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The Honourable LEO HOUSAKOS,
Acting Speaker

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THE SENATE

Wednesday, March 25, 2020

(Pursuant to rule 3-6(1) the Senate was recalled to sit this date, rather than April 21, 2020, as previously ordered.)

The Senate met at 10 a.m., the Honourable Leo Housakos, Acting Speaker, in the chair.

Prayers.

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

MOTION TO EXTEND TODAY'S SITTING AND AUTHORIZE SENATORS TO SPEAK OR VOTE FROM A SEAT OTHER THAN THEIR ASSIGNED PLACES DURING THE SITTING ADOPTED

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(a), I move:

That, notwithstanding rule 3-4, the sitting continue beyond the ordinary time of adjournment today;

That rule 3-3(1) be suspended today; and

That, notwithstanding rules 6-1 and 9-8(1)(b), senators may speak or vote from a seat other than their assigned places during today's sitting.

Hon. Leo Housakos (The Hon. the Acting Speaker): Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

MOTION APPOINTING ACTING SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE FOR TODAY'S SITTING ADOPTED

Hon. Yuen Pau Woo: Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(j), I move:

That, notwithstanding any provision of the Rules or usual practice, the Honourable Senator Ringuette be Acting Speaker pro tempore for today's sitting.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

THE SENATE

MOTION TO RESOLVE INTO COMMITTEES OF THE WHOLE TO CONSIDER SUBJECT MATTER OF BILL C-13 AND GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ADOPTED

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(j), I move:

That, notwithstanding any provisions of the Rules or usual practice:

1. the Senate resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole at the start of Orders of the Day today to consider the subject matter of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19;
2. the Committee of the Whole on the subject matter of Bill C-13, receive the Honourable Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance, accompanied by one official;
3. the Committee of the Whole on the subject matter of Bill C-13 rise no later than one hour after it begins;
4. the Senate resolve itself into another Committee of the Whole immediately before the calling of Motions under Government Business today in order to consider the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic;
5. the Committee of the Whole on the government's response to the pandemic receive the Honourable Bill Blair, P.C., M.P., Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and the Honourable Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, accompanied by one official each;
6. the Committee of the Whole on the government's response to the pandemic rise no later than one hour and thirty minutes after it begins; and
7. the speaking time provided for in rule 12-32(3)(d) be five minutes for both Committees of the Whole today, including the time for both questions and answers.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE BILL

FIRST READING

The Hon. the Acting Speaker informed the Senate that a message had been received from the House of Commons with Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19.

(Bill read first time.)

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, when shall this bill be read the second time?

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-6(1)(f), I move that the bill be placed on the Orders of the Day for second reading later this day.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(On motion of Senator Harder, bill placed on the Orders of the Day for second reading later this day.)

ORDERS OF THE DAY

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, pursuant to the order of earlier this day, I leave the chair for the Senate to be put into a Committee of the Whole on the subject matter of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19. As has been agreed in discussions, the Honourable Senator Ringuette will chair the committee.

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE BILL

CONSIDERATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

On the Order:

The Senate in Committee of the Whole in order to receive the Honourable Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance, accompanied by one official, respecting the subject matter of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19.

(The sitting of the Senate was suspended and put into Committee of the Whole, the Honourable Pierrette Ringuette in the chair.)

The Chair: Honourable senators, the Senate is resolved into a Committee of the Whole on the subject matter of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19.

Honourable senators, in a Committee of the Whole senators shall address the chair but need not stand. As ordered earlier today, the speaking time is five minutes — including questions and answers. As also ordered by the Senate, the committee will receive the Minister of Finance, and I would invite him to enter, accompanied by his official.

(Pursuant to the Order of the Senate, the Honourable Bill Morneau and his official were escorted to seats in the Senate chamber.)

• (1010)

The Chair: Minister, welcome to the Senate. I would ask you to introduce your official and to make your opening remarks.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance: Honourable senators, thank you for having me here today. We all understand that COVID-19 is a crisis unlike any we have ever faced. The outbreak of the disease is rapidly evolving, and the government's ability to respond must be rapid too. It must be nimble, responsive and, above all, able to take rapid action. We must be able to protect Canadians' health and protect our economy.

The legislation that I tabled in the House of Commons earlier this morning, and which is now before the Senate, will enable the government to do just that. It will help to fund our health care systems, support Canadian workers, support Canadian businesses and stabilize the Canadian economy.

First and foremost, our priority is protecting the health of Canadians. The proposed legislation provides authority to the Minister of Health and myself to requisition funds to support federal efforts to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19.

The legislation also proposes to provide one-time funding of \$500 million through the Canada Health Transfer for provinces and territories to ensure our health care systems can continue to deliver world-class care.

We also know that many Canadians don't have access to benefits when they're sick. They're worried about being able to afford groceries, to afford their rent, to afford medicine. We're proposing the new Canada emergency response benefit. This benefit would provide support for up to 16 weeks for workers who lose their income as a result of COVID-19. The CERB would be a simpler and more accessible combination of the previously announced Emergency Care Benefit and Emergency Support Benefit. This approach supports any Canadians who find themselves in a situation in which they lose all of their income as a result of COVID-19. It supports Canadian businesses by preserving employees so they do not have to be laid off. It's a wage subsidy delivered directly to people.

This includes workers who are still employed but aren't receiving income because of work disruptions related to COVID-19. It will help businesses keep their employees as they navigate these difficult times and make sure they can quickly resume operations when the time is right.

We're also proposing to support families through a temporary \$300 top-up on the Canada Child Benefit for each child, which will be delivered in May. For Canada's 12 million low- and modest-income families, a special top-up will be delivered through the GST credit payment.

We're also proposing a six-month pause on Canada student loans. For seniors, we have reduced the minimum withdrawals from RRIFs by 25%, helping to protect their savings from market volatility. The legislation also proposes a wage subsidy for small organizations on top of the direct wage subsidy to citizens to help them keep Canadians working.

In addition to the subsidy, as I mentioned, the Canada emergency response benefit permits employers to furlough employees that they can't pay, knowing employees will receive money directly from the federal government.

We know that businesses need support to weather the storm and to keep Canadians employed. During this time, businesses may require liquidity. With this legislation, we'd make amendments that will give government the flexibility to help more businesses through the Business Development Bank of Canada and through Export Development Canada. These changes will allow BDC to provide more financial support to Canadian businesses and give EDC the flexibility to deliver financial and credit insurance support to affected Canadian companies.

We're also proposing to strengthen our ability to act through the Canada Account. The Canada Account is an important tool that can support Canadian companies with financing and with guarantees.

We know that financing is crucial right now for businesses across the country. We're proposing to strengthen Farm Credit Canada to support our farmers in the agri-food sector during these times and make sure they have access to financing.

The government is taking action to help the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation increase liquidity in the financial sector by providing stable funding to banks and mortgage lenders to support continued lending to Canadian businesses and individuals. This work is absolutely crucial.

It's our collective responsibility to ensure that the government has the tools to respond quickly to protect Canadians and to protect our economy. I'm asking my honourable colleagues to support this legislation. There can really be no delay. Canadians are counting on us. Thank you.

Senator Plett: Minister, my questions will be succinct, and I hope your answers will be as well so I can get through as many of these as I can in five minutes.

My questions for you concern support for the foundation of Canada's economy, our small- and medium-sized businesses that are suffering enormously at this time.

Regarding the wage subsidy for small businesses, your government is offering a 10% subsidy. The U.K.'s subsidy is 80%; Denmark's is 75%. Our SMEs and business groups, including the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, are calling for a similar level of subsidy from your government. Helping small businesses keep their employees will help us to recover faster when this crisis ends. Small businesses appreciate any help they can get, but 10% is too small to do any good.

Minister, why did you choose this method of supporting small businesses? Can you explain how you arrived at the figure of 10%? Do you still believe 10% is sufficient or are you looking for a further increase?

Mr. Morneau: Senator, this is a fast-moving and dynamic situation. It's obviously unprecedented and I'm going to have to correct you because what you're saying is actually incorrect.

The way that we have decided to move forward on this is we are providing a wage subsidy that's going to go directly to employees. A week ago, as you may recall, we were talking about delivering the benefit through the Employment Insurance system with a separate benefit. We've actually decided that the way we need to move forward is to provide support that will allow us to ensure that people have the capacity to be furloughed from their place of work, exactly as is the case in the United Kingdom. They will be allowed to do that so they can continue to get this benefit. It will be delivered directly from the government, and, on top of that, there will be this 10% subsidy for the workers who continue to be actively at work.

If you take a close look at what's going on in the United Kingdom, you will see our approach is largely similar. I spent time yesterday morning on the phone with the G7 finance ministers, and that was our conclusion.

Separately, if you look at what Denmark is doing, I think you will conclude that, in fact, ours is superior. In Denmark's case, they are only allowing firms that have a significant reduction in revenue to have access to that wage subsidy. What we're proposing is that people who find themselves out of work for any reason related to COVID-19 — that could be for sickness, quarantine, because you're caring for an elderly parent, caring for a child, because they're off work, they don't want to go to work or their employer has asked them to be off work — will get access to this benefit. Workers will not be separated from their place of employment, so that will allow them to come back quickly.

When you do the math — I know this will be coming in a couple of days — I think you will see and I know that small businesses will see that this provides them with significant support.

Of course, there are other areas we're supporting as well, but this is critically important, and we believe what we have done now puts them in a much stronger position.

Senator Plett: It is clear to me, and I hope to you, that this is a bad time to raise taxes on small business. Minister, do you have plans to defer or cancel planned increases to CPP payroll taxes and EI premiums, or the hike in the carbon tax coming on April 1?

Mr. Morneau: We have taken a position that it's quite important for us to enable businesses and individuals to defer the payment of any of their income taxes until August 31. That's a \$55 billion deferral, so that's making sure that \$55 billion that would have come out of the economy is not going to come out of the economy, allowing people to continue to do that.

We have also taken a number of other measures that will support businesses, large and small. The most important, from our perspective, is we know we'll be making sure credit is available to bridge people through this time.

• (1020)

We have not taken any measures off the table. This is an unprecedented time. We continue to work on ensuring that we're supporting businesses. I know that what we've put forward at this stage will help to ensure people can bridge this time. As we don't know either the depth or the duration of the challenge we're facing, we think it's important we have the capacity — and through this legislation we do have the capacity — to continue to react appropriately.

Senator Plett: I'm 15 seconds away so I won't bother starting the next one.

Senator Smith: Welcome, minister. Everything seems to be moving quickly and in a positive way. My question is simple.

According to the government, some of the proposals, such as the COVID-19 emergency care benefit, will be implemented in early April, while increases in GST transfers as well as increases in the Canada Child Benefit are slated to begin in May. The problem is that vulnerable Canadians require financial assistance now.

[Mr. Morneau]

In January 2019, a survey conducted for MNP suggested that 46% of Canadians were \$200 away from being unable to pay their bills and therefore faced insolvency.

Minister, could you explain the reasoning behind the implementation dates for these programs? Did the government review other potentially faster and more efficient means of delivering the programs?

Mr. Morneau: Thanks for the question, senator. There aren't faster ways to get money into Canadians' hands. That is the challenge we are facing in this particular situation. The approach we took — and this was a whole-of-government approach — was that we needed to find a way we could get support for Canadians to them in the most simple, efficient and time-sensitive way.

In looking at the way we can do this, that is how we came to our conclusion. What you are seeing with this new Canada emergency response benefit is a change from where we were last week, because we realized this is the way we can deliver for Canadians most efficiently and in the most time-appropriate manner. It will be delivered both through the Canada Revenue Agency and the Employment Insurance back-end systems, but it will be simplified. It will be simplified so people only have to go online to satisfy some very limited conditions saying that they have had \$5,000 in revenue over the last 12 months and that their income has gone down to zero as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. It's a simple and effective way for us to get money to people. We are working hard to make sure that happens rapidly. We expect that the week of April 6 is our target date. But as we work to have an exact date, we will get it out to Canadians so they can have confidence.

With respect to both the GST low-income credit and the Canada Child Benefit top up, the earliest they can be delivered, from a systems standpoint, is in the month of May. It's not that we didn't want them to happen in the month of April, but the capacity is not there to deliver in that time frame. That's how we got to the time frame of May. Should we find ourselves with the ability to do it more rapidly, which we are working toward on a daily basis, recognizing that no one has ever used the systems in this way, we will move forward more rapidly.

Senator Smith: Recognizing the pressure on the system, do you have the ability to be able to deliver with the volume of requests that have already been proposed by Canadians? With restaurant businesses, I'm very close to it. My son has a restaurant he had to close down. They started closing down over two and a half weeks ago, laying off all their employees. For the small-business person, timing becomes a critical issue. Do you have the capacity within the various departments to be able to deliver the service, especially with the incredible strain that has been put on the system now? What type of confidence do you have in the system to be able to deliver?

Mr. Morneau: Clearly, this is unprecedented. The systems were not built for this sort of stress and strain.

The answer is that we have put forward measures we believe we can deliver under the time frame we said can deliver on. We are working to make sure we can do that.

I want to talk about your son specifically. Your son has a restaurant with a number of employees. He has laid them off. Any of his laid-off employees will be allowed to go into this new program, backdated to March 15, and it is for 16 weeks. That's what they will be applying for. If your son's business is not generating any revenue for him, he will also be able to do that. Unlike the typical way we do these things, he will be able to apply himself. On top of the benefits for his employees and himself, we are working to make sure there is credit available for him during this time.

There will be more we are going to be talking about in the days to come. We are working literally overnight with the banking sector to make sure we can find ways to bridge that gap. Over and above that, we've decided we don't want him or any of his employees paying taxes during this time because that would be inappropriate. All of those things are being delivered. I can tell you that we are also considering other things we can do in order to make sure that when this is over — and we hope and expect it's temporary — he can get his business back up and running in a rapid way. That's what we're trying to achieve.

Senator Dasko: First of all, minister, thank you very much for all of the hard work you have been doing on behalf of Canadians in putting this incredible package together.

Over the past few weeks, we've heard about the impacts of the crisis in economic terms, in terms of job loss, layoffs and consequences for entire industries like tourism, the cultural sector, hospitality, retail and so many other sectors. They have been devastated.

Taking into account the measures that you have put forward, can you give us your analysis of the state of the economy? We've heard talk of recession. I'd like to know your view of the likelihood of recession, how severe you think it might be, what might be the timetable for recovery. I'm looking for your analysis. I know we all hope things will get better and I know it's a fast-moving situation, but your department does these projections. This is what the Department of Finance does. I'd like to get a sense of your analysis, at least of the scenarios going forward.

Mr. Morneau: Thank you, senator. I think we'd all like to know things that we don't know right now. I appreciate that the question is in absolute good faith. We'd like to know that we understand the depth of this challenge. We'd like to know about the duration of this challenge. We'd like to know whether it will come in waves. We don't know any of these things.

When the Federal Reserve in the United States lowered their interest rates just a few days ago, although it feels like a long time ago, they didn't put any financial projection out because they concluded that that would really not be worth doing in this particular situation because they couldn't actually come to an analysis on where they're going.

I spoke to the Ontario Minister of Finance last night. They're delivering their fiscal update today. I can't upstage his update, which is coming today, but he expressed the same sort of challenge in trying to get to those conclusions.

My department is trying to ensure we understand the financial implications of all the measures we're putting forward. That's what we're working hard to do. You saw that announcement last week. There will be another announcement, at least, this week. That will articulate for Canadians what we think we will need to invest in the face of this challenge. It would be wholly inappropriate for me to give you an estimate that is not founded on credible analysis. We do know that we have enormous job loss going on right now. We hope and expect it will be temporary.

As you think about that and about what's going to happen, in particular, to consumer demand over the next period of time — I can't determine exactly that period of time — you can see that we will experience significant decline in economic activity during that period of time. A reasonable expectation is consumer demand will increase once we get past this. That's what regular economic analysis would get you to, but it is fair to say that there's nothing regular about what we're facing. For me to make an argument that we know something that we don't, I'm not going to do that. We're going to be transparent about what we know, what we don't know and deal with the situation as we find it.

• (1030)

[Translation]

Senator Miville-Dechéne: Minister, thank you for being with us today. I'm going to continue in the same vein as my colleague, Senator Smith. Many independent workers, unemployed people, sick people and caregivers are extremely worried about the red tape they're running into when applying for assistance. As you know, a vast number of Canadians have no income at the moment.

I'd like to know what measures you're planning to take. As we know, public service employees are working from home right now, and the computer networks and teleconferencing systems are overwhelmed. What specific measures are you going to take to deal with that? Quebec Premier François Legault mentioned April 6 as the date when benefits would start to be paid out. Is that indeed the case?

Mr. Morneau: Thank you very much. I want to reiterate that we think it is very important to find a simple and effective way to get money to people who are in a difficult situation. We know that it's important to make that happen quickly for people who are sick and for others who have to stay at home, regardless of the reason. That's why we opted for a very simple approach involving just two questions. First, did the person making the claim earn \$5,000 in income over the past year? Second, is that person currently in a situation where they're not receiving any income because of COVID-19? With our system, we believe it will be possible for people to get some money within two or three weeks. That is the situation. I can't be more specific, but I believe it will be around April 6 or the week of April 6.

It is clear that our systems aren't adapted to the situation we find ourselves in. That's why we're working every day to ensure that the systems work given the number of people who are in a difficult situation.

Senator Miville-Dechêne: My second question is about fair treatment for the self-employed. Why should they have to go 14 days with no income when you've done away with the waiting period for unemployed workers? To be clear, self-employed workers are earning no income at all. As everyone knows, their income tends to be irregular because they get big contracts here, small contracts there, or maybe \$20 for a music lesson. Why have you set the bar so high for self-employed workers who are now in a particularly precarious position?

Mr. Morneau: Let me explain our approach. We're talking about everyone who has earned \$5,000 over the past 12 months; so, the vast majority of workers such as freelancers, Uber drivers, and so on would fall into that category. If these individuals no longer have an income because of COVID-19, they will be able to collect benefits as of March 15 for a 16-week period. That's exactly what will be available to other people in our economy who receive employment insurance benefits.

Senator Miville-Dechêne: My question, more specifically, is this: Why 14 days without any income when we know that, under normal circumstances, self-employed workers might have all kinds of different contracts? You're setting the bar very high. These individuals can't have an income of \$20 or \$40 a week if they want to get these benefits.

Mr. Morneau: We're not talking about 14 days. I don't understand the question.

[English]

Senator Miville-Dechêne: They cannot have any revenues for 14 days in one month. That's what I read. If they have any revenues, they will not be able to access the help. That's a really high threshold for those workers, I find, because they have many contracts. They can have a contract going on, which is really small, but may have lost their bigger contract.

The Chair: Senator, we have to turn to another questioner.

Senator Campbell: Thank you for being here today, minister. The government has tasked the Business Development Bank of Canada, the BDC, with executing a significant part of the financial aid to small- and mid-sized business. Given the situation as it is now, is there a danger of the BDC becoming swamped and not being able to respond to all requests in a time frame that will keep businesses from folding?

Mr. Morneau: I would like to respond to the senator. The decision was that it has to be for people who have no revenue. That's a decision we took because that's the way we can administer it.

In fact, senator, the Business Development Bank approach is not suggesting that people need to go to the Business Development Bank of Canada nor to Export Development Canada. In fact, they are standing behind the banks. That means a small business can actually go to its current banker to get a loan. That loan will be supported with a credit facility from Business Development Bank of Canada.

We continue to have the entire capacity of the Canadian banking system as a way for people to come on board. It was the same approach used in 2008-09 when 10,000 small employers actually used this approach to get credit during that time period. We are using an approach that was already in existence, that worked, that used \$11 billion in capital at that time. We believe the most efficient way for us to do this is using the credit availability from the Crown through BDC delivered through our banks. It's broader than just our six large banks. It also includes other smaller banks and Desjardins, for example, so we can continue to have people use their existing banking relationships to deliver the aid.

Senator Campbell: I have a further question. This is not 2008. I believe it's going to be way worse than 2008 by multiples. BDC acts as the backup to the financial community; I understand that. However, I really worry that at some point, they could get overwhelmed with the sheer volume of requests coming down the road. I want to be sure that you're in a position to monitor the capacity and effectiveness of the BDC, and have a plan if they do become swamped. As you said, we are going into an area where we have no previous experience. That's my concern.

Mr. Morneau: Senator, that's a valid concern. We are most definitely in a situation that we have not seen before. Our systems, our approaches to dealing with business on a regular day-to-day basis have not been stressed to deal with an unprecedented challenge. That is exactly the reason we chose what we think is the best way to deliver credit to businesses. We don't think there's any other better approach. We stand ready if there are people who have ideas on ways we can either change that approach or improve it. We will be monitoring it not on a weekly basis but on a daily basis to see what the challenges are. Among the things we are continuing to consider, we're working with the banks to understand their administrative capability to do that.

This situation is going to be a very dynamic one. We need to be thinking about the actual benefits, the scale of the benefits and how they're delivered. That includes everything from benefits directly to employees to loans to businesses. Trust me, should we find we need to change, we will change. One of the reasons that this legislation is intended to give us some capability we wouldn't normally have is because we don't know. We don't pretend to know where we're going to be in the coming days and weeks.

Senator Campbell: Thank you, minister. For what it's worth, I do trust you.

Senator Munson: Thank you, minister, for being here today. It's so important.

• (1040)

I have three quick questions on behalf of my group, the progressive group in the Senate. The first question is submitted by Senator Lillian Dyck from Saskatchewan and it is about the Indigenous people.

A budget of \$305 million is set aside. There is concern because in the H1N1 pandemic the numbers were so high in comparison to other Canadians. Can you explain how \$305 million will be

sufficient to provide protection and treatment for COVID-19 in Indigenous communities? I will go to my second and third questions as we have time.

Mr. Morneau: Thank you. We recognize that the COVID-19 crisis will affect literally all of us in terms of how we're living our lives, and perhaps some of us in more dramatic ways based on our situation, for example, people living on reserve or people who don't have the same access to health care. That is why we allocated special funding to Indigenous peoples. Of course, the funding we've put for the entire country is also funding for every Canadian, which is important for us to consider.

Our ability to continue to deal with this public health crisis, which is in the legislation you're looking at, will allow us to respond appropriately to issues as they arise. This will include the ability for us to deal with challenges, as they emerge, facing Indigenous peoples.

I will tell you that we allocated \$305 million for this right now because we think there are measures we need to take immediately. To the extent there are additional measures we need to take because of emerging situations that cannot be predicted at this time, we will move forward and take those measures.

Senator Munson: Thank you, minister. In terms of EI benefits, many Canadians don't have access to a computer, and in many communities schools and libraries are closed. How do those Canadians apply if there is no way for them to apply online? Where do they go? What do they do? I think there is some desperation in trying to get these forms in quickly. There are many Canadians who don't have this technology.

Mr. Morneau: First, there will be multiple challenges because there are many people who aren't in the EI system, as you know. About 5.7 million of the 19 million Canadian workers aren't in the EI system, so in most cases they have no familiarity with the system at all. That's why we're introducing a very simplified approach, which is critically important for people to be able to receive benefits.

In the case of those individuals being able to go online — and I acknowledge that not everyone will have that capacity, although most Canadians do — they will be able to go online and receive direct deposit. We are working with the banks to increase the number of people who have direct deposit capability. Currently about 70% of Canadians through the CRA system have direct deposit. We are looking now at how we can increase that 70%, and the banks are working on it.

For those who don't have access to online facilities, we acknowledge that there is a bigger challenge. We are moving significant numbers of people from the work they've been doing into the work they will need to do in call centres. We set up a call centre at CRA rapidly. In the EI system, we're moving about 1,300 people to this function. Of course, in the CRA system we have a significant number of people who can respond because we have deferred the tax administration, so there are another thousand people or so.

Those numbers are current as of yesterday. We will certainly have to be nimble and respond to this as we see calls come in that will likely be more significant in number than ever before.

Senator Munson: Thank you. In terms of credit card debt, will the government coordinate with major credit card companies and banks to offer relief to their customers via payment or interest rates during this unprecedented time?

Mr. Morneau: Credit card debt is actually debt from the banks. We have been working with the banks to look at how they can help people during this time. Importantly, we have obtained the banks' agreement on ideas like the ability to skip a payment on credit card debt.

There are three kinds of debt that are in the unsecured category or similar to credit card debt: credit card debt, auto loans and unsecured loans. The banks have developed protocols so that people can skip debt payments. We're working to ensure they communicate that to Canadians. We are also looking at other ways we can be supportive, but that's an important start.

Senator Galvez: Dear minister, amendments in this bill to the Export Development Act allow greater discretion for government to increase liabilities, adjust authorized capital and broaden the type of activities that can be supported by adding a new domestic business mandate to EDC and paving the way to important bailouts.

These packages, as you said, should be economically efficient and protect Canadian workers, not like in the 2008 bailout of the Canadian auto industry that left Canadian taxpayers billions of dollars short of investment money that was never recouped, and without lasting improvement for workers, since factories are still closed 10 years later.

How can Canadians be reassured that these mechanisms will be used to invest in the industries of the future and not in those of the past, and in building a truly sustainable, resilient economy rather than keeping corporate welfare on life support for sunset, high-polluting industries? How can Canadians trust that investment will align with climate action, reconciliation and respect for human rights, since there are no such safeguards in the present law?

Mr. Morneau: Senator, I appreciate your question. The subtext of your question is that we are living in normal times, and we're not. We're in a situation where a significant number of businesses, small and large, will find themselves under extraordinary duress in the coming weeks and months.

Through this legislation, we're seeking the capacity for us, through this time, to support those employees and businesses that, of course, are significant employers across the country. We are not discriminating on the basis of one business being better than another business or one employee being somehow superior to another employee.

We recognize that people are under severe strain and that people, in short order, won't have enough money for groceries. We need to find a way to ensure we get money to them. We need to find a way to ensure that, through this time, we bridge for these businesses so that employment will be there for people when we come back. That's what we're seeking to do.

The situation will be different for the various industries, absolutely. However, I can tell you that in the past days I've spoken to business leaders in various industries, ranging from the airline sector, to the broader tourism sector, to the energy sector, who are in a situation where, if they don't have some sort of credit or some other way for them to deal with their challenges, their businesses will not be able to continue and we will see ourselves with a very different economy going forward.

You can expect that we will work to put people first. You can expect that we will try to protect, in every way we can, the government and the people — who are obviously the most important, Canadians — as we seek to work with businesses to get them through this time.

Through this legislation, we are seeking the opportunity to do that. We know that Canadians will agree with us that this is urgent and important, and it should be without particular bias at this moment, other than a bias to support people through this time.

Senator Galvez: Can you reassure us that you will reflect on how we got to this point and what were the multiple factors in society and in the economy that brought us to this point of high vulnerability, in order that will we not be placed in the same situation in the future and in order that we are prepared for the next crisis?

Mr. Morneau: I do appreciate your question in the sense that everything is not perfect in Canada. However, we enter this particular crisis at a very good starting point, better than most other places in the world that are facing this. We enter it with a strong health care system; a strong banking system, I would argue the best banking system in the world; and in a fiscal position that allows us to invest in dealing with this.

• (1050)

The situation itself is absolutely unprecedented. So asking whether we can be prepared for a situation like this, I think the best we can do is to support our strong institutions that allow us to respond to challenges like this. We're fortunate we have done that. It enables us to respond in a way that I think is appropriate, and we hope that we will come out at the end in order to answer the kinds of questions you're asking about how we can help all Canadians to continue to be successful.

Senator Ngo: Thank you, minister, for coming today. Soon after the COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared a pandemic, the government issued a travel ban and Canadians were urged to take necessary precautions to help contain the spread of the virus. With the conditions changing daily, many Canadians made the necessary and responsible decision to cancel their travel plans. Airlines responded by presenting so-called flex travel options, which offered customers the possibility of deferring travel

instead of a refund. As such, many Canadians chose the lesser of the two evils — reschedule the trip or travel at a later date — rather than risking their lives and health.

Many Canadians during this time need money in their pockets in order to pay bills and buy food and essential supplies. A travel voucher won't do that. What will the government do to make sure that Canadians get a refund, and can the government ensure that Canadians receive a refund from the airlines once they have been bailed out?

Mr. Morneau: Thank you for the question. I'm sure we will face challenges in places that right now we can't expect. One of the challenges most certainly will be around our ability to travel in the near term. There will be a challenge for the airline industries and we will be engaged with them in working to deal with that situation. Obviously, at an individual level, the challenges you're talking about are real.

My focus right now is the urgent need to deliver a benefit to Canadians that will allow them to bridge a time where obviously a huge number of people will be unable to have their normal source of income. That's job one.

Clearly, part of the next step in that job, which is not weeks away but is hours away, is figuring out how we can make sure that businesses have the capacity to be bridged from this into the next step. For small- and medium-sized businesses that is critically urgent. And for some large businesses like the airline businesses where not only are they not getting revenue from bookings; they're actually getting negative revenue because they have to give money back in refunds. So we're working with them. Of course, enabling them to succeed will help us to enable consumers to be dealt with appropriately, and that's what we're working towards right now.

Senator Ngo: Thank you. In addition to the economic pressure being placed on provinces due to the coronavirus pandemic, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador are dealing with the collapse of energy prices, the lowest price in about 20 years.

Minister, you have been talking about stimulus such as cleanup and abandoning oil wells. What exactly will the government do to help these provinces and our energy industry at this exceptional time, and what form will this support take and how fast will it be delivered?

Mr. Morneau: Let me first address the issue. Obviously, the energy sector is in a particularly challenging situation. There are really three things facing that sector as opposed to one enormous thing facing every other Canadian sector. They are facing the combination of the situation right now with OPEC, with Russia and Saudi Arabia not agreeing on a stable oil market; they're facing tumultuous equity markets, which are presenting very big challenges for funding of any sort; and they're facing COVID-19. So the issues are real. The stresses and strains for the provinces you mentioned are real. We've been in daily contact with them to think about how this is impacting the provincial government revenues. We're also in hourly contact with the energy sector to think about how we can bridge the time by providing some sort of appropriate credit opportunities for them. That is work that is going on right now.

I don't have the final answer on the exact hour that will be delivered but I'm not talking about weeks. I'm talking about hours, potentially days, that we can ensure that there are credit facilities for especially the small- and medium-sized firms in that sector. Then the larger sector, the 10 largest companies in the oil and gas sector, most of them have existing credit relationships with their banks, in most cases with available credit. But they are under strain, too, so we're also looking at individual issues in that sector.

Those are all important issues. However, as I've said to others today here in this chamber, our primary focus is on people. We're looking at how we can support businesses, and we'll continue to do so.

Senator Loffreda: Thank you, minister, for being here and putting together a fine aid package along with all the members of the House of Commons, which is much needed at this point in time.

Our banks are healthy and wealthy. You mentioned that. Thank you for making them part of the solution. We've had some fine results on an individual basis deferring mortgage payments for six months. I know that it's on a case-by-case basis, but have we explored similar treatments for small- and medium-sized businesses at this point in time? My concern as a former banker is when we do sit down and look on a case-by-case basis and look at those balance sheets and income statements, in a few months they won't be very healthy and projections won't be very interesting to look at. So have we explored a similar treatment?

Second, have we looked at the BDC maybe guaranteeing some of those distressed loans, direct guarantees? I know you're working with the banks to fund future loans, but it would be interesting to see or elaborate on some of those discussions you've had with our banks. As you know, it's important to get Canadians back to work to have a quick recovery. We don't want unemployment spiking.

Last but not least, have we explored with the BDC, not competing directly with the banks but maybe putting together some programs or forgiving — loan forgiveness is not a good term to use as a banker — but putting together some programs to put an incentive package together to help companies that have retained workers or are hiring workers? Have we explored those avenues with the BDC or explored other avenues to get the BDC to be much more active in supporting our banks?

Mr. Morneau: Those are two separate questions. The first question is in regard to have we been working with the banks in order to consider how they would be able to deliver support to their clients or the organizations that are not currently their clients that might need their support. This work is ongoing right now, and really given the state of those discussions, I'm not at liberty to talk about where we are at them, but I can assure you that we're working to make sure that the availability of credit, the oxygen that businesses need to succeed, will be there.

You've seen us work with the Bank of Canada and the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions to increase liquidity into the banking sector. We have put about \$500 billion of additional liquidity into the banking sector, providing the

opportunity for credit of about \$1.4 trillion versus the \$900 billion we had before this. The issue is now how to ensure that lending capacity is utilized. We are working on that.

With respect to the BDC working directly on approaches that are, from what I understand, non-commercial, we are taking the approach that it's the government working on the non-commercial ideas and the BDC is working to provide the commercial support as that is its mandate, and that includes the development of the backstop for the Business Credit Availability Program, which is the specific idea that we've used for the BDC being engaged in this.

There will be more details on these measures in the coming days. We think that they will provide significant help. As I've mentioned, we will remain open to other ideas to deal with this crisis.

Senator Loffreda: Thank you very much for the response. I think it's crucial to get all Canadians back to work. I thank you for all that you've done.

If we look at what we've done for individuals, the message is clear; they will defer mortgage payments for six months. We also have to send a clear message to our businesses. I've had many questions from former clients, and it's not clear what we're trying to do. That applies to the BDC or the EDC, as well. Messages are not clear. I think we should have a uniform message to our banks saying here, it's a uniform message, this is what we're looking at.

• (1100)

On the individuals, I think it's clearer. We're deferring mortgage payments for six months, we're willing to do so, come and see us, case by case. With the businesses it's not that clear. If we have to focus somewhere, giving them some certainty that once all this is said and done, the banks are there to support us, the BDC will step up, play a bigger role and send a clear message to everybody that we're there to help them. If I were to focus on one thing, this is where I would focus for the upcoming months.

[*Translation*]

Senator Boisvenu: Welcome, minister. Let me start by acknowledging the extraordinary work of our colleagues in the other place in passing this bill to not only help Canadian workers, but also protect Canada's democratic system.

Minister, the majority of financial and tax experts I was listening to this morning were saying that the government's approach of giving money directly to workers to cover their costs was without a doubt the worst approach given the fact that more than one million workers have applied for employment insurance benefits and five million Canadians aren't registered.

Why not take the same approach as other countries like Norway that have supported private businesses and introduced wage subsidies to allow them to retain their workers? The approach you're taking, minister, could create a break in the employer-employee relationship. When the crisis is over, these employers will have a serious recruitment problem. Is it wise to fund millions of workers instead of funding thousands of employers so that they can retain their employees and ensure that the employer-employee relationship is still intact when business resumes? Your approach is breaking the employer-employee relationship.

Mr. Morneau: Thank you for the question. Clearly, we don't agree. Our approach will let us maintain the relationship between businesses and their employees. With our approach, there's no reason for companies to have to separate from their employees. In this way, it's possible to pay money directly to people. That allows us to know that these people have no income, which is very important. At the same time, the measures will help employers by giving them a subsidy.

We believe this approach works. In my opinion, it's preferable to the approach taken by Denmark, where companies have to prove that they're generating less revenue. Our approach of making direct payments is important for people and businesses alike, because businesses can maintain their ties to their employees. That's why we decided to use this new approach, which isn't part of our employment insurance program. This means that, after the crisis, anyone who can use the EI system will be able to do so. However, the measures we're now proposing are different from the employment insurance program in that there's no separation of employer and employee.

Senator Boisvenu: There is something that either I don't understand or you don't understand. I recently spoke to some accountants. Right now, most of the work of accounting offices consists in issuing termination notices so that people can access the government assistance. This means that the employer-employee relationship is severed. I don't quite understand why you are saying that the companies will now be able to maintain the employer-employee relationship when these companies are forced to terminate employees so that they can be eligible for your program.

Mr. Morneau: As a matter of fact, we have changed our approach. If employees are in a situation where they're without income, because their employer isn't paying them, they can receive benefits. A termination of employment isn't necessary. They simply mustn't receive any money from their employer. In that sense, this is a wage subsidy for employers.

[*English*]

Senator Pate: Minister, you and other cabinet ministers have characterized this laudable legislative package as a first step. Unfortunately, we are hearing from many Canadians that there are still many gaps. There are many challenges accessing the benefits, and therefore there are many Canadians who will lack the means to stay home and physically distance themselves and will disproportionately experience the economic consequences of COVID-19.

[Senator Boisvenu]

I am interested in a few things. First, what steps are being taken to examine guaranteed livable basic income as both a long- and short-term measure to address future health crises?

In addition, we know that the human, social, health and economic consequences of this pandemic will disproportionately affect the most marginalized communities.

In order to ensure that upholding constitutionally protected rights is at the centre of Canada's response to COVID-19, will the government establish an oversight committee of human rights experts representative of these communities to provide ongoing advice and feedback regarding the implementation of this legislation and other decisions relating to COVID-19? Similarly, in the event that an emergency is declared pursuant to the Emergencies Act, will the government commit to extending the oversight provisions of the Emergencies Act to the actions taken pursuant to this bill?

Mr. Morneau: To deal with the last question first, I won't speculate on what we might or might not do in a situation that we haven't declared.

With respect to the other parts of your question, the idea that some people are finding it challenging to get the benefit is absolutely true. We announced the benefit yesterday. So we are working right now to make sure that we have the administrative capability to deliver it as rapidly as possible, and that is built on systems that we know have the capacity to work on behalf of Canadians.

From my perspective, what we're trying to achieve is to make sure that we get money to people who are impacted as a result of this crisis. I appreciate that there are people who have ideas on how we could change our system to have guaranteed annual income. I'm sure that debate will continue.

That's not what we're facing here right now. We're not talking about the long-term idea of changing our system. We're talking about the short and immediate issue that in two weeks, in three weeks, people won't have money for food, they won't have money for medicines and they won't have money for rent. That's what we're trying to deliver in the short term. And in the very near term, we have many businesses facing enormous stress.

April 1 is around the corner. Small- and medium-sized businesses will have to pay their rent on April 1. There are significant issues that we need to deal with right now. So we're not going to be dragged into a discussion about how we should restructure our system for the long term. It wouldn't be appropriate to do that right now.

We will, of course, consider your suggestion and other suggestions on how we can have appropriate insights and governance during this time of stress for all Canadians. That's appropriate. We're seeking powers here that are more extensive than we ever thought we would be seeking and that's because of where we're at. We acknowledge that means we need to have appropriate conversations, have appropriate governance and we'll work to do that as well.

The Chair: We have three minutes left in our session.

• (1110)

Senator R. Black: Thank you very much. Regarding the distribution of funds to be allocated by Bill C-13, there is already a system in place that allows for the Canada Revenue Agency to deposit money directly into Canadian taxpayers' bank accounts.

Has the government considered using direct deposit to distribute funds as opposed to sending cheques in the mail or creating some new bureaucratic delivery system? After this crisis is over, there will be many cash-strapped and weary Canadians who will have spent their life savings and EI benefits on rent, groceries and credit card payments. This is not like 2008. How will we increase consumer confidence after this is over?

Mr. Morneau: Those are two important questions. To your first question, I think you heard me reference earlier that we are not trying to send cheques to people. We are trying to use the Canada Revenue Agency system and other systems that we have to do direct deposit. That is fundamental to our approach to how we want to get this done.

My understanding is that right now, about 70% of Canadians have direct deposit through the CRA system. It is one of the reasons why that system is something we've been working on for the last week. The addition of the ability for banks to put more people on direct deposit will be of significant benefit. That is something we are working on as we speak.

Of course, there will be people who will need to get cheques. We're also testing to ensure that process is as short as possible, and I'm assured that is also quite efficient. That is critically important.

With respect to your second question, we need to see this problem and challenge in phases. The phase we're in right now is where we're trying to get things done that are urgent and important. We will need to think about how to get people out of this challenge for more consumer confidence. The idea that we can get consumer confidence right now — while people are asked to stay at home and, by definition, are not really consumers — is not really the right time, but we'll get there.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Honourable senators, the committee has been sitting for one hour. In conformity with the order of the Senate of earlier this day, I am obliged to interrupt proceedings so that the committee can report to the Senate.

Minister, on behalf of all senators, thank you for joining us today to assist us with our work on the bill. I would also like to thank your official.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Honourable senators, is it agreed that the Committee rise and that I report to the Senate that the witnesses have been heard?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, the sitting of the Senate is resumed.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Hon. Pierrette Ringuette (The Hon. the Acting Speaker pro tempore): Honourable senators, the Committee of the Whole, authorized by the Senate to examine the subject matter of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19, reports that it has heard from the said witnesses.

SECOND READING

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate) moved second reading of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19.

[*English*]

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to and bill read second time.)

THIRD READING

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, when shall this bill be read the third time?

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(b), I move that the bill be read the third time now.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: On debate, Senator Harder.

Senator Harder: Thank you, honourable senators, for being here today for this unprecedented sitting and allowing me to move third reading of Bill C-13, An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19.

Thank you as well to the senators and staff working from home today. We are especially grateful as well to our Black Rod, our Clerk, table officers and all the support staff for being here and who are seeing to it that we can do our jobs here in the Senate today.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Senator Harder: I will be brief because there is little time to waste.

Bill C-13 is designed to provide the means for the government to assist Canadians who have been and will be gravely affected by COVID-19. Circumstances have progressed to the point that tens of thousands are or will soon be in precarious financial circumstances. Protecting their health or paying their bills should not be the choice Canadians face. This is a crisis requiring immediate action and coordination across all levels of government and party lines.

After much negotiation, Bill C-13 was passed with unanimous consent in the other place and now requires our approval in order for Canadians, as business owners, individuals, parents and our Indigenous population to access the much-needed assistance to get us through this global pandemic and all of its repercussions.

The changes made, with the input of all parties, include the requirement to get the concurrence from the Minister of Health and a detailed description of expenses that will be allowed, from added appropriations to limit the type of payments to addressing financially distressed provinces and territories, and the inclusion of a sunset clause of December 30, 2020, to any and all measures related to Bill C-13.

The measures of the Bill C-13 are part of the first phase of the COVID-19 economic response plan. It will provide up to \$27 billion in direct support to Canadian workers and businesses, and it will defer \$55 billion in tax revenue for businesses and individuals. It represents over \$500 billion in credit and liquidity support for people in businesses through the cooperation between financial Crown corporations, the Bank of Canada, the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and commercial lenders.

This is a health crisis. As a result, Bill C-13 will provide one-time funding of \$500 million through the Canada Health Transfer for provinces and territories. These funds will be available immediately upon Royal Assent, hopefully this afternoon.

Bill C-13 introduces the Canada emergency care benefit that provides support for up to 16 weeks for those who cannot work because of COVID-19. It is open to everyone, whether or not they qualify for EI.

[Senator Harder]

You will be eligible if you stay home, if you are ill with COVID-19, are quarantined, caring for someone who is sick, laid off or at home without pay to care for your child. Bill C-13 is temporarily waiving the one-week waiting period for those quarantined and those accessing EI sickness benefits.

Further, assistance to individuals and the marginalized includes providing up to \$900 biweekly for up to 15 weeks, including self-employment; allocating \$5 billion to support workers who are not eligible for Employment Insurance; providing \$305 million for distinctions-based Indigenous community support funds to address the immediate needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities; reducing the minimum withdrawals for 2020 for RRIFs by 25%; providing \$157.5 million to support the homeless; providing up to \$50 million to women's shelters and sexual assault centres to help manage or prevent outbreak in facilities; providing a top-up payment through GST of close to \$400 to single individuals and close to \$600 for couples; increasing the Canada Child Benefit by \$300 per month from the May payment; deferring the payment of personal income taxes and corporate income taxes until this fall; and offering a six-month interest-free moratorium on Canada Student Loan payments.

Small- and medium-sized businesses are at the heart of our economy. The measures in Bill C-13 to support business owners include extending the duration of work week agreements from 38 to 76 weeks, providing a subsidy to small- and medium-sized businesses, and reducing remittances of income tax withheld on employees' remuneration. This includes corporations eligible for the small business deduction, not-for-profit organizations and charities.

• (1120)

The Bank of Canada has taken action to ensure liquidity so that financial institutions can continue to extend credit to households and businesses. OSFI has lowered the domestic stability buffer, allowing Canada's large banks to inject \$300 billion of additional lending into the economy.

One of the biggest expenses for Canadians is the mortgage. Canada's three mortgage insurers have committed to providing homeowners with solutions to mitigate temporary financial hardships, including permitting lenders to defer up to six monthly mortgage payments without engaging the mortgage insurer.

Bill C-13 will increase CMHC's legislative limit to guarantee securities and insure mortgages by \$150 billion to \$750 billion. To support CMHC's operations, this bill increases CMHC's authorized capital limit to \$10 billion. This provides additional capital and resources to support the mortgage financing market.

The Business Development Bank of Canada and Export Development Canada are cooperating with private sector lenders to coordinate credit solutions for businesses including the oil and gas, air transport and tourism sectors. The near-term credit available to farmers and the agriculture food sector is increased through Farm Credit Canada.

In closing, I want to thank all of our professional public service who now have the enormous task of implementing the measures we hopefully will pass today.

Honourable colleagues, this global pandemic is wreaking havoc on the economy, industries and freedom of movement in the lives of thousands of Canadians. COVID-19 does not discriminate. Every region is at risk. This is not a partisan issue. This is a human issue. I ask all senators to do what we are mandated to do, support our businesses, support our communities, our regions and our most vulnerable by passing this bill before the sun sets today. More and more, our fellow Canadians will be needing this help by the time the sun comes up tomorrow. We have our role to do. Let's get on with it.

Hon. Donald Neil Plett (Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, as has been said so many times recently, we find ourselves today in unprecedented times.

Our thoughts and prayers are with every Canadian affected by COVID-19, especially the family and friends of Canadians who have died. These are indeed difficult times, but they are most difficult for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of those who are on the front lines of this pandemic. There are simply too many to mention but they include, first and foremost, our public health officials and front-line health care staff working around the clock to keep us healthy and safe. We thank you for your selfless service and pray that your strength would be renewed day by day as you courageously put the welfare of others ahead of your own.

To all those who are working hard behind the scenes to do your part in providing goods and services to your fellow Canadians, we thank you. To those who have stepped up to help your neighbours, the elderly and others in need, we thank you. To the businesses who are working hard to retool or increase production in order to help us through this challenge, we thank you.

And to everyone who has been following the advice of the public health authorities to practise social distancing and social isolation, thank you. Your sacrifice and your compliance is protecting not only your family but also the most vulnerable among us.

Few of us could have imagined where we are today, but here we are. We are in this together, and together with God's help, we will get through it.

Senators, the health and safety of all Canadians is the top priority of every parliamentarian. I know there are many other senators who wanted to be here today, but out of respect for the direction given to all Canadians by the public health authorities,

they agreed not to be present. I want to thank them for doing the responsible thing and putting the interests of Canadians ahead of their own.

Honourable colleagues, last week, the Prime Minister announced an \$82 billion aid package intended to blunt the impact of this pandemic on both our health and our economy. The package includes \$27 billion in direct supports and another \$55 billion to help business liquidity through tax deferrals.

Today, we have that legislation before us. As many have noted, the government's responsibility is to enact measures that will bridge us over to the other side of this crisis. Canadians are in critical need of such a bridge.

The Conservative caucus in the Senate will be supporting the measures that are present before us in this legislation today. But we have serious reservations about how the government is handling this crisis.

Yesterday, the government was preparing to grant itself the power to raise taxes, debt and spending without parliamentary approval until January 1, 2022. Even wartime governments did not have such sweeping powers, and I am pleased that after being taken to task by the Conservative opposition, the government has backed down.

On behalf of all Canadians, we were able to secure the following concessions and I thank our members in the other place for their diligence and hard work until early this morning.

We insisted that the government remove the section that would have allowed them to raise taxes without parliamentary approval, and they agreed. We insisted that the government walk back their unlimited spending powers and that special warrants expire on June 23, 2020, instead September 30, 2020. They agreed.

We insisted that the government include explicit reference to putting taxpayers' rights first. They agreed. We insisted that the government put sunset clauses in their legislation. They agreed. We insisted that the government be accountable to Parliament through regular reports to the House of Commons Health and Finance Committees, and that the Finance Committee has the right to recall Parliament if we identify any abuses. They agreed.

Conservatives called for stronger action to protect our borders and the government responded. We asked about the impact of the border closure on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, and the government made exemptions. We called on the government to stop the flow of illegal border crossers into Canada, particularly at Roxham Road, and the government listened.

We will continue to use all of the tools available to us to hold the government to account, and we will continue to play our role as the official opposition in the Senate, to ask tough questions of the government on behalf of Canadians and put forward constructive solutions to ensure that no one falls through the cracks.

But what continues to concern me is that while the government was prepared to go over the top for itself, their measures to assist Canadians remain less than adequate. That may surprise many of you, coming from a staunch, fiscal Conservative who has railed against the government for five years over its inability to balance the budget. But the reason you balance a budget is to maintain optimum fiscal and economic health in the nation. That way, you prosper in the good times and have what you need to overcome the difficult times, such as we are experiencing now.

I have no interest in scoring political points today. We will be supporting this legislation, but I would be remiss if I did not put my concerns on the public record.

For the past five years, the government has been giddily spraying money in every direction, unconcerned about debt and deficits. Yet now that we are faced with a real crisis that warrants an aggressive financial response, they are being timid.

When I see measures such as a one-time GST rebate, a one-time increase in the Canada Child Benefit, a mere 25% reduction in the mandatory withdrawals required from registered retirement income funds and only a 10% wage subsidy offered to small businesses, I am concerned.

• (1130)

This sounds like the kind of boutique tax credits that are announced just before an election, not the response you expect when the country is facing a looming national emergency.

Why waive the one-week Employment Insurance waiting period openly for those in imposed quarantine? At a time like this, why not waive the waiting period for all applicants?

Why is there only \$50 million in funding for women's shelters and sexual assault centres, which includes funding for facilities in Indigenous communities? How is this going to be adequate on a national basis?

Colleagues, a sweeping crisis such as we are currently facing begs for a sweeping and comprehensive response. Instead, we have proposals that will be administratively intense, will take too long to roll out, will leave too many people to fall through the cracks and will require a superhuman effort to manage the increased demands and inquiries that come with it.

Consider the fact that since the government's announced reforms to Employment Insurance for those impacted by COVID-19, half a million applications were received overnight. The total applications now exceed 1 million. How does the government think it will manage this surge in demand with much of the public service working from home? Instead of putting money into their bank accounts, Canadians are filling out government paperwork and waiting. This concerns me greatly.

We are facing the worst international pandemic of our lifetime. The market has seen some of its biggest losses in 80 years. Businesses across the country are being forced to close their doors, people can't go to work, they don't know how they're going to pay their rent or make their mortgages and this is the best we can do?

Colleagues, I do not claim to have all the answers, but one thing I am certain of is this: If you're building a bridge, the worst possible outcome is to build one that does not reach far enough.

We are supporting the measures that are before us today because they are critically necessary, but I am doubtful that they are adequate. For the sake of all Canadians, I truly hope they are.

God bless Canada.

Hon. Yuen Pau Woo: Honourable senators, the first thing that needs to be said is that there have been more than 25 deaths in Canada due to COVID-19 and families are mourning the loss of their loved ones. Many more are in hospital at various stages of the illness. I know I speak for all of us in sending our sympathies to those who are grieving.

I want to recognize the work of front-line healthcare workers for their tireless efforts in responding to the crisis. They are carrying out their duties under great duress, having to deal with crowded hospitals and clinics, longer shifts, shortages of test kits, beds and equipment, limited supplies of personal protective equipment and, not least, the threat of getting sick themselves.

There are many others going above and beyond the call of duty, not least the folks who put together this bill in very short order and many more who are working on other measures to address the economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis.

The best way to mitigate the economic crisis arising from COVID-19 is to make sure the health crisis is addressed as fully and as quickly as possible. This means directing essential resources to the health care sector and enforcing public health directives, for as long as is needed, to reduce sharply the spread of the virus. If we restart the economy too early, we run the risk of exacerbating the health crisis, which will only lead to a double-dip economic downturn and likely result in even more damage to livelihoods. This is why the key to the success of the current economic package and all other measures that have been put in place is that they are sufficient to tide the economy over for the duration of the health crisis. I support this package and look forward to a vote very soon to pass the bill so that assistance to Canadians and Canadian businesses can flow immediately.

It is unlikely that this package alone will be sufficient to deal with the crisis. It is not that the bill doesn't have the flexibility to extend funds and funding periods; it is that we haven't yet fully embraced all the tools at our disposal to address a crisis that is unlike any we have faced.

In previous financial crises and economic shock, typically due to excessive leverage in one sector, led to so-called contagion effects on other sectors, resulting in a downturn in the economy as a whole. In the current situation, it is not that distress in one troubled sector of the economy is spreading to other parts of the economy. It is, rather, that all sectors are suffering because labour, which is the key factor of production, has to be withdrawn from the economy in order to curb the spread of disease.

The point here, colleagues, is that this is not, in the first instance a financial crisis, and that is good news. Don't get me wrong; the health crisis will quickly turn into a systemic financial crisis if we don't respond appropriately. But we can take some comfort in the fact that before the onset of the health crisis, our country's finances and our financial institutions were strong compared to other countries. We have to take full advantage of that strength to support the economy during this period of suspended production, investment and consumption.

Any economic response package has to address three issues: stemming a decline in economic output; income support; and preserving productive capacity. The bill before us, together with previously announced measures, touches on all three. However, I believe more can be done.

On the question of direct economic stimulus, the government should not hesitate to use its borrowing and spending power on investment projects that produce public goods for Canadians across the country. If businesses are not investing in the future because of uncertainty, the Canadian government should step in and fill that void. We have already seen how the fear of budget deficits resulted in a slower recovery in the global economy and higher unemployment after the financial crisis of 2008. This time around, the economic downturn could be worse, so there is no room for timidity.

Second, on income support, the current approach is to try and target affected individuals using existing tools such as EI and the tax system, with workarounds such as the emergency response benefit that is part of Bill C-13. But the issue is not about workers who qualify or do not qualify for EI, nor is it about those who have to stay at home because of illness or caregiving. The point is that the vast majority of workers should stay home whether or not they are covered by EI and whether or not they are sick. Assistance programs that try to make such distinctions are not only cumbersome administratively, they also run the risk of missing a large swath of affected workers, such as the self-employed who may continue to have some income, but at a much reduced level because of a COVID-19 induced downturn. These individuals are not eligible for support because their income has not been reduced to zero during the 14-day waiting period.

In other words, we should think about the target population for income support as the entire working population, because pretty much the entire working population has been asked to withdraw from economic activity.

If we reframe the problem in this way, there is a case for a temporary guaranteed livable income for all adult Canadians, perhaps as part of a supplementary package of economic measures. Implementing a temporary guaranteed livable income should not be seen as a risky experiment during a time of crisis, as some may be inclined to say. Rather, it should be seen as perhaps the most appropriate means of meeting the goal of income support that is central to any economic recovery package.

• (1140)

Third, on the goal of preventing the loss of productive capacity, Bill C-13 provides some tools for the government to step in and provide direct assistance to specific companies. With

the passing of the bill, it will be important for the government to articulate the case for saving some firms and not others, and the principles behind the specific approach taken for each case.

I support the idea that some key businesses and industries should be rescued, but any bailouts should not privilege senior executives, shareholders and bondholders over workers. If the principal objective is to prevent the business from failing, the best approach is for the government to take a direct stake in that business and to provide the direct and indirect sovereign guarantees that are needed for the business to continue operating at a reduced level of activity until such time as conditions improve and the government's stake can be sold.

One of the biggest challenges for any business will be servicing its debts. The government has already provided relief in terms of delaying business tax, GST payments and the like, with no penalty. Major lenders have also stepped up by allowing deferral of loan repayments, but the interest on these loans continues to accumulate. There is an opportunity now for our well capitalized, well run and highly profitable financial institutions to step up by providing even more relief to borrowers. I challenge them to match the government in waiving interest and principal payments on outstanding loans to businesses for a period of time. This will have the effect of staunching the outflow of cash from many businesses and, to some extent, freezing the business in a state of suspended animation so that it can be brought back to life when conditions improve.

Waiving interest payments for a period of time is the analytical equivalent of laying off workers as a way of slowing the outflow of cash from a business. To the extent that we need to try and keep businesses afloat by reducing labour costs, we should also look at how they can be kept afloat by reducing their debt-servicing costs. If we fail to keep businesses afloat during the health crisis, it will be very difficult to restart the economy when that crisis is over. The result will be that lenders, borrowers, workers, shareholders — all of us — will face an economic situation that is even more dire.

Colleagues, I sincerely hope that this economic rescue bill is the only one we need and that it contains all the measures necessary to stave off a severe economic downturn. But even as we hope for the best, we need to prepare for the worst. That should start as soon as we have passed Bill C-13. Thank you.

Hon. Robert Black: Honourable senators, I would like to begin by echoing the words of my colleagues in this chamber and the other place to thank all those front-line health care workers, cashiers, store clerks, grocery store employees, truck drivers and the many other Canadians putting their own personal health at risk to help all of us get through this pandemic together.

I rise today to speak on Bill C-13 and to join my colleagues in supporting the need for this emergency aid package to help Canadians cope with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

As many of our fellow senators cannot and should not be here today, I will be sharing some of my views and some concerns of my Canadian Senators Group colleagues. I don't need to reiterate the fact that we are in unprecedented times. We all know that. We have all been affected by this virus already, either directly or indirectly. Personally, I have family members who have been laid off and family members are in self-isolation and quarantine because of recent travel.

I've been heartened to see the efforts of so many Canadians to stay at home and avoid contributing to the spread of this virus. However, as we know and as government knows, more needs to be done. Many Canadians are in precarious financial situations, whether they've been laid off, had their hours cut or have had to use their vacation days to stay at home to self-isolate. During this time of crisis, people are still expected to pay their rent or mortgage, handle their other bills and take care of their families, all while worrying that they and their loved ones might fall sick.

This legislation introduces emergency funds to help individual Canadians as well as businesses. It includes measures to increase the GST tax credit, the Canada Child Benefit, a reduction in the minimum withdrawals from RRSPs, as well as income supports to those who suffer income loss, including a new leave of up to 16 weeks for federally regulated employees. It provides several other supports to reduce financial strain on Canadians, including a program for the government to purchase mortgages from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation and providing a pause for interest on student loans.

Canadian businesses will also be helped by this legislation. Small business will be eligible for a temporary wage subsidy. Additionally, it will allow Export Development Canada to develop domestic business, which is important now that our borders are more restricted. The Business Development Bank of Canada Act will also be amended to ensure continued availability of funds for entrepreneurs.

Importantly, the government has designated an additional \$5 billion to the agriculture and agri-food industry to help those who are suffering during this time but must continue working to provide us with food. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we still have to maintain the value chain from producer to consumer. This includes not only farming and processing but also things like meat inspection and much more.

The government is investing further in Farm Credit Canada, through which farmers can obtain loans. While this is good news, I do have some concerns with this, as does my colleague Senator Wallin. These are additional loans to farmers that will need to be paid back. This deferral may cause serious hardship when it's

required to be paid back. Workers in other industries have increased access to Employment Insurance which, rightfully, they do not have to repay, but our farmers will just have to pay their loans back.

I'm hopeful that with the expeditious passing and Royal Assent of this legislation, the financial assistance needed by many will be able to flow quickly. Certain groups will be affected more than others by this crisis, including those with casual and unsustainable employment, families with children and several mouths to feed, young people who are trying to pay off student loans while they also try to save for their first home, and more.

I am pleased to see that their needs were considered in this legislation. I'm optimistic that the measures will alleviate at least some of the pressure they face today. From reacting to concerns in the agriculture sector's immediate need for temporary foreign workers and seasonal agriculture workers to working with all opposition parties in both chambers to get this emergency funding into the hands of those who need it, the government has done a good job during this difficult time. They have reacted and acted quickly during this crisis to the many different issues arising on a daily basis while collaborating with other levels of government and opposition parties and keeping us all informed.

Of course, there are still questions and unknowns ahead of us because, frankly, we don't know what will happen in this unprecedented situation. We do know that, before introducing this in the House of Commons, the government removed measures that would give sweeping powers to ministers. Instead, further legislation might be needed in coming months, depending on how things go.

I understand that the other place has agreed to a negotiated agreement that will enable their Finance and Health Committees to have virtual meetings to provide for parliamentary oversight. The Senate needs to reconstitute similar or all committees today or it risks becoming irrelevant. For food security interests, it might be important that we consider the Agriculture and Forestry Committee to be reconstituted or included in some of those discussions.

I do have some concerns, though, some of which are shared by my colleagues here in the chamber. I worry that this may not be enough to help us weather this health crisis. People and businesses need assistance now. Will the government have the capacity to distribute funds quickly enough to those in need? We have all heard that almost a million applications for Employment Insurance were filed in the past week. Will the government be able to distribute emergency funds fast enough? What about those Canadians living in rural and remote parts of Canada? They already have connectivity issues. Will they be able to access the funds through an already overloaded infrastructure? My CSG colleagues have concerns and questions too, some of which were already asked during the earlier Committee of the Whole. Will the Business Development Bank of Canada be able to keep up with requests before businesses are forced to fold? Is enough being done to protect small- and medium-sized businesses? Will the oil and gas industry be protected? How are we ensuring that people are self-isolating after travelling, and how can we enforce social distancing?

• (1150)

Before closing, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to farmers and others in the agri-food industry and value chain who ensure that we have a continuous supply of food even in these uncertain times. I also want to thank those who are doing their part to help others in whatever way they can.

The most important and effective way to help right now is to stay at home, and if you must go out, practice social distancing.

If you haven't been following the advice of doctors and government, please think about the effects of your actions. Even if you aren't worried about the virus yourself, which you should be, think about people in vulnerable groups, those who are immune-compromised, those who have underlying health conditions and those who are older. Your carelessness could further the spread of this virus.

Colleagues, thank you for listening. Let's remember to look out for each other, be kind to each other and do what we can to keep ourselves and others healthy. We must work together to help flatten the curve. Thank you. *Meegwetch*.

Hon. Jim Munson: Honourable senators, this is a speech I never thought I would have to make in the Senate, but this is our new reality living with COVID-19, the coronavirus.

On behalf of the progressive Senate group, we strongly support the measures being taken by all governments — federal, provincial, territorial, municipal and Indigenous.

We have had questions today of the minister, and that is normal. We have our concerns, and that is normal. We will continue to push for more to be done, and that is also normal. But we live in abnormal times, and in times like these, we must be united as a nation.

The clock is ticking. The numbers continue to rise.

The words of Canada's Chief Public Health Officer resonate with me. Dr. Theresa Tam said a few days ago, "We don't just need to flatten the curve, we need to plank it." That means every Canadian must do their part.

As we are about to pass this crucial piece of legislation, Bill C-13, I am thinking of every Canadian that it will affect. We see the essential workers, like the people working in our grocery and pharmacy stores, our police services, postal workers, custodians, the small-business owners who are worried about their futures. We see you.

We see Canadians working on the front-lines of our health care system, working long hours away from their families while continuing to care for the well-being of strangers, those working in long-term care facilities caring for our most vulnerable citizens. We see you and all that you do.

We see the volunteers delivering food and necessities to their neighbours. We see you, the Canadians staying at home, making sacrifices in our daily routines. We see humanity at its best despite the challenges.

Every action is important. The efforts we put in now will determine the length and outcome of the biggest health care crisis this country and the world has ever seen. So thank you to each Canadian for shining through this time of uncertainty. We know it is not an easy thing to do.

I often speak about the importance of kindness and inclusion, but in times like these, they are so imperative that I need to mention them again. Remember, the smallest action can still have a big impact. I'm thinking about people who already lived more isolated lives before this started, those with physical and cognitive disabilities who rely on volunteers and community groups for their relationships and socializing. We need to reach out to them. They cannot be forgotten. I know our leaders and my fellow Canadians will not let that happen.

I am encouraged to see American Sign Language, ASL, on our news broadcasts during these times. Finally, a real step towards inclusion and fairness for the deaf community. I know the thousands of Canadians who communicate with ASL appreciate being informed in real time.

I also applaud the daily and detailed sharing of information with Canadians through newscasts. It is comforting for Canadians to have predictable and reliable communications. Our journalists are working around the clock to keep us up-to-date and connected. We see your work and we thank you.

I keep hearing that we're all in this together, but together means those who need our love and support more than ever. I talk again about the elderly and those who are ill, those in the intellectual disability community, those with autism, those in the physically disabled community.

Honourable senators, in the Special Olympics, we like to hug a lot. That's hard to do right now, isn't it? But that doesn't stop me or you from sending out a virtual hug now, an online hug, a telephone hug. We have to hold on to each other.

And again, there are so many of you in the medical community on the front-lines, a line that stretches from coast to coast to coast. You are giving hope to others by caring for others. Through food banks, you are feeding others. You are doing it because this is Canada and what we do best is caring for others. We are all finding ways to have courage, and it can be tough.

In closing, everyone has their own story. My father was 8 years old in 1918 when he lived through a new influenza virus. We know the horrific result of that virus. World War I was ending and then there would be the Great Depression, followed by the Second World War. And then in the 1940s and the 1950s, there was the outbreak of polio. Imagine living through all of that.

My father died in 2003. He was 93.

This is where I find my courage.

Today as a nation, as individuals, we're all taking steps to defeat COVID-19. We must walk together, even if it has to be six feet or two metres apart for the next little while.

With that, honourable senators, I urge immediate passing of this historic piece of legislation. Thank you.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to and bill read third time and passed.)

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, pursuant to the order of earlier this day, I leave the chair for the Senate to be put into a Committee of the Whole on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As has been agreed in discussions, the Honourable Senator Ringuette will chair the committee.

[*Translation*]

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CONSIDERATION OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSE IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

On the Order:

The Senate in Committee of the Whole in order to receive the Honourable Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, and the Honourable Bill Blair, P.C., M.P., Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, accompanied by one official each, concerning the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(The sitting of the Senate was suspended and put into Committee of the Whole, the Honourable Pierrette Ringuette in the chair.)

The Chair: Honourable senators, the Senate is resolved into a Committee of the Whole on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Honourable senators, as you know, in a Committee of the Whole senators shall address the chair but need not stand. As ordered earlier today, the speaking time is five minutes — including questions and answers. As also ordered by the Senate, the committee will receive the Minister of Health and the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, each accompanied by one official, and I would invite them to enter, each accompanied by their official.

[Senator Munson]

(Pursuant to the Order of the Senate, the Honourable Patty Hajdu, the Honourable Bill Blair, and their officials, were escorted to seats in the Senate chamber.)

The Chair: Ministers, welcome to the Senate. I would ask you to introduce your officials and to make your opening remarks.

• (1200)

[*English*]

I remind you that we have agreed to five minutes of questions and answers for each senator, and I may have to cut speakers off to respect that order.

Without further ado, minister, please proceed with your observations.

Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health: Thank you very much, honourable senators.

Over the past three months we have seen the world battling a new enemy, a virus we have never seen before, new to our species, and certainly a pandemic the size of which the world has not experienced in over 100 years. Our government has been working alongside federal, provincial and territorial partners, as well as international partners, to prepare Canadians for its impact.

Millions of Canadians have been trying to adapt to the reality of this pandemic in an effort to save lives. Over the past week, we have seen Canada enter its curve; we have seen an increase in cases and, sadly, deaths.

In these unprecedented times, Canadians deserve to know information rapidly, to protect themselves and to prepare for the disease and the changes it is forcing upon our society. That is why, as Minister of Health, I promised early on to tell Canadians the facts and truths as I learn them. The truth is sometimes unsettling, sometimes scary; however, Canadians need all the information, as we learn it, in order to face this global pandemic with the tools they need to protect themselves and to take courageous and difficult action.

[*Translation*]

Before I continue, I'd like to acknowledge the women and men of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Since we saw the first signs of COVID-19 cases earlier this year, they have been working tirelessly to protect Canadians. Their guidance and support help me keep Canadians better informed about the spread of the virus and Canada's response. Together, we are trying to provide Canadians with clear information on how they can protect their own health and what they can do to help protect that of others.

[English]

In only a few short weeks, the terms “self-isolation” and “social distancing” have become part of our everyday lexicon. I am so grateful to see the courage of Canadians following the extremely difficult advice from our public health experts in terms of new ways to connect with each other while still practising social distancing.

Canadians are also following advice about the need to keep physical distance among ourselves at a time when it is completely counterintuitive. These actions, and ones that are easier to follow — such as washing hands, eliminating handshakes, and more — are important and necessary actions.

Provinces and territories have also stepped up measures to contain the spread. They have declared states of emergency and closed schools and other public facilities.

Effective midnight tonight, travellers returning to Canada, with the exception of essential workers, will be subject to a mandatory 14-day isolation under the Quarantine Act. This new measure will provide clarity for those re-entering the country about the need to self-isolate. Individuals who exhibit symptoms upon arrival in Canada are forbidden from using public transit to travel to their places of self-isolation. They will also be forbidden to self-isolate in a place where they will be in contact with vulnerable people. Alternative arrangements for people in these circumstances will be made by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Our government has also quickly turned to the research community, with more than \$52 million invested through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. This funding will support 96 projects across the country, which as we speak are working on countermeasures to COVID-19. This is part of our \$275-million commitment to enhance capacity to explore antivirals, develop vaccines and support clinical trials.

[Translation]

This funding is enabling researchers at universities and hospitals across the country to work on diagnostic tools and potential COVID-19 vaccines. They are also working on strategies to fight misinformation, stigmatization and fear. Their work will improve our understanding of this disease and ensure that our public health interventions are informed by the best available data.

[English]

Since the first cases of COVID-19 were reported, we have worked to increase our capacity to protect the front-line health care workers who are working so hard every day to serve us. We have been working with provinces and territories on collaborative bulk purchases, leveraging Canada’s buying power to secure medical equipment and supplies that are critical to the health care system’s ability to manage COVID-19. This work has been exceedingly difficult, given the global demand and supply chain disruption we have seen as a result of this pandemic.

We have also been working with Canadian businesses to manufacture critical supplies in Canada, as the Prime Minister announced last week. The Public Health Agency of Canada; Health Canada; Innovation, Science and Economic Development; and Public Services and Procurement Canada are working around the clock to secure items such as masks, face shields and isolation gowns from both domestic and international firms.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented public health threat. None of us has experienced an event of this scale before. Canadians are counting on all of us to protect their health and help them navigate this uncertain time. That is why we need to act now, and we need to act together. Thank you.

Hon. Bill Blair, P.C., M.P., Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness: Honourable senators, I am pleased and honoured to have the opportunity to appear before you today alongside my colleague Minister Hajdu. I want to thank all of you for giving us this opportunity to take immediate and decisive action on behalf of all Canadians, who we know will face hardship as a result of COVID-19.

The entire world is dealing with this virus, and Canada’s response is consistent with the best advice we have been receiving from our public health officials and with the science that informs our every action. This continues to be a rapidly evolving global issue and we are required to respond not only on a daily basis but almost hour by hour. From the start, the Government of Canada’s number one priority has been, and will continue to be, the health and safety of all Canadians, and we will continue to adapt in ways that we believe are necessary to keep Canadians safe.

One of the early observations was that many of the infections in Canada were the result of travellers entering our country from infected regions; therefore, we announced a series of enhanced measures to try to control the spread of this illness into Canada. We introduced measures to prevent foreign nationals from flying to Canada. We also significantly enhanced the work at our borders. The Canada Border Services Agency, for example, has increased the number of officers at all major ports of entry and strengthened screening measures at our airports, land, rail and marine entry points. The CBSA has also increased signage, as well as the distribution of educational pamphlets to travellers.

I also note that air carriers flying into Canada are now required to do basic health checks of all travellers before they board their flight. Regardless of how and where they arrive, all travellers are being assessed upon their arrival into Canada. People who are deemed to be symptomatic will be referred directly to the Public Health Agency of Canada for assessment. Thereafter, they are given masks, instructed to self-isolate at home, and are subject to further examination by a quarantine officer.

I take this opportunity to assure all Canadians who are still abroad that the door is always open to them, as they have a right of entry as Canadian citizens, permanent residents or Indigenous peoples. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs has been working tirelessly to assist Canadians to be repatriated from places where they have been abroad, either on vacation or engaged in other activities, and who have found themselves unable to return to Canada due to the termination of international flights.

For all non-symptomatic air travellers, as well as those using any other mode of transportation, we require them to undertake a 14-day period of self-isolation. We believe this will keep them safe, as well as their neighbours and loved ones.

Last week we reached out to our American colleagues and allies and discussed with them additional border measures to control the spread of COVID-19 between our two countries. Together with our American partners, we announced reciprocal measures to restrict the movement of travellers crossing our shared border for nonessential reasons.

What should also be emphasized is that, as a result of the work we did with our allies, we have been able to maintain essential supply lines between our countries so that the goods and services that are vital to the survival and prosperity of Canadians and Americans will continue to flow. We also acknowledged and recognized between our two countries that there are workers, who are essential to our safety and to our health, who live on one side of the border and work on the other. Therefore we implemented significant and important exemptions to allow those workers to get to their place of work and to do the jobs that serve Canadians and Americans.

- (1210)

It was very important to preserve the supply chains to not only get goods and services, food and pharmaceuticals on the shelves when needed, but maintaining those supply chains will also be essential to our ultimate economic recovery that must follow the challenges we currently face.

We also recognize people who take those goods and services back and forth across our borders — the truck drivers and the crew of a plane, train or marine vessel crossing the border — continue to provide essential services, so we have taken measures to protect their health and safety but also to allow that work to continue.

We also recognize the importance of temporary foreign workers in agriculture, agri-food, seafood processing and other key industries. They will be exempt from the air travel restrictions but still be required to take the steps necessary, through 14 days of isolation, to keep themselves and Canadians safe.

Madame Chair, we believe that our efforts so far have been the appropriate ones, have been informed by the best advice of our health professionals to keep Canadians safe and we will continue to implement public safety plans. I am also responsible for a number of our first responders and agencies that provide essential services. We are working with them all to make sure they have adequate business continuity plans in CBSA, in correctional services, the RCMP and in every area of service that we provide.

We know this is a fluid situation and issues are changing rapidly. We are in constant communication with our provincial and territorial counterparts. I speak to them almost on a daily basis and we continue to monitor the effect of this illness and the measures we have taken in each of those jurisdictions. It has been an extraordinarily collaborative effort.

[Mr. Blair]

Although this has been an extremely challenging time, I share with all in this chamber that officials and our front-line workers have responded in a remarkable and heroic way. They are out there continuing to serve Canadians and people are working collaboratively. I know this is an enormous challenge for the country, but it is bringing out the best in Canadians. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, minister. We will move to questions.

Senator Plett: Thank you, ministers, for being here and for taking us through these difficult times. I also want to take a moment to recognize Dr. Tam, who is with us. Thank you for all the work you do.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Senator Plett: My questions in the first round are for the Minister of Health, Minister Hajdu. I need to try to get them all in, so if your answers could be as succinct as possible, I'd appreciate it. I'll try to do the same.

There are many people, minister, who are rightfully concerned about the health care system prior to COVID-19 and that the level of care may be diminishing due to the pandemic. I'll give a brief example of a young woman in Ontario receiving cancer care. The medications she received intravenously now have to be taken orally. Tests to monitor her levels that were previously conducted several times a week have been reduced to once a week. She knows these changes and others are to protect her and her medical team, but it is still a very difficult situation.

I'm certain other Canadians find themselves in similar circumstances, minister. What do you say to patients across Canada with pre-existing conditions who find their normally excellent level of care reduced dramatically? How long will this be their new norm?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you for the question, senator. The first thing I will say is that my heart goes out to all patients who are asked to postpone elective surgeries or procedures that, in some cases, creates a great deal of anxiety or changes to routines. Again, I thank our medical professionals across the country who are working to critically balance the need to make those decisions and reflect on how they reduce their occupancy, in some cases, in hospitals or their particular loads to prepare for what we know is the coming peak in the weeks to come.

This is obviously an unprecedented situation in Canada and although we have a public health system of which we should be incredibly proud, and most Canadians are, it has been stretched for a very long time, as we know, and it is additionally stretched now as we see our cases rising in Canada. This is a time when all Canadians are making sacrifices and I don't hesitate for a moment to know that those are deeply personal and individual and in some cases quite significant.

I thank the woman you are speaking about for her capacity to work with health care providers to find alternative routes to receive her treatment. I anticipate there are thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Canadians in the same situation as our health care system prepares for an onslaught of patients in a way that we have never seen.

Senator Plett: Minister, how will you ensure that Canada has an adequate supply of blood during this crisis? Have you spoken about the blood supply with your provincial counterparts? What happens if we go into a lockdown? Can you assure this chamber that a process will be put in place so the people who want to donate blood can do so safely?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you, senator. We have seen a decline in blood donation during this time, which is why Dr. Tam and I have appealed to Canadians to continue to donate blood. It's very important that people who can and have the capacity to do that continue to do so. Maintaining our blood supply is a critical need in the best of times.

In terms of lockdown, we have to be very careful when we use the word "lockdown" because it can mean various things. In some ways our country is locked down. We are no longer accepting passengers from international destinations. We have a variety of measures across the country, based on which province you live in, which are significantly limiting people's lives. We do those things at the federal level with the balance of trying to protect people's ability to make their way through everyday life and balance the need to increase social distancing, for example. These are not easy decisions, but I think when we use the word "lockdown" it means many things to many people and we have to be careful we're not using it in a way that implies one thing.

Senator Plett: But will we have an adequate supply of blood?

Ms. Hajdu: For that question, I'll turn to Dr. Tam. I know she has been working on this issue.

Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada: I want to reassure Canadians that Canadian Blood Services and Héma-Québec have put in amazingly stringent measures to ensure the safety of blood donors in their clinics. They will pre-screen and they will not let anyone get into those donation clinics if they have symptoms, so it is very safe to donate blood.

We have seen, given the messaging so far, that Canadians are responding. I ask that they all continue to respond in order to keep our blood supply as needed. We are seeing Canadians step up and they just need to keep going. Thank you.

Senator Seidman: Thank you, ministers and Dr. Tam. A report commissioned by the federal government after the SARS crisis found there was no national database tracking cases and weak mechanisms for data sharing with the provinces. During this COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians expect an extraordinary effort to be in place for data collection, transparency and sharing among their governments. Data management and standardization across the country are crucial.

Minister, how centralized is the epidemiologic tracking of cases? Might you please explain how the federal and provincial governments are sharing and communicating their data? Is the federal government leading this highly important process?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. You're absolutely right; data and, in particular, granular data helps us track the disease across our country and determine what measures need to be taken in a more precise way that could actually help us alleviate some of the economic crises we are seeing.

The challenge we have, quite frankly, is that there are varying degrees of data transparency from provinces and territories. Some of that is capacity, and Health Canada has stepped up to offer support, including human resource support, to be embedded within those provinces and territories that are struggling to provide the level of data that helps the Public Health Agency of Canada track and model the disease and determine the best next steps.

I will turn to Dr. Tam, however, because this is an issue she has been working on diligently through her special advisory committee with the chief public health officers of the provinces and territories.

• (1220)

Dr. Tam: Thank you for that question. Absolutely this is one of the most important things we are doing together with the provinces and territories. Every chief medical officer of health is seized with a collection of data. They are sharing everything that they can possibly get as fast as possible. We all know that everyone on the front lines of the public health system is working flat out. It is not for want of trying. You will see the data getting out there even faster.

Chief medical officers across the country have been providing information every day to the public, every case that they've heard about. What we are trying to do though is to collect more detailed information on those cases in order for us to determine if our actions have impacted the epidemic. That is absolutely ongoing and we are accelerating.

Canada is a vast country. We have to look at the epidemiology separately in different locations. The national aggregated data does not give you level of detail as to what's happening in British Columbia, Alberta or Ontario. So you actually have to have subnational data. Provinces are beginning to do that on their own websites as well and we pull it all together. There are different characteristics of outbreaks in different parts of Canada and these are now being described.

Senator Seidman: How is our country dealing with the actual definition of cases given that many stay at home with mild symptoms and are never tested? From an epidemiological vantage, identifying actual cases is an important one for understanding both incidence and spread.

Has Health Canada or the Public Health Agency of Canada looked into how other countries have set up mechanisms of sharing data with their citizens? I believe there are about 10 countries, including South Korea, Singapore, Belgium, Italy and Germany using cellphone data for tracking cases and contacts. Some are more intrusive with personal data but some are aggregated location and movement data for communities. Has Canada considered this approach?

Ms. Hajdu: I'll start and again turn to Dr. Tam for some granular answers to your question.

In terms of comparisons with other countries, absolutely that work is happening. We are looking at comparator countries in terms of what they're doing to both manage the outbreak and also to figure a way, as I often say, out of this. It is challenging. It feels like we've had this problem in Canada for a year, but this virus has only been with us as a species for three months.

Various countries have been using various methods to try to understand their epidemiology and their path out of this situation barring the development of a vaccine or a treatment.

Dr. Tam has been doing an amazing job with her colleagues in terms of accelerating our testing capacity. In fact, the numbers she gave me were almost 20,000 tests yesterday that were conducted. So we are approaching the rate of South Korea's testing.

The Chair: I'm sorry, we have to move to another senator.

Senator Moodie: Minister Hajdu and Dr. Tam, thank you for all the ongoing hard work you have done on behalf of all Canadians.

I'm very concerned about the dangers confronting front-line responders, especially health care workers. Of the 40,000 cases documented of COVID-19 in Spain, 14% of those were medical professionals, doctors and nurses. We are already seeing a large number of individuals testing positive in Canada; 26 in Ontario was a number I saw and 11 in Alberta. Many health care workers are working with inadequate protection or none at all.

We are also hearing from front-line health care workers that they are fearful for their own safety, and there are multiple examples in the press about this. A dozen nurses in Edmonton are refusing to work because of poor Personal Protective Equipment or PPE. There is an online petition led by 62 physicians asking for protective equipment. Yesterday there were approximately 97,000 signatures attached to this petition.

We've heard that physicians and nurses in clinics and medical offices have restricted or no access to PPEs.

Minister, can you provide an update on the specific actions that are being taken, working with the provinces and territories, to ensure that the investment that has already been made or will be made to provide needed Personal Protective Equipment translates into actual access for this equipment for front-line workers who face the dangers on our behalf and who tell us that they are in need and afraid?

Could you also explain to front-line workers how they can access this Personal Protective Equipment that is currently unavailable to them?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. I'll answer that in three parts and then offer the floor to Dr. Tam if we have a moment after that.

First, we work very closely with international, provincial and territorial partners to ensure that the technical guidance that is provided for front-line workers in terms of the specifics of what protective equipment is needed for what procedure is based on science and uses our equipment in the most efficient way to protect the safety of front-line health workers, but also preserve the supply that we have. We know there has been a debate about that technical guidance, particularly among the nurses. I've spoken with the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions President Linda Silas but many of my officials have as well. We continue to have those conversations.

Let me be clear. The science will guide the advice that we provide at the Public Health Agency of Canada. There are equal voices on the physician side that are calling on us to continue to listen to the science so we have enough protective gear that's appropriate for the level of intervention that patients are receiving at the particular time that they are presenting.

There is technical guidance available for other front-line workers. We often talk about health care front-line workers, but let's not forget the essential services being provided in communities across the country, whether that is people in retail stores, grocery stores, pharmacists, people on the front line in homeless shelters. We have provided a variety of different specifications for Personal Protective Equipment and safety processes for a variety of different kinds of front-line workers in addition to health care workers.

In terms of preparing for the surge, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, there has been an all-out effort on behalf of Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada and Innovation, Science and Economic Development to procure what we need in the global market given a very tight global supply chain, but also to make sure we have the capacity to tool up domestic production in some of these areas. We continue to do that work every day around the clock.

Senator Moodie: Minister, you may be aware that in the past 24 hours many hospitals in Toronto have moved ahead to require that their staff wear masks for any clinical encounter, the idea being that there is no difference in the scientific evidence, but the uncertainty of the infectious status of individuals that they're facing and because of the difficulty in maintaining physical distancing in the clinical setting, it offers an added level of protection for their staff. This flies in the face of there are some who have none and there are institutions that are moving to enhance levels of protection.

[*Translation*]

Senator Massicotte: I want to thank you and your officials for your dedication and expertise. I also want to thank the people working so hard to keep us safe. It's incredibly generous of them, and we appreciate it.

I have a general question that I will ask in the hope of getting some reassurance. For the past month, the federal government and the provinces have said almost every day that even though they know the pandemic is spreading and poses a significant threat, the situation is well in hand and we can expect all of our basic needs to be met.

Yesterday, however, I heard the Premier of Quebec blame the federal government for the shortage of ventilators, and I'm worried that things could start to go sour in two to three weeks and the two sides could turn on each other.

Can you assure us that we'll be able to meet all needs? I realize you have a monumental challenge to overcome, but can you confirm that everything will be handled appropriately for Canadians?

• (1230)

[*English*]

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you, senator. I'm sorry, I have to respond in English. My French is too rudimentary for that complicated response. I will say, first of all, we have been working very diligently with all the provinces and territories and as the tension around providing service to Canadians in this extraordinarily difficult time rises, so does the tension amongst politicians around making sure that we have done everything we can for our population.

But let's be perfectly clear. Part of our work right now to flatten the curve is because there are not enough respirators if we were to see the dramatic steep curve that many other countries like Italy have seen. I think we need to be honest about that. We are trying our best to procure more respirators. They will be delivered, as we determine collectively as provinces and territories and the federal government, to the areas that most need them. We do have an agreement with provinces and territories where we would share equipment based on the expression of the disease and the severity of the disease.

Now is not the time for people, whether it's at the individual level, or at the provincial or territorial level, to be hoarding anything. We have to be in the spirit of sharing and generosity so that we can move supplies and people and resources to the areas that most need it.

I know my colleague Dr. Tam is working with the Public Health Officer of the Province of Quebec as well.

Dr. Tam: There are efforts every single day to pull together all the provinces and territories to look at what their needs are. Of course, provinces and territories do have to provide us with estimates of what their needs are. In the area of ventilators, for example, the federal government actually moved ahead to buy some before provinces come up with any estimates as to what their needs might be.

We are examining every single avenue, including some domestic suppliers of ventilators as well. But, of course, our key goal is not to have anyone go on ventilators, and with the numbers, if you modelled some of these outbreaks, there is no way we can actually keep up with that. All of our efforts are to keep the epidemic curve, and the peak of that, below the capacity that Canada has to manage our patients. But we are absolutely focusing on PPE, ventilators and other essential supplies.

Senator Massicotte: Just to make sure, are we maximizing the whole innovation that's going on? For instance, I read there is a company called Cepheid; they have a 45-minute response time for tests, FDA-approved, now being used in the United States. I also see there is an immunity test that is now available, used by many countries, a significant source by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Are we making use of all that new equipment to make sure we become more efficient and more productive?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. Absolutely, we are leveraging innovation and changing regulations as quickly as possible to make sure that we can use innovation both on the testing capacity front but also on the capacity of domestic producers to provide personal safety equipment and things like ventilators. While we do that, though, especially in the production of equipment, we also have to make sure they meet at least minimum specifications, because there is no point in buying a caseload of N95 masks that don't actually protect workers.

As you know, in a time like this, there are hundreds upon thousands of offers that come forward from people to sell us things. Some of them are legitimate, and some of them are people seeking to profit from an extremely tragic situation that's happening around the world. Our procurement officials are working very closely with Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to make sure that what we buy is actually going to be useful for our front-line workers and for the Canadians who will rely on those products.

Senator White: Thanks to the ministers and the officials for being here, particularly Dr. Tam; I think you are a calming voice in a difficult time for many Canadians. I appreciate the work you're doing.

My question is for Minister Blair. The Emergencies Act has never been used in its current form in Canada and, in fact, I think most people refer to the War Measures Act that we saw in 1970. But I think if most people read the legislation, they would realize that the public welfare emergency section actually fits what we're facing today. I could argue back and forth as to why we should have it in place, but more than that, I would like to hear you walk us through the consideration that has been given to enacting, up to now, why we've decided not to and what will be the tipping point.

Mr. Blair: Thank you very much, senator. I'll try to do this quickly. First of all, I agree that the public welfare section, section 8 of the Emergencies Act, is quite appropriate to these circumstances. That act requires that certain conditions be met before the act would actually be invoked. The first, of course, is the presence of an urgent and critical situation of a temporary nature that endangers the lives, health and safety of Canadians.

Certainly these are circumstances that comply with that. But the act also requires that we consider the capacity or authority of provinces to deal with the situation, and it must be deemed to be insufficient or lacking, and we must also conclude that the situation cannot be dealt with effectively under the authority of any other Canadian laws.

Senator, I want to assure you that we are giving daily consideration, and in our consultations with the provinces and territories I canvassed the effectiveness and the adequacy of their emergency legislation and the measures that they are taking. We consult with them on a daily basis as to whether or not there is more that needs to be done.

I want to assure you that our government is in no way reluctant to invoke the measures of the Emergencies Act when it is deemed to be required. It's being evaluated on a daily basis to ensure that if it is required and if the authorities that are contained therein are required in any part of Canada, we are prepared to act. But it must, by the very nature of the act, be done in consultation with the provinces and territories. That consultation is taking place at all levels between our officials, between my counterparts and even between the first ministers and the Prime Minister. This is an ongoing discussion on a nearly daily basis.

Senator White: Thank you very much for that, minister. The RCMP put in place about a decade ago a large reserve unit that hadn't been in place previously, as well as auxiliary constable programs that exist in all provinces except Ontario and Quebec, I believe. Has there been any movement about activating the reservists and also activating the auxiliaries at a higher level than they typically would be used for?

Mr. Blair: Again, this is a rather unusual emergency that we're facing. Normally the police, fire and ambulance are the first implicated of our first responders but, in fact, it has not in these circumstances been the case. Our first responders are actually health professionals. Our focus has been overwhelmingly on supporting their critically important work. But at the same time, we recognize that as this illness progresses in our communities, the work of other first responders will become critical. All of our agencies and departments have reviewed and presented their business continuity plans. The opportunity and the capacity to increase their response has been examined and reviewed.

I've also asked the Commissioner of the RCMP to provide national leadership to other first-responder leadership across the country to ensure there is a coordinated and supported response everywhere. We are looking at every capability and capacity to be ramped up at the time it's needed. There are some unique challenges and, as you know, one of the things the RCMP are often required to do is move people around the country, but the movement of those people actually can aggravate an already difficult situation. So we are looking at ways in which some additional new measures can be implemented that are respectful of the challenges of a pandemic.

Senator White: Thank you very much.

[Editor's Note: Senator White spoke in unidentified language.]

[Mr. Blair]

Senator Munson: I have two questions for the two ministers. Thank you for what you're doing. We know you're trying your best. But a CBC story just this morning said:

Canadians desperate to return home from abroad in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are easily circumventing air travel screening . . .

And they talk about facts in this story.

Minister, China almost flattened the curve. And then people who returned home easily probably circumvented whatever they're trying to do, with people coming back to their country. How can you stop this? What other measures do you have to make sure that the person who gets on that plane is not carrying the disease back to this country?

• (1240)

Mr. Blair: I'll begin and turn to my colleague to speak from the health perspective. We have put a number of measures for international travellers in place. The first line of defence is the air carrier itself. We have issued directions to air carriers who are flying into Canada that they have a duty of care and responsibility to check for symptomatic passengers boarding their planes. Once a symptomatic passenger is on the plane, they can put other people at risk.

It's not merely an issue of asking the questions because we do know overwhelmingly the majority of Canadians are very responsible and conscientious and will tell the truth but some will not. We've asked the airlines and their flight crews to make observations and to identify people who appear to be symptomatic. This is identified to our officials before the plane lands. Those individuals are met right at the gate and separated from the rest of the arriving passengers and directed towards appropriate health interventions. We also require that everyone acknowledge a question. They are asked if they are symptomatic. They have to provide an answer. They are also asked and told to enter into a 14-day period of self-isolation. They have to acknowledge that.

We have officers roving through the areas of the passenger arrival areas to make observations around symptomology and to make references to refer people who are symptomatic into the appropriate health interventions. So we are not conducting health examinations at those sites, but we are screening them on arrival for being symptomatic. We are also giving them direction and instructions on the measures they must take in order to prevent the spread of the illness.

Senator Munson: To the Minister of Health, why aren't we having health examinations? I have travelled in Africa many times, sometimes they will take your temperature as you walk up. This is before any pandemics. I think this is a very serious situation.

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you, senator. First of all, let me say this is a very sneaky virus. I mean, the challenge with the virus is that it can present as very mild without a temperature at all. The variety of symptomology depends on the individual and it is extremely difficult to detect illness. Sometimes people have such mild symptoms that they may not even know they have the illness.

That has been the challenge with this virus from the very beginning. The best evidence we have is, in fact, drawn from the time of SARS, where some of you may remember there was a use of thermometers at the border. Not one case was detected using that technology.

How we use our resources in a time like this is critical. Of course we have Public Health Agency quarantine officers at all of the airports. We've tripled up on staff to support CBSA. When CBSA staff identify someone with symptoms, those people are isolated from other travellers, asked additional questions, funnelled to public health if necessary. That work is happening.

We are obviously concerned about people coming back to Canada who are not taking this seriously, the need to quarantine for 14 days, the need to stay in isolation for 14 days. That is why as of midnight tonight that will be mandatory for all returning travellers.

This is especially true for people coming from countries that have minimized the issue of this virus. We know many people are coming from winter homes, for example, that may have been hearing different kinds of news around the severity of this illness and are not taking this seriously. As of tonight it will be mandatory for anyone returning to the country to isolate for 14 days under the Quarantine Act. They are also not to isolate in the same home where there is a vulnerable individual and not to take public transportation to get to that place. The Public Health Agency of Canada will be supporting people who are in the circumstance of not having a place to stay and/or not having transportation that is private.

We need Canadians who are returning to this country to take this seriously. Even if they are asymptomatic when they get off the plane, it is extremely important that Canadians understand for the safety of their families and communities that they take the public health advice and now requirement to stay at home for 14 days. That means not visiting friends and family.

[Translation]

Senator Pettigrew: Thank you for being here with us today. We really appreciate it.

My question is for the Minister of Health, Ms. Hajdu, and has to do with mental health care services for Canadians.

[English]

I think we all realize that we have this health urgency, but I do have some concern when it comes to mental health services. Is there a plan for people to have access — more readily maybe — to help with mental health issues. It is also very stressful. Some people experience stress, fear and anxiety because they face many unknown factors in their future. Along with that we have those who currently experience mental health issues.

Is there a plan and a strategy in terms of help? In this case, maybe more services, help lines, maybe more funding for non-profit groups to assist. I would appreciate if you could expand on what we have for a plan.

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. That is part of why we are debating this piece of legislation today, to help alleviate some of the fear and anxiety that Canadians are having from a variety of different perspectives. Of course the fear of contracting the virus or the impact it might have on their own health and safety is one thing, but also people have an incredible amount of fear around the loss of their income, how long they will be asked to self-isolate. These are all very difficult questions to answer. Even in this extraordinary time, we see countries around the world trying to answer those questions and sometimes there aren't easy answers.

I'm glad you have acknowledged the incredible burden on Canadians in terms of their mental health, and it is something that preoccupies me. As I go to bed at night, I worry about the children who are in homes that are struggling. I worry about the people with substance use disorders who are now isolated and not able to get out to receive the treatment they need. I worry about people who are already living with significant mental illness who are having their situation exacerbated. There are a number of things that we are doing, including working with not-for-profit organizations. The Minister of Gender Equality is working on supports for organizations that work with families, that work with women at risk of domestic violence, gender-based violence.

In the days to come we are launching a virtual mental health tool that Canadians will be able to access for free that will help them at least be able to learn some skills that could help reduce their anxiety and their fear. This is all hands on deck. This is why I call on Canadians also to be kind to one another. This is a time where governments will not solve all of this. It will be Canadians who work together who support each other, who listen to each other, who are kind to one another, who don't stigmatize communities and who understand that everyone in their own circumstance is trying their absolute best to make sense of this and we're all going to need a hand to get through it.

Your question is an extremely important one. The longer that we see social distancing going on, the more severe the challenges we'll have in terms of people's mental health and personal outcomes related to mental health and stress. It's going to be on all of us as Canadians to make sure that we continue to reach out to people, especially those people who often have no one in their lives.

[Translation]

Senator Dalphond: Thank you to the ministers for being here. My question is for the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

[English]

Minister, more and more Canadians are concerned about the situation in the U.S. where there seems to be a hesitation between the types of policies to be put in place versus the policies we are strongly putting in place. In Quebec especially, where I am from, we have a large border with the state of New York where the situation, the pandemic, is alarming. We are concerned about two issues and I would like you to address these two issues. First, we need the supply chain to be unbroken. What kind of confidence do we have in the supply chain especially if the pandemic goes on without control on the U.S. side of the supply chain?

The second question I have for you is what measures are we taking to make sure that the supply chain doesn't become a link to infect more Canadians and spread the illness in Canada? We like the drivers to go as fast as possible through the border, but I guess we would like them to be healthy when they go across the border.

Mr. Blair: Thank you, senator. I agree that the questions you ask are very important and were front of mind in our planning and implementation of the measures we have taken to restrict the movement across our border of nonessential travel.

• (1250)

That's an important distinction that we've put in place. It is having a significant impact. In comparing year-over-year data, we've seen an 80% decrease in U.S. air travellers coming to Canada. On our land travel, we have seen about a 71% decline in highway volume which is quite significant.

At the same time, I can assure you we're monitoring daily. Although there has been some reduction in the number of tractor trailers crossing back and forth across our border, that reduction is almost entirely the result of plants that are shutting down because their workers aren't able to get to their nonessential work.

We are monitoring carefully all aspects of critical infrastructure to make sure that it can be maintained. That includes our supply chains, our transportation, utilities across the country, health services and safety services. All aspects of critical infrastructure are being monitored very carefully. I am confident at this point that we have been able to maintain those supply chains.

I can also tell you, senator, that for those individuals who are driving those trucks or operating those trains and bringing those goods back and forth across the border, we have exempted them from the requirement of the 14-day mandatory period of quarantine, but we are taking steps to ensure that they remain healthy in their essential work of delivering those goods back and forth to our border. We have given them information and are working closely with their association to ensure that they are rigorously self-monitoring, practising appropriate hygiene techniques and have the opportunity to engage in the important activity of social distancing to keep them safe. Should they become symptomatic, they will be immediately removed from that activity. It will be closely monitored.

It remains a challenge to maintain those supply lines, but we are monitoring on a daily basis, senator. I can tell you that truck traffic is moving very freely and readily across our border. Those chains are being maintained.

Senator Dalphond: Is it a self-declaratory system? Does the truck driver stop at the border and say that he doesn't feel bad? Is there some testing or follow-up?

Mr. Blair: There are inquiries made of them. First, they must have the appropriate documents to cross the border and be identified as an essential worker. We are providing them with health information with respect to identifying symptoms and

other measures that they can take to be safe. They are subject to rigorous screening by our border officials, but they are allowed to come across to do the essential work that they still need to do.

Senator Housakos: Welcome, ministers. Like many Canadians, we are very concerned that we appear to be behind rather than ahead of the curve. It seemed to be that way from the start. There were questions of why we didn't impose travel restrictions quicker and why there were not better screening processes at the airports and at our borders.

We can't look back now. We cannot change things, of course. We made the same mistakes that many other countries have made, and we're dealing with an unprecedented circumstance. But if we're going to flatten this curve, we have to look at the next catastrophe that is around the corner.

To be honest with you, ministers, as parliamentarians, we should all be very concerned. One of my colleagues earlier talked about what's going on, on the ground, with health care providers. I speak with first-hand knowledge because my wife is one of those providers who has been putting in 15-hour days for the last 15 days, non-stop. Her staff is stressed. This is a question that comes directly from her. On the front lines, at the hospitals in our province, they don't have adequate infrastructure safety for their employees from booths to triage centres. Just basic infrastructure. Construction required to deal with this particular virus. They don't have adequate amounts of masks. They don't have adequate amounts of gowns. They don't have adequate numbers of ventilators for what's coming around the corner, as we watch some of the countries that have been hit with this.

We don't have an adequate number of test kits. That's why we're also in a situation where we don't have quite a good sense of what the numbers are, in terms of the spread of the virus and what areas and the rest of it.

If we look ahead of the curve and what's coming up next based on other countries, the numbers are growing now exponentially. The government confirmed that we have a little over 5,000 ventilators. What happens in a few weeks if over 10,000 Canadians are hospitalized? Hospital workers like my wife will have to start deciding who dies and who lives and who gets a ventilator and who gets intubated. We would feel more assured if we had more than, "We are looking into it," and "We're doing an assessment with the provinces."

In 2008, our Senate National Security and Defence Committee issued a report on emergency preparedness. They looked at emergency reserves, specifically Health Canada's national emergency stockpile system. Back then, the stockpile consisted of eight warehouses, 1,300 supply reserves, strategically placed throughout the country. There are 165 field hospitals, 200 beds in each, which could be deployed on a 24-hour notice. Can you also tell us what is in those supplies and if they are ready to go? Are they up to date? Have we given serious consideration as well to getting the military engaged in this, in providing the infrastructure support to our health care system, which was cracking across this country before the coronavirus? We were already at our maximum. Have we given consideration to utilizing our Armed Forces to bring in and set up triage centres, makeshift hospitals, to provide the beds, provide them with test

kits, provide them with ventilators, equipment and support in case the numbers get out of hand in Canada as they have in Italy and other countries? Thank you, ministers.

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. First, I want to thank Dr. Tam and the Public Health Agency of Canada for their incredible work in guiding us through this very difficult time and helping us make decisions that are extremely difficult to make.

I disagree with your assessment that we are not ahead of other countries. Of course, other countries have different systems of governance that allow them to take more stringent measures, but certainly, as a democracy and using science and evidence, I am very confident in the leadership of Dr. Tam and the Public Health Agency of Canada to deal with the situation the best that we possibly can.

In terms of a surge, no country is prepared for the kind of surge that this pandemic is presenting, which is why the globe is in the crisis that it is, which is why, no matter which country you are in, you have seen health care systems struggle to meet the needs and the demands of sick individuals and, in particular, critically sick individuals. That is why we're working so hard right now to flatten that curve. We know that's actually our best chance. Our best chance is actually to prevent people from getting so significantly ill all at the same time. We hope to spread out the contraction of this illness by Canadians over a longer period of time. That is not to say that fewer people will be ill. What it means is they won't all be ill at one time, which will help alleviate the burden on health care professionals, such as your wife and many others all across the country who are understandably alarmed, who are understandably under an overwhelming amount of pressure as they try to prepare their hospitals and prepare these systems that have never actually been designed for the kind of surge that we may see as a country and that other countries have seen.

[Translation]

Senator Boisvenu: I welcome our guests. My question is for Minister Blair and it is twofold. What is the current situation with regard to the spread of the virus in Canadian prisons? Have many people been infected? What are you doing to protect correctional officers, who do such extraordinary work? We know that your government has not always listened to them in the past. How are you going to protect our correctional officers working in prisons?

[English]

Mr. Blair: Thank you very much, senator. As of this morning, there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in any of our correctional institutions. We're continuing to plan with public health authorities. Contingency plans are in place in all of our institutions.

We've also been providing training to our officers. We are ensuring that the inventories of Personal Protection Equipment are adequate for the challenges we may face.

Senator, I share your concern. The prison population, by virtue of their incarceration, is a particularly vulnerable group. Ongoing discussions are being held with our Correctional Service Canada officials and also with the unions representing their workers to

ensure that they are receiving the support they need to do their important job. At the same time, we are also very concerned about the safety of the prison population. Steps are being taken. For example, Correctional Service Canada, several days ago, stopped all visits to the prisons. We placed restrictions on the movement and transfer of prisoners between institutions.

• (1300)

There are a number of significant steps being taken within the institutions to reduce the likelihood that the illness could be brought into the institution. We are preparing. As I'm sure you're aware, in those institutions there are health facilities. They have well-established procedures for the containment of other illnesses and viruses that come into the prison system because it is a significant challenge they face on a regular basis. As the Minister of Health has indicated, this is a sneaky virus. It's far more insidious and far more difficult to contain and so we have been taking very significant steps.

I've also asked the commissioner of Correctional Service Canada and the chair of the Parole Board of Canada to examine methods and opportunities to reduce the number of people who would be potentially exposed to this virus, to see if there are measures that could be taken to facilitate for non-dangerous offenders' early release, for example. There are a number of things being examined to address the fairly significant risk in our correctional institutions.

[Translation]

Senator Boisvenu: I have another question. Why did you decide to temporarily close the crossing at Roxham Road? Most Canadians would like to see it closed permanently.

[English]

Mr. Blair: We have had a long-standing relationship with the Province of Quebec that provides temporary shelter to those who cross our borders regularly and seek to make an application for asylum. We have been advised by the Province of Quebec that the 14-day self-isolation of those individuals presented a very significant challenge.

We are in discussion with other agencies and organizations responsible for refugees. For example, the UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration all undertook a temporary suspension of refugee resettlement. For those already in the queue, IRCC stepped forward and arranged for appropriate accommodation for those who are already in the system to be housed in a situation that was appropriate for a 14-day isolation period.

We worked with our counterparts in the United States. On the basis of the temporary restriction that is currently in place between our two countries for non-essential travel, we agreed to have a process of directing back individuals. It has had a very significant effect almost immediately. One individual was turned back from Canada to the United States and one individual was turned back from the United States to Canada. What we've seen by the implementation of this temporary measure is that it has had the effect of discouraging individuals from coming.

Our rationale for doing it at this time was because, while we are dealing with the many challenges of containing this illness and placing appropriate restrictions on the movement of people across the Canada-U.S. border, we believed this was the right thing to do at this time.

Senator Campbell: My question is to the Minister of Health. We had a brief discussion about mental health and isolation and the necessity to take care of ourselves. The question I have may not seem that deep. How do people get outside to exercise or just walk around safely? Is that possible? If it is, how do we advise Canadians to do that?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you, senator. It is an area where there has been confusion. We're providing additional advice on our website. I think it will be updated today to address some of the confusion that is out there.

The best advice from a health perspective is to get outside for fresh air if you are not ill. It is extremely important that if you are exhibiting symptoms, even if you haven't been diagnosed with COVID-19 that you remain in your house and remain isolated until such time that you are tested or that you are no longer ill based on advice you are getting from public health. But if you are not symptomatic and are feeling well, we encourage people to get outside and take a walk.

Someone told me yesterday a great analogy that six feet is the length of a hockey stick. Most Canadians know intuitively how long a hockey stick is. That's the distance you should be keeping between you and someone you're walking with. Of course family members can walk closer if you are both asymptomatic and living together. If you are walking with a friend, keep the distance of six feet between yourselves and with people passing by on the street. Use the hockey stick analogy and keep six feet between themselves and people passing by.

The fresh air is actually good for you. It is also a way to alleviate boredom and anxiety and helps with mental health and the challenges people are facing in this extremely anxious and fearful time. We will continue to provide public health guidance on how to do so in a safe way. I appreciate the question. It is one on the minds of many Canadians. Thank you, senator.

Senator Campbell: Thank you, minister.

Senator Ngo: My question is for the Minister of Health. With COVID-19 spreading at an alarming rate, we know this unprecedented situation could last months. As we speak, some parts of Asia are facing a second wave.

Dr. Tam said last week that Canada should prepare for another wave. As of today, how many months is the government anticipating this situation to last? Are we prepared to take measures for a second wave?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you, senator. I think that's the burning question on every Canadian's mind, in fact, every global citizen's mind. How do we get out of the situation that we find ourselves in as a world?

For example Wuhan, the city at the forefront of the outbreak, is now starting to relax some of its measures around isolation and restricting services and is taking slow steps to restart their economy and the everyday lives of its citizens. But it is difficult because we don't know until we know whether there is a vaccine or whether there is a treatment or how the science is developing around immunity. There are interesting things happening with all kinds of testing. Obviously we are using testing right now to determine people's illness, but there is also research happening in the area of serology to determine how many people have been exposed and the level of immunity they might have.

I remind honourable senators that this virus has been with us for three months, and science is hard. Science takes time. Science takes some level of certainty. I want to thank all the researchers and scientists globally who are working flat out, including Canadian scientists who are at the front of this effort for doing their absolute best to help us have some of these answers so we can answer your questions, senator. Right now, we don't have the answer.

I will be presenting later today to cabinet some of our most hopeful scenarios. They are not necessarily what Canadians would like to hear. Dr. Tam has been very clear and so have I. This is not a matter of a couple of weeks. We're talking, as you pointed out, a couple of months. I think the entire world is looking for a solution to help us all get out of this situation much more quickly, but we will need to rely on our scientists and researchers to help us do so safely.

Senator Ngo: How about the second wave? Are we prepared for that?

Ms. Hajdu: Senator, right now we are preparing for the first wave. It's hard for me to say we are prepared for a second wave given the enormous effort we are taking to prepare for the first wave that is actually upon us. We will have more information for the second wave. What we can hope for as Canadians and global citizens is that the research and science will actually prove to present an antidote, for example, that can lessen the severity of the illness for those most vulnerable to severe outcomes, including death, and for a vaccine that can provide immunity to citizens.

Senator Ngo: For Minister Blair, we closed the border to foreign nations as of March 18. On March 9, Israel already closed and imposed a mandatory quarantine for all incoming travellers. It's mandatory; it's not voluntary. Why didn't we take that action sooner rather than later?

Mr. Blair: Thank you, senator. I would point out that we actually implemented our first enhanced screening measures at our four international airports on January 22. We began screening all travellers coming from the infected region in Wuhan, China. We expanded that throughout early February. We have been responding to an evolving situation but also following the advice of the World Health Organization and our very capable public health officials here in Canada to implement measures as and when they were required.

• (1310)

Senator Cotter: I had intended to ask a question of Minister Hajdu on behalf of my colleague Senator Boyer, but your answer to Senator Moodie's question about front-line health care workers was so extensive, including, quite frankly, your answer to my preamble that I hadn't even asked, that I would like to take the opportunity on behalf of my colleague Senator Pate and myself to pose a question to Minister Blair. It is the other side of the coin to which you answered, to some degree, Senator Boisvenu's question about the circumstances in our prisons.

Many Canadian prison-based medical professionals have expressed concern about the risks inside prisons for inmate populations. Our attack on this virus has been to try to address the circumstances of vulnerable people, particularly those in close quarters. Minister Blair, many people have been sentenced to our prisons and jails for anti-social behaviour and they've been sentenced to incarceration, but they weren't sentenced to the risk of serious illness and potentially death. I think they would constitute one of our most vulnerable populations. Often, their health circumstances put them at some risk as well.

You noted to some extent your interest in dialogue with the Parole Board and others. There is a series of tools available to you and your provincial counterparts to address these kinds of circumstances. Parole is one; prerogative of mercy is another; early release for prisoners is another; and strategies to address prisoners who are held on remand, who are particularly vulnerable because they are not actually guilty of any offence in those circumstances.

I'm interested in what dialogue you have had with your colleagues, the degree to which efforts have actually been activated to reduce the numbers of inmate populations in our federal prisons and correctional centres, and whether you have numbers for those achievements to date.

Mr. Blair: Unfortunately, senator, I do not. But I can tell you some of the steps that have been taken.

I had a meeting yesterday with the head of Corrections and the head of the Parole Board. I've asked them to explore all of the options and authorities that are available so that we might take the appropriate measures to reduce the incidence of people who would be in that vulnerable situation in our prison systems.

I can also share with you that there have been discussions with all of our provincial and territorial counterparts about the remand populations. The movement of people to and from the institutions poses a particular risk because that's often how the illness is brought in.

Our correctional institutions federally do have very extensive procedures for lockdown in these cases. For example, currently, the Bowden Institution is on partial lockdown for influenza. Now, the testing has been done in that case and it is not a COVID-19 illness, but the flu is in those places. Protocols are in place to deal with those individuals.

I want to assure you that we recognize the vulnerability of this population. Steps have been taken within the institutions themselves to reduce the likelihood of the illness coming in, and to protect the inmate population and the people who work with them in those institutions.

At the same time, we also have plans in place to deal with circumstances where that illness may get into that institution. One of the things we are strongly considering at this point in time are the ways in which we can remove people from that vulnerable situation. It's a work in progress.

Senator Cotter: And what is the degree to which a reduction in those populations among not-at-risk prisoners has been achieved?

Mr. Blair: Again, I know there has been some acceleration on early release on a number of the provisions, but we're examining those authorities and the appropriateness of those steps at this time. Public safety does remain a priority in these decisions, but it is equally matched by our concern for the safety of the individuals in the prison system, and we will take the steps necessary to do everything we can to keep them safe.

Senator Smith: Welcome, ministers and Dr. Tam. On behalf of Senator Marshall from Newfoundland, who can't be with us today, she asked me to pose this question.

There have been numerous articles regarding the backlog in testing for COVID-19. There is also the concern, as we stated, regarding testing kits and facing shortages in the number of people who are able to administer tests, interpret and communicate the results of patients.

By temporarily reducing the regulatory burden around diagnostic testing, scientists outside the public health system could be able to contribute their skills and other resources while under the supervision of public health.

Minister, has the government considered expanding the range and possibility of temporarily broadening the scope of COVID-19 testing in order to allow scientists outside the public health system to contribute their resources?

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. I will speak to the last question first and then turn to Dr. Tam to talk a bit about the testing strategy. Of course, there are many articles, many armchair epidemiologists and many armchair virologists these days, and it would be great to hear from Dr. Tam on Canada's testing strategy.

I will say, yes, we have managed to accelerate and remove regulatory barriers to new and innovative test kits. In fact, Health Canada has been working with manufacturers to enable market access for commercial diagnostic devices. On March 13, Health Canada received two applications for diagnostic devices, one from Roche Diagnostics and one from Thermo Fisher Scientific. These applications have received expedited review and are now approved for access by health care professionals through our special access program. We are working with a variety of other companies to do that and to ramp up our capacity to use testing kits from a variety of different sources.

If we do have time, I think it would be appropriate to turn to Dr. Tam to talk about Canada's testing capacity and strategy.

Dr. Tam: I think that capacity is ramping up almost on a daily basis. Up to today — the number keeps increasing — we've tested over 142,000 people. A lot of people are asking if that is enough, and why can't we be like South Korea? In fact, we are one country that has tested more per capita than so many in the world. We are probably about the third highest in testing numbers per capita in the world, just behind a few countries that, quite frankly, had different circumstances. Italy is a bit ahead of us, but they have a massive issue. South Korea had a massive outbreak, hence they stepped up the testing. Canada has been testing ever since we heard about the actual outbreak and have acquired the technology really fast.

One strength of the Canadian system is that we decentralized the testing very fast from the Winnipeg lab to the provincial labs. Our aspiration is to decentralize even more with these rapid regulatory reviews so these tests can be made available. Our Winnipeg lab is helping with quality assurance. You want that test to actually detect the virus.

All of that is happening at the same time as ramping up getting supplies such as swabs and reagents. All of that is happening right now.

In addition, I work with the chief medical officers and all the public health laboratory directors to come up with guidance. You want to test the right people in the right place at the right time. You don't want to waste lab testing on people who perhaps don't need it. Persons who are in correctional facilities and the staff are one of the priorities, for example. Health care workers, long-term care facilities — absolutely, we have to test all of those people, regardless of travel, using our community testing methods.

All of that is going on right now, and our strategy is evolving as we speak. Given that the whole world is trying to deal with escalation, I think we are trying one of the hardest.

[*Translation*]

Senator Cormier: Thank you for being here, ministers.

[*English*]

My questions were for the Finance Minister, but please allow me to ask them to you since we all know that the arts and culture sector is crucial to maintaining healthy and secure communities.

[Ms. Hajdu]

• (1320)

Those working in this sector are being hit hard by this pandemic with the closing of all venues. A feature of the cultural industry is that it relies primarily on self-employed workers, contract workers and freelancers, whose work is often sporadic or project-based in not-for-profit organizations.

Given the eligibility criteria for income support payments set out in Part 2 of the bill we just adopted, can you confirm whether these workers, who are particularly vulnerable, will benefit from this assistance? And in light of the ongoing nature of the crisis, is your government contemplating an emergency fund to support these workers for the duration of the shutdown of artistic and cultural activities in Canada?

Mr. Blair: I'll do my best to answer that. I heard a similar question put to our Finance Minister last night. He indicated that individuals who earned \$5,000 in the past year and no longer have an income as a result of this illness, either because they became ill or were laid off from their work, would be eligible for support. I am confident in the response to those individuals engaged in the arts and cultural activities in this country. We know that concerts are being cancelled and that theatres and art galleries are being closed down. The opportunity for these vital people in our society to continue to make their living has been challenged by this illness, and they will be eligible for support.

Senator Cormier: I'm particularly concerned about the 14-day criterion in the bill, which says they cannot earn any money for 14 days in a row. We know the cultural sector doesn't work that way, so that is one of my concerns.

Mr. Blair: I know many people in the cultural sector and I am aware of the sporadic nature of their work. I will bring that issue to the Finance Minister and undertake to have that discussion. We know that many Canadians will find themselves in that challenging situation. I believe the support is there for them; we just have to make sure it is readily accessible.

Senator Cormier: Thank you. Can you confirm that the for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that make up the Canadian cultural industry will be eligible for the temporary wage subsidies under Part 1 of the bill? And are you contemplating longer-term assistance for those organizations?

Mr. Blair: Again, senator, you'll forgive me; I believe that is the case, but I would be reluctant to confirm without first consulting with our Finance officials. We recognize that the measures we have put in place today are measures that are absolutely necessary today. We have also committed to continuing to assess the needs of Canadians and the recovery of our economy and culture following this illness, and we will take the steps necessary to support those institutions and those Canadians.

Senator Plett: Minister Blair, my question is in relation to the RCMP. We know that the training depot in Regina has been suspended for almost all troops and that detachments have made changes to their front counter service to the public. Have any other changes been implemented within the RCMP in response to COVID-19? What changes are being considered, if any?

Mr. Blair: Senator, I consulted with the Commissioner yesterday on their business continuity plans and the steps they are taking in response to the health crisis that is taking place across the country. As you have indicated, they have expedited a number of troops so they can have an early graduation. By necessity, they have had to suspend that activity at Depot.

As I indicated earlier in my remarks, many RCMP officers are moved around the country to respond to different needs. We recognize that the movement of people into remote communities can present a unique challenge under these circumstances. The RCMP is adapting their policies and procedures for the movement of their officers to ensure people can be in a particular area and not rotating through as routinely as before in order to keep them, and the communities they serve, safe.

The planning of the RCMP in this regard has been extensive. If you will allow me, I have a note on it; and if I don't have time to get to it today, I can speak with you separately.

I have been advised that the RCMP business continuity plans are in place and that they've been working with their provincial partners to procure and distribute, for example, personal protective equipment to ensure it is available to them. They are providing training and instruction to all their members to ensure they can do their jobs safely. As I've mentioned, there's a particular challenge in safeguarding northern and isolated communities by ensuring that employees returning from abroad engage in self-isolation before returning to the communities in which they work.

The RCMP and all our agencies and departments have been taking a number of steps. Before they move any of their people, they are ensuring that they are appropriately screened so that they don't bring the illness into the communities they serve.

Senator Plett: Thank you. It is the nature of the job for RCMP members to come into contact with the general public every day. When I drove to the airport on Monday, fortunately my wife was with me, and she keeps me at the speed limit when I drive. There was a speed trap. It wasn't the RCMP; it was the Winnipeg Police Service. However, those speed traps would be out on the highway as well.

What protective measures do officers use if they approach a vehicle? I found it strange that the speed trap was there. Would the RCMP be doing that? Do they have the protective equipment in their cars to protect themselves and me if they approach the vehicle?

Mr. Blair: The officers have received instructions and have access to the equipment they need to do their jobs. Quite frankly, I'm not surprised at all that they continue to enforce laws that keep our roadways safe. Last week was National Impaired Driving Prevention Week. That work is critical and must continue. It is their responsibility to keep us safe from all threats and risks.

We recognize the important work that all first responders do. There is a great deal of work in terms of planning and preparation to ensure our officers are safe, but also firefighters, EMS workers and other front-line people who are potentially

susceptible to this disease because of their contact with the public they serve. We're making sure they have the training, information and equipment they need to do their job safely.

At the same time, as I've said, to this point the disease has not spread widely throughout these communities. Therefore, our focus has been on ensuring that health professionals receive the support and equipment they need, first and foremost. However, as this disease has moved now more readily into our community, our first responders are ramping up their efforts and response to make sure they can do their jobs safely.

Senator Plett: In closing, let me say that our hearts and our appreciation go out to all of these individuals: firefighters, RCMP and the Winnipeg Police Service. Thank you very much.

Senator Dean: Thank you, ministers; and thank you, Dr. Tam, for your hard work and leadership, and for the huge degree of collaboration that is occurring between the federal government and the provinces and territories.

It's important for us all to recall that, until 2004, we didn't have a national Public Health Agency in Canada, and we certainly didn't have a Chief Public Health Officer. It's worth taking a moment to reflect on where we would be today without your agency and without a Chief Public Health Officer. So let's reflect on that.

I have a quick question to you, Minister Hajdu, about steps being taken to organize supplemental health personnel at the provincial level. We place a lot of emphasis on this, and there's a huge responsibility and contribution being made by health personnel, including nurses and others.

Is it your sense that, at the provincial and territorial levels, steps are in place to help those personnel by developing plans for additional or supplemental health personnel? I'll leave it at that.

Ms. Hajdu: Thank you very much, senator. I would like to recognize that the reason why Canada can act in partnership to the degree that we have is because we have a Public Health Agency of Canada and a Chief Public Health Officer. I can't thank Dr. Tam enough for the guidance she has been providing us in managing this issue as a country.

We know that health care professionals, as many senators have noted, are stretched and worried; and as we see our curve rise, capacity is obviously going to be an issue.

• (1330)

Provinces and territories are implementing many measures to increase the supply of health care professionals and expand delivery models to deal with the surge. This includes expediting licensing to enable retired or inactive nurses and doctors to be licensed in another province or territory to be deployed in an area where we might see an additional surge; creating new physician billing codes and removing of billing limits to allow for an uptick in virtual care, including virtual COVID-19 screening, which will have an amazing legacy in terms of our ability to access physicians in the 21st century; developing virtual care guidelines to promote the continuation of routine care while social distancing to protect patients and doctors to deal with some of

those issues that other senators have raised about people who have urgent health care needs but are having a hard time accessing physical care; and ensuring that health care professionals can operate using full or expanded scopes of practice, for example, allowing pharmacists to renew prescriptions, licensed practical nurses to perform swabs and paramedics to screen for COVID-19.

We continue to work with provinces and territories to find innovative ways to ensure that we have the professionals we need on the front lines, and that we're using every tool possible to accelerate access to care in innovative ways.

If there's any silver lining to this crisis whatsoever, it's the rapidity at which I see provinces and territories moving toward innovation and the delivery of health care that I think will be one of the legacies of COVID-19. Obviously, we can't celebrate anything right now, but I think, when we look back on this generation and this time, we will see that this is when we actually took action to change the way that we provided care in a way that makes it more accessible to everyone across the country. Thank you, senator, for a very good question.

[Translation]

The Chair: Honourable senators, the committee has been sitting for 90 minutes. In conformity with the order of the Senate of earlier this day, I am obliged to interrupt proceedings so that the committee can report to the Senate.

Ministers, on behalf of all senators, thank you for joining us today to assist us with our work in regard to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I would also like to thank your officials.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Honourable senators, is it agreed that I report to the Senate that the witnesses have been heard?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

[English]

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, the sitting of the Senate is resumed.

REPORT OF COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

The Hon. the Acting Speaker pro tempore: Honourable senators, the Committee of the Whole, authorized by the Senate to hear from the Minister of Health and the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness concerning the government's response to the COVID 19 pandemic, reports that it has heard from the said witnesses.

[Ms. Hajdu]

[Translation]

ROYAL ASSENT

The Hon. the Acting Speaker informed the Senate that the following communication had been received:

RIDEAU HALL

March 25, 2020

Mr. Speaker:

I have the honour to inform you that the Right Honourable Julie Payette, Governor General of Canada, signified royal assent by written declaration to the bill listed in the Schedule to this letter on the 25th day of March, 2020, at 12:18 p.m.

Yours sincerely,

Assunta Di Lorenzo

*Secretary to the Governor General and Herald
Chancellor*

The Honourable
The Speaker of the Senate
Ottawa

Bill Assented to Wednesday, March 25, 2020:

An Act respecting certain measures in response to COVID-19 (*Bill C-13, Chapter 5, 2020*)

[English]

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION ADOPTED

Hon. Peter Harder (Acting Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(g), I move:

That, when the Senate next adjourns after the adoption of this motion, it do stand adjourned until Tuesday, April 21, 2020, at 2 p.m.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Accordingly, it is moved by the Honourable Senator Harder, seconded by Honourable Senator Dean — shall I dispense?

Hon. Senators: Dispense.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

THE SENATE

MOTION CONCERNING NATIONAL FINANCE; SOCIAL AFFAIRS,
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY; AND INTERNAL ECONOMY,
BUDGETS AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEES—
LEAVE DENIED

Hon. Yuen Pau Woo: Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(j), I move:

That, notwithstanding rule 12-2(2), any usual practice and the order of February 25, 2020, the Honourable Senators Duncan, Forest, Boehm, Galvez, Klyne, Loffreda, Deacon (Ontario), Mockler, Marshall, Smith, Tannas and Griffin be appointed to serve on the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance, replacing the current members, and continue to serve on the committee, subject to any membership changes pursuant to rule 12-5 or decision of the Senate;

That, for greater certainty, the current chair of the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance, while still a member of the committee, remain chair until the committee decides otherwise;

That the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance be authorized to examine and report on all actions undertaken pursuant to parts 3, 8 and 19 of the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act once it receives Royal Assent, as well as the provisions and operations of the act in general;

That, notwithstanding rule 12-2(2) and any usual practice, the Honourable Senators Dasko, Forest-Niesing, Kutcher, Mégie, Moodie, Omidvar, Petitclerc, Manning, Poirier, Seidman, Campbell and Black (Ontario) be appointed to serve on the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, subject to any membership changes pursuant to rule 12-5 or decision of the Senate;

That the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology be authorized to examine and report on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic;

That the government be authorized to table with the Clerk of the Senate, following the processes of rule 14-1(6), any report or document relating to its response to the COVID-19

pandemic and to actions undertaken pursuant to the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act once it receives Royal Assent, as well as the provisions and operations of the act, including any regular report on this subject tabled in the House of Commons, and that the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology be authorized to consider any such reports or documents for the purposes of the studies authorized by this order;

That, notwithstanding any provision of the Rules or usual practices, and taking into account the exceptional circumstances of the current pandemic, for the purposes of the studies authorized by this order, the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, during any period the Senate is adjourned, have power to meet by videoconference or teleconference, if technically feasible, with both senators and witnesses being allowed to participate in meetings by such means, and with such meetings being considered for all purposes to be meetings of the relevant committee and senators participating in such meetings being considered for all purposes to be present at the meeting;

That, in addition to the conditions set out in the previous paragraph, the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology also be authorized to hold meetings by videoconference or teleconference for the purpose of an organization meeting pursuant to rule 12-13 or to elect a chair, subject to the terms of the previous paragraph of this order;

That, notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph five of the order of March 11, 2020, allowing certain members of a Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure to direct the convening of a meeting of a committee, in the case of the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, the terms of that paragraph also apply so as to allow the members of their respective Subcommittees on Agenda and Procedure, other than the chair, to direct the convening of a meeting of the relevant committee for the purposes of its study pursuant to this order, and, if such a request is made during a period that the Senate is adjourned, the meeting be convened at the earlier of the time provided for in that paragraph or, if technically feasible, noon on the third day during the period from Monday to Friday after the clerk of the committee receives the letter;

That, for the purpose of studies authorized by this order, the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology have the power to meet, even though the Senate may then be sitting or adjourned, and that rules 12-18(1) and 12-18(2) be suspended in relation thereto;

That, notwithstanding any provision of the Rules or usual practices, and taking into account the exceptional circumstances of the current pandemic, the Standing Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration, during any period the Senate is adjourned,

have power to meet by videoconference or teleconference, if technically feasible, with both senators and witnesses being allowed to participate in meetings by such means, and with such meetings being considered for all purposes to be meetings of the committee and senators participating in such meetings being considered for all purposes to be present at the meeting;

That Standing Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration have the power to meet, even though the Senate may then be sitting or adjourned, and that rules 12-18(1) and 12-18(2) be suspended in relation thereto; and

That the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology be permitted, notwithstanding usual practices, to deposit with the Clerk of the Senate, any reports on studies authorized by this order, if the Senate is not then sitting, with the reports then being deemed to have been tabled or presented in the Chamber.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Is leave granted, honourable senators?

Some Hon. Senators: No.

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Leave is not granted.

• (1340)

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, before we adjourn, I wish to request the indulgence of the chamber for a moment.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank all of our colleagues for being here today and for the extraordinary work they do in this chamber, as we go through a very difficult time. I know I speak on behalf of all Canadians as I wish our government and our administration good luck. Stay strong.

[*English*]

Honourable senators, I would like to thank you all for being here today under these very difficult circumstances. I thank you for the extraordinary work you have done for democracy and for this institution. I know I speak for all Canadians when I say that on behalf of all of us, we wish our government and our executive branch courage, good luck, and may they stickhandle us through this crisis to the best of their ability.

God bless you all. God bless Canada.

(*At 1:45 p.m., the Senate was continued until Tuesday, April 21, 2020, at 2 p.m.*)

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