarborough—Agincourt, are not affected for a second or third time for that matter. I want to remind seniors to file their taxes to ensure that their benefits will continue.

Let me be clear. Parliamentary processes are important to this government. We respect the House, but we are also concerned for our seniors who are worrying right now. We ask all members to help us strike this balance. We can uphold the processes of Parliament and have the backs of low-income seniors.

We have worked very hard and engaged with members from all parties on this very pressing matter from the very beginning. The Minister of Seniors engaged with her critics. From tabling this bill to technical briefings to second reading, we are ensuring that the bill goes through vigorous processes and analysis.

• (1950)

Just yesterday, although the minister was at the human resources committee to speak particularly on her mandate letter, she dedicated a significant amount of time speaking about Bill C-12 and answering any questions members had.

Government Orders

We did not just want to provide a quick fix. We wanted to ensure seniors would not be facing such a loss or reduction in benefits again. Bill C-12 would permanently exempt federal pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits, beginning in July 2022, which would prevent this from happening again. To be clear, the following benefits would be exempt: the Canada emergency response benefit, including any CERB amount paid under the Employment Insurance Act; the Canada recovery benefit; the Canada recovery sickness benefit; the Canada recovery caregiving benefit; and the Canada worker lockdown benefit. Once again, we are proposing this change to the OAS Act to ensure this problem never happens again.

Bill C-12 would make an important legislative change that would provide seniors with the certainty and peace of mind that, in the future, they would receive the GIS and allowance benefits to which they are entitled, without the need for a one-time payment. This bill is simple and understandable. I could easily read the bill to the House to showcase its simplicity. There is no fine print.

Moreover, this is not the first time an amendment would be made to the Old Age Security Act. In fact, it underwent its first big important amendment in 1966. That was the amendment that created the guaranteed income supplement, the very mechanism we are dealing with today in Bill C-12. The idea of this mechanism was always to support the lowest-income and most vulnerable seniors. We all agree that prioritizing them is the right approach. Seniors who took these benefits need a quick response to keep them confident that their financial security will be protected. This is what we are here for.

This is what I hope opposition parties will join us in doing today. All parties have already agreed that this is the most pressing or one of the top priorities for them because it relates to vulnerable, low-income seniors. This would mean to me that all members should explicitly show support for Bill C-12 and move it ahead quickly.

Seniors deserve nothing less than diligent and co-operative work in this regard. As parliamentarians and Canadians, we owe this to our seniors, and I hope we can all get behind Bill C-12.

● (1955)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our colleague has done incredible work over the years as the chair of the seniors caucus. I wonder if she could share with the House the way that work has informed her understanding of the bill and how the bill would impact seniors in her riding.

Ms. Jean Yip: Mr. Speaker, it has been a great honour to be the co-chair of the Liberals' seniors caucus. I believe this bill is important because we need to take care of our most vulnerable seniors. In my work in that caucus, we heard from so many seniors across the country. As I mentioned in my speech, it should be everybody's number one priority in the House to get this bill passed.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I echo the congratulations to the member for Scarborough—Agincourt for her work on the seniors caucus. Friday afternoons, when many MPs are thinking about weekends, she is still working on behalf of seniors.

Looking at details like this, the automatic payment portion is important. In my office, we get a lot of inquiries from seniors. Sometimes, when we ask them if they have applied for a benefit, they have not because they do not realize it is there, so guiding them toward automated processes like this might be able to help with other programs. Could the hon. member comment on that?

Ms. Jean Yip: Mr. Speaker, it is indeed important that affected seniors understand that this payment will go directly into their bank accounts. It is the easiest way for them to receive the payment.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for speaking about the impact this particular piece of legislation will have on Canadian seniors. At the end of the day, we need to get this bill passed quickly because it is absolutely critical that we get these measures in place for the next tax season.

I am wondering if the member could expand on the urgency of this and how important it is for constituents in her riding that this happens now, today, instead of waiting even another day or two.

● (2000)

Ms. Jean Yip: Mr. Speaker, it is indeed urgent. I have had many phone calls from seniors. When I visit seniors' residences, affected seniors mention it is important that they be able to receive the funds. I would urge all members in the House to put their support behind this bill.

The Speaker: It being 8 p.m., pursuant to an order made earlier today, it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of Government Business No. 7 now before the House.

The question is on the amendment. If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the amendment be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I would request a recorded vote, please.

The Speaker: Call in the members.

● (2045)

(The House divided on the amendment, which was negated on the following division:)

(Division No. 29)

YEAS

Members

Aboulttaif	Aitchison
Albas	Allison
Arnold	Baldinelli
Barlow	Barrett
Barsalou-Duval	Beaulieu
Benzen	Bergen
Bergeron	Berthold
Bérubé	Bezan

Government Orders

Blanchet	Blanchette-Joncas	Angus	Arseneault
Block	Bragdon	Arya	Ashton
Brassard	Brock	Atwin	Bachrach
Brunelle-Duceppe	Calkins	Badawey	Bains
Caputo	Carrie	Baker	Barron
Chabot	Chambers	Battiste	Beech
Champoux	Chong	Bendayan	Bennett
Cooper	Dalton	Bibeau	Bittle
Dancho	Davidson	Blaikie	Blair
DeBellefeuille	Deltell	Blaney	Blois
d'Entremont	Desbiens	Boissonnault	Boulerice
Desilets	Doherty	Bradford	Brière
Dowdall	Dreeshen	Cannings	Carr
Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)	Ellis	Casey	Chagger
Epp	Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)	Chahal	Champagne
Falk (Provencher)	Fast	Chatel	Chen
Ferreri	Findlay	Chiang	Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)
Fortin	Gallant	Collins (Victoria)	Cormier
Garon	Gaudreau	Coteau	Dabrusin
Généreux	Genius	Damoff	Davies
Gill	Gladu	Desjarlais	Dhaliwal
Godin	Goodridge	Dhillon	Diab
Gourde	Gray	Dong	Drouin
Hallan	Hoback	Dubourg	Duclos
Jeneroux	Kelly	Duguid	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Kitchen	Kmiec	Dzerowicz	Ehsassi
Kram	Kramp-Neuman	El-Khoury	Erskine-Smith
Kurek	Kusie	Fergus	Fillmore
Lake	Lantsman	Fisher	Fonseca
Larouche	Lawrence	Fortier	Fragiskatos
Lehoux	Lemire	Fraser	Freeland
Lewis (Essex)	Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Fry	Gaheer
Liepert	Lloyd	Garneau	Garrison
Lobb	MacKenzie	Gazan	Gerretsen
Martel	Mazier	Gould	Green
McCauley (Edmonton West)	McLean	Guilbeault	Hajdu
Melillo	Michaud	Hanley	Hardie
Moore	Morantz	Hepfner	Holland
Morrison	Motz	Housefather	Hughes
Muys	Nater	Hussen	Hutchings
Normandin	O'Toole	Iacono	Idlout
Patzer	Paul-Hus	Ien	Jaczek
Pauzé	Perkins	Johns	Joly
Perron	Plamondon	Jones	Jowhari
Poilievre	Rayes	Julian	Kayabaga
Redekopp	Reid	Kelloway	Khalid
Rempel Garner	Richards	Khera	Koutrakis
Roberts	Rood	Kusmierczyk	Kwan
Ruff	Savard-Tremblay	Lalonde	Lambropoulos
Scheer	Schmale	Lametti	Lamoureux
Seeback	Shields	Lapointe	Lattanzio
Shiplay	Simard	Lauzon	LeBlanc
Sinclair-Desgagné	Small	Lebouthillier	Lightbound
Soroka	Steinley	Long	Longfield
Ste-Marie	Stewart	Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)	MacAulay (Cardigan)
Strahl	Stubbs	MacDonald (Malpeque)	MacGregor
Thériault	Therrien	MacKinnon (Gatineau)	Maloney
Thomas	Tochor	Martinez Ferrada	Masse
Tolmie	Trudel	Mathysen	May (Cambridge)
Uppal	Van Popta	May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)	McDonald (Avalon)
Vecchio	Vidal	McGuinty	McKay
Vien	Viersen	McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)	McLeod
Vignola	Villemure	McPherson	Mendès
Vis	Wagantall	Mendicino	Miao
Warkentin	Waugh	Miller	Morrice
Webber	Williams	Morrissey	Murray
Williamson	Zimmer— 150	Naqvi	Ng
		Noormohamed	O'Connell
		Oliphant	O'Regan
		Petitpas Taylor	Qualtrough
		Robillard	Rodriguez
		Rogers	Romanado
		Sahota	Sajjan

NAYS

Members

Aldag	Alghabra
Ali	Anandasangaree

Government Orders

Saks
Saraï
Schiefke
Sgro
Sheehan
Sidhu (Brampton South)
Spengemann
Sudds
Thompson
Turnbull
Van Bynen
Vandal
Virani
Weiler
Yip
Zarrillo

Samson
Scarpaleggia
Serré
Shanahan
Sidhu (Brampton East)
Sorbara
St-Onge
Tassi
Trudeau
Valdez
van Koeverden
Vandenbeld
Vuong
Wilkinson
Zahid
Zuberi — 182

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the amendment defeated.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among the parties, and if you seek it, I believe you will find unanimous consent to adopt the following motion:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order, special order or usual practice of the House, Government Business No. 7 be amended:

- a) in paragraph (c), by deleting all the words after the words “recorded division is requested” and substituting the following, “it shall be deferred to the next sitting day at the expiry of the time provided for Oral Questions, and the House shall then adjourn to the next sitting day”; and
- b) by deleting paragraph (g)

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

Hearing no dissenting voice, it is agreed.

The House has heard the terms of the motion. All those opposed to the motion will please say nay.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Speaker: The next question is on the main motion, as amended.

[*Translation*]

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, we request a recorded vote, please.

• (2100)

[*Translation*]

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

(*Division No. 30*)

YEAS

Members

Aldag
Ali

Alghabra
Anandasangaree

Angus
Arya
Atwin
Badawey
Baker
Barsalou-Duval
Beaulieu
Bendayan
Bergeron
Bibeau
Blaikie
Blanchette-Joncas
Blois
Boulerice
Brière
Cannings
Casey
Chagger
Champagne
Chatel
Chiang
Collins (Victoria)
Coteau
Damoff
DeBellefeuille
Desilets
Dhaliwal
Diab
Drouin
Duclos
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Ehsassi
Erskine-Smith
Fillmore
Fonseca
Fortin
Fraser
Fry
Garneau
Garrison
Gazan
Gill
Green
Hanley
Hepfner
Housefather
Hussen
Iacono
Ien
Johns
Jowhari
Kayabaga
Khalid
Koutrakis
Kwan
Lambropoulos
Lamoureux
Larouche
Lauzon
Lebouthillier
Lightbound
Longfield
MacAulay (Cardigan)
MacGregor
Maloney
Masse
May (Cambridge)
McDonald (Avalon)
McKay
McLeod
Mendès
Miao
Miller

Arseneault
Ashton
Bachrach
Bains
Barron
Battiste
Beech
Bennett
Bérubé
Bittle
Blair
Blaney
Boissonnault
Bradford
Brunelle-Duceppe
Carr
Chabot
Chahal
Champoux
Chen
Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)
Cormier
Dabrusin
Davies
Desbiens
Desjarlais
Dhillon
Dong
Dubourg
Duguid
Dzerowicz
El-Khoury
Fergus
Fisher
Fortier
Fragiskatos
Freeland
Gaheer
Garon
Gaudreau
Gerretsen
Gould
Guilbeault
Hardie
Holland
Hughes
Hutchings
Idlout
Jaczek
Jones
Julian
Kelloway
Khera
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Lalonde
Lametti
Lapointe
Lattanzio
LeBlanc
Lemire
Long
Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)
MacDonald (Malpeque)
MacKinnon (Gatineau)
Martinez Ferrada
Mathysen
May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)
McGuinty
McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)
McPherson
Mendicino
Michaud
Morrice

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Naqvi	Ng
Noormohamed	Normandin
O'Connell	Oliphant
O'Regan	Pauzé
Perron	Petitpas Taylor
Plamondon	Powlowski
Qualtrough	Robillard
Rodriguez	Rogers
Romanado	Sahota
Sajjan	Saks
Samson	Sarai
Savard-Tremblay	Scarpaleggia
Schiefke	Serré
Sgro	Shanahan
Sheehan	Sidhu (Brampton East)
Sidhu (Brampton South)	Simard
Sinclair-Desgagné	Singh
Sorbara	Spengemann
Ste-Marie	St-Onge
Sudds	Tassi
Taylor Roy	Thériault
Therrien	Thompson
Trudeau	Trudel
Turnbull	Valdez
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Calkins	Caputo
Carrie	Chambers
Chong	Cooper
Dalton	Dancho
Davidson	Deltell
d'Entremont	Doherty
Dowdall	Dreeshen
Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)	Ellis
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Falk (Provencher)	Fast
Ferreri	Findlay
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Genuis	Glada
Godin	Goodridge
Gourde	Gray
Hallan	Hoback
Jeneroux	Kelly
Kitchen	Kmieciak
Kram	Kurek
Kusie	Lake
Lantsman	Lawrence
Lehoux	Lewis (Essex)
Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Liepert
Lloyd	Lobb
MacKenzie	Maguire
Martel	Mazier
McCauley (Edmonton West)	McLean
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Morantz	Morrison

Motz	Muys
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Perkins	Poillievre
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PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion, as amended, carried.

Pursuant to order made earlier today, the House will now proceed to the consideration of Bill C-12 at second reading.

* * *

*[English]***OLD AGE SECURITY ACT****Hon. Kamal Khara (Minister of Seniors, Lib.)** moved that Bill C-12, An Act to amend the Old Age Security Act (Guaranteed Income Supplement), be read the second time and referred to a committee.*[Translation]***The Speaker:** Pursuant to order made earlier today, two members of each recognized party and a member of the Green Party may each speak for not more than 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes for questions and comments. Members may be permitted to split their time with another member.*[English]***Hon. Kamal Khara:** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join members virtually from Brampton West, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Ojibwa and Chippewa people, the land that is home to the Métis and the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

I will be sharing my time with my excellent colleague and parliamentary secretary, the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

I am pleased to speak on Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act, Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Simply, this bill would exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement or allowance benefits beginning in July, 2022. Allow me to explain this short, simple and clear piece of legislation a little more and expand on why we are proposing this amendment.

Government Orders

As hon. members may know, and they surely know, when this pandemic first began in early 2020 our government moved very quickly to provide an unprecedented response to a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. We left no stone unturned to help Canadians, from workers to businesses to students to, indeed, seniors.

We did that through introducing pandemic benefits, such as the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada recovery benefit, to support employed and self-employed people who lost jobs during the pandemic so that they could have a roof over their heads and food on their tables. All of these measures helped millions of Canadians avoid catastrophic income loss. In fact, let me remind the House that \$8 out of every \$10 that was spent during this pandemic was invested through our federal government. We also know that these benefits are having an impact on some of our most vulnerable seniors.

To start, I would like to remind my hon. colleagues that the guaranteed income supplement is an income-tested benefit payable to low-income seniors who receive the old age security pension. The allowances are income-tested benefits that are payable to 60- to 64-year-olds who are the spouses or common-law partners of GIS recipients, or who are widows or widowers. Every July, an individual's entitlement to these income-tested benefits is reassessed based on their income or the combined income of a couple.

I want to highlight this, as I have heard during debate in the House some members from the Bloc ask why it is in July. It is because July is when income benefits are reassessed, based on the income of the previous year. Therefore, GIS and allowance payments can increase, decrease or even cease according to the changes in a person's annual net income from the previous year.

Let me also clarify for the House that old age security is not income tested, which means that seniors continue to receive it every year. It is not reassessed based on an individual's previous income. In fact, our pension system is designed to reflect the cost of living, with payments only ever increasing or staying the same. They actually never go down. This is something I have heard members from the Conservative Party speak to and debate: that somehow a senior's OAS was impacted by these pandemic benefits. That is simply not the case. Seniors continue to receive their old age security.

The Income Tax Act defines pandemic relief benefits as taxable income, which means that they have also been considered income when determining entitlement to the GIS or allowance benefits. Unfortunately, that means that some seniors receiving GIS may now be facing lower benefit payments because of the income they received from these pandemic benefits.

We recognize that some seniors were facing significant challenges as a result of this, and we needed to move quickly to rectify the situation. I can tell the House that we moved very quickly with our extraordinary public servants to look at all the options possible. We worked very closely with the Minister of Finance, and we did just that.

As a first step towards resolving this issue, we proposed to provide up to \$742.4 million for one-time payments. These payments would help to alleviate the financial hardship for GIS and allowance recipients who received pandemic relief benefits in 2020

and saw their GIS affected as a result. This automatic, non-taxable, one-time payment would support those who saw a decrease in their GIS or allowance payments by compensating them for the full annualized loss amount.

• (2105)

We are going to fully compensate seniors for their loss of GIS or allowance benefits, and we are making it simple. Seniors would not need to take any action to receive their one-time payments. These payments would be provided to approximately 204,000 seniors who qualified to receive the CERB or similar benefits in 2020, and as I announced yesterday, we are now going to be able to deliver payments to those who saw their GIS reduced in 2020 ahead of schedule. It will be as early as April 19. To support those seniors in dire need, members of Parliament will be able to work with Service Canada to help those seniors even sooner.

However, we will not stop there. We do not just want to compensate those who saw reductions in the past, because we know seniors continued to struggle to make ends meet and navigate the pandemic into 2021. Some seniors are still facing financial difficulties and relying on benefits to support themselves, and we want to ensure that seniors will not be facing a loss or reduction in benefits again. That is precisely why we introduced this simple but significant piece of legislation.

Bill C-12 would exempt federal pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits beginning in July, 2022. Once again, we are proposing this change to the OAS Act to ensure that this problem never happens again. Bill C-12 would make an important legislative change that would provide seniors with peace of mind and certainty in knowing they will not face any undue financial hardship if they continue to access pandemic relief benefits.

As Canadians know, the well-being of seniors, especially the most vulnerable, has been a priority for our government since 2015. I will remind the House of some of the measures our government has put in place and some of our priorities moving forward. We made seniors' financial well-being a top priority. One of the very first things we did as a government was restore the age of eligibility for OAS and GIS to 65 from 67. We also increased the guaranteed income supplement, which has helped over 900,000 low-income single seniors and has lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. We have enhanced the CPP, which was mirrored by the QPP.

Government Orders

We are also moving forward with our plan to increase the OAS pension by 10% for seniors aged 75 or over in July, 2022. This increase will provide an extra \$766 to full pensioners over the first year. To help address the urgent needs of this group of seniors, we provided a one-time payment of \$500 last summer. We provided this one-time payment to support older seniors who face higher financial pressures, because we know that as they age seniors tend to have lower incomes and often face higher health-related expenses, all while they are more likely to be unable to work, to have disabilities or to be widowed. Simply, we followed the facts and evidence. We understand seniors' needs grow as they age, and we are there to support them. Of course, a big part of my mandate is to increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples.

During the pandemic, the focus of our support was always on people. We helped millions of Canadians with pandemic supports and benefits. We delivered direct payments to seniors and families, and when we saw that some seniors were affected by this, we took action to support vulnerable seniors who experienced reductions in their GIS or allowance as a result. With Bill C-12, we can ensure that low-income seniors would not have to face a reduction in their GIS or allowance benefits again if they took them in 2021, or if they find they need to access relief benefits in the future.

As I have said, this pandemic has worsened many challenges facing the most vulnerable seniors and those who care for them. We are constantly working hard to find permanent solutions that will bring ongoing comfort and relief to people whose hard work, and in many cases sacrifice, has contributed to the Canada we are so proud and privileged to call home.

Seniors deserve nothing less than the best from us. They do not need delays or political games at this crucial moment, and I really hope all members in the House will join us in moving quickly to pass this bill.

• (2110)

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister, through you, for her speech, and for working with the NDP to actually make some of these things happen a lot more rapidly. I know that seniors across the country have been devastated by this decision. They have lost more than we can ever measure with respect to their health, their housing and in some cases their self-respect, because they have had to ask people to lend them money when they never had to do that before.

Could the minister let the House know if she will be working with any of her provincial or territorial partners? We know a lot of seniors lost all of the provincial and territorial supports they used to get because GIS opened those doors. Will the minister be working with them to make sure that these are returned to them, and that any supports that the provinces or territories provided in the absence of GIS are replaced in their coffers?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Speaker, through you, allow me to also thank the hon. member for her advocacy and certainly her commitment to help seniors. I know we have worked closely together since I became the minister on this particular file, and I really want to take an opportunity to thank her for her work.

I think we all agree that it is important for us to move forward on this bill quickly, and on just how challenging this pandemic has been for those most vulnerable seniors. This is why we proposed this bill. It is short, concise and very clear. It is going to exempt pandemic relief benefits from the calculation of the GIS or allowance benefits beginning in 2022 so that the seniors who took these benefits last year will have the security and surety that their GIS will not be impacted.

As the member knows, we have always had a very collaborative relationship with our provincial and territorial counterparts, and we are going to continue to build on that relationship and make sure our seniors are supported.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if I understand correctly what the minister said, the payment will be made only in July because the calculation is updated in July.

If I were to accept this explanation, I would have to ask the minister why the correction was not made last July given that the Bloc Québécois finance critic pointed out the problem to the government in April 2020.

Why did the government decide to trigger an election instead of correcting the problem last July and looking after seniors?

• (2115)

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member very well knows, in 2020 we were in a pandemic. We are still in a pandemic, but the reality is that we moved very quickly to provide an unprecedented response to the crisis of our lifetime. We put in supports for seniors, workers and businesses. We moved very quickly of course, and we know it affected the GIS of some seniors last year. That is why, when I was first appointed to this role, we moved very quickly and worked extremely hard with our officials and the Minister of Finance to put in this one-time payment, which we are working really hard to get out to seniors as soon as possible.

Government Orders

This is precisely why we have this bill before us. I have had conversations with all the members and all the critics, including from the Bloc party, to make sure we can move quickly on this. They agree that we need to move quickly on this, and I really hope we can count on their support to do just that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the minister on introducing this very important piece of legislation. From what I understand, this is the first and only piece of legislation that has been introduced by the newly created Minister of Seniors position.

What we have seen today, in my opinion, is a reluctance to move forward on this, despite the fact that everybody in the House knows how incredibly important it is to get this legislation in place so that seniors can be properly taken care of.

Can the minister explain to the House why it is so critically important that this happen right now?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Speaker, through you, allow me to thank my good friend for Kingston and the Islands for his question, and indeed for his hard work on all the files that he touches.

Let me also say there are a lot of fundamental issues that we disagree with on all different sides, but I think this is something we all agree with. Our government's priority has always been to support those most vulnerable seniors. That is why we moved so quickly to provide support for them through the one-time payment. Of course, this bill is important so we can prevent that and make sure seniors are not negatively affected again this year. I really hope we can all move quickly to do just that.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my friend, the hon. minister, for splitting her time with me tonight.

It is with tremendous pleasure that I virtually rise in the House this evening to talk about Bill C-12, an act to amend the Old Age Security Act, guaranteed income supplement, at this very important second reading stage. Before I do so, I would like to acknowledge that I am joining the debate from the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

To echo the words of the hon. Minister of Seniors, the purpose of Bill C-12 is very simple. This bill would permanently exempt pandemic benefits from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement, the GIS, or allowance benefits starting as of July 2022. As we have heard discussed by my hon. colleagues today during a very thorough debate, our government has a plan in place to get direct compensation to seniors who experienced reductions in their GIS previously. This is not enough, however. We know that we will find ourselves back in the same position four months from now if further action is not taken immediately. We have heard agreement on this from all parties who share our concern in preventing this problem from ever happening again.

The Canada emergency recovery benefit and the Canada recovery benefit continue to play an important role in supporting Canadians who were unable to work throughout 2021 and protecting so many from crippling income loss. To allow pandemic benefits like this to continue being effective and to avoid negative impacts on

seniors, Bill C-12 would provide the reassurance seniors need to continue collecting the financial support they need, if they need to do so.

Our government has also helped seniors in many ways beyond direct emergency benefit payments and tax relief. We invested \$100 million to improve access to food for Canadians, including seniors facing social, economic and health impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We created a \$350-million emergency community support fund to support charities and non-profit organizations to adapt the services that they provide to vulnerable groups, including seniors, in response to COVID-19.

When COVID hit, we had already approved many New Horizons for Seniors projects. As the pandemic's effects became clearer, we gave organizations the flexibility to adapt previously approved projects and use their funding to provide support for seniors' needs specific to COVID-19. In addition, in March of 2020, we invested an additional \$9 million via the New Horizons for Seniors program to support projects by community organizations serving seniors. In May of 2020, we invested a further \$20 million to expand the New Horizons for Seniors program to support organizations that offer community-based projects that reduce isolation, improve the quality of life of seniors and help them maintain a very important social support network.

It is a sad reality that the COVID pandemic has brought isolation to the lives of so many of our most vulnerable senior citizens. With isolation to stay safe at home, seniors have had challenges maintaining their physical and mental health. Seniors built the Canada that we know and love today and they deserve our support to live with dignity. That sense of vulnerability is real and cannot be overstated. It is why our government has dug deep and continues to dig deep to find ways to address those fears and bring some element of comfort to those deprived of basic securities that most of us take for granted.

To support seniors to live in their homes for longer as they age, we committed to providing \$90 million for the age well at home initiative. The initiative would assist senior-serving organizations in providing practical support that helps low-income and otherwise vulnerable seniors age in their homes. It would match seniors with volunteers who can help with meal preparations, home maintenance, daily errands, yardwork, transportation, just name it. It would also help seniors access local services such as shovelling snow, cutting grass, picking up medicine and taking care of other practical non-medical tasks that they are no longer able to manage.

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In budget 2021, we provided \$3 billion to Health Canada to support provinces and territories in ensuring standards for long-term care are applied and permanent changes are made so that seniors who live in care live in safe and dignified conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted long-standing challenges in Canada's long-term care homes, as the Minister of Seniors knows all too well.

• (2120)

Gaps have been exposed in infection prevention and control, staffing and infrastructure, with tragic effects on residents, their families and those working in long-term care facilities. That is why, in the 2020 fall economic statement, the Government of Canada committed up to \$1 billion for the safe long-term care fund to help provinces and territories support infection prevention and control, through making improvements to ventilation, hiring additional staff and topping up wages.

We are also committed to affordable housing. We plan to build, repair and support an additional 35,000 affordable housing units for vulnerable Canadians, including seniors. This is part of the national housing strategy, which is on track to invest \$70 billion by 2027-28 to help more Canadians find an affordable place to call home.

We are working to improve access to palliative care and end-of-life care, including culturally sensitive care by providing \$29.8 million over six years to Health Canada to advance the government's palliative care strategy and lay a better foundation for coordinated action on long-term care and supportive care needs.

We are also supporting seniors and Canadians' mental health by providing \$100 million to the Public Health Agency of Canada to support projects for innovative mental health interventions for populations disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including seniors. We have invested \$50 million for the Public Health Agency of Canada to design and deliver interventions that promote safe relationships and prevent family violence, including elder abuse.

These are just some of the supports that our government has provided to improve the lives and financial situation of our Canadian seniors. We will continue to look at ways, in co-operation with all members in the House, to improve our supports and services for seniors.

Our government has been there time and again for seniors across Canada. The pandemic has highlighted the many challenges facing our most vulnerable seniors. We have done a lot, but here is an area where we still have a bit more to do. It is time for all members of the House to put aside politics and focus on why we are here as members of Parliament, delivering for Canadians in need of help.

I am hoping that all hon. colleagues in this House will join with us to pass this bill when it comes to a second reading vote.

• (2125)

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I worry that perhaps the Liberal Party is keeping its own members in the dark. It did look awfully dimly lit out there in Nova Scotia. I hope it is not a matter of a failure to pay the hydro bill out there. I do send my colleague all the best. I am happy to help contribute to that bill if that is an issue.

Back to the point, we did just have a programming motion that cut short debate on this matter. Would the member not agree that it would have been preferable if this bill could have gone to committee where we would have heard from stakeholders and made amendments if possible at committee?

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Speaker, the hon. colleague need not be concerned about the fact that some of us on this side of the House are environmentalists and like to keep the power bill as low as possible.

I disagree vehemently with the premise of that question. This is a five-line bill that responds to all of the members of the House and what they were asking this government to do. Five lines, what is there to study? The minister was at committee yesterday and was asked about this repeatedly. This debate has gone on all day today and most of the conversation has been about things other than Bill C-12.

No, I do not agree with the member that this needs to be studied more, not a five-line bill.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am happy that we are debating this bill this evening. It is a great step in the right direction. However, this bill alone will not resolve the inequality and poverty that seniors are experiencing. We know that right here in Canada one-third of women over the age of 65 who are single are living in poverty. This is unacceptable. In my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith I am hearing from constituents who are seniors and are experiencing poverty in so many ways, such as losing their homes or being unable to keep food in their fridge.

I wonder if the member would agree that supporting this bill and this bill alone will not lift seniors out of poverty. Will he join the many constituents in my riding who are asking for us to support Bill C-223 for a guaranteed livable basic income?

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the NDP for its collaboration on working for the betterment of low-income, vulnerable seniors in Canada. I gave a long list of the things we have accomplished for seniors in Canada. That does not, by any means, mean that we are through. There is still so much to do. If I can look at this co-operation between some of the members of this House tonight, it gives me encouragement that we will continue to work toward making things better for vulnerable seniors in Canada.

Mr. Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our hon. colleagues in the NDP raised that this was an issue back at least in July of last year. An election was then called and now the senior citizens who are waiting for help have to wait until July of this year.

Does the parliamentary secretary feel like this is a quick enough remedy for these seniors?

• (2130)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Speaker, I will thank the hon. member for the question, but I find it almost amusing that, before a bill comes forward, Conservatives tell us to go fast and then as soon as the bill comes forward the Conservatives say to slow down. We will take no lessons from the Conservative Party of Canada on how to treat seniors in Canada as we think back to some of the things the past government did. An example is changing the age of eligibility from 65 to 67 and forcing hundreds of thousands of seniors to work an extra two years before they qualified or were eligible for benefits.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Bloc Québécois recognizes the merits of Bill C-12. We know that it is an error that will be corrected.

Nevertheless, we also would have liked to propose amendments to this bill. I know that the parliamentary secretary mentioned that the bill is only five lines long.

I would like to know if the parliamentary secretary is aware that the word “March” is only five letters long and could easily be slotted into this bill.

[*English*]

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Speaker, the member's question cut out on me through the Internet, but what I will say is that I want to thank the Bloc party for working toward letting us know what was needed so we could put that in this legislation, which is exactly what we did. I get a bit frustrated by the partisanship in the House. I think there are times when members do really well, but then there are times when some members say they really like a bill and they are going to support it, but it could be better. This is a four- or five-line bill. It has been talked about and debated today.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to speak tonight to the first piece of legislation in my portfolio. This legislation would amend the calculation formula for determining benefits payable under the act by deducting the amount received under three COVID-19 benefit acts and a portion of the Employment Insurance Act from a person's income for the year, starting in 2022. While I am thrilled that the government is taking action on this and highlighting its swift willingness to have the backs of Canadians, allow me tonight to speak to the unnecessary delay. This is not a piece of legislation that, in my opinion, the government members should be patting themselves on the back for. This, sadly, is a result of an error that should have and could have been acknowledged and remedied months ago.

I would like to acknowledge the work of the minister on this file. To her credit, she continues to show a willingness to act on this, albeit not as quickly as we would have liked, and more importantly, not as quickly as our seniors needed. As a result of the government's poor rollout of the CRB, scores of seniors have found themselves destitute after they were stripped of OAS and GIS payments through no fault of their own. It seemed as though there were con-

tinuous empty platitudes with no timely and clearly communicated solutions.

In my opinion, the government House leader's office was using Canadian seniors to play petty procedural games at the expense of our low-income seniors. Canadians, while they are embracing their golden years, have been hit over the last few years in every conceivable metric. It was just a few months back when I stood in this very place and said that instead of providing the compassion, empathy and support that the seniors who built this great country deserve, the Liberal government has decided to penalize Canada's seniors who took CRB by lowering their old age security payments. I asked this: When will the government reverse this decision and allow our seniors to collect what they have earned? This brings me to today.

Many members from all sides of the House have been representing the voices of their constituents and continuously pressuring the government to act. The government is acting, and for that I am grateful. Sadly, it seems like a bit too little, too late. It has taken eight months for the Liberals to fix the problem that they were aware of nearly two years ago. Yes, we support the principle and the content of the bill, but the attempt by the government to score political points is not acceptable.

Today I was thrilled. We heard from the members for Elgin—Middlesex—London, Calgary Shepard, Kenora, Abbotsford, Calgary Midnapore, Sarnia—Lambton and Parry Sound—Muskoka, and I am confident that all members of our caucus would have proudly stood up had time allowed. All the communities these members represent echo the values of my constituents in small towns in my riding like Odessa, Coe Hill, Tamworth and the many other towns in the great riding of Hastings—Lennox and Addington. I would like to take a short opportunity to thank many of my fellow members for their willingness to speak up for Bill C-12.

Seniors that I have spoken to, and many of us have read the emails, are happy that we are standing up for them. They need our help and I do not think they are asking for too much. The cost of everything is going up. Heating our homes is up 30%. Rent and insurance are up. Groceries are up 24%, and fuel in my riding this week is over \$1.50. This is not okay and it continues to go up.

Many Canadian and seniors are exhausted. They are fed up and they are tired of hearing empty platitudes like the government has their backs. They want actions, not words. On top of that, there is fear and concern, stressors of social isolation and elder abuse.

• (2135)

Some seniors completely rely on the GIS, and this clawback was devastating. They are our neighbours, friends, uncles, aunts, parents and grandparents. They are all finding it very difficult to make ends meet. The role of a member of Parliament is to represent the views of the people in our riding. We owe it to seniors to speak to the error that was made. That should not be how a government functions.

Government Orders

Earlier today, as in the last few weeks, we asked for legislative accountability for a simple bill. A payout timeline of May 2022 would leave impacted seniors waiting over 10 months. This situation did not happen overnight. It has been brewing for months, and it was not acted upon until the government was continuously pressed by all stripes of the House. Allow me to remind members that the government, specifically the office of the minister's predecessor, identified there was a known conflict between the CERB and the GIS program that would impact payments from the latter. If the magnitude of the impact of the GIS clawback was truly understood or fully appreciated by the federal government, distribution of the clawback repayment would have and should have already happened.

The outrage, frustration and fear are real. We need to get the money into the pockets of our seniors. We have seen how quickly our government can act when necessary, so why the delay on this?

Clawing back GIS payments from the poorest seniors in the wake of a pandemic was clearly out of touch. It was a flawed design all due to poor communication and lack of delivery. Today in the House of Commons, a member rose and questioned our party with regard to the urgency of the matter and why we were delaying the case. The government has created this unnecessary delay, and I do not understand why the New Democrats are continuously covering up and helping to fix the Liberals' mistakes.

Approving programs and rushing things through do not always work. It seems as though we need to continuously fix and answer the failures of the government. In Hastings—Lennox and Addington, there are a host of issues and concerns, but let me remind members that every day, seniors have been seeking clarification and asking for guidance. It is a plea for help. It is in my nature to help, to be empathetic and to advocate strongly on their behalf, and that is what I continue to do here tonight.

Just this morning, I received a call from a couple who live in the most southern part of my riding. The conversation was filled with a lot of concern and exhaustion. They thanked me profusely for speaking up for seniors, and I assured them that I would continue to do that. They had accepted pandemic supports and had their GIS clawed back. They had never in their lifetime missed a bill payment and have always paid on time. They are so embarrassed because they have overdue bill payments and cannot find it in themselves to own up to it and acknowledge why. They are having a really difficult time. This is just one story of so many. They were definitely relieved, in their conversation with me, to hear there is a fix coming, but they cannot comprehend why they now have to wait until May.

The government has dropped the ball and our vulnerable seniors are feeling it. Everybody has a story. Everybody makes choices on how they navigate through their lives. However, we can all agree that right now our country is in a bit of chaos. When Canadians are in need of more certainty, they are getting less. Many seniors have worked so hard their whole lives to save and invest. Seniors are not looking for a handout; they are seeking a hand up.

● (2140)

Many of our Canadian seniors have stepped up and done what was needed to be done, and it is an expectation that our government

will work equally hard to find solutions to the problems they are facing and act on them quickly. Growing older, becoming more seasoned and entering into a different phase of life can be beautiful. Aging gracefully and staying engaged mentally, spiritually and physically in our retirement years is a special chapter of our life to embrace. We are all going to become seniors one day. Some of us already are. Sadly, this is not the case for all people. As we become seniors, we do not all get to enjoy that beautiful retirement phase of our life.

The issues and needs of seniors should be one of the utmost priorities for the government. I am here, and I will continue to be a strong advocate for the people in my riding and the seniors across our country. On top of the clawback issues, many are experiencing loss and loneliness, which of course have been highlighted by the pandemic, regret, lack of proper care, lack of hygiene, dementia, financial and physical abuse, and fear of technology, which is a big one these days.

Currently, COVID-19-related benefits are not listed exemptions under the act for the purpose of benefit calculations. The proposal is to amend the definition of income in the OAS by deducting the amount received from three COVID-19 benefit acts. Do not get me wrong. I am delighted that the government wishes to move forward on this. The goal of this legislation is not to have a repeat of the 2021 GIS clawback. This is great news. My concern is, why the delay? More specifically, why would we not be allowing the House to properly and respectfully review the options that have been presented, respect the process of healthy debate and swiftly move forward in the best interests of all Canadians being impacted? I can certainly appreciate that time is sensitive and that action is required, but not at the expense of ensuring that this bill is presented in its best, most thorough possible form.

A fine gentleman once told me, "The facts, ma'am, just the facts", so allow me to provide some this evening.

When ministers are called before committees, they have a document prepared for them. It briefs them on topics that may be raised. These binders are available for anyone to read.

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In May 2020, the then Minister of Seniors appeared before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. As is standard practice, the minister was prepared a binder by department officials. In that binder, in section 7, under the heading “Questions and answers—COVID-19 Economic Response Plan: Support for Canadians and businesses”, and under “Interaction with CERB and GIS”, the following question appears: “Will income from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit be used in the calculation of Guaranteed Income Supplement benefits?” The answer is as follows:

It is considered to be taxable income and must be considered when determining entitlement to the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and the Allowances.

This being said, this will not affect the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and the Allowances for about a year. Income received...in 2020 will only affect GIS and Allowances benefit amounts beginning in July 2021, as those benefits will be based on 2020 income.

This is a verbatim quote from our government, from their own briefing binders, proving that the government was aware of this for at least 21 months and chose not to act. Flags had been raised and tens of thousands of seniors have been affected.

● (2145)

As for this next point, I had not intended to raise it, but listening carefully to the debate in the House today, I heard one of the hon. members from across the floor engage the House to reflect or, in his words, focus on the 10 years before the Liberals came to office. I took that as a welcome opportunity for me to highlight those years in the House.

For the last decade, Canada's population has been in the midst of a fundamental shift. We can all recognize that. The extraordinary change to Canada's demographics can present opportunities. We do not necessarily just have to see these as obstacles. These are opportunities. In response to the member across the floor, I ask members to allow me to indulge in the achievements of the recent Conservative government when it comes to our seniors.

Since 2006, the Harper government created \$3 billion in additional annual targeted tax relief for seniors and pensioners. It introduced tax-free savings accounts, TFSA's, which over three million Canadian seniors have opened. It introduced pension splitting for seniors to benefit millions of seniors each year. It improved the rules for registered retirement income funds to allow seniors to preserve more of their retirement savings.

It also introduced the largest increase to GIS in 25 years. As well, the GIS earning exemption was increased. Improvements were made to the CPP to allow individuals who wished to stay in the labour force to also receive CPP pensions. Shall I go on? Perhaps I will leave it at that for the purpose of tonight's discussions.

Especially as a new parliamentarian, I know I cannot, and must not, understate the importance of these stages of the legislative process. What we have in front of us is admittedly a very important piece of legislation. It is a piece of legislation that should have come long ago. Many are desperate, and our federal government has had a significant role to play.

I have mentioned before, while standing in the House, that the role of an effective opposition is not just to oppose but to critique,

and our responsibility is to build solutions. We need to ensure that all low-income seniors who saw their GIS clawed back in 2021 are included in appropriate and timely, yet thorough, legislation.

This portfolio need not be partisan. This is not Liberal versus Conservative issue. This is inaction that requires action. I welcome the opportunity to continue to work with the minister and all members of the House to ensure we are all working together and accomplishing the best interests for all Canadians.

● (2150)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, I found it interesting that the member, as she reflected on the Harper years, referenced back to things like tax-free savings accounts and registered retirement income funds, all stuff that well-off seniors can afford. I do not know many low-income seniors who are tapping into the tax-free savings accounts. Yes, the Conservative Party certainly does have a history of being sure to take care of those who are well off.

Nonetheless, I took great issue with her comment that the NDP is somehow having to come up and cover up mistakes. The NDP is actually the only party that has been participating over the last two days in moving forward with legislation to get things into people's hands, and to get legislation passed for the betterment of Canadians. The New Democrats have actually been participating in making that happen.

This member identified the problems and the urgency of moving quickly, but then in the same breath asked why the NDP is supporting us to move quickly on this. She is being hypocritical in her approach to this, and I cannot help but think that is just for partisan interest.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, I will certainly be the first to acknowledge how helpful the minister has been. The technical briefing was wonderful. With no disrespect, there has been no reluctance for us to move forward. Seniors that have built this country deserve for all of us to move forward together.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member made a comment wondering why the NDP is always running around fixing Liberal mistakes. Well, it is because the NDP is focused on one thing, and that is helping Canadians. When the pandemic first hit, people were suffering. It was the NDP that pushed for supports for seniors and people with disabilities. The Liberals were not there and the Conservatives were not there. It was the NDP that was pushing for that.

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If the pandemic has taught us one thing, it is that we have the ability in the House to make decisions to help Canadians, and we have the capacity to do that. One thing that would really accomplish that, which would go a long way to help seniors and people with disabilities, is a guaranteed livable basic income. We have a private member's bill on that, Bill C-223, which is on the docket.

I am wondering, if Conservatives care about seniors, if they will support that bill.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, I do not think it has ever been in question whether we care for seniors. That is 100% not debatable.

We can all recognize that we are in a historic and quite an alarming moment in Canadian history. I can speak for all Conservatives when I say it is really important that we continue to look at and consider everything that will improve the lives of all of our Canadian seniors moving forward.

• (2155)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the speech by my colleague from Hastings—Lennox and Addington, and I took notes, especially when she was talking about recognizing the dignity of workers.

The Bloc Québécois made its position very clear during the election campaign: We want old age security to be increased by \$110 a month starting at 65. We will not create two classes of seniors. We want to be sure to increase seniors' purchasing power because everything costs more now, including groceries and housing.

My question for my Conservative colleague is this: Does she think that the Liberals are being stingy?

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, what I will suggest here is that the focus of tonight's debate is on C-12. The principle and simplicity of this bill speaks to the necessity of it and our rationale was that although we have no reason to delay, we certainly wanted a timely, thorough study on it.

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the hon. member's speech, she mentioned some of the mental health implications of the pandemic on seniors in particular.

I wonder if she could share with the chamber, what should the government be doing differently, and what could the government have done differently, to minimize some of the mental health impact of the pandemic on seniors?

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, I know, for example, that we are waiting on the three-digit hotline. It is in the works and we are just waiting and waiting. I do not know where it is, but the sooner we find out, the better.

There are so many seniors, and actually those in all demographics, who are suffering right now. The mental health of Canadians is at an all-time low, and there has never been a more pressing time to act on the three-digit hotline.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when we suggested some improvements to the short Bill C-12, I heard some Liberal Party members talk about how making improvements is partisan. That explains a lot. I am starting to understand them more.

I can be slow to catch on, so I would appreciate it if my colleague could explain why, after seniors have endured 21 months of reduced benefits, it is partisan to ask for the payment to be adjusted as of March.

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, I think that the rationale for us wanting some additional explanation is to respect the process of this Parliament and of this place. We are not attempting to delay this, but attempting to have thorough, respectful dialogue.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am a little confused by the arguments against the use of the procedural motion that we talked about earlier. The member spoke very strongly in support of seniors. There are seniors in the riding that I represent, and across Canada, who are having their GIS clawed back. They need the funds that the bill represents, and they need those funds quickly.

Could the member explain and speak directly to those seniors in our communities and tell them why House procedure, or following what she understands to be House procedure, is more important than getting them the money as soon as possible so they can pay their bills?

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, I am happy to respond.

This is a result of poor communication and a lack of dialogue. Recognizing that this is time sensitive, there would be no obvious hold up or delay in the delivery of this. We are not talking weeks and weeks. We are talking about giving it the prudent time that it deserves, and I do not think that is asking too much. We are not delaying the bill.

• (2200)

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for Hastings—Lennox and Addington for her caring and professional leadership on this file.

One of the things that really impacted me during the member's intervention was the reference to the minister's briefing binder, which had a lot of the information regarding the issues with the original legislation, which we are trying to correct here today. She also referenced some constituents from her riding, and I have heard very similar stories in my riding.

I am wondering if the member can comment, based on what she saw in the briefing binder, on whether there would have been opportunities over the last 21 months to resolve this prior to today.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Mr. Speaker, indeed, there have been so many comments. As I spoke with colleagues, there were so many seniors who had been approaching them.

When I first looked at the briefing binder, I thought, wow, is this normal? Am I allowed to see this? However, the fact is, it is available for everyone. Perhaps it is the rookie in me, but I could not believe it when I read that this could have and should have been dealt with months ago. So, that is the most frustrating part of this whole thing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Terrebonne and, who knows, perhaps little Hadrien as well.

In my time as the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue, I have heard from many seniors in my riding who are very frustrated about their financial insecurity. They can no longer pay their bills.

Seniors have been the primary victims of COVID-19. They are the ones more likely to die and to suffer the repercussions of the coronavirus. By repercussions, I mean isolation, anxiety and loss of purchasing power.

In my region of Abitibi—Témiscamingue, much like in the rest of Quebec and Canada, there are seniors who continue to work, in spite of their advanced age. They are still working because they still need an income to live independently.

I remember one woman from Témiscamingue whose supplementary income suddenly disappeared when the schools in Témiscamingue were shut down for months because of the health measures. She could no longer make ends meet but still had to pay her mortgage and car loan, so she applied for the Canada emergency response benefit, the much-touted CERB, as did many other seniors.

She was in for a nasty surprise. A few months after she applied, her guaranteed income supplement was massively clawed back to cover the CERB she had collected. That was a significant hit to her income for months. She spent many long months in a state of anxiety, constantly worried because she could not cover her payments.

That is what I heard from one person in my riding and, sadly, hers is not an isolated case. There are tens of thousands like it all over Quebec and Canada.

The worst of it is that the Liberal government responded by insisting that every CERB dollar received by a senior would result in a 50% cut to their GIS. That is equivalent to a federal taxation rate of 50%. It is the rich who should be taxed at 50%, not the most vulnerable members of our society.

It is appalling and shameful, all the more so because the Liberal government was well aware of the situation thanks to letters the Bloc Québécois sent to the Minister of Seniors and the Minister of Finance in 2021 describing the awful situation that so many seniors found themselves in. It is appalling and shameful because the Liberal Party did not seem to care about the problem these seniors are facing. It took ages to respond even though it has known about this difficult situation since May 2021. That is nine months, and it is way too long.

That is why, despite Bill C-12's shortcomings, the Bloc Québécois will vote to support it because time is running out. Why did the Liberal government wait so long to act? At the very least,

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the federal government should be able to exclude emergency benefits from the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement payable for any month after June 2022. This will avoid further penalizing GIS recipients as of July 2022.

Bill C-12 is a first step in ending the negative impact CERB has had on the GIS, but it will be too late if it does not happen until July. GIS payments have been reduced since July 1, 2021. For several months now, this has weakened the already precarious financial situation of many seniors. The Bloc Québécois has urged the government to move up the end of its cuts by changing the wording of the bill from “June 2022” to “March 2022”. This change, which would have increased benefit payments more quickly for seniors affected by this problem, was refused, supposedly for IT reasons, which we obviously deplore.

What is more, Bill C-12 does not contain the retroactive one-time payment that was promised in the December 2021 economic and fiscal update for reductions that had already been made. The fiscal update read: “The government proposes to provide up to \$742.4 million for one-time payments to alleviate the financial hardship of GIS...recipients who received CERB or the Canada Recovery Benefit”.

It is hard for us to understand where the Liberal government is going with this. I think that it is improvising at seniors' expense. I think that this Parliament is not doing enough for seniors. We could do so much more.

Because of the many obstacles that seniors have faced, I personally have decided to start a seniors advisory committee in my riding. Now more than ever, I feel the need to bring the voice of seniors in my region to the House of Commons, because for far too long, they have been the most vulnerable and the most neglected by the Liberal government.

● (2205)

I am speaking in particular of those in rural and remote areas, where people must travel great distances, where there is little or no public transportation, where services are limited and, in some villages, non-existent.

Parliament is not doing enough for our seniors. We must be generous to our seniors. With their intelligence, tenacity, and the taxes they paid, they built everything that we use today: our houses, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, factories, neighbourhoods and city centres. Our great-grandparents, grandparents and parents who are still living directly or indirectly built everything we own and made us everything we are. This pride has been weakened, and unfortunately that reflects how vulnerable our seniors are today.

We must cherish them and show greater appreciation for them. That is what the Bloc Québécois wants for seniors. That is why the Bloc Québécois is concerned with the quality of life they deserve to have. Seniors were hit the hardest by the pandemic and have received the least amount of support from the federal government.

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That is why the Bloc Québécois, through our critic for seniors, the member for Shefford, launched a petition to ensure that our seniors have a decent quality of life. I invite everyone to consult the member for Shefford's Facebook page to link to this petition and to sign it.

That is also why the Bloc Québécois has proposed a series of measures to improve the standard of living for the people who built Quebec, in every single one of our regions, and to bolster their purchasing power. In Parliament, the Bloc Québécois raised the urgent need for legislators to increase old age security by \$110 per month for all seniors 65 and older. Furthermore, the Bloc Québécois rejects any attempt to create two classes of seniors through age-based discrimination. Lastly, archaic and discriminatory provisions must be abolished from the Pension Act.

Surviving spouses of pensioners whose marriage or common-law relationship took place after the age of 60 or after retirement are not eligible to receive their late spouse's pension. The Bloc Québécois is calling for these discriminatory practices to be repealed. These provisions are an affront to the dignity of seniors who worked, for example, within the federal public service or in the Canadian Armed Forces. Quebecers want seniors to enjoy a retirement that reflects the lifelong work they put into helping their families, communities and nation flourish. That is exactly what the Bloc Québécois wants.

This cannot be overstated: Health is Quebecers' top priority. More than anything else, the pandemic showed us how important it is to strengthen Quebec's health care system. Service cuts in our health care centres this summer made it clear that the consequences of Ottawa's chronic health care underfunding will outlast the end of the pandemic. Ottawa needs to pay its fair share so people who are suffering can access quality health care and so our dedicated health care workers can get reinforcements and the working conditions they deserve.

The federal government needs to increase health transfers, no strings attached, to cover 35% of health care services, as Quebec and the provinces are unanimously demanding. The Bloc would also support home care by means of a tax credit. Quebecers expect higher health transfers, and the Bloc Québécois has made that its number one issue.

Prices have been rising since 2021. Inflation is the highest it has been in over 35 years. Food prices have gone way up. Housing costs too. This is catastrophic for all lower-income seniors.

The Liberal Party is on the wrong track. Its only solutions are totally inadequate one-time payments. It also chose to create two classes of seniors by increasing OAS only for those 75 and up. That is unacceptable. In closing, let me reiterate: Parliament is not doing enough for our seniors.

• (2210)

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue mentioned tax unfairness. It is starting to dawn on me that there is a bit of a pattern forming here. We have a government that did not act to help seniors who were having their GIS clawed back. The gov-

ernment went after the poorest of Canadians who applied for and received CERB because they were told to, and then the Liberals clawed that back. They went after small businesses in the last Parliament, and yet they are letting the wealthiest of Canadians and big corporations off the hook. The NDP has put forward the idea of having a wealth tax for people with assets of over \$10 million. There are the CEO benefits they get. There just does not seem to be any appetite to go after the people who have actually done very well in this pandemic.

I am wondering if the member would support the NDP in calling for that tax fairness to make sure the wealthy pay their fair share and to stop going after the little—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I have to give the hon. member time to answer.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Madam Speaker, I am always on the lookout for any opportunity to increase seniors' purchasing power. There are always measures and traps in what the NDP presents, so I will remain vigilant.

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of a senior. We have all visited seniors' homes in our ridings, and we have all received phone calls from seniors who are sure there has been an error because the amount on their pension cheque has changed by 34¢ or 6¢ or 8¢. Seniors are forced to count every last penny because their purchasing power has decreased significantly over the years. I say this again in all sincerity. I think the government is being cheap when it comes to seniors, and that has to change. It is a matter of dignity.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. member for Mirabel.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Madam Speaker, I believe you have the wrong riding and you meant to recognize the hon. member for Trois-Rivières.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Yes, that is right. I apologize. The hon. member for Trois-Rivières.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Madam Speaker, you are forgiven.

I appreciate what my hon. colleague from Abitibi—Témiscamingue said. All parties agree that seniors are important. I often say that we are trying to replace speed with due diligence, but perhaps he would agree with me that there has been neither speed nor due diligence when it comes to this bill.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Madam Speaker, I can see how you could get the member for Mirabel and the member for Trois-Rivières mixed up. I must admit that I confuse the two as well sometimes.

I thank my colleague from Trois-Rivières for his excellent question. Obviously, it is duly noted. I would remind members of what may be the most egregious part of the bill. It does not fix the entire issue of seniors, as it is only a small step. However, why does it not specify March 2022 as the date? That would be so simple.

Instead, the government is putting things off another three months by postponing increasing seniors' purchasing power until July. Seniors who are already affected by the pandemic, who cannot see their loved ones, who cannot spend time with their grandchildren, and whose mental health has already suffered over the past few years are anxious enough without this added major financial stress. The wealthy are not the ones going through this hardship. They are not the ones who are counting—

• (2215)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. member for Nunavut for one last question.

[English]

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): *Qujannamiik, Uqaqtittiji.* I want to express that the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue and I have some similarities, including taxing the rich and not the poor, that he supports passing the bill, that we have bilingual constituents and that the second language of our constituents is English.

In the rollout of this program, I wonder if the member would agree that bilingualism also needs to include indigenous languages like Inuktitut and other ones for first nations and Métis so that seniors who want to access programs can understand them and make sure they have access to the important supports that this bill would provide.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague from Nunavut, whom I am getting to know this evening. I thank her for being here.

If there is one thing in this file for which we should turn to the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and the Inuit, it is their relationship with our seniors. We have a lot to learn in that regard.

The decade from 2022 to 2032 is the Decade of Indigenous Languages. We must take heed and provide services in indigenous languages. It is essential. I personally consider French to be a language that is under threat, just like all the indigenous languages. My colleague can count on my support for—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Terrebonne.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Madam Speaker, I do not want to disappoint my dear colleague from Abitibi—Témiscamingue who is sharing his time with me, but my son is putting my husband to sleep with some lullabies. He will not be joining us.

The Bloc Québécois has always supported targeted assistance programs that respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the fact that the Liberal government failed to be proactive. We voted for Bill C-2, which was hastily passed in the fall, in order to quickly help the groups most affected by this pandemic. One of our conditions for supporting that bill was that Ottawa stop penalizing working seniors who receive the guaranteed income supplement, or GIS, by treating the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, as employment income for the purpose of calculating the GIS.

At the parliamentary committee, the Minister of Finance even admitted that this was a significant problem, but, like senior offi-

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cial of the Canada Revenue Agency, or CRA, she stated that it was a complex issue that would be difficult to resolve because of the computer system. She nonetheless made a commitment to resolve it.

Here we are today with a bill that would finally correct this injustice being inflicted on our seniors, but that is still disappointing on several counts.

First of all, this bill will ensure that GIS recipients will not be penalized as of July 2022. This may sound good at first glance, but this substantial reduction of their cheques has been going on since July 1, 2021. These seniors have been watching their finances worsen since last summer. Our party made several proposals to the government, urging it to act quickly to ensure that the recipients affected can obtain relief as quickly as possible—as of March 2022, as my colleague from Abitibi—Témiscamingue hammered home. The government said that this was not possible for technical reasons, more specifically because of computer issues at the CRA. These so-called “computer issues” are pretty surprising for a G7 country.

Furthermore, Bill C-12 does not include the retroactive one-time payment that the government promised in the December 2021 economic statement as compensation for the reductions that have already been made. We unfortunately do not have details on how the payment will be calculated, but we hope that it will be paid automatically and that the seniors affected will not have to do anything at all. One thing is for sure, seniors have had to wait far too long for this compensation and for their full benefits to be restored. The government only made the announcement on December 17, 2021, in a news release that stated the following:

The CERB and the CRB were designed to provide financial support to employed and self-employed Canadians directly affected by COVID-19. The Government of Canada recognizes that some GIS and Allowance recipients are now facing lower benefit payments this year because of the income they received from these pandemic benefits.

It took the government several months, way too long, to admit there had been a mistake, and now it is taking way too long to act. It is deeply disrespectful to these senior workers who have been impacted by this problem since July. The problem is affecting their financial resources and their ability to buy essentials.

What is really disappointing is that the government is once again attacking a deeply vulnerable population. Everyone knew CERB was taxable income, but when people's income is low enough to qualify for GIS, they do not pay much tax. For GIS beneficiaries who collected CERB, the problem is a simple one. For every CERB dollar they got, the federal government would claw back 50 cents from their GIS. That amounts to a federal tax rate of 50%. We can all agree that is too high.

It is important to note that no one in the federal government informed GIS recipients that their CERB income would literally melt away their GIS benefits. The Bloc Québécois sees this as a major injustice that constitutes prejudicial and appalling treatment. The FADOQ network described the situation as a tragedy. Compensation is urgently needed. The government has known this for a long time, but has not acted accordingly.

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Need I remind members of the huge inflationary surge that occurred in 2021? The inflation rate in December was 4.8%, the highest it has been in over 35 years. Prices went up even more for many essential goods. Grocery prices rose by 5.7% year over year, the largest increase in a decade, while housing prices rose by 9.3% relative to December 2020.

• (2220)

It is the most vulnerable, especially people living on fixed incomes, such as seniors, who feel the greatest impact. It is outrageous that the government is doing this to our seniors.

Another big disappointment is that Bill C-12 will not end the inequity between GIS recipients who applied for CERB through the CRA and those who applied at Service Canada. It is important to remember that CERB was administered by the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada.

In certain circumstances, when pension income is reduced from one year to the next, claimants may request that their benefits be recalculated on the basis of an estimate of their income for the current calendar year. This is known as the “GIS option”.

We have criticized the fact the “GIS option” is available only to claimants who received CERB through Service Canada, not those who received it through the Canada Revenue Agency.

Indeed, only CERB benefits issued by Service Canada have been legally constituted as EI and are eligible for a “GIS option” review. CERB should be treated the same for all GIS calculating purposes, whether it was issued by Service Canada or the Canada Revenue Agency.

Pandemic-related assistance programs were brought in quickly. However, by the summer of 2021, in other words 15 months after the pandemic began, there were no more excuses for the government to keep reproducing this inconsistency to the detriment of seniors. The government should have used the bill to correct this gap, but clearly it missed the boat yet again.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a lot of people and businesses since the beginning of 2020, but that is nothing compared to the consequences it has had on the senior population with respect to both their physical and mental health, as well as their financial health.

The government is offering a solution that can be described as too little, too late. Once again, that shows that the government is MIA when it is time to help seniors. I would remind the House that this is the same government that chose to create two classes of seniors by increasing OAS only for those 75 and up.

Let us not forget that financial insecurity does not wait for a person to turn 75 to strike. To fix the problem, the Bloc Québécois has proposed that the OAS be increased by \$110 a month for all seniors 65 and up. What do the Liberals propose?

They propose a one-time, non-recurring cheque for \$500 for seniors who will be 75 or older as of June 2022. Pre-election smoke and mirrors: such is the Liberal way of governing. With that decision, the Liberals are sending a very negative message to the

970,000 pensioners in Quebec aged 65 to 74, telling them that they do not matter.

In my opinion, Bill C-12, as presented and without the changes proposed by the Bloc Québécois, demonstrates that the government is ignoring the most vulnerable seniors, and that is deeply disappointing. When we watch what this Liberal government is doing, we have the impression that it is downplaying the problem and expecting it to fix itself, which seems to be the norm recently.

We have before us a bill that does seek to fix a problematic situation, but it is flawed. We expected better from the government, after it took so long to address such a serious situation. The people who spent their lives building the society in which we live today deserve more respect from the federal government. The Bloc Québécois will always be there to stand up for seniors.

• (2225)

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member on her speech today. It was thoughtful, smart and extremely well done.

I want to follow up on some of the things that she mentioned and ask her a quick question.

Earlier in February, I was talking about seniors' issues and the GIS clawback and raised that issue with the government. One of the members from the government stood up and said he was quite concerned with respect to a senior person in his riding who was a babysitter. He thought she was taking more than was due to her. He was trying to blame a vulnerable senior who needed to do some work to supplement her income and had no thoughts at all about the idea of holding to account corporations or extremely wealthy folks who have taken some of these benefits during COVID.

Does the member have any concern that what we are seeing right now is just a further example of the Liberal government's choosing to always privilege and prioritize big business and the wealthy on the backs of the most vulnerable people in this country?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her question and her kind words about my speech.

I completely agree. Once again, the Liberal government is adopting a wait-and-see approach for the most vulnerable in society. It is choosing to wait, instead of seeking funds and financing from those who are not vulnerable and could pay more.

Government Orders

The government is choosing once again to stomp on the most vulnerable, as my esteemed colleague mentioned. It is disconcerting that people have waited so long for such an appalling situation to be addressed in such a flawed manner. It is too little, too late and it is not very well done. However, we will have to support Bill C-12, because it addresses a very difficult situation.

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Madam Speaker, that was well put by my colleague from the Bloc.

One thing that I want to focus on when we talk about this legislation is something I have heard several members speak about. Yes, we are dealing with legislation that created undue hardship for seniors and needs to be corrected. I think there is agreement on that, but when we deal with pieces of legislation like Bill C-12, I have heard one thing spoken about repeatedly in the House today. It is about the bigger issues that seniors are facing. It is really important to have the proper time to debate bills like this while also raising the issues and concerns that seniors are facing across the country, such as housing prices, rent, the cost of living and so forth.

I wonder if my colleague from the Bloc could speak a bit about the process. We want to make sure we have ministers here and that we as members will have as much time as possible to not only talk about Bill C-12 and talk about the correction that we believe needs to be made, but also to make sure we are getting on the record the stories of our constituents from our respective provinces and regions to make sure that seniors' voices and issues are being raised on the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Madam Speaker, there are two issues here.

First, we need to correct the situation that Bill C-12 seeks to address, which is that CERB was not factored into the calculation of the guaranteed income supplement. This is not the only problem that seniors have faced, of course, but the bill must be approved relatively quickly because the government has already waited too long to fix this situation.

That said, I completely agree with my colleague that seniors are facing undue hardship, especially in terms of the lack of affordable housing and the ability to afford basic necessities. This must absolutely be addressed, and the House will be happy to discuss these issues in due course.

• (2230)

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very happy to be here today to speak on this really important issue, especially for the many seniors across our country who are relying on us to get this piece of legislation passed.

I will be sharing my time with the amazing member for Nunavut, who has some very important things to share with us about the region she represents and how unique those experiences are for seniors.

I also want to take this opportunity to recognize that over 50 more children's bodies have been found outside of a residential institution. All of us sit in this place, a place that created all of the framework for what happened and continues to happen to indigenous communities, and I hope we are all listening. For every single child we hear about and for every community that is talking about what happened and are sharing these stories, I hope we are all listening and carrying those stories and communities with us. I would like to express my sincerest condolences to those communities and let them know I will be thinking of them during this very painful time. I continue to think of all the communities that are in the process of still looking for children who have been lost and are still waiting for them to be recovered, and of course I recognize all of those who have been found.

We are here tonight to talk about seniors and the fact the government made a colossal mistake that really impacted seniors profoundly. Working seniors did what every other Canadian did. They lost their jobs because of the pandemic and they applied for pandemic benefits to help tide them over during this very difficult time.

As we have these discussions, I hope we recognize seniors across this country, the most vulnerable of them, the ones who are receiving the guaranteed income supplement, are hitting a crisis point. Even with this payment that I am very grateful to see happen, it is far too late. July of last year was when these seniors lost their GIS, some partially and some completely. During that time, they have not only lost this amount of money but lost the provincial benefits that are automatically given to them because they qualify for the guaranteed income supplement.

I talked about those people in the House of Commons repeatedly, because it is important all of us as legislators understand the impacts we have when we make decisions, the impacts the government creates when it makes decisions without really looking at the ramifications, especially for those of us who are challenged the most.

Even with this money coming sooner than we expected and opening up stores so Service Canada can work with members to identify the seniors who are the most vulnerable and get them the money even sooner, we know they have lost so much during that time. I think of the many seniors who lost their homes. They lost the places where they lived and are now put in a bad situation. We all know in this place, because we are hearing in all our communities and constituencies, that the cost of living is going up dramatically. The cost of housing is one of the most profoundly expensive costs we have.

When we look at some of these low-income seniors, they lost their housing when they lost their GIS. They lost the stable housing they could afford and are now living in vehicles or in someone's basement. They are living an experience they hoped they would never have to. Something I will also think about when I remember this time is how many seniors said they never thought they would be in this position in their eighties.

Government Orders

Here they are now and they are finally getting a one-time payment. They are going to be retroactively paid, and then into the future we are being promised by the government that there will be no more cutbacks, that they will return to their normal GIS and that things should continue. However, they have already lost so much, and now they are having to pay a lot higher rates for their rent. In some cases, they have lost their health because they have not been able to afford their medication.

I do not know about the other members in the House, but as the senior spokesperson for the NDP, I am hearing not only from my constituency but from seniors across Canada who are writing to ask if they will be punished again in the next tax season. They are asking me if this is really going to be over and if I can promise them this is going to be over.

• (2235)

I really hope that the minister thinks about that as this rolls out and that we make sure that seniors across this country are educated so they know that things should get better. More than anything I hope that of course this place will make sure that this does not happen again.

It does really outline something that I believe this place has to take more consideration of and that is the growing poverty across our country. Persons living with disabilities and seniors are some of the poorest people across our country. We need to look into that and figure out how we can do much better. All of us have been shaken by this. When we recognize that, for single seniors, the GIS tops them up to just over \$19,000 a year and if they are in a partnership just over \$25,000 a year, most of us cannot imagine, especially with the cost of everything increasing, living on that low income.

I hope and have encouraged the minister to start talking meaningfully about a guaranteed basic livable income. We need to have this conversation. As we see the world changing and see automation increasing, we need to see the bar of dignity extended and not dismissed as it has been.

We also have to have big conversations about how long seniors are working, some by choice and some because they do not have a choice, and make sure that the tax system works for them. We know a lot of seniors are working into their mid-seventies and when they hit a certain point in their seventies, they are no longer able to pay into the Canadian pension plan. That can be a big deterrent for people who have good health and want to keep working.

I also want to talk about the guaranteed income supplement and one of the big faults that it has. Every year between 20,000 to 30,000 seniors in July lose their guaranteed income supplement. They lose it in part because they filed their taxes a little too late, because somebody they loved was ill, because they themselves were ill, and sometimes because they are having an onset of dementia. There are multiple reasons that happens.

I have asked the minister to consider a bill I presented that would look at making sure that every senior who received the guaranteed income supplement had a one-year amnesty. If they got their taxes in a little late, they would not be worried about being able to pay their rent in July.

When I was first elected, I had a call from a senior who was 84 years old, telling me that she got her taxes in a little late because she was sick with the flu during tax time. She had lost her GIS and did not know when it was coming and was going to be evicted from her apartment. I do not think anyone in the House wants to see an 84-year-old evicted simply because she was ill.

My bill would look at creating a space for people to be secure in their income, for those like this amazing senior who was so brave to reach out. For seniors to have to humble themselves, who have worked hard their whole lives, the vast majority of seniors receiving GIS are single women or the working poor. That is who they are. They have worked hard all of their lives. They do not want to ask for handouts. They want to look after themselves, so this has been really hard. We were able to work with the senior, her landlord and with the CRA to make sure that she got her money quickly and assured the landlord she would be able to pay her rent, if a little late.

I hope as we go through this experience all of us remember it is our job here as legislators to make sure that the most vulnerable in our country are cared for. When we look at the processes that we are putting into place, we need to think first of those who need us to think of them and not think of those who have so much that they can fill in those gaps when they need to.

It has been said to me many times that we know who we are by how the people who are the most vulnerable in our communities are doing. Canada must do better. We have seen this example for seniors. Let us make sure that we no longer punish the poor for simply doing the hardest work they can to look after themselves.

• (2240)

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Madam Speaker, I know my committee colleague from the NDP has risen several times in the House to advocate specifically on the legislative change that we are seeing. I want to pick up on the point of timing and she raises a very good point. We started to hear a lot of confusion when CERB was rolled out about the impacts it would have in July in that renewal period. Those with busy constituency offices would know that, but again, it has been several months since this has been highlighted and we are finally getting a change.

I wonder if the member could speak about the process and the frustration that I have heard in that it has taken so long to get to this point and the fact that we are here at 10:45 eastern time debating the bill as quickly as we possibly can with a timeline against us. Could she speak about the frustrations and the lack of timeliness to get seniors this change and the impact that they face? Yes, they will get an arrears payment, but the credit card debt, the line of credit, the IOUs with landlords and other bills have been significant. I would welcome her comments on that.

Government Orders

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I also enjoy my time in committee with the member. This is probably the most devastating reality. The NDP has been very clear since August that something needed to be done. Earlier in the spring, we brought up multiple times that we were concerned that as these rollouts happened the most vulnerable would pay. Unfortunately, that is exactly what we have seen.

We have seen seniors with the GIS lose their fundamental ability to pay for the basics. We have also seen low-income parents who have lost or had part of their child tax benefit removed. The child tax benefit is there to make sure that children are not in poverty. That is what it is there for, yet we have seen this clawed back as well.

Therefore, I am frustrated. The reality is that this is too late. Seniors have died because they do not have the resources to pay for their medication. That has happened in this country because of this clawback. We know of seniors who were sleeping in their cars. One story that always sticks out in my head is from the Northwest Territories, where an elderly person was sleeping in her car when it was below zero outside.

How do we repair this? Why did it take the government this long? Only the government members can answer that. I am just here debating to try to get the money to the seniors as quickly as I possibly can.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech. Her compassion shines through.

My question for her is very simple. How does she explain that the bill says June 2022 instead of March 2022? Would it have been possible to simply change the date and stop the benefit reductions sooner? Would that not show more compassion? Why did the Liberal government not do that?

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for those kind words. It really means a lot to me because I do care passionately. I share that with him and I just want to acknowledge that.

I could not agree more. This needs to happen now. It needs to happen sooner. I have been talking to a lot of people in different departments of the government, talking to different ministers, pleading for the reality that these seniors are facing. I wish it were sooner. I am glad that there are some ways that we are going to be able to get money to seniors as quickly as possible, working with MPs' offices and Service Canada, in March if they absolutely need it, and there are so many who absolutely do. I think of my area. In my riding, 810 seniors have lost their GIS, so we need to work and we need to work quickly.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to ask a question of my colleague from North Island—Powell River. I certainly commend her for everything that she has done to raise this issue. I am particularly struck by her private member's bill, which is not directly related to this, except, of course, it is about poverty among seniors. I wonder if her private member's bill is in this current Parliament, what its

current number is, or if it was from the last Parliament. I certainly want to do everything I can to support it. With respect to late filings of income tax, I have had similar cases in my own riding and certainly it is appalling.

● (2245)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for her support. I have not tabled it in this Parliament, but it is in front of the minister's office right now and we are looking forward to having conversations on it. It is true that if we think about it, between 25,000 and 35,000 seniors across this country every year lose their GIS for up to four months. It is very concerning.

I look forward to the member's support and I believe that we will continue the fight against poverty among seniors.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for North Island—Powell River. I have appreciated her leadership on this important issue.

From the beginning, the government has broken many promises made to Nunavummiut and indigenous peoples broadly, and specifically when it came to rolling out pandemic supports.

In this statement, I will paint a picture of the structural challenges Nunavummiut experience and highlight the importance of passing this important bill. Bill C-12 would fill a small gap in serving the needs of Nunavummiut; however, its insufficiency still presents a problem when one considers the structural challenges already in our wake.

Well before this pandemic, Nunavummiut have also been struggling with an affordability crisis, unemployment, poverty and food insecurity. The Government of Canada states that Nunavut has the highest cost of living. Roughly four in 10 residents of Nunavut are on social assistance, the highest proportion in the country. Basic needs like heating and electricity are even more expensive because almost all of Nunavut's electricity is generated from diesel fuel. There are 25 power plants operating in all of Nunavut's communities that run solely on diesel fuel to produce electricity.

In 2016, 18% of those of working age in Nunavut were unemployed. For the rest of Canada, that number was 7%. According to Food Banks Canada, 57% of households in Nunavut are food insecure and are unable to afford food for their families.

All the while Nunavummiut also continue to struggle amidst a housing crisis. A 2020 report from the Nunavut Housing Corporation said there are an estimated 56% of Inuit that live in overcrowded homes. The Government of Canada states that Nunavut has the highest number of people per household. Overcrowded housing is a central cause of the spread of COVID-19. Why are these structural challenges a persistent struggle for Nunavummiut?

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Research from the First Nations Tax Commission notes that hundreds of millions of infrastructure proposals are shovel-ready; however, it currently takes about five times longer to make an indigenous project shovel ready compared to provincial systems.

Why do I share all of this? It is because there are too many structural challenges in the way for Nunavummiut, and they have been waiting far too long for redress by the federal government. Clawbacks on pandemic supports are just another structural failure hurting Nunavummiut, only it is not just another challenge. These failings on the most basic livelihood needs and rights compound and exacerbate the challenges experienced by Nunavummiut.

It is clear that Nunavummiut struggle with an affordability crisis. There is a prevailing struggle to feed families, keep houses warm and keep families safe and out of overcrowded housing, yet the government clawed back the supports Nunavut depended on. It is just not right.

Now that I have laid out this context, I would like to speak more to just how pandemic supports have not only failed Nunavummiut but deepened their struggles. In early fall 2020, the Government of Nunavut expressed fear of possible tax implications, repayment and impacts to social assistance. Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated asserted that many Nunavummiut thought it was a universal benefit and applied in good faith. Messaging was not accessible to Nunavummiut.

The Minister of Health in Nunavut, Minister Main, noted in January 2021 that there was a potential for his clients to get hammered with repayment requirements or clawbacks. Minister Main criticized communications around the CERB rollout in Nunavut saying there was no information provided in Inuktitut.

● (2250)

That, compounded by the lack of Service Canada offices in many Nunavut communities, led to rumours flying about what CERB was and who it was intended for. The Government of Canada later admitted that it had provided poor information.

According to Statistics Canada, close to 10,000 recipients in Nunavut, of which a couple of thousand were income assistance clients, switched to CERB. This ultimately impacted Nunavummiut's eligibility for income assistance programs, which they depend on, like the guaranteed income supplement. Similar to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, Nunavut treats CERB as unearned income. This has had the effect of reducing social assistance benefits dollar for dollar. This occurred despite the overwhelming struggle with an affordability crisis.

Inuit living in extreme poverty were not in a position to repay. CERB benefits largely went to buy food. We saw food bank visits go down, because CERB finally allowed Inuit to afford to feed their families. Now the government wants them to repay a debt because of the Liberals' mistake. In October 2020, delegates to the Nunavut Tunngavik annual general meeting asked in a resolution that Inuit who had collected CERB despite being ineligible should not have to repay it. Nunavummiut had been waiting for the government to deliver on their most basic rights, not to have these rights further withheld.

Nunavummiut cannot wait any longer. Seniors across Canada cannot wait any longer. The bill before us does not address the many immediate critical needs of many Nunavummiut, but it alleviates the struggles of the most respected in our Inuit community. Canada's poorest working seniors have been cruelly punished by the government simply for receiving legitimate pandemic supports like any other working Canadian received.

New Democrats support Bill C-12 because it answers our demand to exclude pandemic income supports from future calculations of the guaranteed income supplement. The bill would allow some pressures to be relieved from the seniors whom we look so highly to. I hope we can work together on this and do right by our elders and in respect of our elders.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Nunavut, because I learned something tonight in this debate. That was one of the best speeches I have heard this entire evening. It goes to show what the member outlined in terms of the miscommunication from the government on what programs were accessible to Canadians and speaks to why I wish closure had not been enacted on the bill.

I do support this legislation and agree that we need to get it finished this week, but a more detailed committee study could have outlined in further detail some of the struggles Canadians and the Nunavummiut in the north have with the bill. If the member would comment briefly on that, it would be very helpful.

● (2255)

Ms. Lori Idlout: Madam Speaker, in hindsight, I think we all feel like we can learn from the past. All we can do is use that new knowledge to do what we can to make a difference now so that we can make sure that mistakes like these do not keep going on in the future. I have been listening to the debate and really appreciate that we need urgency on this matter.

Hopefully, in the rollout the CERB will be communicated better. As I mentioned, much of the rollout was all in English, which is quite unacceptable in Nunavut. I am really hoping that improvements will be made for this rollout so that all first nations, Métis and Inuit who prefer to communicate in their indigenous language are able to receive it in their language, as well as, of course, the French language, which, as we know, is a strong language in Canada.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague from Nunavut for her eloquent speech.

I would like to hear what she has to say about the services that the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada provide to the Inuit and indigenous peoples. I understand that there is a serious lack of communication from these departments and that many errors could otherwise have been avoided.

How does she propose that the government improve service delivery, especially to the first nations?

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout: Qujannamiik.

Madam Speaker, the services for Inuit might be slightly better compared to first nations and Métis. In the past they have tried to hire bilingual Inuktitut-speaking agents, but the availability, the consistency and the retention has not allowed the services to consistently be provided in Inuktitut, so there can definitely be improvements.

Because of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, both the Government of Nunavut and the Government of Canada have obligations to meet language requirements for the services that are offered for Inuit. Unfortunately, those targets are hardly ever met. I am still learning my role as the indigenous critic and I am still not fully aware of the issues for other first nations and Métis languages in Canada.

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member so clearly laid out the structural challenges that the federal government has created and that Nunavummiut face. Every time I hear her speak in this chamber, I am always struck by what a strong and powerful advocate she is for her territory.

In my riding there are seniors who have lost access to provincial benefits because of the GIS clawback. For example, the rental assistance program SAFER requires recipients to be on GIS. However, the impact of CERB repayment requirements on people who are on income assistance have an even more dire impact because of the government's miscommunication on CERB.

Could the member speak a bit more about the difference it would make for Nunavummiut seniors and elders to have amnesty when it comes to CERB repayments?

Ms. Lori Idlout: Qujannamiik.

Madam Speaker, it would be critically important.

The information we need to get for all first nations, Métis and Inuit needs to be in the language that is the preference of our first peoples. When people understand this information, people will use it for their purpose. It is so important that these programs, whatever they are—

• (2300)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I apologize, but we have to resume debate.

The hon. member for Battle River—Crowfoot.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is good to be able to enter into debate in this place. I am glad that everyone is so chipper even though the debate is going late here this evening. I also thank you, Madam Speaker, for guiding the debate over the course of this evening.

As we address the many challenges we face as a nation, I think it is important that I just make a couple of comments that are not directly related to the subject matter at hand. With the utmost seriousness, we are seeing some of the events taking place around the world, specifically the unrest in Ukraine. My heart and my prayers are with the people of Ukraine this evening, as it seems like a rapidly evolving situation there.

Certainly, it is of the utmost importance that our country has a strong response. I know for myself, and for the members of the Ukrainian diaspora who live in my constituency, it is a very serious evening as they wait on what could be an incredibly challenging time for that country. I would just like to acknowledge that. I want the people of Ukraine who might be watching this to know we are thinking of them and praying for them. I hope, as we face these challenges, that Canada will be there to stand for democracy and what is right in the world.

We are here again for the second debate this week for which closure has been invoked. For all of those who are watching at home, as I am sure there are many, it is when the government moves a motion to limit debate on a particular issue. In this case, it is a problem that the government created. As it was yesterday, when we entered into debate on the situation regarding rapid tests, it is pandemic-related.

Canadians expect all of us in this place to be responsive to the challenges that we face as a country. I would like to backtrack a bit, to July of last year. This concerns those who are 65 and older and, quite frankly, many other Canadians who have depended on or received certain benefits from the government. It is on July 1 that they, in many cases, figure out exactly what the calculation is for their next year's benefits.

As we finished up the spring sitting of Parliament this past June, I started hearing from constituents, as I am sure others in this place started hearing from their constituents, who were concerned that their benefits were going to be clawed back. What has become commonly referred to as the GIS clawback has had a significant impact on many of my constituents. I am sure I am not alone, as I have listened to some of the speeches by other members over the course of the debate today.

Government Orders

Members would think that the government would be quick to respond on what appeared to be a fairly technical bureaucratic issue with the way the benefits were calculated. It depended on how a particular senior, in this case, applied for a benefit, and whether they applied through the EI system or the CRA system, which administered the CERB and other pandemic benefits. In fact, one of my constituents said they applied on the wrong day. If they had applied one day earlier, they would have been okay, but in this case they were facing a significant personal difficulty because of that one-day difference causing a GIS clawback.

There is a reason why I wanted to talk about that time, seven months ago. The government had a responsibility, and I started bringing this up. Letters were sent, my staff were working with constituents, and we were trying to work with the minister's office.

● (2305)

I saw an alarming lack of a response from the various avenues of government that should be ready, one would expect, to serve Canadians, especially some of the most vulnerable in this country, who depend on things like the GIS.

About a month and a half later, after many of these benefits were recalculated for many seniors across this country, which media reports at the time were talking about, we found out that the reason the government was not responsive was because it was putting all its energy and focus not in the best interest of Canadians, but, rather, in an election. It is incredibly unfortunate that however many months later, six or seven, we are now finally getting to the meat of addressing the challenges that these Canadians are facing.

It is unfortunate because this highlights what has been a very concerning trend with the Liberal government. We heard the Liberals say today that somehow it is the Conservatives' fault that we even want to ask simple questions about Bill C-12. I know it is not only Conservatives who have questions. I have heard other questions from my colleague in the Bloc Québécois, the NDP and the Green Party. There are a lot of questions, and the Liberals will have to forgive me if them saying, "just trust me" is not a good enough answer when it comes to addressing the challenges that these Canadians are facing.

When Canadians expected their government to be working for them, it was planning an election, yet it now claims it needs a team Canada approach and that it is the bad Conservatives who are all about delay, or whatever its talking points are for the day. The reality could not be further from the truth. We have a bill before us that would attempt to fix what was a Liberal problem, which has had a pretty significant impact on the challenges faced by seniors.

I spoke to my constituency assistant and case manager earlier today and told her I was going to be speaking this evening on Bill C-12, which has to do with the GIS. I asked her to share with me some of the calls that my office received over the last number of weeks, just a light synopsis so that I could share some of the challenges that seniors are facing. She sent me an email with a number of stories, one of which I would like to read.

A constituent named Larry had to move out of his home, the home he had lived in for more than 40 years, because he could not afford his bills. Further to that, shortly after selling his home and

moving into a rental property, he got a notice from the landlord saying that his rent was going to increase the maximum allowed because of the challenges associated with heating costs. Larry had thought that he was in a good position going into retirement, and now he is facing incredible challenges. My constituency assistant listened to his story and his uncertainty about whether he would be able to even get the benefits we are talking about here tonight. These are real stories about real people.

A number of folks have reached out about the cost of heating. I have been sent dozens of heating bills from constituents over the course of the last number of months, as I know members opposite have as well. What is quite tragic is that often the cost of energy is one of the smaller items on those bills, aside from things like the carbon tax, distribution fees and whatnot. Not all of them are in federal jurisdiction, but the costs, especially for those on fixed incomes, cannot simply be absorbed.

● (2310)

There are many challenges that seniors are facing, such as the cost of living. A number of seniors have shared that when they go to the grocery store, they now, more than ever, have to look at things like the cost of milk and decide whether they can buy a jug of milk that week or whether they have to find a less expensive alternative. They have to decide whether they can afford meat or not.

One senior shared with me that her benefit increase, according to inflation, was 65¢ a month. I am not sure if members have been to the grocery store in the last little while, but with the cost of everything, there is not much we could buy for 65¢. These are the challenges that real people are facing.

Further, I have heard from some seniors, including those who have been impacted by this GIS clawback, that they have had to take on debt in order to make it through. Now they are watching the evening news and hearing talk of interest rates. The debts they have had to take on are not long-term, secure lending options; these were last-ditch efforts to try to put food on their tables, and now they are hearing talk about interest rates and feeling more uncertainty.

It is incredibly unfortunate that this is the reality for so many, yet I hear the finance minister and Deputy Prime Minister, whenever she is asked a question about the economy, making accusations that the Conservatives are somehow dragging down the economy. In real terms, the inflation in this country is about twice the amount that wage growth is. That is the minimal indexing that seniors' pensions and benefits get as well as the young family or the student who is simply having trouble making ends meet.

It may be all well and fine for property owners. It may be all well and fine for those who have consistent incomes with guaranteed escalators that many blue-collar Canadians would dream about, but when it comes to the real impacts of the policies of the government, those policies are hurting Canadians.

When we come back to the reality faced by Bill C-12, we do have a chance here to fix a problem, but I think what needs to be noted very importantly is that the role of this place is to ensure against things like the mistakes that have been highlighted and the government's admission of those mistakes through the tabling of Bill C-12, and they cannot blame the significant delays that have been then faced on the Conservatives.

I can tell the House a secret: The only person in the House who can decide when an election will be called outside of the fixed election date that was brought in by the former Harper government is the man who sits in the chair across the aisle. The election had nothing to do with the opposition. I am sure that if the Prime Minister was able to find some creative way to meander around a cleverly worded talking point, he would try to blame the opposition, but he chose to call an election, so here we are at the last minute and the last hour, trying to get this stuff sorted out for Canadians.

I do not think I am even talking in hypotheticals, but my submission is that had we had the chance to more thoroughly debate many of these things, we would not be in this situation. We were criticized yesterday, and it is very relevant to this debate, for asking simple questions about things like the delivery of rapid tests. We have heard many questions today about what this would look like in terms of its possible impacts on future benefits for seniors. In fact, when I heard the minister talk earlier today, she was being completely misleading about former Conservative policies regarding benefits in what I think was an attempt to score some cheap political points. It was truly misleading when she brought forward some of those comments.

• (2315)

This place is unique in the sense that every corner of our country is represented. There is no forum like it. Literally every square inch of our country is represented by the 338 individuals who have the honour of sitting in these seats. What is important and what makes up the strength of our democratic system is the fact that we come to this place with different levels of expertise and different political affiliations. Although I was somewhat disappointed with the number of seats each party got after the last election, which the Prime Minister said he would not call but did anyway, we still ensured that every square inch of this country was represented.

The fact is, we can have debate and can hear from the people of this country. We have a wide diversity of perspectives represented, not just the political and ideological perspectives, but perspectives from different backgrounds. We have a medical doctor who sits as a Conservative, and it is interesting that there are some spin doctors on the other side. Regardless, it speaks to the strength of our system. We have lawyers, social workers and farmers, and I am proud to have a farming background. It is also interesting to note, especially for a certain demographic that happens to be involved in a certain protest that has dominated headlines of late, that I am proud to have a class 1 licence, which means that I can drive those big

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rigs out front. If anybody needs help moving them I can actually do it legally. I am not sure the Prime Minister can. It is just a little something I am proud of, like the fact that I still farm. I am sure some of my colleagues can share some fun experiences about that.

The strength of this place is in the diversity represented: women, men and different ethnic origins. There are some with a Ukrainian background, and I mentioned some of the challenges they are facing. There are some who are fairly new to Canada, fairly recent citizens, and there are some, like me, who are multi-generational. That is why I find it so frustrating that over the course of my time here since being elected in 2019, the Liberals have seemed to avoid, at all costs, the democratic discourse this place needs to function. That harms our ability to succeed as a country. That harms our ability to be able to function well.

We will disagree about different aspects of politics. Chances are that there are those within this place who will want to read and agree with the opinion columns of the Toronto Star. There are those who would probably agree with what is talked about on rabble.ca. There are those who read the National Post or The Globe and Mail. It speaks to the strength of our democratic institutions.

As I come to the end of this very important discussion, I think it is important to acknowledge, with regard to the substance of this bill, that so many people have been affected by it. We have to take the time that is needed to get it right, because in many cases, seniors like Larry need us to get things right, not like with the CEBA. I think it was after the third or fourth try that it was finally fixed. There are so many other examples, and the discourse that happens in this place is so very important for solving and dealing with the challenges Canadians are facing.

• (2320)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is always interesting to hear from the member opposite. We are discussing a bill relating to seniors tonight.

I have a question for the member. Does he still agree with his party's position, which apparently has not evolved, at least not that I am aware of, that the age of eligibility for OAS should be 67, which they changed it to a number of years ago under the Harper government, or should it in fact be 65, which is what this government restored it to? What does he think about that?

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, there it is. We have a Liberal who thinks they can score a cheap political shot. It was the minister, interestingly, in her remarks, who suggested that that age of eligibility was going to be applied to everything, I think, probably even to the child benefit. Wait until someone is 67 for the child benefit. That could not be further from the truth.

First, let us get the facts on the record. The previous Harper government—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The question was short and the answer has to be short too.

The hon. member for Edmonton Strathcona.

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Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am in Alberta right now, my colleague's home province, so it is a bit earlier for me. I am a little lucky for that.

I would also like to thank him for his words on Ukraine. It is something that all of us are seized with at the moment.

I agree with the member when he talks about the cruel delays the Liberals have put our most vulnerable seniors through. As we go forward, I think everyone in this House wants to move as fast as we possibly can for seniors. One of the times that I was most proud of being a member of Parliament during this particular sitting was when the Conservatives moved all stages of the conversion therapy ban. The Conservatives were the ones who made the motion so that we would ban conversion therapy. I was so proud of the Conservatives then.

We have this moment where they could do the same thing and move fast for seniors. Why do they not see that this is an opportunity to use the powers that we have as parliamentarians to get help to seniors as fast as we can?

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, first, let me get back to finish the facts about the previous member's response—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Answer questions as they come. Thank you.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, I look forward to being able to debate that at length at some point in time, which would be very, very important.

A simple response is that there was a lot of dialogue about the issue which the member mentioned that did take place in the last Parliament. There was a lot of work that got it to the point where the decision was made for that to be fast tracked in this Parliament, but we are literally debating a fix to a problem with a program that the government created.

Forgive my skepticism when it comes to my lack of trust with the fact that the Liberals would have gone through the due diligence to actually get it right. Challenges with CEBA have had to be addressed three times. Time and time again, there have been many examples where the government has made claims that a team Canada approach was needed, yet what happened? We ended up back here in this place having to fix its mistakes.

I think there is a healthy level of skepticism that many of us have when it comes to ensuring that we can do exactly what our jobs are. The fact that we are sitting until midnight—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Now it is time for another question.

The hon. member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, this is such a riveting debate. I especially enjoyed the at-length comments from my friend from Battle River—Crowfoot on diversity and how we represent 338 unique corners of this world. I happen to think my riding is the number one riding in Canada. I have glaciers, ski hills and all sorts of great things.

One of the things that we all come here to do as members of Parliament is go to committees. I love committees, but with this bill we

have been prevented from going to committee. What I am worried about with this legislation, and with the other bill that passed the other day, has to do with the importance of committees in debating legislation. Why should we not bring this bill before committee? Would Canadians not be better served if we spent one day to debate this bill at committee and go clause by clause before the other House returns next week?

● (2325)

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, I appreciate the comment from the eminent member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, although I would disagree with him, quite strongly, on the best riding in the country. Although I do not have glaciers, it may feel like that before a chinook comes in the cold winter months, which start pretty early in the fall and go pretty late in the spring.

The member makes a very valid point. There is due process in this place that has been finely tuned over more than a century here and multiple centuries, close to a millennia, of parliamentary process when it comes to the historical basis for the Westminster system that we are all privileged to be able to take our seat in.

The committee process is one of the very valid and important steps required to ensure that we get it right. Again, forgive me for my skepticism, but we are fixing a Liberal mistake. We should make sure that there are not further mistakes that would end up hurting folks like Larry who deserve government to get it right.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, does the hon. member for Battle River—Crowfoot have an answer to the question of the Conservative Party position on OAS at age 67.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, the member asked that quickly. This will take just a moment so I hope you will indulge me just slightly.

The conversations that took place back in 2013 and 2014 were about making sure that there was the long-term viability of a benefit that Canadians depended on. I find it ironic that the Liberals will try to talk about somehow there being significant cuts when it was truly about ensuring that there was a conversation—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Questions and comments, the hon. parliamentary secretary.

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Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I want to go back to the question that my NDP colleague asked previously because she made an excellent point. This member allowed to pass all stages of the conversion therapy ban bill, all in one quick unanimous consent motion where everybody agreed to all stages of it and it passed unanimously, so quickly, and this member clearly voted in favour of it.

Why does this member not care about seniors the same way that he clearly does the LGBTQ community?

Mr. Damien Kurek: I have a point of order, Madam Speaker.

I believe that if we were to look at the Standing Orders and conventions of this place, to try to impugn the record of a member is certainly not something that is permitted within the dialogue of this esteemed chamber.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Can I caution the hon. member to be perhaps less blunt in impugning intentions on the hon. member?

I do ask the member to answer, please.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, I appreciate your clarification on the matter.

I find that it is, again, ironic that we are dealing with two very different issues here. We are fixing a problem with a Liberal bill. That is what this bill is about. We are fixing a Liberal problem.

When it comes to Bill C-4 and Bill C-6, there was extensive debate that had taken place over the course of my time in Parliament that certainly led to the decisions that were made regarding conversion therapy.

When it comes to this bill, I find it very troubling that members opposite would somehow suggest that it is a dislike or some aversion against a certain segment of society and that we would not simply want to be here to do our jobs. That is the sort of politics that is forcing Canadians to give up the faith that they should have in our public institutions. We have a—

• (2330)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We will have one last question from the hon. member for Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am happy to hear about Larry specifically. I have many constituents in my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith with very similar stories to Larry's, so I am always happy to hear about what is happening in other ridings and to know, unfortunately, this story is not alone.

During the pandemic, we saw that, unfortunately, seniors are becoming poorer while the ultrarich are getting richer. Could the member please clarify whether it is now time for the ultrarich to pay their fair share and to finally provide seniors, like Larry, with what they need and deserve such as—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. member for Battle River—Crowfoot.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Speaker, like Larry, there are so many blue collar workers out there, including many shift workers, who would start work at this hour. It is an honour to participate in debate in this place at an hour when many across this country, whether it be health care workers or those in any other segment of the Canadian economy, may be just getting to work.

We see the devastating impacts of many things, like inflation, that are making middle- and lower-income Canadians poorer. These things have to be addressed to ensure that benefits are being indexed appropriately and people can simply qualify for what they are entitled to. I could go on and on about this extensively.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, as always, it is an honour to rise this evening to speak to Bill C-12.

Over the course of this day of debate, it has been shown that this very simple and very clear bill seeks to fix an obvious mistake that is a source of profound injustice for seniors across Canada, especially the poorest seniors.

[*English*]

I think we know what we are dealing with tonight. I have twenty minutes of speaking time, and I do not plan to use it. This is the end of a long day. It is very clear where we all stand. This bill should pass.

This is very rare for me, by the way. Earlier today I voted for closure. I think in the whole time I have been a member of Parliament, which is astonishingly, and this is a huge honour, coming onto 11 years, I think I have only voted for closure one other time. It offends me to close debate almost every time.

However, seniors have been waiting too long for a simple error to be repaired, and I want to see the bill pass as quickly as possible. I wanted to look at this from a broader perspective and raise something about this. This comes from the comments immediately before mine, from the hon. member for Battle River—Crowfoot, but from those of others as well.

We are here to fix a mistake, something that should never have happened. The seniors who applied for COVID relief were, in many cases, assured it would not affect their guaranteed income supplement. There was bad advice given to many people, as has happened before on other aspects of COVID relief. However, seniors were shocked to find that their guaranteed income supplement had been clawed back.

To fix the mistake, we have to bring another bill to Parliament. Think of how many times this has happened. The member for Battle River—Crowfoot mentioned the three times to fix the CEBA. Think about what happened when we found that there were other unintended mistakes that occurred under COVID relief.

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One that is still hanging over us was the change to the Canada Recovery Benefit, which happened in the summer. This was when it looked as though we were coming out of the pandemic, and there was tremendous pressure that we were not getting people back to work because their COVID benefits made it easier for them to stay home. I think we have all heard that narrative. I do not buy into it, by the way.

We have all heard that narrative, that it was hard to get people to come back to work. Because of that, the CRB was reduced from \$500 to \$300. However, now it is clear that we were not on our way out of the COVID experience. We still have businesses closing. We still have public health orders. They have gone on.

They may be about to be lifted, but the decision that was made in July does not look so good in February. That is so much time for people to have been struggling to hang on at \$300. Again, to fix this simple mistake, an entire new piece of legislation is required, and we have to come back to Parliament.

Think about another thing that was promised by the Liberal government in 2020. That, of course, is the Canada disability benefit. It is much needed. We know that, as a community, if we look at people with disabilities, that is the differently abled community, it struggles the most with poverty. The Canada disability benefit is long overdue. It was promised in 2020. It was promised again in the Liberal platform in 2021. I am sure they intend to get to it. I honestly do. I am not suggesting anything to do with skepticism on my part. I think the minister genuinely wants to bring forward the legislation.

However, here we are. People are poor, and they are still struggling with a society that is struggling with the pandemic, and they are still living with being differently abled in a society that does not accommodate them. We pass legislation for a barrier-free society, but we are not there yet.

Again, it needs legislation. I think we can make the case that, after two years in the pandemic, what we have discovered through COVID are the depths of inequality, which many of us had not looked at. I think a lot of us who are arguing all the time to address poverty have looked at it.

We have been very, I hate to use the word smug, but Canadians who are living above the poverty line have a hard time imagining how hard it is for our fellow citizens, who are homeless, dealing with addiction, and unable to find a place to live, even with two people in the same family working.

● (2335)

One thing that struck me regarding COVID-related stories has to do with the spread of COVID. This is a story from two years ago in Ottawa at one of the homeless shelters. The workers and supervisors wondered how COVID had come into this particular homeless shelter, only to discover that two of its regular residents were workers at long-term care homes. This was their address; this was where they lived. They went to work at long-term care homes and brought COVID back to the homeless shelter. Working people doing hard jobs, the frontline workers we needed so desperately, were infected with COVID and brought it to a homeless shelter.

We need to recognize from all these various stories that we do not have a social safety net that works. Our predecessors in this place from another minority Liberal Parliament in the late 1960s, when Lester B. Pearson was the Prime Minister, and the extraordinary people who once were the NDP, managed to use their minority position to push for what was needed. I apologize to my friends in the NDP now, as it is a shadow of its former self without the giants of social justice Tommy Douglas and David Lewis.

We had our whole health care system put in place in the late 1960s. We had the Canada pension plan put in place in the late 1960s. We had unemployment insurance and student loans without interest payments all in that period. I describe it in ways that might make one think the music of *Camelot* is about to swell in the background, but we had that once.

Here we are in a minority Parliament again. Let us be creative. I ask this of my friends across party lines. This is a moment to point out the inefficiencies of the failure to eradicate poverty when we have the chance. This is the time to accept.

I am very proud of the fact that the Green Party of Canada was the first party in this country to advocate for a guaranteed livable income, but there are many more of us now. Obviously the New Democrats have been advocating for it strongly, and many backbenchers in the Liberal Party are advocating for a guaranteed livable income. Prominent Conservatives are too, like former senator Hugh Segal, whose brilliant book, called *Bootstraps Need Boots*, was just wonderful. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps if we are shoeless.

This is an important moment for us to think about the ways we take on these problems. They are massively inefficient. Each mistake made is not calculated to make the poor poorer, but they have that effect. Each mistake, each piece of legislation and each failure to get the right decimal number cannot be fixed by a simple regulation or a wave of the wand from the minister. Bill after bill has to come back to this place. Let us fix it once and for all. Let us say, as we debate Bill C-12, that we are going to pass this one quickly but are not going to give up on casting a light on what is unacceptable in this country. Poverty is unacceptable in this country, poverty in indigenous communities and poverty in any community.

Government Orders

We are a wealthy country and we have study after study after study on this. The all-party poverty caucus has been holding hearings on it for as long as I have been in this place. These are studies that prove our society will be better. It is not about charity. The health, the resilience and the economic strength of our country will be fortified when we have eliminated poverty, and every Canadian has a roof over their head, has access to pharmacare and is able to live in dignity. Then this place will not be bogged down in a pandemic with realizing over and over again that we have a gap here and a gap over there and more legislation is needed.

Let us be brave. Let us be bold. Let us think like earlier generations of parliamentarians did, and let us think fully about the full range of programs that seniors need, such as affordable housing for every Canadian and long-term care that is not for profit. Let us think about what we can do for housing to ensure that seniors do not need to leave their own home, and let us perhaps have creative solutions to ensure they can stay at home. We know that the costs for seniors living in their own home are far less than if they end up in hospital.

I could go on, but the hour is late and I promised myself that I would not use all my available time, because all of us are of one mind in this place: This bill should pass. Our only difference of opinion is about how fast. I am on the side of as fast as possible. That is the only difference in this place tonight.

• (2340)

While we are thinking about what we need to do for each other and for our parents, I am now a senior. I am in the boat of the 67-year-olds, but boy am I lucky to have such a good, rewarding job. I think we are paid too much as MPs. When we look at the people who do social work and frontline health care work, they do not earn enough, and we may earn too much, but that is a conversation for another day.

I am honoured to have this job. I want to be of service. I ask all of my colleagues who agree to let us get rid of poverty altogether, not with piecemeal, band-aid programs. Let us do the decent thing. Let us show the world that we are committed to social justice, equality, anti-racism, fairness and, above all, democracy.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank my friend for her commitment, her sincerity and her passion. She presented us with a wish list for a world without scarcity, which I would say, quite honestly, is not the world we live in. That is a function of the reality of the human condition, not of anything else. She and I both hope for a world in which scarcity does not exist.

In the world we live in, we have to face trade-offs. It seems to me that policy-making is about those trade-offs. Realistically, one cannot simply say that we want to spend more here and spend more there without asking where it all comes from. We are in a situation where, in the midst of this pandemic alone, the government has run up a deficit that has created a national debt of over \$1 trillion in this country. I think about my kids and the cost they will have to pay. That has to come from somewhere.

I would like to work with the member and other members on the issues she talked about: combatting poverty and making it easier for

people to have the opportunities they need. To me, that comes from growth of jobs and opportunity—

• (2345)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I would remind the member that this is questions and comments. We have to leave time for other members.

The hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, I am going to let a big secret out of the bag and just say that I am deeply fond of the member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan. We share a lot.

I will say that bean counters would love a guaranteed livable income. Can members guess where we would save money? Snooping around on single moms, to cut their benefits if they find out they have moved in with their boyfriends, takes money. We have a shame-based system of band-aid solutions to poverty. They are expensive. They cost a lot of money. It does not cost money at the federal level the way it costs money at the provincial or municipal levels, but if it is all counted up, and people have done a lot of research on this, a guaranteed livable income could replace a lot of very inefficient programs that are expensive.

Those people who lose their jobs snooping around and checking up on single moms would be all right. They would not fall below the poverty line, because there would be a guaranteed livable income for all.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoulu, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her speech and for the words she spoke in excellent French. Her speech once again attests to her big heart, her generosity and her ability to analyze an issue.

At the beginning of her speech, my colleague spoke about fixing a mistake and discrimination against seniors. We agree that what happened with the GIS was pure discrimination.

I would like her to comment on another type of discrimination resulting from the creation of two classes of seniors and on how we could fix that mistake.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, I thank my Bloc Québécois colleague from Beauport—Limoulu for her very kind and generous comments.

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I do think the government needs to fix the mistake it made when it created two classes of seniors. I think the best way to address inequality is to create a system that will eliminate poverty. That is the point of the guaranteed income supplement.

There are other things we must do to protect seniors' health, such as fix problems with long-term health care, which should not be in the hands of for-profit enterprise.

[*English*]

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Madam Speaker, I think my colleague from Saanich—Gulf Islands will agree that in addition to fixing this glaring problem facing seniors and the clawback of their GIS benefits, one of the real benefits of this debate has been the opportunity to shed light on the need for a guaranteed basic income for seniors and all people struggling in poverty. However, it seems there are still barriers to our coming together and delivering this basic dignity for people.

Can my colleague speak to what some of those barriers seem to be? The beliefs that we hold, either subconsciously or otherwise, are holding us back as a society from making the bold move like the one in the 1960s that she referred to. What is holding us back now from making that kind of move and delivering the basic dignity that people deserve?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, I am older than some members, and that is not to say that I am smarter; I just remember stuff. I remember Reagan and Thatcher and the rise of neoliberalism, and it shifted consciousness. It made a lot of citizens look at government as something alien from them, with a hand out to pick their pockets, whereas the postwar narrative that was in our heads, which lasted through the 1950s, the 1960s and into the 1970s, was that collectively we could look after each other. We had that collective sense. As I mentioned in referring to the importance of democracy at the end of my speech, we had the sense that the way the government operates was at the very tips of our fingers. We controlled what our government did because it was not alien from us: It was us. It was us taking care of each other.

The fabric of that has been significantly damaged, but I hope that post-COVID, people will realize that neoliberalism is dead, because when we were banging our pots and pans on our balconies, it was not for billionaires. We were banging our pots and pans on our balconies for people we knew were underpaid and working hard in health care.

I hope that we can change the way we think about our job as parliamentarians to include leaps of faith to do what is right.

• (2350)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for her comments and her really great speech. I agree with her that it is time for this bill to pass and to pass quickly. We have talked about how much all of us really want to support seniors and how many of us were sent to this House by seniors to be strong advocates for them.

Would the member continue her call on how we can continue to support people? I thank her for making her comments in her great speech, and I think this is a step toward getting to that place of continuing to support people. We know how much COVID has impact-

ed seniors, so I want to thank her and encourage her to continue to make that call to support passing this bill and to pass it quickly.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, to the hon. member for London West and to all in this House, although I described how beautiful things were in the 1960s and 1970s when those changes were made, there was only one woman in the House of Commons and there were not any really young women and there were no young racialized women. I just want to say what a joy it is to see the number of wonderful young women who have taken their places as MPs here, and I thank the hon. member for London West and promise to keep being as difficult as I possibly can be from my older vantage point.

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for her speech. The member spoke powerfully about the profound injustice that low-income seniors face.

It made me think about some of the incredible organizations in our region. She may be familiar with some of them, including Senior Entitlement Service, Silver Threads service for seniors and James Bay New Horizons. I sat down with the James Bay community project in January; it is supporting seniors who are facing immense challenges with isolation and food insecurity. Staff there spoke about how these challenges are increasing and the inequality is increasing.

These organizations are doing such powerful, incredible work and are working tirelessly to support seniors. Our government could be tackling this and taking the burden off volunteers and service providers. Scarcity, inequality and poverty are all policy choices. They are not elements of the human condition.

Can the member speak more about how pharmacare and a guaranteed livable income would ensure seniors and all community members could live in dignity?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague is from the neighbouring riding of Victoria where she is doing great work.

I would just say that we have to finish the work that started under Lester B. Pearson, Tommy Douglas and David Lewis, and that includes pharmacare. It will save Canada money and it will be better for our economy.

People think that our ridings, Victoria and Saanich—Gulf Islands, are fairly wealthy, but I have seniors living in their cars. I have people for whom I pay their electricity bills so that they do not fall out of their apartment and end up living in a car. We have desperate needs, and Bill C-12 will help, but pharmacare is essential.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The question is on the motion.

• (2355)

[*Translation*]

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I request a recorded division.

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The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Pursuant to an order made earlier today, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, February 16, at the expiry of the time provided for Oral Questions.

[*Translation*]

Accordingly, pursuant to order made earlier today, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 11:55 p.m.)

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