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Thursday, February 12, 2026

The Honourable RAYMONDE GAGNÉ,
Speaker

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THE SENATE

Thursday, February 12, 2026

The Senate met at 1:30 p.m., the Speaker in the chair.

Prayers.

SENATORS' STATEMENTS

CANADIAN INNOVATION

Hon. Colin Deacon: Honourable senators, how many of us are feeling like life is on hold while we wait to see a specialist, be it for ourselves or someone we love? Wait times have stretched from months to years, and I'm willing to bet that everyone in this chamber feels the resulting anxiety, along with countless families across the country. If a family physician needs quick specialist input, the only option is a formal referral, even when the issue could be resolved with a five-minute conversation. This leaves patients waiting, specialists overwhelmed and emergency rooms overcrowded.

Imagine if we could recreate the doctor's lounge but for the modern era. What if primary care physicians could rapidly consult specialists, avoiding unnecessary referrals and delays? This is exactly what Virtual Hallway, an innovative Nova Scotia company, has accomplished through their digital communication platform. It quickly enables targeted specialist consultations, approaching 1 million interactions annually. The results speak for themselves: 84% of Virtual Hallway consultations avoided the need for a formal referral to a specialist. More than 10,000 clinicians now use the platform, including our very own Senator Ravalia.

Sadly, Virtual Hallway is the exception, not the rule. Too often, Canadian startups with world-class solutions to global problems struggle to gain any traction at home, only to find investment, customers and scale after moving to the United States.

I've watched this reality continue to undermine our prosperity for about 30 years. That's the reality that CAN Health Network, funded by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, or ISED, is determined to change. Its CEO, Dr. Dante Morra, built CAN Health Network to connect Canadian health care organizations with innovative Canadian companies that are ready to solve real, identified needs. CAN Health built and funded a project with Nova Scotia Health that proved the benefits of Virtual Hallway and demonstrated its value, leading to procurements in Nova Scotia, P.E.I. and Newfoundland, with more expansion under way.

CAN Health Network has completed 136 similar commercialization projects, creating 2,400 direct jobs, and companies generating over \$700 million in revenue. Eighty per cent of its projects lead to competitive procurements in Canada.

This integrated market model can be replicated across sectors, from defence to food systems. By strengthening and expanding models like CAN Health Network, ISED and other federal programs can help achieve the goal of buying Canadian, strengthening our domestic industries, improving outcomes for Canadians and transforming our economy into the innovation superpower that I dream of.

Thank you, Dr. Dante Morra and team, for leading the way and showing us how to do it.

Thank you, colleagues.

THE LATE ROSALIND SMITH

Hon. Kristopher Wells: Honourable senators, I rise today to honour a remarkable educator, trailblazer, community leader, mentor and friend Rosalind Smith, whose passing is felt not only in Edmonton but across Canada.

As we mark Black History Month — a time to reflect on the resilience, leadership and contributions of Black Canadians — there is no more fitting moment to celebrate a woman whose life helped shape that history in classrooms, communities and the lives of countless young people.

Rosalind Smith, known simply as "Ros" to her colleagues and friends, made history as the first Black principal in Edmonton Public Schools. But her legacy reaches far beyond that milestone. It lives on in the confidence she nurtured in students, the educators she mentored and the communities she strengthened through her unwavering belief in the power and purpose of public education.

At a time when both women and Black Canadians were rarely seen in school leadership, Ros led with grace, compassion and quiet strength. She saw every child not as a problem to be solved but as a future waiting to unfold. Yet, like many who break barriers, her path was not without resistance.

Ros once shared with me how a student arrived at her school wearing a full Ku Klux Klan costume. When confronted, the family dismissed it as a joke. Ros understood it for what it was — a message meant to intimidate and exclude. But she answered hatred not with bitterness but with excellence and humanity. Again and again, she transformed resistance into respect, opening doors for others to follow, myself included, when I had the privilege of working alongside her at Edmonton Public Schools.

Later, as supervisor of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Ros championed marginalized students and families, including those from 2SLGBTQI+ communities, helping schools become places where every young person could learn in safety and with dignity and pride. Her life reminds us that Black history is not confined to the past. It is living history, written every day by leaders who widen the circle of belonging for those who come next.

Across Canada, wherever a child now feels seen, wherever diversity is celebrated and wherever a young person believes leadership is possible for them, Ros's legacy endures. We deeply mourn her loss, but we celebrate a life that made our country kinder, fairer and more hopeful. May we honour her memory by continuing her work for equity, dignity and belonging for all.

Thank you, Ros, for showing us how to lead with courage and heart. Your lessons will forever continue to guide us.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

VISITORS IN THE GALLERY

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, I wish to draw your attention to the presence in the gallery of Her Excellency Ang Lay Ling, High Commissioner of Brunei Darussalam to Canada; His Excellency Muhsin Syihab, Ambassador, Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia; His Excellency Zaw Tun Oo, Ambassador, Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar; and Ms. Rea G. Oreta, Chargé d'Affaires, a.i., Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines. They are the guests of the Honourable Senators Woo and Gignac.

On behalf of all honourable senators, I welcome you to the Senate of Canada.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

OCEAN RANGER DISASTER

Hon. David M. Wells: Honourable senators, in the early hours of February 15, 1982, the semi-submersible *Ocean Ranger* drilling rig sank 300 kilometres off the coast of Newfoundland, costing all 84 crew members their lives.

• (1340)

The *Ocean Ranger*, which in the six years prior had seen service off the coasts of Ireland, Alaska and New Jersey, began exploratory drilling in the Hibernia oil field in November 1980. It was the largest and most advanced drilling rig of its kind.

This is not the first time I have spoken here on the anniversary of this tragedy, and it won't be the last. But what struck me in getting ready to speak today was one sentence in a document I read that recalled both the disaster and its aftermath:

The loss of the *Ocean Ranger* was not just a terrible tragedy, but also a wake-up call to the oil industry, the provincial and federal governments, and the people of Newfoundland and Labrador. . . .

It often takes a tragedy before we hear the wake-up call, and if enough time passes between lessons, we settle into complacency and have to learn all over again — more times than we would like, it's at the cost of human life.

The *Ocean Ranger* sinking remains the deadliest offshore drilling accident in Canadian history.

Recently, the *Ocean Ranger* Legacy Foundation was formed, and among its objectives is to seek the return of artifacts from the rig from Ottawa to Newfoundland and Labrador. The intention is to create a permanent exhibit that will honour the victims, promote safety, memorialize the disaster and educate the public. A permanent exhibit — more than any annual statement in the Senate — will be a constant reminder of the indomitable power of nature and help guard against our complacency when confronting it. Moreover, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will become the stewards of the memory of the *Ocean Ranger*, as they rightfully should.

Honourable senators, the *Ocean Ranger* Legacy Foundation has been working since 2024 to make this happen. Their strategic goals for 2026 are the return of the artifacts housed at the Canada Science and Technology Museum in Ottawa and finding an appropriate location for their permanent display in Newfoundland and Labrador. I will be doing what I can to support the government-to-government discussions leading to this artifact repatriation, and I hope many of you will join me.

Honourable senators, the *Ocean Ranger* must never become a footnote in our history. It must remain a warning written in memory so that safety is learned through remembrance, not relearned through loss. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

VISITORS IN THE GALLERY

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, I wish to draw your attention to the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Lyne Chantal Boudreau, Minister of Seniors and Minister responsible for Women's Equality, and Suzanne Dupuis-Blanchard, Research Chair in Population Aging and Director of the Centre on Aging at the Université de Moncton. They are the guests of the Honourable Senators Boudreau and Cormier.

On behalf of all honourable senators, I welcome you to the Senate of Canada.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

NURSING HOME WITHOUT WALLS

Hon. Victor Boudreau: Honourable senators, Canada's population is aging. It is estimated that one in 10 seniors who is admitted into a long-term care facility could remain in their home longer or for good, if the proper community services were available.

In order to respond to seniors' desire to remain at home for as long as possible and to address the costs related to institutionalization, a nurse, professor and researcher and her team at the Université de Moncton developed a program to support home care.

Nursing Home Without Walls is an evidence-based program. It promotes aging in place in an innovative way, by drawing on the resources and expertise of long-term care facilities and extending them beyond the walls of those facilities.

[*English*]

Nursing Home Without Walls provides services that support older adults in their homes, such as social visits, dispatching volunteers to help with things like washing hair or providing foot care and helping people navigate the health care system. So far, the results have been impressive. Evaluations have shown that the Nursing Home Without Walls program has improved social connectedness, reduced social isolation and loneliness and enhanced knowledge on where to turn for help. From the perspective of the health care system, this program is also relieving pressure on primary care by allowing visits to doctors or nurse practitioners to focus more on essential medical issues.

[*Translation*]

I want to congratulate Dr. Suzanne Dupuis-Blanchard and her team at Université de Moncton for establishing and leading such a commendable and influential initiative.

We are proud that Nursing Home Without Walls was first piloted in four communities in our province between 2019 and 2023. Moreover, because of its positive impact, the program was adopted by the provincial government so it could be gradually expanded across the province.

Thanks to people like Lyne Chantal Boudreau, Minister of Seniors, who is here with us today, New Brunswick currently has 31 Nursing Home Without Walls programs. The program's expansion is continuing, not only in new communities across the province, but also in five other Canadian provinces. That is proof that the program works.

Honourable colleagues, the Nursing Home Without Walls program represents an important shift to community-based support models. Continued research, political support and investment will be key to ensuring its sustainability.

Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

[*English*]

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Hon. Michael L. MacDonald: Honourable senators, February marks Black History Month in Canada, but nowhere in Canada does Black history run as deep as it does in my home province of Nova Scotia. It should be noted that until the opening up of immigration in the 1960s, well over half of the Black community in Canada was found in Nova Scotia.

The Black community arrived early and in three primary waves. Over 3,000 Black Loyalists arrived between 1783 and 1785, then 600 Jamaican Maroons arrived in 1796 and, finally, about 2,000 refugees arrived during and after the War of 1812. Although some enslaved people did come north with the Loyalist migration in the 1780s, they were in the minority, as most of the Black people who migrated to Nova Scotia arrived as free people.

One of the children of those free men and women who arrived during the War of 1812 was a man named William Hall. More Canadians should know his name.

Born in 1827, William Hall would join the Merchant Navy and later the Royal Navy at a young age. By the time the Crimean War started, William Hall was an experienced sailor. He would serve first at the famous Siege of Sevastopol and the Battle of Inkerman.

After his service in Crimea, William Hall was assigned to the *HMS Shannon*. In 1857, during the Sepoy Rebellion, he sailed to Calcutta to assist a British garrison surrounded at the Siege of Lucknow.

After relentlessly hauling their 24-pounder naval guns toward the enemy position, Hall's brigade engaged the fortifications. After each round, they ran their guns forward under heavy fire, closer to the enemy. Eventually, only Hall and one other gunner remained alive and standing. Despite constant fire, William Hall continued to load and fire his 24-pounder naval gun until the enemy position was captured.

In 1859, in recognition of his bravery at Lucknow, William Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross — a recognition that broke barriers and marked a historic milestone. He was the first Black Nova Scotian and, indeed, the first Black man in all of the British Empire to win the Victoria Cross, the highest award that could be given for bravery under fire.

Hall went on to serve in the Royal Navy for 24 years, achieving the rank of Petty Officer, 1st Class. Although he was offered a position in London after his retirement from the navy, he chose to return to Nova Scotia to live on the farm with his two sisters, where he died in 1904. He was buried privately without fanfare.

In 1945, after a lengthy campaign by the Canadian Legion to properly recognize his service, William Hall's remains were reinterred in a special plot with a cairn erected as a permanent memorial.

William Hall's legacy is one of quiet dignity and courage of the highest order. He stands as a pioneer for Black Canadians in uniform and a symbol of service beyond prejudice.

Today, his name continues to sail our seas. One of the Royal Canadian Navy's newest Harry DeWolf-class Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels proudly bears his name. *HMCS William Hall* was commissioned in 2024 and serves as a living tribute, carrying his legacy across Canadian waters and beyond.

As we recognize William Hall, may we recommit ourselves to honouring all who serve and to telling the full story of Canada's past — one that reflects the courage and contributions of all its people. Thank you.

VISITORS IN THE GALLERY

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, I wish to draw your attention to the presence in the gallery of His Excellency Andrii Plakhotniuk, Ambassador of Ukraine to Canada, and Ihor Michalchyshyn, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, alongside embassy and Ukrainian Canadian Congress representatives. They are the guests of the Honourable Senator Kutcher.

On behalf of all honourable senators, I welcome you to the Senate of Canada.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

• (1350)

SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Hon. Stan Kutcher: Honourable senators, in two weeks, we will mark the four-year anniversary of Russia's genocidal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

World War I lasted just over four years and World War II about five and a half, but Russia's war against Ukraine has lasted 12 years, starting in 2014 with its annexation of Crimea, in contravention of the Budapest agreement of 1999. The security guarantees promised to Ukraine were ignored by all signatories. The U.S. did not push back. Europe bickered and fretted and followed the U.S. Since then, Russia, with the second-largest army in the world and an economy 10 times larger than Ukraine, has not won. Indeed, thanks to Ukraine's armed forces, its determined and resilient people and military support from Western allies, including Canada, it has brought Russia's army to a stalemate.

However, since the Trump-Putin phone call of February 15, 2025, a so-called peace plan has been under way. The first meeting was only between Russia and the U.S. The two men

whose strategy in negotiations is a zero-sum game are calling this dance. Because this is a "peace plan" with no ceasefire, it is also a cover for the continued Russian genocide and an excuse for the Coalition of the Willing not to act. Europe is still following where the U.S. leads.

2025 was the deadliest year ever for civilians in Ukraine, with over 2,500 killed and over 12,000 injured. The worst day occurred in Ternopil, a city in western Ukraine, resulting in 38 dead and about 100 wounded. Ternopil is where my father was born and raised and where much of my family still lives.

During the coldest nights of the year, Russia continues its attacks on energy infrastructure that is essential for keeping people warm, housed and fed. Ukraine does not have sufficient air defence to protect its civilians.

Putin cannot win on the battlefield, so instead he's killing civilians — killing children.

The Trump-Putin plan is to let Ukraine bleed long enough until its people agree to give up territory for another worthless security guarantee that will simply be broken later by a rearmed and emboldened Russia, a Russia that will not only look to move into Europe but into our Arctic, as well.

Europe continues to follow where Trump leads. It bickers and bickers and doesn't seem to realize that this is not the direction in which to go.

In his Davos speech, our Prime Minister made it clear that following Trump is not an option. He's correct. So, colleagues, let's resolve to push our country to do a bit more, stop following Trump and enabling Putin, and work with our allies to close the skies. Give Ukraine the weapons it needs to ensure just and long-lasting peace.

If we do that collectively, we will indeed, as John Lennon sang, "give peace a chance."

Thank you, *d'akuju*.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

THE ESTIMATES, 2025-26

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (C) TABLED

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the Supplementary Estimates (C), 2025-26.

JUSTICE

[Translation]

CHARTER STATEMENT IN RELATION TO BILL S-5—
DOCUMENT TABLED

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, a Charter Statement prepared by the Minister of Justice in relation to Bill S-5, An Act respecting the interoperability of health information technology and to prohibit data blocking by health information technology vendors, pursuant to the *Department of Justice Act*, R.S.C. 1985, c. J-2, sbs. 4.2(1).

[Translation]

STUDY ON MINORITY-LANGUAGE HEALTH SERVICES

FIRST REPORT OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES COMMITTEE TABLED

Hon. Allister W. Surette: Honourable senators, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, entitled *Breaking Down Language Barriers in Health Care: For Equitable, Safe and Quality Health Care and Health Services* and I move that the report be placed on the Orders of the Day for consideration at the next sitting of the Senate.

(On motion of Senator Surette, report placed on the Orders of the Day for consideration at the next sitting of the Senate.)

[English]

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH BILL

FIFTH REPORT OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE PRESENTED

Hon. Sharon Burey: Honourable senators, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, which deals with Bill S-212, An Act respecting a national strategy for children and youth in Canada.

(For text of report, see today's Journals of the Senate, p. 627.)

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, when shall this report be taken into consideration?

(On motion of Senator Burey, report placed on the Orders of the Day for consideration at the next sitting of the Senate.)

BUDGET 2025 IMPLEMENTATION BILL, NO. 1

THIRD REPORT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES COMMITTEE TABLED

Hon. Michèle Audette: Honourable senators, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Senate Committee on Indigenous Peoples, which deals with the subject matter of Bill C-15, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on November 4, 2025.

(Pursuant to the order adopted November 26, 2025, the report was deemed referred to the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and placed on the Orders of the Day for consideration at the next sitting of the Senate.)

SECOND REPORT OF TRANSPORT AND
COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE TABLED

Hon. Larry W. Smith: Honourable senators, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the second report of the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, which deals with the subject matter of Bill C-15, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on November 4, 2025.

(Pursuant to the order adopted November 26, 2025, the report was deemed referred to the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and placed on the Orders of the Day for consideration at the next sitting of the Senate.)

[English]

STRENGTHENING CANADA'S IMMIGRATION
SYSTEM AND BORDERS BILLNATIONAL SECURITY, DEFENCE AND VETERANS AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE AUTHORIZED TO EXTEND DATE OF FINAL REPORT

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(k), I move:

That the date in paragraph 3(b) of the order adopted by the Senate on Thursday, February 5, 2026, in relation to Bill C-12, An Act respecting certain measures relating to the security of Canada's borders and the integrity of the Canadian immigration system and respecting other related security measures, be replaced with February 26, 2026.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

THE SENATE

NOTICE OF MOTION TO EXTEND SITTING ON WEDNESDAY,
FEBRUARY 25, 2026, AND AUTHORIZE COMMITTEES TO
MEET DURING SITTING OF THE SENATE

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, I give notice that, at the next sitting of the Senate, I will move:

That, notwithstanding the order adopted by the Senate on June 4, 2025, the sitting of Wednesday, February 25, 2026, continue beyond 4 p.m., if Government Business is not completed, and be adjourned at the later of the completion of Government Business or 4 p.m.; and

That committees of the Senate scheduled to meet on that day be authorized to meet after 4 p.m., even though the Senate may then be sitting, with rule 12-18(1) being suspended in relation thereto.

• (1400)

THE ESTIMATES, 2025-26

NOTICE OF MOTION TO AUTHORIZE NATIONAL FINANCE
COMMITTEE TO STUDY SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (C)

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, I give notice that, at the next sitting of the Senate, I will move:

That the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance be authorized to examine and report upon the expenditures set out in the Supplementary Estimates (C) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026; and

That, for the purpose of this study, the committee 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.

QUESTION PERIOD

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

Hon. Leo Housakos (Leader of the Opposition): Government leader, newcomers who are here legally and have been building a life in our country are seeing growing delays in permanent residency processing. Ukrainians who arrived under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel program, Venezuelans fleeing political and economic crisis, Hong Kongers fleeing Beijing's dictatorship and the Sudanese escaping genocide wait for years, with little clarity on when their cases will be resolved. These delays prevent families who have been contributing fully to their communities from planning for the future.

Senator Moreau, how does your government justify a system that leaves so many lawful applicants in uncertainty, unable to achieve permanent residency despite meeting all of Canada's immigration requirements?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Thank you for the question, Senator Housakos. The government knows that Canadians want a strong and fair immigration system that provides protection for those in need while applying rigorous admissibility standards for those seeking entry. For instance, I know that for Ukrainian cases Canada has opened a fast track for some of those who are applying for Canadian permanent residence, and my information is that, at this time, 2,500 Ukrainians have obtained permanent residence.

Now, those inquiries take time. Canada needs to have a very strong immigration system, and that's what the government is trying to provide.

Senator Housakos: Government leader, I have been hearing from many from various communities — from Ukrainians, from Hong Kongers — that it is taking a far longer time than necessary and reasonable. These people's lives are in limbo. While these families await timely protection, others are exploiting our immigration system just because of criminal convictions. The inversion of our priorities seems to be happening.

Shouldn't your government ensure that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada protects Canadians from criminal foreign nationals while fulfilling its humanitarian obligations and that it finds a way to do that a lot more expeditiously?

Senator Moreau: You are well aware — and I think that Senator Martin and yourself made a speech recently on Bill C-12, and I understand that the minister herself will be at committee this afternoon — Bill C-12 is looking to improve on some of the aspects of the immigration system. I am sure that both the National Security Committee and the Social Affairs Committee will ask the appropriate questions to the minister. I know that the minister —

The Hon. the Speaker: Thank you, Senator Moreau.

HEALTH

PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY

Hon. Michael L. MacDonald: Senator Moreau, according to recent reports and committee testimony in the other place, the Public Health Agency of Canada recently lost \$20 million worth of specialty drugs because staff failed to ensure a freezer door was secure. Alarm systems, surveillance and daily inspections were apparently not in place, and no one has been held accountable.

Senator Moreau, Canadians expect prudent stewardship of public funds and assets. How can the government justify this level of mismanagement in one of the country's most critical national stockpiles?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Well, I am not informed of the findings of the committee at the other place, senator, but I will certainly bring the question to the attention of the minister, and I will get back to you with a more precise answer than I can give you today.

Senator MacDonald: The lack of accountability is deeply troubling. Despite this mismanagement of public funds and critical property, 116 of the 117 executives at the Public Health Agency received bonuses last year, averaging \$18,000 each.

Senator Moreau, these discretionary bonuses should not be handed out automatically, particularly when the agency cannot properly manage one of Canada's most important biosecurity assets. Why did only one of the —

The Hon. the Speaker: Thank you, Senator MacDonald.

Senator Moreau: Senator MacDonald, thank you for the question. I would be very surprised if bonuses were given in an automatic manner. However, since you are asking the question and it is one of your premises, I will raise the question with the minister as well, and I will get back to you with an answer.

TRANSPORT

CANADIAN TRANSPORTATION AGENCY

Hon. Tony Loffreda: My question is for the Government Representative in the Senate. Canadians are seeing a dramatic rise in air passenger complaints filed under the Air Passenger Protection Regulations. The Canadian Transportation Agency, or CTA, now faces a backlog of nearly 90,000 unresolved cases, with some complainants waiting up to two years for decisions. This situation undermines public trust in the enforcement regime and leaves travellers without timely recourse after significant flight delays or cancellations. Despite changes to the complaint process, backlogs keep growing and a fee on airlines has yet to be implemented.

What concrete actions is the government taking to ensure that the CTA can reduce this backlog and support effective, timely resolutions for Canadian passengers?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Thank you for the question, Senator Loffreda. The safety and rights of air travellers remain a top priority for this government, which remains determined to improve the air travel system for Canadians.

The government is pushing actively on airlines to share complaint costs and clarify safety exemptions that airlines misuse so that passengers get refunded meals and rebooking without years of delay. But I understand that there is a backlog, and the government is trying to improve that situation by pushing on airlines.

Senator Loffreda: Thank you for that answer. In 2023, with Bill C-47, the CTA was directed to introduce a cost recovery fee on airlines to help fund complaint resolution. However, some reports suggest there may have been delays related to ministerial considerations.

Can you clarify what role, if any, Transport Canada has played in this process and how it's supporting the agency's independence, accountability and transparency?

Restoring confidence in the air passenger complaint process is fundamental.

• (1410)

Senator Moreau: Senator Loffreda, the government is actively working with the Canadian Transportation Agency to modernize its approach and ensure the system is sustainable for the long term. Last year, the government directed the CTA to simplify rules, making compensation easier to access and reducing the 88,000-case backlog through better processes, not just more funding. Canadians can rest assured that we will see a balanced system that holds airlines accountable.

[Translation]

HEALTH

CANADIAN FOOD INSPECTION AGENCY

Hon. Josée Verner: Senator Moreau, recent events have prompted me to once again raise the issue of the origin of the food we put in our grocery carts.

On January 23, Health Canada quietly authorized the sale of genetically modified pork, a first in the country's agri-food history for a farm animal intended for human consumption.

As in the case of cloned animal meat, which I raised here last November, we are once again seeing a lack of transparency from the department.

In your opinion, what justifies this approach? Is the department afraid to inform consumers who simply want to know the truth about decisions that may affect the food they buy?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Thank you for your question, Senator Verner. I know this is an issue close to your heart, as this is the third time you have raised it. As a result, I dug a little deeper.

Health Canada has been analyzing genetically modified foods for over 20 years now. To date, 180 genetically modified food products have been approved because, according to Health Canada's research, they have been found to be as safe and nutritious as conventional foods.

I know that one of your questions was about the labelling of these products. Health Canada's policy is to require specific labelling when food products pose a risk of causing allergic reactions, when there is a change in the composition of the food or when there is a change in the nutritional quality of the food.

Senator Verner: On January 30, duBreton, a well-known company in Quebec, spoke out against Health Canada's decision not to impose mandatory labelling so we are all informed about the origin of genetically modified pork.

These products will be on the market by this summer. Can you ask the minister to review the department's decision and impose mandatory labelling in the name of food transparency?

Senator Moreau: As I told you, mandatory labelling exists for foods in the three scenarios I mentioned, whether they are genetically modified or not.

You're asking me to bring the matter to the minister's attention for review. I will do so with pleasure, Senator Verner.

[English]

HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Hon. Kristopher Wells: Senator Moreau, protecting our publicly funded, single-payer, universal health care system is the responsibility of the federal government under the Canada Health Act, but at this moment, it is under threat.

In my own home province of Alberta, the provincial government is opening the door to more American-style, private, for-profit care that undermines services for all Albertans. The province's proposed Bill 11 will take practitioners out of the public system at a time when shortages are being felt by families across the province.

What steps is the federal government prepared to take in order to protect public health care in Alberta and across the country?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Thank you, Senator Wells.

This question was raised earlier by Senator Osler. We know that Bill 11 has not been adopted yet, but the government has been clear that it will always prioritize the Canada Health Act and Canada's universal health care system. The federal

government takes a collaborative approach with all provinces and territories to ensure that all Canadians continue to have equitable access to medically necessary care based on their medical needs, not their ability to pay.

I have also been informed that Minister Michel is having regular conversations with her Alberta counterpart on that issue.

Senator K. Wells: Thank you. Our public health care system is something that unites us all as Canadians. It is how we look after each other, but at this moment, we are seeing efforts by the UCP to Americanize our health care system. In fact, the Canadian Health Coalition has even expressed concern that Bill 11 puts at risk the carve-out of public health insurance in our trade agreements, which stops U.S. private health insurance companies from swamping our country.

Senator Moreau, is the federal government doing an analysis of what Alberta's Bill 11 would mean for our current free trade agreement obligations?

Senator Moreau: As I said earlier, Minister Michel is having conversations with her counterpart in Alberta, and Health Canada officials are engaging with Alberta's officials to better understand the various components and implications of Bill 11, if it is adopted.

TRANSPORT

CANADIAN TRANSPORTATION AGENCY

Hon. Yonah Martin (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Government leader, recent testimony from Transport Canada before the Ontario Superior Court revealed that the Canada Transportation Agency processes, on average, only one passenger complaint per day, despite having a backlog of over 93,000 cases. Canadians are waiting more than a year for their complaints to even enter the resolution process.

Leader, how can the government justify a passenger protection regime where travellers wait years for resolution while the backlog continues to grow?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): I think I answered that question in part with Senator Loffreda's question earlier today.

The government is putting pressure on airlines to better understand the new regulation so that it will reduce complaints concerning how they manage the complaints that they have. We understand there is a huge backlog, but the government is working very hard with airlines to make sure that, in the future, there will be a better understanding of the actual regulations.

Senator Martin: Every once in a while, Senator Loffreda and I are on the same page.

Many of these cases, senator, involve modest sums, yet they are tied up in a system described as labour intensive and inefficient. I'm hearing that about many other agencies and

departments as well. It is very inefficient. Canadians deserve more from their government. This is not good stewardship of taxpayers' money.

At what point will your government accept that this system is failing Canadians?

Senator Moreau: The system has been changed to help Canadians with claims concerning their rights when they use aircraft, when they're onboard the aircraft and they experience mismanagement of their meals, luggage or have flight delays. The government is committed to making the system better, and I think that a better understanding by airlines of the new rules should help.

FINANCE

COST OF LIVING

Hon. Yonah Martin (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): On another very important note, a recent *Financial Post* report highlights that as the cost of living rises, Canadians' debt loads are soaring, with more households becoming insolvent. Many families are juggling multiple credit cards and payday loans just to cover the basics.

This should be a flashing red light for your government. This is survival, not choice. Lower- and middle-income households are struggling to make ends meet, while debt servicing erodes their ability to save or invest. Senator Moreau, working Canadians deserve better than Liberal failure.

Can your government claim to be protecting the middle class when so many families are drowning in debt just to survive?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Again, Senator Martin, I wonder why you're asking this question when your friends in the other place are voting against that. Most of the time, I am answering questions saying that I will raise the issue with the minister. Maybe you should invite me to your national caucus. I would raise questions with them and ask why they are voting against measures that increase the possibility for Canadians to have a better life.

May I remind you of what we have already accomplished? I have a long list of what we are doing, even though your friends in the other place have voted against all budget measures that would help Canadians at this time.

Senator Martin: Well, they should definitely begin by inviting you to their caucus meeting so that you can have that direct face time during cabinet sessions. That would be very important.

• (1420)

But, Senator Moreau, how can you defend an affordability budget when families are forced to rely on payday loans and

credit cards to get by? Middle-income Canadians' wealth has stagnated, while the top 20% prosper. How can you defend your government's terrible record on this?

Senator Moreau: Thank you. This would be a very good declaration for you to make at your own national caucus, Senator Martin, because maybe you could convince them to vote for the measures in the budget that would help Canadians. We're lowering taxes for 22 million Canadians, which you voted against; cutting the consumer carbon tax, which you voted against; protecting dental care and pharmacare, which you voted against; and lowering the requirement for access to the disability tax credit — and the list goes on.

HEALTH

CANADIAN INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH

Hon. Stan Kutcher: Senator Moreau, last week, we received the news that only 13.6% of grant applications to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, or CIHR, were funded. This is the lowest success rate since CIHR was created. The number of researchers rejected for funding is an astonishing 2,680. However, most of the grants reviewed were likely good enough to be funded. The reason for this abysmal rate was not the quality of the applications; it was a lack of funding. This result was the latest in years of underfunding of CIHR. This is a death knell for our sovereign health research capabilities. Will the government find ways to increase funding for CIHR so we do not lose our health research ability?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Thank you for the question, Senator Kutcher. I don't know where the 13.6% number comes from. I asked the question, and the government understands the significance of investment in health research and the need to support the next generation of researchers, giving them equal opportunity to succeed and providing them with the resources to tackle complex challenges and drive innovation. Canada has made a historic investment in research and innovation, which includes \$1.8 billion in core research grant funding over five years, with \$748 million per year ongoing. Funding rules and decisions are made by qualified scientists and researchers via the arm's-length Canadian Institutes of Health Research to ensure that decisions are made based on facts and not politics.

Senator Kutcher: Thank you, Senator Moreau. I'm very well aware of how the CIHR works, having been on the board of the Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction, or INMHA.

In Budget 2025, Canada established the global impact programs designed to bring new researchers here, and that's really good. We're very pleased with that. Yet I understand that the funding for CIHR has not increased to accommodate this new influx. They will simply add to the numbers that have to apply to CIHR. This is basic research funding. This is different than projects and direct funding. This is the core funding that our researchers depend on. Can you ask —

The Hon. the Speaker: Thank you, Senator Kutcher.

Senator Moreau: I will bring the question to the ministers, certainly. Just for your information, the government is investing \$199 million to increase the annual value of master's and doctoral students' scholarships to \$27,000 and \$40,000, respectively, and postdoctoral fellowships to \$70,000, which is good, I think.

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Mary Coyle: Senator Moreau, I recently met with representatives of Canada's 15 international volunteer cooperation organizations. Over the last 60 years, more than 80,000 volunteers have had a positive impact on 40 million people in 100 countries while enhancing our diplomatic relationships and launching many careers, including my own. With the changing world and shifting priorities, I was encouraged to hear the leaders of these organizations speak to how they can further support the government's priorities of expanding global economic opportunities and strengthening our diplomatic relationships. Canada's 15 volunteer cooperation organizations are ready to step up in new ways. Will Canada embrace this powerful opportunity for the future?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): Yes, and I appreciate you bringing this issue forward. I want this chamber and Canadians to be aware of this program, which the government funds to provide opportunities for skilled Canadians to support development abroad. Canada has committed nearly \$418 million over seven years to support the Volunteer Cooperation Program. Much of this funding is aimed at advancing Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, which includes priorities such as promoting the rights of women and girls, innovation, climate change, diversity and inclusion and the integration of marginalized groups, such as Indigenous People, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ communities.

Senator Coyle: My question was really about being a part of the realignment of our foreign policy, but I will build on that.

Building on the work undertaken at the Civil Society 7, hosted in Canada last year in conjunction with the G7, Canada's civil society organizations are establishing global networks to strategize for the future of international development. France has put international development on the G7 agenda. Senator Moreau, could you confirm that Canada will work with these civil society leaders and with France to ensure that international development remains a key priority at the next G7 summit and beyond?

Senator Moreau: To your first question, the \$418 million provides funds for years to come.

I am happy to inform you that the government welcomes France's leadership on this issue. To your second question, Canada is already engaged in similar efforts, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, Development Assistance Committee and the multilateral development bank. These efforts remain a Canadian priority in 2026, including under France's G7 presidency —

[Translation]

The Hon. the Speaker: Thank you, Senator Moreau.

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

ARCTIC SENTRY

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Senator Moreau, yesterday, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, Supreme Allied Commander Europe announced the alliance's Arctic Sentry program.

He said:

Arctic Sentry underscores the Alliance's commitment to safeguard its members and maintain stability in one of the world's most strategically significant and environmentally challenging areas.

My question is this: I realize it is early days yet, but when will the government be ready to announce how Canada will be engaged in Arctic Sentry? Will it be through existing commitments to the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, or expanded to include troop commitments to engage in NATO-led training exercises in places such as Greenland and Norway? If possible, could you please provide a written answer when available?

Hon. Pierre Moreau (Government Representative in the Senate): I can refer to Minister Anand's declaration from yesterday. The minister expressed her support for the operation Arctic Sentry taking shape within the NATO context. She notably expressed that she would like to see that initiative be permanent. The government is reviewing its relationship with the U.S., as you well know, including with respect to collaboration when and where it makes sense. Minister Anand said more information will be coming shortly. I will gladly provide it to you.

Senator Patterson: As a follow-up, it was also announced that Arctic Sentry will be led by the Joint Force Command, or JFC, in Norfolk, Virginia. Media reports say that the command of JFC Norfolk will soon pass from American to European leadership. Given our vast Arctic territory, when will the minister be able to articulate whether we have a senior military leadership role in Norfolk to oversee the implementation and execution of Arctic Sentry?

Senator Moreau: You're well aware, senator, that military and security appointments are made with the highest standards for qualification and competence, which is the way to go. I cannot comment on nominations, but the government has shown an interest in taking a leadership role in the Arctic with its increased investment and is looking forward to collaborating closely with our allies to protect this political region.

VOTE 16 BILL

BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator McPhedran, seconded by the Honourable Senator Sorensen, for the second reading of Bill S-222, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and the Regulation Adapting the Canada Elections Act for the Purposes of a Referendum.

Hon. Yonah Martin (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to Bill S-222, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and the Regulation Adapting the Canada Elections Act for the Purposes of a Referendum. As colleagues know, this bill seeks to lower the federal voting age from 18 to 16.

I want to begin by acknowledging Senator McPhedran's commitment and passion on this issue. Her desire to engage young Canadians in our democratic processes is commendable and shared by all of us here. However, despite Senator McPhedran's best efforts, I must confess that I remain unconvinced that the voting age should be lowered to 16.

While I, too, celebrate the enthusiasm, participation and increased civic engagement of our youth, these alone cannot dictate changes to one of the most fundamental pillars of our democratic system — the opportunity to vote.

While Canada has always been an electoral democracy, the shape of that electoral process has changed significantly over the last 158 years. At the time of Confederation, the Constitution Act, 1867 stated that control of election law and the federal franchise would remain a provincial matter until Parliament decided otherwise. This was an interim measure for the 1867 election in order to provide Parliament the opportunity to adopt its own election law.

It was 1885 when Sir John A. Macdonald managed to succeed in passing the Electoral Franchise Act, which gave control of the federal franchise to the federal government for the first time, and that law retained the three conditions of voter eligibility.

Thirteen years later, the Liberal government under Sir Wilfrid Laurier repealed the Electoral Franchise Act and returned control of voting eligibility to the provinces. It wasn't until 1920 when Prime Minister Borden's Unionist government passed the Dominion Elections Act, and a uniform federal election system was finally established and provided access to the vote without reference to property ownership or gender. Age and citizenship remained the only criteria, with the qualifying age of 21 being retained.

It was 50 years later, in 1970, when the voting age was lowered once again, this time to 18. Yet, colleagues, in spite of the significance of the change, the decision was not contentious, even though it was made with relatively limited public debate. It was marked by a general consensus and seen as a sensible and appropriate step.

• (1430)

ORDERS OF THE DAY

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, pursuant to the order adopted June 4, 2025, I would like to inform the Senate that Question Period with the Honourable Dominic LeBlanc, P.C., M.P., President of the King's Privy Council for Canada and Minister responsible for Canada-U.S. Trade, Intergovernmental Affairs, Internal Trade and One Canadian Economy, will take place on Tuesday, February 24, 2026, at 3:30 p.m.

[Translation]

COMMISSIONER OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

MOTION TO APPROVE APPOINTMENT ADOPTED

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate), pursuant to notice of February 5, 2026, moved:

That, in accordance with section 49 of the *Official Languages Act*, R.S.C., 1985, c. 31 (4th Supp.), the Senate approve the appointment of Kelly Burke as Commissioner of Official Languages.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

[English]

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

The Hon. the Speaker: Pursuant to the order adopted on February 11, 2026, the Committee of the Whole will begin at 3 p.m.

The reasons for this consensus are many. More than 700,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who were younger than 21 already had the right to vote because of their service. Many provinces had been lowering their voting age for some time. Alberta dropped its voting age to 19 as early as 1944. Saskatchewan lowered it to 18 in 1945; British Columbia, to 19 in 1952. Quebec, Prince Edward Island and Manitoba later followed by lowering their own voting ages to 18.

By the time the federal government changed the voting age in 1970, it was not the least bit controversial, and the bill which amended the voting age was passed almost unanimously.

Honourable senators, it is imperative to note that this same consensus does not exist for the current proposal to change the voting age to 16. In fact, this issue has been considered over and over by both Parliament and the courts, and each time the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 has been rejected. In addition to being examined by parliamentary committees, the question of voting age has also been repeatedly posed to both houses of Parliament through legislation, beginning in 1990.

Honourable colleagues, as mentioned by Senator McPhedran in her second reading speech on this issue, the Lortie commission recommended that Parliament should revisit the issue periodically. However, in my view, one special committee, one royal commission and 14 bills before Parliament seem a bit excessive when all of them have so far determined that lowering the voting age is not the way to go.

Furthermore, the question of whether the voting age should be lowered has not only been considered by Parliament; it has also been considered by the courts. After reviewing the court decisions about lowering the voting age all the way up to the Supreme Court level, it is difficult to come to any conclusion other than the fact that, in the court's mind, the issue is settled.

Honourable senators, this debate is not about whether we value young people and their contributions. It is not about feelings of inclusion or acknowledgment. The fundamental question is one of maturity, and that is where our judgment on this bill before us must rest.

• (1440)

The simple fact is that 18 years old is not a perfect age, but it has become the line where society generally recognizes adult responsibility and capacity. As past court decisions have pointed out, under most laws, a person is not considered an adult until 18. Those legal boundaries reflect a broader social judgment: While young people may show great potential — and I saw that during my 21 years as an educator — 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds are still in a formative stage.

The voting age limit is not about underestimating our young people; it is about recognizing developmental reality. Our laws are built upon the principle that full autonomy arrives gradually, not suddenly. Lowering the voting age to 16 would create a patchwork of exceptions that would erode that consistency.

As you know, 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds cannot enter into binding contracts without parental consent. They cannot serve on juries, join the military without permission or buy alcohol or

cannabis. They are treated differently under the Youth Criminal Justice Act and must often rely upon their parents for medical decisions. We cannot simply lower the voting age without realizing that it would introduce legal contradictions that are not inconsequential. It would be like the start of a domino effect, which goes into so many places.

Let me give you an example. Section 3 of the Charter begins by stating the following:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly

But it doesn't stop there. The full text reads:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.

In other words, granting 16-year-olds the right to vote would also grant them the right to sit as parliamentarians. Both rights are anchored together in section 3.

Let me give you another example. In 2021, 13 young Canadians aged 12 to 18 from across Canada launched a constitutional challenge to the federal voting age, which is ongoing to this day. Known as the *Penney-Crocker* case, the case argues that limiting the right to vote based upon age is discriminatory and unjustifiable, especially as children represent nearly a quarter of the population yet remain disenfranchised.

Normally, because most of the litigants were under the age of 18 when the case began, a litigation guardian would have been appointed to represent their interests and make decisions on their behalf during the litigation process. A litigation guardian is required in court proceedings when a party involved is considered to be "under a disability," meaning that they legally cannot manage their own legal affairs or represent themselves. This typically includes minors and individuals who are mentally incapable of making decisions related to the proceedings.

However, early in the proceedings, the court was asked by the plaintiffs to dispense with the requirement for a litigation guardian, and the government did not oppose the motion.

This illustrates the legal contradictions that lowering the voting age will introduce. Recognizing 16-year-olds as voters creates a compelling argument that they may also possess sufficient judgment and capacity to participate in court proceedings without a guardian, especially if their capacity to fulfill their civic duties is seen as indicative of their overall maturity. This argument could influence legal reforms or judicial decisions to lower the age or waive the guardian requirement, aligning the legal decision-making age with voting rights and other civil capacities.

Even UNICEF, which supports the lowering of the voting age, has acknowledged that doing so would introduce these legal contradictions. In their 2024 report entitled *Lowering the Voting Age: UNICEF Canada Policy Brief*, they said that these contradictions highlight a complex interplay between extending democratic participation to younger citizens and maintaining protective legal frameworks that treat those under 18 as minors

needing special protection, such as litigation guardianship in court. The move to lower the voting age would require careful legislative and policy adjustments to resolve conflicts between these different areas of law and practice.

That, honourable senators, should give us pause.

Based upon some of the speeches presented thus far in support of this bill, we are left with the impression that granting voting rights to 16-year-olds is a rising tide that will eventually carry us all, and we just need to acknowledge it and get on board. To quote Senator McPhedran, “Since the introduction of my first Vote16 bill, the worldwide trend of expanding voting rights has continued to grow. . . .”

She noted there are now 17 countries that have lowered their voting age, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Nicaragua, the Isle of Man, Guernsey, Jersey, Malta, Scotland, Wales, Slovenia and Switzerland — it’s quite a list. In addition, the U.K. government has also confirmed its intention to lower the voting age to 16 before the next general election.

I’ll admit that at first glance, this can seem like a compelling argument, but I believe we need to look a little deeper to properly understand the context of what happened in each of these countries that lowered their voting age to 16.

In the Dominican Republic, 16-year-olds can only vote if they are married. In Estonia, they can only vote in some local elections. In Germany, they can vote in some local and state elections and in EU elections for the European Parliament. In Hungary, 16-year-olds must be married to vote. In Slovenia, 16-year-olds cannot vote if they are unemployed. In Switzerland, 16-year-olds can only vote in the canton of Glarus and only for cantonal and local elections. On the Isle of Man, it is local elections only. In Guernsey, it is for local elections only. In Jersey, it is for local elections only. In Scotland, it is for the Scottish Parliament and local elections only. In Wales, it applies to the Welsh Parliament and local elections only.

Do you see the pattern, honourable senators?

As noted in a September 2025 research briefing by the U.K. House of Commons Library, “Few countries so far have lowered the voting age for national elections.” A 2024 OECD publication clarifies that the minimum age to vote in national elections is 18 years old in all OECD countries, except Austria which is 16 years old and Greece which is 17 years old. Furthermore, if you look at those countries that have lowered their voting age for national elections, almost all of those were preceded by earlier changes to the voting age at the local or subnational level.

This trend of beginning on a local or subnational level is not without exception, but it is very consistent.

Consider our own history: When Canada lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1970, that decision did not appear overnight; it was the culmination of 25 years of gradual change. Provinces had already moved in that direction. As I said earlier, Alberta did so in 1944, Saskatchewan did so in 1945, British Columbia did so in 1952 and several others did so soon after. By the time

Parliament acted, the idea was neither new nor controversial; it reflected the broad acceptance that 18 years old was the new standard of adulthood.

Here is why that is significant to our debate: In my view, a shift in the voting age should reflect public consensus, not an attempt to create it. It should follow a visible evolution in social norms and civic practices, not try to lead them by legislative decree.

We have not seen that process with this proposal to lower the voting age to 16.

• (1450)

The most recent comprehensive findings are from the Elections Canada 2021 *Generation Z* report, showing 50% support among 16- and 17-year-olds but under 25% among those 35 years of age and older.

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator Martin, your time has expired. Would you like more time to finish your speech?

Senator Martin: Yes, I appeal to my colleagues to grant me a bit more time.

The Hon. the Speaker: Is leave granted?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Martin: Thank you, colleagues.

I would note that no provinces have moved to lower their voting age for provincial elections. That’s a really important point. Only a few municipalities have experimented with youth engagement, but none have extended the franchise yet. Some may. I have heard that Vancouver is considering it, but that has not yet happened.

By contrast, in countries often cited as examples, such as the United Kingdom, changes at the national level came only after years of experience at the local level. Here in Canada, there is no comparable pattern. Adopting this change federally would put Parliament ahead of public sentiment and provincial practice. It would invert the natural order of democratic reform, which, I believe, is a dangerous thing.

I would propose that if lowering the voting age is indeed the right path, then let it begin where democratic participation is most immediate: at the local level through municipal experiments and provincial debates. Let Canadians see the results. Let the case be made, tested and proven — not imposed.

I was going to talk about my personal experience as a teacher. I won’t go into all that, except to say that we have to remember that 16- and 17-year-olds are a captive audience in a classroom. They often spend more time with teachers than they do with other adults in their lives, including their own parents, so we would also need to prepare the classrooms and the educational system to be able to accommodate and ensure the integrity of what happens in schools. If they were to be allowed to vote, we would have to prepare for that. My colleagues in the teaching system are amazing professionals, but I do know that preparations need to be made.

Instead of lowering the voting age to 16, we should continue to do exactly what has already been happening: Let's engage our young people through education, such as participating in excellent programs like student votes, mock debates, youth parliaments and other experiential learning programs and conferences, through volunteering and leadership experiences, like student councils and district councils, so that, when they do cast their first ballot at the age of 18, they do so with the full maturity and independence that citizenship deserves.

Colleagues, though I could not expand on everything, I ask you to consider my reasoning for why I cannot support Bill S-222 at second reading. Thank you.

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator McPhedran, do you have a question?

Hon. Marilou McPhedran: Is there enough time for Senator Martin to take a question?

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator Martin, will you take a question? If so, you will need to request leave for more time.

Senator Martin: Yes, I realize how close we are to three o'clock, so maybe one question, Senator McPhedran. I would like to request more time.

The Hon. the Speaker: Is leave granted for one question?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator McPhedran: Thank you very much. Senator Martin, for your speech, your thoughtful comments and the strong opinions you've expressed.

Are you aware of the fact that in Canada there are now 17 municipalities that have voted in favour of extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds?

Senator Martin: I stand corrected then. I knew Vancouver was considering it, but that's a good number. That also supports my position that we should absolutely look at what we can do municipally and then let the provinces make those decisions. Then, as the federal Parliament, we can look at that after a great deal of progress has been made. I'm happy to hear that has happened, and thank you for your activism and passion on this issue.

Senator McPhedran: Is there time for an additional question?

The Hon. the Speaker: You asked leave for one question. Senator Martin, will you take another question? If so, you will need to request leave for more time again.

Senator Martin: If the chamber is willing, I request more time.

The Hon. the Speaker: Is leave granted?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator McPhedran: Thank you. Senator Martin, you've expressed a preference for how the Senate and the federal level of government should process change. Is there anything in the

way of procedural or legal requirements indicating that change must occur first at the municipal level, then at the provincial level and only then at the federal level?

Senator Martin: In response, I will simply say this: Of the countries that have lowered their voting age federally, we have consistently seen that it begins from the ground up. It makes sense that younger voters can be engaged in schools and their local communities. To me, that just seems to be the natural progression, rather than the Senate imposing it on the nation without the readiness I've identified in various areas, which suggests that we do need to prepare as a country. Seventeen municipalities is great progress, and we shall see what happens going forward.

(On motion of Senator Carignan, debate adjourned.)

CAN'T BUY SILENCE BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator McPhedran, seconded by the Honourable Senator Pate, for the second reading of Bill S-232, An Act respecting non-disclosure agreements.

Hon. Kim Pate: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak in support of Bill S-232. Thank you, Senator McPhedran, for your leadership on this issue and your tireless work to shine a light on the harms, injustices and inequalities that non-disclosure agreements cause, as they too often obscure and protect and thereby perpetuate abuse.

Non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs, originated in the 1980s as a means of protecting the markets and profits of tech businesses in Silicon Valley, preventing employees and others from divulging trade secrets.

In 1984 U.S. Federal Judge Miles Lord issued a courtroom reprimand exposing settlement agreements that the A. H. Robins Company used to silence women injured by the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device. Judge Lord stated:

If one poor young man were, without authority or consent, to inflict such damage upon one woman, he would be jailed for a good portion of the rest of his life. Yet your company, without warning to women, invaded their bodies by the millions and caused them injuries by the thousands. And when the time came for these women to make their claims against your company, you attacked their characters. You inquired into their sexual practices and into the identity of their sex partners. You ruined families and reputations and careers in order to intimidate those who would raise their voices against you.

Then, in a situation that simply beggars belief, Judge Lord himself was subsequently silenced. On appeal, the company that had injured and killed women succeeded in convincing the court to strike the judge's comments and expunge the record. Since then, the use of NDAs has grown exponentially, forcing silence that primarily serves to protect wealth, power and privilege.

• (1500)

In Canada, the best available data indicate that nearly all sexual harassment settlements include NDAs. Approximately one in two Canadian workers who have experienced harassment or discrimination has been required to sign an NDA as a condition of settlement.

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

The Hon. the Speaker: Senator Pate, I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Honourable senators, pursuant to the order of February 11, 2026, I leave the chair for the Senate to resolve into a Committee of the Whole on the subject matter of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act. The Honourable Senator Cormier will chair the committee.

INCOME TAX ACT

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 François-Philippe Champagne, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance and National Revenue, accompanied by at most two officials, to consider the subject matter of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act.

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

The Chair: Honourable senators, the Senate is resolved into a Committee of the Whole in order to study the subject matter of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act.

Honourable senators, in a Committee of the Whole, senators shall address the chair but need not stand. Under the Rules, the speaking time is 10 minutes, including questions and answers, but, as ordered, if a senator does not use all of their time, the balance may be yielded to another senator. The committee will receive the Honourable François-Philippe Champagne, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance and National Revenue. I would now invite Minister Champagne to enter, accompanied by his officials.

[Senator Pate]

(Pursuant to the order of the Senate, the Honourable François-Philippe Champagne and his officials were escorted to seats in the Senate Chamber.)

The Chair: Minister, on behalf of all senators, welcome to the Senate.

As I have informed my colleagues, the question-and-answer period will be divided into 10-minute blocks. These blocks will be shared between two or three senators and will include time for your responses. I thank the honourable senators and minister for their concise questions and concise answers.

I would ask you to make your opening remarks of at most five minutes.

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance and National Revenue: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's always a privilege and a pleasure to be among you, honourable senators. As you know, Mr. Chair, there will be three votes in the House of Commons, so there will be some interruptions. Out of respect for my colleagues, I wanted to mention that off the top and remind them that I'll have to excuse myself for a few moments.

Before I begin, Mr. Chair, I would like to say a few words about the tragedy in Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia. The news is shocking, of course, and deeply upsetting for all Canadians. My thoughts are with the families of the victims, the survivors, the students whose lives are forever changed, and the entire community. This has been a difficult week, because there was also another serious incident in a community not far from here.

I'm here today because senators are beginning their study of Bill C-19, the Canada Groceries and Essentials Benefit Act.

[English]

The fact that this legislation is before the Senate today is, in my view, a credit to what members of the House of Commons can accomplish when they work together for Canadians. I am confident that a similar spirit of collaboration will inform the Senate's consideration of this very important bill.

This is the third piece of legislation, Your Honour, that I have had the honour of introducing as the Minister of Finance and National Revenue. The first bill, Bill C-4, put more money into the pockets of Canadians with a middle-class tax cut. The second bill, Bill C-15, which I hope will come to you very soon, is the budget implementation act, which will help lay the groundwork for generational investments included in Budget 2025.

Bill C-19 is a key part of our government's response to a rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain world that is leaving economies, businesses and workers under a cloud of uncertainty. Some would say we live in a more uncertain world than at any time since 1945 or 1989. In other words, Your Honour, we have a long-term vision that is focused on building a strong and resilient Canadian economy while at the same time remaining focused on the more immediate needs of Canadian workers and families.

We know, for example, that, while inflation has cooled since its post-pandemic peak, food inflation remains stubbornly high. Global supply chain shocks caused by tariffs, geopolitical disruptions and climate change have all caused food prices to rise around the world. In fact, a new report by the Bank of Canada found that the majority of recent increases in food prices in this country have been driven by higher import costs rather than domestic pressures.

[Translation]

Our government is focused on what it can control: on building a stronger economy while charting a course to a less dependent and, naturally, more resilient economy. That's why we're proposing to create the Canada groceries and essentials benefit. All told, more than 12 million Canadians will benefit from it. With Bill C-19, we're putting forward a responsible and pragmatic approach that tackles the long-term structural deficit while recognizing the need for action now, to help Canadians struggling with the cost of living.

[English]

It is both a bridge and a median boost.

[Translation]

As you know, this new benefit will replace the GST credit. What's important, however, is that it'll be more generous in order to address the current situation. As honourable senators know, the GST credit is one way to make our tax system fairer. With Bill C-19, we propose to increase this benefit by 25% for five years, starting in July 2026.

This year, we're going to offer an additional one-time payment amounting to 50% of the current benefit. Since 2020, excess inflation has cost the average household \$782. That is precisely what we're going to try to offset for Canadian families and households. All things considered, it's going to make a big difference.

[English]

Right now, a person living alone who is eligible for the GST credit can receive a maximum of \$443 for the 2026-27 benefit year. With Bill C-19, that same person would receive approximately \$950 in total from the one-time payment and the support provided for the 2026-27 benefit year, which includes the 25% increase in benefits. For a couple with two children, the amount would increase from approximately \$1,086 to \$1,890. As Food Banks Canada recently indicated, these sums would make a meaningful difference in the lives of Canadians, especially those who are more vulnerable.

Your Honour, I see you looking at me. That means that my time is probably up, so I will say this: Let's seize the moment. Let's be there for Canadians at a time of need, and together, let's build Canada strong. I will be more than pleased to take questions from the honourable senators.

[Translation]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, minister.

Senator Housakos: Welcome to the Senate, minister. It is always a pleasure to see you.

[English]

Minister, your government presented Budget 2025 as an essential affordability plan, yet in 405 pages, there was no mention of a permanent expansion of the GST credit of the kind now proposed in Bill C-19. Now, just three months later, your government is adding a roughly \$12-billion measure to Canada's fiscal framework. Budget 2025 projected a deficit of \$78.3 billion. With the immediate \$3-billion impact of Bill C-19 and additional commitments, such as the new EV subsidies, that deficit will be pushed higher.

I have a very simple question: What is the government's updated projected deficit for this fiscal year?

Mr. Champagne: Honourable senator, when you are in government, you have to make choices. This is a choice we are making. We are choosing Canadians. I am glad to say that even the opposition approved of that measure. Your colleagues in the House of Commons saw fit to support Canadians in this time of need.

You know that the pressure on affordability is the main concern of G7 countries. I can tell you, as a member of the G7 — and I chaired as the G7 finance minister last year — this is the concern of everyone. If you look at Canadian families, you will see that their first concern is with respect to shelter. Their second concern is food. After that, you would go to car loan payments, cellphone bills and student loans.

• (1510)

The first thing we did when we came into government was to cut taxes for 22 million Canadians. That measure is helping 12 million Canadians across the board. We did it using a vehicle that is well known to you, senator, and Canadians, which is the GST tax credit.

Let me tell you about the thinking behind it. We looked at the numbers and saw that if you look at the excess food inflation since COVID, it was about \$782. That's what we tried to do. That's the boost. The bridge is that, obviously, we have a vision to 2030 to increase GDP per capita with the investments that we expect and plan to see coming into the Canadian economy. That's why it is both a boost and a bridge for Canadians to be able to benefit from the increase in GDP in Canada.

[Translation]

Senator Housakos: Minister, my second question is on foreign investment, which has been in sharp decline for the past 10 years. It is very worrisome. The lack of foreign investment in Canada is one of the reasons our dollar is falling. To me, one of the primary reasons the cost of living and the cost of groceries keep going up is that our dollar is so weak. Why is this problematic situation not a priority for the government? Why not try to attract more foreign investment?

Mr. Champagne: That's an excellent question, senator. Over the past six months, we have signed 12 strategic agreements on four continents. When I was in Europe and the Middle East with the Prime Minister recently, it became clear that Canada is the envy of the world. Canada attracts talent. Canada is one of the few G7 countries with a manufacturing industry that produces cars, ships and aircraft. Canada is one of the few countries that have the critical minerals that will be needed for the 21st-century economy. Canada has an abundance of energy resources and is the only G7 country that has free trade agreements with all other G7 countries.

Let me give you some examples. I was with the CEO of Volkswagen and we discussed some very significant investments. You know, the largest of the so-called mega-factories outside of Germany will be located in Canada. We're talking about an \$8-billion to \$9-billion investment in St. Thomas, Ontario.

I could give you a long list of examples. If you look at what BHP has invested in Canada, what Shell has done with LNG Canada Phase 2 and the discussions we're having with various investors, it's obvious that, in today's world, stability, predictability and the rule of law are in demand, and supply is quite limited. Canada therefore stands out in that regard.

Indeed, in Budget 2025, which you will have the opportunity to review during your consideration of Bill C-15, you will notice many measures that put Canada ahead of the game. Canada has the second-highest growth rate in the G7 according to the International Monetary Fund. Canada also has a lower marginal tax rate than any other G7 country. Given the productivity deduction we proposed, if you talk to CEOs — and I know that you know a number of CEOs around the world — you will see that Canada is a leader and is in an enviable position within the new economy compared to a number of other countries.

[English]

Senator Housakos: I cede the balance of my time to Senator MacDonald.

Senator MacDonald: Minister, welcome to the Senate.

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, sir.

Senator MacDonald: Since 2022, your government has implemented four time-limited expansions of the GST credit. In 2023, you summoned grocery CEOs to Ottawa and threatened them with consequences if food inflation remains above headline inflation, and food bank usage has reached record levels. Our food inflation is twice that of the U.S. and the highest in the G7.

Why should Canadians now believe that this latest cash transfer will succeed where previous high-profile interventions failed to reduce grocery prices or halt the exploding reliance on food banks in this country?

Mr. Champagne: Senator, you would know that food inflation across the G7 is a complex set of circumstances and one of the challenges that Canada is facing. There are the benefits we are increasing, but we are also making structural changes. Having talked to farmers' associations in the country, that's why we're putting \$500 million to increase our supply chain in Canada. You would know that, in terms of produce, Canada imports about 30% a year. When winter comes, we import 80% to 90% of our produce in Canada. Therefore, we're subject to currency fluctuations. We're subject to trade measures. We're subject to drought. That's why we wanted to provide this bridge and a boost to Canadians.

At the same time, you will see, for example, we did the immediate expensing for greenhouses, something that the industry has applauded, and we're also making more structural changes so that food security is top of mind. I know the people you represent, and it is true where I come from — but I would say when I talk to different premiers across the nation, they would certainly applaud the focus of the government on food security and being a bit more resilient. When you look at the numbers, you would see that about 50% of the food inflation that you have noticed is with respect to very few items. They are beef, pork, chicken, coffee, somewhat sugar and lettuce. But they represent only 10% of the CPI basket.

We need to do more. We need to produce more. We need to become more resilient as a nation. That's why this bill, with the approval of the Senate, will allow Canada to become more resilient in a very challenging world.

Senator MacDonald: Thank you, minister. You are also asking Parliament to authorize a one-time payment plus a five-year 25% increase in maximum GST credit amounts at a projected cost of \$11 billion to \$12 billion over the next few years. How does the government plan to pay for this measure? Will you cut spending? Will you increase taxes? Are you just going to continue to print money? We know what money does: It drives inflation.

Mr. Champagne: I'm happy, senator, that you pointed to savings. I'm sure you have seen that in Budget 2025, but in Bill C-15, this government has been able to identify \$60 billion of savings. I would say if you compare that with what Prime Minister Chrétien did at the time or what Prime Minister Harper did, we have done that in record time and at a similar level or above what was done at the time. This was warranted. We took tough decisions to bring back the finances of Canada to a sustainable level.

I would also refer you to the International Monetary Fund. Canada is the only country of the G7, along with Germany, with a AAA credit rating, the lowest net debt-to-GDP ratio and one of the lowest deficit-to-GDP ratios. I can tell you that when I sit at the G7, everyone wants my job, but it is not going to happen. They all like Canada. They see Canada with a very strong foundation, and, also, Canada is what people want.

I go back to talent. We have the most educated workforce, critical minerals, energy, which is a proxy for growth.

I would say, despite the headwinds that the world is facing, when you compare Canada to other G7 nations, that's why I feel confident. I know that we all believe in Canada. I believe in Canada, and I'm sure every member of this house believes in Canada. We will build Canada strong together.

Senator MacDonald: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Senator Oudar: Good afternoon, minister, and welcome.

The Chair: Senator, I'm sorry to interrupt. I believe that the minister has parliamentary obligations to attend to.

Go ahead, minister. We will pick up where we left off as soon as we can.

(The committee suspended.)

(The committee resumed.)

• (1520)

Senator Oudar: Thank you again, minister, for joining us this afternoon and for answering our questions.

Bill C-19 provides that only eligible individuals who filed a tax return can receive the benefit. As you know, however, millions of low-income Canadians don't file annual tax returns, often because they lack the necessary resources or tax knowledge, which deprives them of essential benefits that they're entitled to receive.

I want to congratulate you on the budget. Some people have announced a phase-in of automatic prefilled tax returns expected to reach 5.5 million people by 2028. Has the government estimated the number of low-income individuals who would have been eligible under Bill C-19 during the transition period leading up to that deadline, and who would therefore be excluded from receiving payments during that period?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you. My apologies, I didn't mean to interrupt you earlier, senator.

Senator Oudar: All is forgiven.

Mr. Champagne: That's an excellent question. First, the automatic filing project came out of a concept dating back to when we asked the Canada Revenue Agency for a 100-day plan.

At the time, I asked for ways to improve processes and technology to see how we could help Canadian families. I was told that there was a pilot project under way to make it easier for people to file their tax returns. That's when we decided to change the pilot project into a program so that it could be extended to as many Canadians as possible.

We have set a target of 5.5 million people by 2028. I think it's moving as quickly as possible. There will certainly be people who will gradually be able to file their tax returns automatically. We based our approach on what the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, are doing. You're right, this is something we will continue to promote because, as you said, many Canadian individuals and families could benefit from the tax credit.

I would point out, honourable senators, that one of the reasons we used the GST rebate as a vehicle is because it is familiar and fast. There's no need to create a new formula, because one has been in place since 1991. We already had a vehicle to get it done quickly. Canadian families have told us that they understand our 2030 vision and they support our plan to build the country, but they need immediate help.

As some of your colleagues have already mentioned, the Food Banks Canada report talks about support that will really make a difference for families. That money will flow quickly, depending on the vote in the Senate and Royal Assent. That's why the House made such a wise choice. We all know it's crucial to help people now, while continuing to grow the Canadian economy. However, I can assure you that we will advertise to make sure —

The Chair: Thank you, minister.

Senator Loffreda: Welcome to the Senate, minister.

[*English*]

Affordability is a concern for Canadians, and grocery inflation remains a serious concern. Bill C-19 directly helps affordability through increased GST-style benefits and other affordability-enhancing measures.

It is well known that two major challenges in Canada are productivity and lack of competition in certain sectors. A few years ago, you were contemplating measures or government initiatives to attract foreign grocers. Is there any update on these initiatives? I do applaud your food security resilience measures that you have taken.

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, senator, for that. I said at the time it's hard work, but it's worth doing. We need to push for more competition, not only at the grocery store level but in the whole supply chain. It is a fairly complex supply chain, but we need to keep the pressure on.

I'll give you an example. Some foreign grocers had looked at the Canadian market in some detail, but you know what? They found out that what we call restrictive covenants in leases were not allowing them to go into what they call "Site A" premises. That's why we changed the law to make sure we would push for more competition because, believe it or not, that has led to what they call "food deserts." If you had a major grocery chain leave a commercial centre, the restrictive covenant in the lease would continue. No one could take the premises within a certain radius.

We have learned. We have adapted, I would say. We made sure that we have done more. Today, the Competition Bureau is on top of these covenants to make sure that whenever they see something that would restrict competition, they can act.

I am just giving you some of the challenges we were facing at the time. People will say — and it is true, I did have conversations with a number of them — that there were structural issues that we needed to remove; we did that. We always encourage the Competition Bureau to do more because — you are right — it is a complex change, but changes like that with respect to restrictive covenants in leases are the kinds of things that make a difference over the mid-to-long term.

[Translation]

Senator Forest: Thank you for being here to contribute to our discussion, minister. It is very helpful.

Enhancing the GST credit to help low-income families is an excellent initiative, but it is still a temporary solution to a structural problem. It also promotes competition. With that in mind, why not eliminate or simplify taxes on food, as some experts are proposing? It is rather absurd that a muffin sold for \$4 is taxable, while another sold for \$3.80 is not.

Can you tell us whether other more structural measures are being considered to tackle inflation in the food sector?

Mr. Champagne: That's an excellent question, senator. We looked at all possibilities to help families. As you know, the tax rate on food is zero in most cases, except for prepared foods, which have a different rate. However, our analysis revealed that the fastest and broadest way to help families, since it affects 12 million Canadians, was with a measure that could be introduced immediately.

I believe that leaving money in people's pockets so they can make their own choices is a good thing. People can choose the products they can afford to consume. I assure you that we assessed this carefully, because there were different solutions for tackling the problem of food inflation. We concluded that this was the most effective way to do so.

I'd like to come back to what you pointed out, senator, regarding the fact that the bill you're going to be studying also contains more lasting measures. I spoke with Martin Caron,

the president of the Union des producteurs agricoles, who gave me some ideas about what structural changes could be made. He said that there needs to be more slaughtering, we need more resources to produce fruits and vegetables in Canada and we need more refrigerated sites. Many measures have also been put in place to provide immediate assistance to families, because making lasting changes for Canadian families is all well and good, but they are still somewhat out of reach.

We have therefore found a good balance between structural measures — such as greater food self-sufficiency — and faster assistance for people, because, as you know, their primary concern is food. This is an almost daily concern, unlike concerns about rent, which are monthly. There is constant pressure on families, which is why we wanted to respond in a timely, rapid but also structural manner.

Senator Forest: Thank you.

The Chair: Honourable senators, we're going to suspend the sitting until the minister has attended to his parliamentary obligations. We'll pick up where we left off as soon as possible.

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

(The committee suspended.)

(The committee resumed.)

• (1530)

Senator Gignac: Good afternoon, minister. Thank you for being with us today.

Most tax experts and economists agree that the temporary increase in the GST credit provided in Bill C-19 is an excellent way to help families and probably more appropriate than a temporary reduction in the GST, as we saw a few quarters ago. On the other hand, the public purse will lose \$12 billion in revenue over the next five years. Can you assure us that the federal government can afford such a measure without jeopardizing its viability or even its AAA credit rating?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. At the rate I keep interrupting you, I'm not sure I will ever be invited back.

Thank you for your understanding, Senator Gignac. I was quickly told that there were a few minutes left for voting.

You're absolutely right. You are a renowned economist, senator. You know this better than most in the country. I thank you for informing Canadians so that they can weigh the facts.

Obviously, Canada's fiscal situation is the envy of the G7. As I was saying, Canada is the only country along with Germany that has a AAA credit rating. Our debt-to-GDP ratio is the lowest in the G7. Indeed, we have the capacity to do this.

[Mr. Champagne]

Our economy will grow. People understand our vision for 2030 and the investments we made in Budget 2025.

To give you an idea of its scope, our investment plan in infrastructure, housing, productivity and defence is comparable to that of Germany. The German infrastructure plan is seen around the world as one of the largest. It amounts to roughly €500 billion over 12 years. If you convert to Canadian dollars, their plan is roughly \$800 billion over 12 years. The Canadian plan amounts to roughly \$500 billion over five years. Many would say that Canada's infrastructure and investment plan is the most ambitious in the G7, even without comparing it to Germany's larger economy.

According to statements from the International Monetary Fund, Canada has the fiscal capacity to make that choice today. It is important to be there for people in these difficult times. That is part of our Canadian values.

Senator Gignac: Is your goal of achieving a positive operating balance within four years still viable with this new measure, which will deprive you of revenue, given that it is pretty much the only budgetary anchor we have now, since there's no real target for the debt-to-GDP ratio? Do you still intend to balance your operating balance, meaning that your deficit will be explained solely by capital expenditures within four years?

Mr. Champagne: Absolutely, and it will happen in 2028-29, as stated in the budget.

Senator Gignac: Thank you.

[English]

Senator Al Zaibak: Minister Champagne, welcome back to the Senate. Thank you for your opening remarks.

One of the key policy recommendations made by Food Banks Canada that you referenced earlier was to implement targeted financial support for low-income households, like the Canada groceries and essentials benefit reflected in Bill C-19, providing up to nearly \$1,900 for a family of four and impacting 12 million Canadians, as you have mentioned. To put this into practical perspective, what does this type of money mean for a Canadian family, in your opinion?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, senator, for your comments and the question. If you were to look at Food Banks Canada, they would say it's a meaningful difference.

Thank you also for allowing me to say you have to couple that with the number of measures that we have implemented to help Canadian families. I can only name a few, but think of the Canada Child Benefit, which impacts 6 million families; the National School Food Program, which impacts 400,000 kids; the Canada Disability Benefit, which impacts 465,000 Canadians;

the \$10-a-day child care program, which helps 900,000 families; the Canada Workers Benefit, which impacts 3 million workers; and the Canadian Dental Care Plan, from which 6 million Canadians benefit. This is part of a suite of measures to really bring Canadians along.

It's nice that we talk about the growth of the economy, but I can tell you, if you're like me and talking to people on the street, as I know you do, people say, "Okay, but we need support now."

I do my groceries, and I can assure you that Canadians and people whom I represent come up to me, and that's certainly one of the things they have noticed the most. Rent is the other one. Other things have come down. The price of fuel has come down, the price of cellphone plans has come down, and the price of child care in the provinces that adopted the measure has come down, but we have to accept the fact that millions of Canadians, Canadian families — as you mentioned in the Food Banks Canada report — need our help. I think it's part of our Canadian values.

We have to help each other in times of need, and you've seen the nation come together again this week in a very different context. When it's difficult, we close ranks and we stand with each other. I think that measure is really in the spirit of standing with the most vulnerable Canadians.

Senator Al Zaibak: Thank you. Also, from your perspective, what role do partnerships, especially with provinces, territories and industry, play in addressing the structural measures and challenges you addressed earlier?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you for your question. We put \$500 million from the Strategic Response Fund, for example, to help capacity in the country in terms of food production, and the immediate expensing for greenhouses, which will help to produce more food in the country. We hope that provinces and municipalities will join with us because these are structural measures. We're looking at a national food security strategy, which will be coming, to ensure that our country becomes more resilient.

However, food security is something which is top of mind for Canadians, I think, as well as economic security and energy security, and I think people are really mindful of us becoming more resilient as a nation.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Senator Miville-Dechêne: Welcome, minister.

Bill C-19 will undoubtedly help families breathe a little easier when doing their grocery shopping. I am delighted about that, of course. However, this policy doesn't address the root causes of this rapid rise in food prices. There are, of course, causes beyond our control, such as geopolitical tensions and climate change. However, domestically, are there not also grocery chains that are raking in excessive profits? Does our dependence on food imports in winter contribute to inflated prices? What are you doing in this regard to achieve greater affordability?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, senator. I think you hit on two essential points.

The first is competition. We must always increase competition in the grocery sector.

The second is slightly more direct and immediate measures that are structural. As I was saying, after speaking to Quebec's Union des producteurs agricoles, we could see that some sectors need structural measures. The \$500-million fund will certainly help. We talked about things like slaughterhouses in certain regions, refrigeration and transportation.

The foods that have caused the most inflation are beef, pork, chicken, lettuce, coffee and sugar. Some things will always have to be imported, and that makes us more vulnerable to global fluctuations, such as climate change, exchange rates and trade restrictions. That said, investing in things like our greenhouse production and more resilient supply chains and introducing a grocery code of conduct are some of the measures that will work together to help us become more resilient. It is in the national interest to make the country's food production and distribution systems much more resilient.

Senator Miville-Dechêne: What will you do in five years? What makes you think that inflation will stabilize or that the poverty rate will fall? It will be hard to turn back the clock.

Mr. Champagne: Indeed. In English we said that we wanted to raise the amount in order to offset the \$782 in excess food inflation. At the same time, we provided a bridge. Based on our vision, we are sure that the Canadian economy will have grown by 2030. Economic growth will raise the per capita GDP and create wealth in the country. That was the idea behind the measure.

• (1540)

Senator Miville-Dechêne: Thank you, minister.

[*English*]

Senator Cardozo: Minister, welcome back to the Senate. I want to ask you a few questions about the bill. I compliment you on the bill. I think you're focusing on low-income people, but I'd like to focus on youth and ask about expanding the Canada Summer Jobs program, either through this bill or the budget implementation bill.

You're well aware that the youth unemployment rate is double that of Canadians at large, and that certainly results in young people being discouraged and frustrated about the future of their country and their future in this country. I'm asking you if you would consider — and I don't need a "yes" or "no" now; I want you to think about this — doubling the number of students who would benefit from 100,000 to 200,000, doubling the number of weeks so they all have 16 weeks. I am asking for you to take a leadership role with your provincial and territorial counterparts, as well as the private sector, and ask them all to engage in a national project. Right now, the projects that are outlined in the budget cover about 10% of unemployed youth. There's a lot we're not covering. We need a national approach to deal with this crisis.

I think you have a vote coming up.

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne, P.C., M.P., Minister of Finance and National Revenue: I do have a vote. Is it okay if I excuse myself, Mr. Chair?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Yes. We'll suspend again and allow the minister to vote. We'll resume when he returns.

(The committee suspended.)

(The committee resumed.)

[*English*]

The Chair: Senator Cardozo, please complete your question.

Senator Cardozo: I completed my question, but I will summarize it. Would you consider convening your provincial and territorial counterparts, as well as the private sector, to take a major new initiative to deal with the crisis of youth unemployment?

POINT OF ORDER—CHAIR'S RULING

Senator Downe: Your Honour, I rise on a point of order. During Committee of the Whole, we're to deal with the issue before us. The scope of Senator Cardozo's question is outside of Bill C-19.

Senator Cardozo: With respect, and to respond to that, at the beginning, I asked the minister if he would consider including in this bill or in another measure the specific issue of the cost of living and affordability for young Canadians.

The Chair: Are there other senators who want to comment on this point of order?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Honourable senators, in light of the comments, I understand the concerns expressed. But I believe that, given that we are studying the subject matter of the bill, I will invite Senator Cardozo and the minister to continue.

CONSIDERATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Mr. Champagne: Thank you. I apologize again for the interruption. Democracy is alive and well in Canada.

[*English*]

Senator, I want to thank you for your very pointed question with respect to youth. You are quite right to note that young Canadians are facing affordability challenges. Like I said in the other house, there's good news coming, which you will see in a bill that will come to your floor very soon. We've launched a youth climate corps that will add 175,000 placements to Canada Summer Jobs. We are looking at a youth employment and skills strategy.

The fundamental point of your question is that a nation that wants to prosper always needs to think about its young people. The key measure — the first one we did — was the tax cut helping 22 million Canadians. But I can assure you, senator, that this is front and centre. If we want to build a strong Canada, we need strong youth talent and a strong workforce. Like I said, there's good news coming in a bill that will cross your desk very shortly, I hope.

Senator Cardozo: I want to continue and comment on an answer you gave a few minutes ago to one of my colleagues. You talked about a number of measures that this government has taken, this bill, Bill C-19, being one of them.

I find that your government sometimes forgets to outline that this is an affordability agenda, which you have had for 10 years, but you tend not to use that language. There have been a number of measures taken, this being the latest, so do you think you could use that language more and talk about the affordability agenda you have?

Mr. Champagne: Definitely, senator. I think your question highlights a point. I went through a list of measures that deal with affordability. Our housing strategy is also about affordability, because if you think about a family, the biggest expense they will face is usually about housing. So, by increasing the stock of housing, for example, families will have to dedicate less of their disposable income if they can find affordable homes. You're quite right that it's not just the measures that I've listed; it's also about Build Canada Homes and a number of other measures we have taken that will support affordability in the country.

I take your point that it's us; we need to do better in highlighting the different measures. We are very mindful that for Canadians, it's shelter and food. Those are what they see the most. Therefore, we have taken measures for those in this bill as well as in the bill that will come to the Senate very soon. Those support affordability in a broad base.

Senator Cardozo: In closing, it's less about the political support for government; I'm concerned about the view that young people have about their government. You're speaking on behalf of the government, and it's really important that you relate the role of what you're doing on behalf of the people. Thank you.

[Translation]

Senator Carignan: Minister, thank you for being here. It's always a pleasure to see you. My colleagues asked questions about the fact that the government is investing \$12 billion and making transfers, but there doesn't seem to be a strategy to address the structural aspect of inflation. We're not seeing a comprehensive plan to overhaul the tax system or the GST cuts.

You talked about a few measures, but it seems like you're looking for band-aid solutions. There's no vision for structural change to address the drivers of inflation. Am I wrong about that?

• (1550)

Mr. Champagne: With all due respect, yes, you are.

Senator, we did hold consultations. I would invite you to speak with the Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec, for example, which helped shape new structural measures. The \$500 million in the strategic response fund is for structural measures, specifically slaughterhouses in the regions and food distribution.

Are you trying to say that we could do more? Of course we could. That's why we said we will also create a national food security strategy. You know as well as I do that we import 30% of the fruits and vegetables we eat — up to 80% or even 90% in the winter. That's a real issue, a vulnerability that we are trying to address. We're also looking at domestic meat production and how we can work with the industry to increase production. As I said, 50% of inflation is driven by just a few commodities.

Senator Carignan: Yes, you did say that, namely beef, pork, lettuce and coffee.

Mr. Champagne: Yes, that's right.

Senator Carignan: Thank you.

As a final point, I will go back to groceries. My colleague Senator Forest gave the example of muffins earlier today. There are a number of other inconsistencies when it comes to GST on groceries. For example, this glass of water I have here is not taxable. However, that one, because it has bubbles, is taxable. Putting bubbles in a glass of water doesn't make it champagne. It's still water.

Mr. Champagne: I've heard a lot about champagne in my life, but that's a first.

Senator Carignan: When a mom purchases a box of four cakes, it's taxed, but a box of six is not. There are many examples like that. The little individual fruit juice that goes into a child's school lunch box is taxed, but the 1.6-litre container is not. The poor mom isn't going to put the 1.6-litre container in her child's lunch box.

Why don't you do a complete review of all the GST on basic groceries? It makes no sense. When you explain this to people, they say it's completely crazy. Pardon the expression. As Minister of Finance and National Revenue, you collect that money. You must feel somewhat uncomfortable about that when you realize how nonsensical it all is.

Mr. Champagne: The two aren't mutually exclusive, senator. This is a direct measure. If you look at the amount of money involved and the average family grocery basket, you'd agree with me that a measure like this one is more structural. The experts we consulted said that the GST credit allows more tax fairness than a one-time approach would.

Of course, we considered this measure. However, the choice we made and which your Senate colleagues approved is more transformative than one-time measures. I'm not saying that we can't look at the points you raised. It's just that we wanted to come up with a measure that would help families right away. This measure will help 12 million Canadians. You know the numbers as well as I do. For a family, this can be a considerable amount. That's an amount that can make a big difference.

When the measures that you're talking about were taken, there were public health issues. You'll no doubt tell me that the size of the packages has changed since then. You've noticed some inconsistencies. In a structural sense, however, we saw it as a way to get money into the pockets of more people faster than a one-time measure could in some regards.

Senator Carignan: I understand that, minister. However, as the title of your bill indicates, these measures are intended for groceries and essentials. Now, you're sending out cheques. How do you know people won't buy lottery tickets with that amount? Those aren't essential items. The program will give out money and perhaps even contribute to increasing inflation, incidentally, but it won't necessarily be used for the essentials. If we removed the GST from grocery items, we would in fact be dealing with the essentials.

I will give you another example: clothing. The clothes we buy are taxed, and when children outgrow their clothes, parents sometimes donate them to an organization. The organization then resells the used clothes, and you tax them again. It makes no sense. Are you also considering removing taxes on used products?

Mr. Champagne: Are we looking at certain measures that could help families? Always.

You mentioned two specific examples. I can tell you that we have looked at more structural ways to help families. That is the measure you see in Bill C-19 today. I'm certain you will agree that there are few measures that can be adopted quickly that will affect so many people.

This is a measure that will affect 12 million Canadians. Canadians need this money. I trust Canadians, senator. I agree that some people may use this money for other things. However, when I look at the people who work at Canadian food banks, those who are truly in touch with folks, I understand why your colleagues in the House unanimously supported such a measure.

Senator Carignan: I'm not saying this measure won't be effective at all, but you seem to be in band-aid mode rather than comprehensive solution mode. Band-aids are taxed, by the way. I don't see a strategy or vision that would really tackle the cost of essential goods and groceries. That's not what I see in this bill. I see a one-time distribution of money that might even end up being inflationary.

[Mr. Champagne]

I'm not saying it's all bad, but you have the power to change things, minister. You have the power to help families put food on the table by reducing costs, eliminating taxes on essential products and removing arbitrary tax measures that no longer make any sense. I am speaking on behalf of the people of Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, senator. They have a very good representative.

[English]

Senator Pate: Thank you for joining us, minister.

It's a cold and stark reality that homelessness continues to skyrocket. Here in Ontario, our largest city has seen 50% more people on the streets in this frigid weather than during the height of the pandemic. In northern Ontario, 117% more people — especially Indigenous Peoples — are homeless. Research by Dr. Zhao at the University of British Columbia has demonstrated that cash transfers of as little as \$7,500 have not only allowed people on the streets to find adequate housing but also saved governments money.

This year, Bill C-19 will provide a maximum of an extra \$417 for a single person. What concrete human, health, social and financial benefits have you projected with respect to those facing homelessness and poverty, and how will the government collect and share data regarding these outcomes?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, Senator Pate. You've touched on a serious topic in our country: homelessness. Bill C-19 must be seen as a suite of measures to support affordability for Canadians. Honourable senators commented on that earlier. One shouldn't look at Bill C-19 in isolation but rather as a suite of measures. The Senate will consider Bill C-15 fairly soon, I hope, and you will see, for example, a number of measures allowing more construction in this country.

I agree with you that building more affordable homes is probably one of the largest drivers of affordability. Senator Carignan was mentioning boutique things that you can do, but if we increase the stock of affordable homes in this country — and I'm not saying just marginally — at the scale that we need to ensure everyone can find a place they can afford which is suited to their needs, this will probably be the most important measure around affordability.

• (1600)

We are happy to do our part. But I also hear you, senator, about the wraparound, as we call it, where provinces and municipalities need to come around. We can provide the infrastructure and housing, but there will need to be wraparound services for these people to ensure we provide them the best chance once they have an affordable place to live.

We will work with provinces to ensure that there is a system to support people. Even in my own riding, I have seen — which Senator Carignan was mentioning — places like that where we have built affordable homes with the municipalities. The charitable sector came and provided those kinds of wraparound services. It is extraordinary what it does to people. It is dignity. It is autonomy. It provides them with a new start in life.

That's why you will soon see other measures that will complement. I appreciate that now we are just looking at one piece of the bigger puzzle, but when you put all the pieces together, I think it will do something good for the country.

Senator Coyle: Welcome, Minister Champagne. I'm going to build on Senator Oudar's question. Bill C-19 is welcomed by Canadians struggling with the cost of living. The one-time top-up payment and the increase to the Canada groceries and essentials benefit for five years will be very helpful. Both benefits require tax filing. However, 8.6% of people living in poverty are less likely to file their taxes. We know that the federal budget includes the Liberal election promise of rolling out automatic tax filing for about 1 million people in 2027 for the 2026 tax year. This is an important distinction. The one-time top-up payment, however, is linked to the 2025 tax year.

Minister, will the government retroactively pay these Canadians the one-time top-up payment if they did not file their taxes until the next year? Could you tell us how the Canada Revenue Agency, or CRA, is preparing itself to fulfill the promise of automatic tax filing assistance?

Mr. Champagne: Thank you, senator. It is a very good and pointed question.

I will comment on the general frame of what you said in terms of increasing the number of automatic tax filings. Like I said, we started with a pilot, and it is becoming a program. I want to accelerate that to the largest extent possible.

With respect to the CRA, if the chair would allow me, I would like to come back to you in writing because when it comes to the matter of tax administration, I want to be very straight and clear with Canadians. I would have to consult with the Commissioner of the Canada Revenue Agency to ensure that whatever I testify on today is the way that the CRA intends to proceed. If the chair allows me and if you allow me, senator, I will come back to you in writing after having consulted the Commissioner of the Canada Revenue Agency.

Senator Coyle: Thank you. I hope you will encourage them to allow it.

[*Translation*]

Senator Hébert: Good afternoon, minister. I think we need to acknowledge the government's efforts to support the Canadian economy and taxpayers. I understand that the measures in Bill C-19, as you mentioned, are part of a larger whole, and that it all relates back to Bill C-4 and Bill C-15. In fact, I want to come back to that.

The lower rate of the first tax bracket affects all taxpayers in Canada, including the wealthiest. I've seen the latest figures from Statistics Canada. In practical terms, if we take, for example, the 5% of Canadian taxpayers with the highest incomes — I have nothing against wealth, because if we want to redistribute it, we have to have it and create it — we see that 1.5 million taxpayers with an average income of around \$280,000, based on your average of \$420 or the top of the first tax bracket, are also going to benefit from this tax cut.

When you add it up, depending on the number you use, the \$420 or the top of the tax bracket, it amounts to between \$650 million and \$900 million.

Since \$900 million is a lot of money, would it not have been wiser to decide to put that money into more targeted measures or measures with greater leverage, such as what my colleagues mentioned with regard to certain sales taxes?

Mr. Champagne: That's an excellent question, senator.

We decided to use a vehicle that already exists. As I said, the GST rebate dates back to 1991. This mechanism is already in place. I hear you when you say that perhaps we could have chosen another model, another mechanism, but we had to address the needs of families immediately. We wanted to move quickly. The proof is that if you look at Bill C-19, I believe it will have passed faster than any other bill in history, if the Senate passes it at third reading, of course. I have been a member of the House of Commons for a little over 10 years, and it is rare that I have seen such unanimity on a bill. What I understand is that my colleagues in the other place also understood that urgent action was needed.

We tried to keep it simple, but you're right, when I look at the numbers for my riding, Saint-Maurice—Champlain, 47,914 people will benefit from the credit we're sending. That's a lot of people. We considered changing certain aspects. I'm not saying we can't take another look at certain things in the future, because senators have given us some good ideas. However, the rules are already in place, so changing the existing mechanism wouldn't have been productive. The credit is paid out four times a year. If we were to change it, it would obviously take longer for the Canada Revenue Agency to deliver this benefit.

What we heard from people was that they need the money now, so the most direct and fastest vehicle we had was the GST credit.

Senator Hébert: Might we suggest for careful consideration by you and your colleagues in the other place that, instead of granting a tax cut that also benefits the wealthy — as I said earlier, it really is a significant amount of money — the government might, in the future, look at more targeted measures that will benefit the less fortunate more than the well-off, as is the case here?

Mr. Champagne: Absolutely.

Senator Hébert: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable senators, the committee has been sitting for 65 minutes. In conformity with the order of the Senate, 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 officials.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Honourable senators, is it agreed that the committee rise and I report to the Senate that the witness has been heard?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

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

POINT OF ORDER—SPEAKER'S RULING

Hon. Percy E. Downe: I rise on a point of order. When we were in Committee of the Whole, we had questions that were excellent. Senator Cardozo, in particular, had an excellent question, and I totally support what he is trying to do. But the tradition and rules, in my experience, when we're in Committee of the Whole with a minister on a particular bill, allow for some flexibility to the scope of the discussion, but the scope should pertain to the bill before the Senate.

• (1610)

For example, I would have had questions — as I'm sure others would — on different matters for the Minister of Finance. I would have had questions about beneficial ownership, questions about the Canada Revenue Agency, or CRA, call centre and so on. We need a clear understanding. This minister will be back regarding Bill C-15. Other ministers will be here in Committee of the Whole.

What can we ask? Do we have to restrict ourselves to the legislation? Some people are very creative, working in other questions around the bill, which is fair game. However, if we can ask anything of any minister when they are before us in Committee of the Whole distinct from the bill before us, I would like to know that. I'm sure my colleagues would like to know that as well. Thank you.

Hon. Andrew Cardozo: Honourable senators, I don't disagree with the honourable senator, but I wish he had listened to my question a little more closely because I was very clear in stating that the issue I was raising could have been raised within this bill or within another bill.

I am particularly concerned with ensuring that, when we raise issues of concern to young people in this chamber, we do so with respect.

I did what I did and was very clear. Maybe he felt I was going a bit too far. I don't know whether he heard the beginning of my question. It seemed as if he didn't, but I will believe whatever he says on that.

If we have an objection, unless it is outrageously outside the purview — if I asked a question that was not even in his portfolio, yes — perhaps out of courtesy to each other, the time to raise it would be now, after the session, as opposed to raising it then, which I thought was very indelicate. Perhaps it changes the tone of the way we operate in this chamber. This is a chamber of not just sober second thought but respectful dealings with each other. As I said, unless things are wildly out of proportion, I would suggest people consider their timing when they want to object to such things.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucie Moncion: Senator Downe was within his rights to raise a point of order. He raised his point of order. Senator Cormier was within his rights to make a rule about that, and Senator Cormier gave the floor back to Senator Cardozo. So I think that everything proceeded appropriately.

However, when we're considering matters like Bill C-19 and when the purpose of the Committee of the Whole is to work on that bill, I think that Senator Downe's point was valid, as was Senator Cardozo's point in his response. Senators may need to be reminded that it's important to focus their questions primarily on the subject matter of the Committee of the Whole. There will be other opportunities for senators to raise other issues, such as when we meet with ministers invited to answer general questions.

In the case of Committee of the Whole, I believe both senators were within their rights.

[*English*]

The Hon. the Speaker: Are there any other senators who would like to comment?

Senator Downe: Senator Cardozo made some points to which I think I should respond. I listened to his whole question; that's why I got up.

When it was done, it was done within the *Rules of the Senate*, which is my very point and the foundation of my argument. If we are to be a chamber of rules, we should follow the Rules. If the Rules are unclear to people, then there should be clarity from Your Honour, and I hope, either now or on reflection, you will make that ruling.

The Hon. the Speaker: Thank you, Senator Downe, for bringing up this issue.

Honourable senators, a Committee of the Whole is a committee and like any other committee, master of its own proceedings. A point of order was raised during Committee of the Whole and the chair ruled. If senators wish to set parameters for future Committees of the Whole, they may do so by way of motion.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Hon. René Cormier: Honourable senators, the Committee of the Whole, authorized by the Senate to study the subject matter of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act, reports that it has heard from the said witness.

BILL TO AMEND—THIRD READING

Hon. Victor Boudreau moved third reading of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act.

He said: Honourable senators, I am pleased to rise at the third reading of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act, or, by its short title, the Canada groceries and essentials benefit act —

[Translation]

I would like to thank the Minister of Finance and National Revenue for presenting this important bill in greater detail before the Committee of the Whole.

[English]

In his remarks today, the Minister of Finance and National Revenue underscored the urgency of this legislation while commending parliamentarians of all stripes for coming together to consider and hopefully pass this bill in an expedited fashion.

I share the minister's sentiments, and for the purposes of today's debate, I would like to offer you a few more brief reflections on Bill C-19 in its final form and why it merits your support.

[Translation]

Colleagues, the targeted financial support provided for in this bill will make essentials, such as groceries, much more affordable for Canadians facing financial hardship during this period of global economic crisis.

In short, this will help more than 12 million low- and modest-income Canadians meet their basic daily needs starting this spring, subject to Royal Assent.

[English]

The benefit will accomplish this in two steps. First, it will provide a one-time top-up payment, to be paid as early as possible this spring and no later than June, equal to a 50% increase in the annual 2025-26 value of the GST credit. This will deliver, as was mentioned, \$3.1 billion in immediate assistance to individuals and families who currently get the GST credit.

Second, it will increase the value of the Canada Groceries and Essentials Benefit by 25% for five years starting in July 2026. This increase will deliver \$8.6 billion in additional support over the period from 2026-27 to 2030-31, including to over 500,000 new individuals and families.

[Translation]

In practical terms, the one-time payment of 50% planned for this spring means that a family of four will receive up to \$1,890 this year and approximately \$1,400 per year for the next four years.

Currently, a single person who is eligible for the GST credit can receive a maximum of \$543 per year. This same individual would receive roughly \$950 in total, thanks to the one-time payment during the 2026-27 benefit year, and approximately \$700 per year for the next four years.

[English]

Taken together, these measures would provide up to an additional \$402 for a single individual without children, \$527 for a couple and \$805 for a couple with two children. At these levels, this new benefit will be offsetting grocery cost increases, which have outpaced inflation since the pandemic.

• (1620)

Without question, this benefit truly will help people who need it most. Overall, approximately 75% of the additional support provided through top-ups over the next two years will go to families whose net incomes are less than \$40,000.

And to ensure that more Canadians with low incomes receive these new benefits, the government has made recent investments in outreach and assistance with tax filing for vulnerable populations. For example, the government is introducing the automated federal benefits program, starting in the 2026 tax year, to ensure up to 5.5 million low-income Canadians automatically receive the benefits they qualify for, including the Canada groceries and essentials benefit.

[Translation]

What's more, to ensure that those who need this assistance receive it when they need it, the benefit will be paid quarterly, at the start of the quarter, to permit timely access to the funds.

These amounts are additional to existing benefits such as the Canada Child Benefit, the Canada Disability Benefit, and the Guaranteed Income Supplement and the Canada Workers Benefit.

[English]

Besides introducing this new benefit, the Prime Minister also announced measures to strengthen domestic food production, competition and supply chains, including funding to help businesses address the costs of supply chain disruptions without passing those costs on to Canadians at the checkout line, as well as to help address food insecurity and support food banks.

[Translation]

That is why the government has implemented several other measures aimed at making life more affordable for Canadians.

This includes reducing taxes for 22 million taxpayers, eliminating the GST for first-time homebuyers of new homes valued up to \$1 million and reducing the GST for first-time homebuyers of new homes valued between \$1 million and \$1.5 million, cancelling the federal fuel charge and making the National School Food Program permanent, to name just a few examples.

[English]

These actions are part of the government's agenda to help Canadians manage essential costs, improve food affordability, strengthen a more resilient food system and ultimately build a more resilient, affordable economy for the future.

Honourable senators, at a time when global supply chain disruptions have driven up prices to the point where some Canadians can no longer comfortably buy food to feed their families, the Canada groceries and essentials benefit is deserving of our support.

[Translation]

This benefit will help more than 12 million low- and modest-income Canadians afford day-to-day essentials in a targeted, timely and temporary manner.

[English]

Parliamentarians have acknowledged the merits of Bill C-19 with their decision to expedite its passage, and I strongly believe this legislation deserves the same treatment here.

Thank you, *meegwetch*.

Hon. Leo Housakos (Leader of the Opposition): Thank you, Senator Boudreau, for your remarks. I'll try to be brief as well.

Honourable senators, we have created this new precedent over the last few years in this new independent Senate of having speeches both at second and at third and final reading, which I really have a hard time understanding at times. I will spare you all my second reading speech. Those of you who were here, of course, remember how great it was. Those who were not here, well, you can go back and read it. I won't repeat it. I will, though, just make a couple of comments.

The opposition, both in the House and in the Senate, supports Bill C-19 not because it addresses the problem — because this government is constantly busy addressing the symptoms and not the causes, and this is another example of where we're going now a fourth time around the track with the same policy, trying to resolve the same problem of scarcity, an economic crisis where the cost of living has hit record highs, where grocery prices are hitting record highs and the Canadian public is suffering.

Of course, there is an old adage that when you do the same things over and over again expecting a different result, that is the definition of insanity. I know that is something we wouldn't be doing in business as entrepreneurs. I know Senator Loffreda wouldn't be doing that when he had a real job, like I did, working at the RBC. When a strategy doesn't work, we re-evaluate, reflect and change strategies.

[Senator Boudreau]

Putting in place a patch job on a hole for the fourth time — it has been tried since 2020 by this government, and it hasn't worked — I can guarantee you we will be back a year from now and continue to have the same problem. The problem is the following: We have a government with no fiscal anchor. We have a government that is running historic debts and deficits while creating a climate where we are not bringing in enough foreign investment in this country in order to unleash the entrepreneurial spirit and create the preconditions for the creation of wealth.

When all those common denominators are the factor of creating a weak economy, it is why foreign investors are not investing in Canada. It is why Canadian domestic investors are choosing to invest in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world — because they think we are not competitive. You can see study after study over the last 10 years: Canada's level of competitiveness is one of the worst amongst the G20 nations and industrial countries in the world.

Let's have a coherent policy, not makeshift programs. We had a budget a few months ago, 405 pages. The government put so much thought, right after the election, into giving us a budget of 405 pages where they didn't think that this was worthy only two months ago of putting in the budget. As the problem continues to grow, they are in a very rash way trying to put other patches on top of patches.

When they get rid of the carbon tax, which we were calling for in this house and in the other place for the last seven years, on the eve of an election, to win an election — if you are going to borrow the ideas of the opposition to win an election, at least borrow all of them and, in addition to the carbon tax, get rid of the industrial carbon tax so all the money that farmers are passing on to consumers when they are producing their goods and services aren't passing on those goods and services. That would be the kind of thoughtful public policy that would give you results.

When you have a weak dollar and it costs a distributor of fruits and vegetables in this country C\$136 to buy US\$100 worth of produce, who do you think is paying for it at the end of the equation?

Any one of us who has been in business and has transacted in the buying and selling of goods and services and produce, we know how it works. Get rid of unnecessary taxes that are driving up prices. Get rid of unnecessary taxes that are creating a climate of stagnation in the economy, and strengthen the Canadian dollar to where it was in 2008, 2009 and 2010, when we were equal and, at times, over 2010-11, stronger than the U.S. dollar. So when we hit an international economic crisis, what happened? Canada weathered that storm a little bit better than any other country — a lot better, actually.

These are some of the things I want to share with you.

Despite the fact that, as I said, the government is dealing with the symptoms and not the cause, we in the opposition do recognize that middle-class and poor Canadians are suffering like they have never done before.

I will say this: We have seen my good friend the leader of the government get up in this chamber time and again and try to paint the rosy picture of how great things are and justify the fact that he is on that side and I'm on this side, and why we're losing elections. I will say this: If you do not at least steal the entirety of our public policies, you will not be there on that side for very long. Time will tell. But I will tell you this: In the meantime, we know that Canadians are suffering. We will support, Your Honour and honourable colleagues, this bill because we think it needs to be done at this particular juncture, but I plead with the government to take note of solid public policy ideas that won't bring us back in the future to doing these short-term measures in order to patch holes that are getting larger and larger.

I call the question on Bill C-19.

The Hon. the Speaker: Are honourable senators ready for the question?

Hon. Senators: Question.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

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

• (1630)

CAN'T BUY SILENCE BILL

SECOND READING—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator McPhedran, seconded by the Honourable Senator Pate, for the second reading of Bill S-232, An Act respecting non-disclosure agreements.

Hon. Kim Pate: Honourable senators, since the 1980s, the use of non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs, has grown exponentially, forcing silence that primarily serves to protect the wealthy, those with power and those with privilege.

In Canada, the best available data indicate that nearly all sexual harassment settlements include NDAs. Some one in two Canadian workers who have experienced harassment or discrimination have been required to sign an NDA as a condition of settlement. Those who sign are disproportionately women, racialized folks, those living with disabilities, those who are impoverished or financially precarious and those who have been victimized by someone in a relative position of power and privilege.

People who sign usually do so as a condition of receiving a financial settlement, too often when they're in economically disadvantaged circumstances and when they believe they have no other options. Too often, NDAs are signed by those who fear

backlash and attacks on them and when it seems that abusers won't be held accountable in civil or criminal trials. Simply put, they most often believe that they have no choice.

Experiences of some 130 victims and survivors who have signed NDAs were collected by Can't Buy My Silence, an organization co-founded by Julie Macfarlane, Emerita Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Windsor, as well as Zelda Perkins, a woman at the forefront of the #MeToo movement and the first to break a non-disclosure agreement signed with Harvey Weinstein.

Survivors spoke loudly and clearly about what it means to be silenced by NDAs, highlighting patterns of coercion, time pressure, lack of information, exploitation of financial and other power imbalances and dismissal of any concerns raised.

One survivor said:

I was given just 10 calendar days to accept or reject the settlement, including the NDA. . . . [creating] immense pressure to decide without adequate time to consult a lawyer or fully assess the implications. The rushed process felt deliberately designed to limit my ability to resist or seek alternatives

A common myth is that those who report abuse are the ones who seek NDAs for their own protection. NDA signers report not being offered ways of protecting their own privacy without also agreeing to protect institutions and abusers in return. Too many do not even receive copies of the settlement agreements they sign.

Legal experts note that NDAs are intentionally worded in ways that make them difficult to comprehend. Dr. Macfarlane says:

I have never spoken to anybody, no matter what their level of education, who fully understood the consequences of an NDA when they signed it

What are some of those consequences?

People who sign NDAs are prevented from speaking, even to family and friends, about what happened to them. They are unable to warn others. They often worry about whether their abusers go on to harm others or, worse yet, see the evidence of them doing so. Can't Buy My Silence indicates that while half of victims left the workplace after experiencing harassment or abuse, only 5% of those who victimized them left or moved. Abuse continues and abusers are protected.

When settlements with the Canadian government and its agencies contain NDAs, the cost of all of this — the silencing of victims, the protection of abusers and leaving in place conditions for future abuse — is funded by public money. Canadians are the ones whose tax dollars pay for these predatory arrangements. Too few of us know this, precisely because NDAs enforce silence.

Notably, Bill S-232 would ensure that the Government of Canada does not spend public money on settlement agreements relating to harassment, violence or discrimination that silence people through NDAs or on legal actions to punish those with NDAs who speak out about what happened to them. The bill would not prevent victims and survivors from choosing to protect their own privacy through NDAs or otherwise. Rather, Bill S-232 would recognize the reality that NDAs currently and overwhelmingly operate to protect institutions and perpetrators of injustice rather than victims and survivors. It would aim to ensure that Canadians do not support and assume the costs of revictimizing and punishing survivors of discrimination and violence.

For nearly five decades, I have had the privilege of walking into and, more importantly, out of federal prisons. As senators, we have a statutory right of access. Those of you, honourable colleagues, who have exercised this right to visit prisons know the feeling of moving through multiple layers of barbed-wire fences, stone walls, metal security doors, guarded gates and security checks. Who controls the entry and departure of people and information is palpably clear.

When the rights of a prisoner are violated by someone responsible for their care and custody, they are violated by the very people and entities who control whether a prisoner can reach lawyers or other supports. Prisoners do not have access to email. Most are impoverished and can neither afford nor access adequate legal, mental health or other vital supports. For those who can afford to pay for phone calls and stamps, corrections still controls access to phones and even to pens, paper and information.

Corrections also creates and holds records, from the prisoner's personal file to video cameras and recordings. When they appear in court, as Law Professor Emma Cunliffe has documented, the accuracy and reliability of the record-keeping that they provide are all too rarely questioned. Can you imagine mounting a successful court challenge under such an extreme imbalance of power? Would you even try, given the documented risk of reprisals within prisons against those who speak out about wrongdoings by prison authorities?

Virtually every prisoner who bravely brings forward a complaint that could give rise to a human rights case or criminal charge is met with an offer of a cash settlement with a prerequisite NDA. Most people in such a situation are struggling financially or personally — particularly if released from prison — with how to live, how to work and how to afford to be in the community.

People accept those settlements because they need the resources to address their basic needs: to live, eat and house themselves. They lack the resources to go to court, even though they would almost certainly thereby receive a larger amount of compensation and more effective accountability. They can't afford to wait for the months or years it may take for a tribunal or court decision. This, in addition to their isolation and criminal record, makes them both desperate for relief and justifiably fearful that they won't be believed. They are, therefore, uncertain of any alternate result.

Because of the NDAs attached to these settlements, information relating to the abuses rarely becomes public knowledge. Patterns of abuse or other wrongdoings remain shrouded, and knowledge cannot be shared. Perpetrators of injustice and wrongdoing are protected. If a victim even inadvertently or unintentionally breaches an NDA, such breaches are often litigated, and victims are charged with contempt and ordered to pay back the compensation they received. They are sometimes even jailed for contempt of court.

Between April 2022 and the end of 2025 alone, the Government of Canada paid out more than \$74 million in public money to 200 federally sentenced people under settlement agreements. Some were related to public court settlements, but the vast majority of those arrangements — 88% — included a non-disclosure requirement.

When I speak in this place of relative power and privilege about the prison system, honourable colleagues, I often try to share the story of someone with whom I've worked and walked and tell you how they have struggled against the injustice we are discussing.

Today, government-initiated NDAs preclude me from doing so.

How is this helpful, let alone fair or just?

Within prisons and beyond, those who take advantage of secrecy and silencing through NDAs are too often the very people whom we expect not only to uphold the law but also to model appropriate behaviours. Many of the allegations they face concern breaches of the criminal law as well as breaches of Charter and human rights, backed by clear and often incontrovertible evidence. This is what an NDA renders invisible.

What example is set when those responsible for protecting us are unwilling to correct their own behaviours and then hide those behaviours from us?

Colleagues, the government has stated its commitment to redressing violence against women and girls, as well as implementing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Most Indigenous women in prison have experienced the horrific legacies of residential schools as well as child welfare and additional abuse and trauma.

• (1640)

There is much to be done to eradicate the racism, colonialism, misogyny and other systemic, economic and social inequalities that underlie this violence. Bill S-232 is not a panacea, but it is an important step to address the misuse of non-disclosure agreements by federally funded entities. It will allow Canada to invest not in buying silence and further persecuting those in vulnerable positions, those who are victimized by others in positions of authority, but rather in healthier, more just and equal communities for all of us. For these reasons and more, I am grateful for, and happy to vote in favour of, this bill.

Chi-meegwetch, thank you.

Hon. Percy E. Downe: Senator Pate, as you may be aware, Prince Edward Island passed a non-disclosure agreement — the first province in Canada to do that. I believe it was in 2021. It was proposed by Lynne Lund, who was then part of the Green Party opposition. The Conservatives were in power and the Liberals were the third party. I'm glad to report that's reversed now. The Liberals are the second party in P.E.I. It was unanimous in the P.E.I. legislature to pass it.

Have you studied the positive impact that a non-disclosure agreement has had in P.E.I. when you were doing your research for your speech?

Senator Pate: In fact, the people with whom I spoke talked about the P.E.I. legislation. Thank you, Senator Downe, for raising it as a model that could be looked at for other jurisdictions, as well as for Canada as a whole. Thank you for raising that.

Senator Downe: Thank you. I don't have your experience or expertise in prison work. However, the major impact of the non-disclosure agreement in P.E.I. appeared to be on women who, as you correctly identified, were silenced on a go-forward basis for any sexual harassment or abuse that they suffered, and the biggest problem was that they couldn't warn others.

So, for example, we've had situations in which, unfortunately, the president of a university was involved, and the rest of the university community was unaware of what was going on. The release and removal of that have had a tremendous impact on the safety of women in Prince Edward Island. I assume that was part of your research as well.

Senator Pate: In fact, as you may recall from my speech, one of the realities is that, in situations where people have tried to challenge non-disclosure agreements, because of their recognition, they see other people being abused by the perpetrators whom they had to deal with, and they, themselves, have been punished.

In fact, as I mentioned, there have actually been women jailed for contempt because they tried to challenge an NDA.

(On motion of Senator Martin, debate adjourned.)

CITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES DAY BILL

SECOND READING

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the motion of the Honourable Senator Forest, seconded by the Honourable Senator Dasko, for the second reading of Bill S-237, An Act respecting a Cities and Municipalities Day.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to and bill read second time.)

REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

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

(On motion of Senator Forest, bill referred to the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs.)

NATIONAL FLAG OF CANADA DAY AND EXTRA RELEVANCE OF FLAG GIVEN CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the Order:

Resuming debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Cardozo, calling the attention of the Senate to National Flag of Canada Day and the extra relevance of our flag given the current geopolitical situation.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Honourable senators, I rise today, on the last sitting — during the final moments of this particular sitting — before National Flag of Canada Day, to speak to Senator Cardozo's inquiry calling the attention of the Senate to the importance and relevance of Canada's flag.

I apologize that I'm catching you at the eleventh hour, but the timing is very relevant. Let us consider the Canadian flag, first flown on February 15, 1965. It is even older than me. The red and white stripes and the red maple leaf have become an unmistakable symbol of Canada.

It is thanks to the creative design work of George Stanley, who took inspiration from the flag of the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston and substituted the college badge with a red maple leaf.

So, you see, colleagues, there has always been attachment, affinity and pride felt by the Canadian military towards Canada's distinctive flag, and the maple leaf, as a uniting symbol for Canadians, which is recognized around the world.

However, even before George Stanley, the men and women of the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force fought and died for Canada while wearing a maple leaf.

First authorized on July 10, 1915, the cap badge of the 77th Battalion (Ottawa) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force featured a wreath of maple leaves. Recruited in and around Ottawa, the 77th Battalion sailed for Europe in June 1916. Think about those soldiers, colleagues, because many of them would have passed through this very building, taking the train from here to Montreal, Quebec, or to Halifax and onward to Britain and Europe.

Speaking of sailing, battered by waves and harassed by U-boats, Canada's Sheepdog Navy helped turn the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic during the Second World War. Painted on the funnels of those ships was a maple leaf — a tradition that continues to this day.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, in a matter of only two weeks after the initial invasion of South Korea, the Royal Canadian Air Force transport aircraft, with their distinctive maple leaf roundel, arrived in the Korean theatre.

Everywhere the Canadian military has been, there has been a maple leaf. So, it really is no wonder then that the maple leaf features so prominently on Canada's flag.

Colleagues, I know you know that I'm a 34-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. I may have worn my heart on my sleeve about this, but that was because I was wearing the Canadian flag on my shoulder, and I can tell you that I did so with immense pride.

When I joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1989, the Cold War was coming to an end. However, it was not long after, in 1990, that Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. In 1991 we were deployed to the Persian Gulf War under the umbrella of Operation Friction. The Canadian medical component for this was known as Operation Scalpel. As a critical care nursing officer, I deployed with 1 Canadian Field Hospital to Al Qaysumah in Saudi Arabia, near the Kuwait border — or most of our team did.

We were the only Canadian ground forces deployed to that conflict in support of coalition ground forces.

- (1650)

We served under the constant threat of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear warfare while also trying to take on the austere desert conditions and burning oil wells. Later this month, I will join a group of fellow veterans in Halifax to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the end of that conflict and to proudly honour our service.

[Senator Patterson]

More than 4,000 Canadians served in the Persian Gulf region in support of the American-led, United Nations-mandated international coalition. When the American cruiser the USS *Princeton* was struck with sea mines and needed to be safely escorted out of the area, the task was assigned to Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Athabaskan*. In addition to being well suited for the role, *Athabaskan* had something few other ships in the region did — a recognizable symbol of a trusted ally, a red maple leaf, on its funnel.

After escorting the *Princeton* safely out of harm's way, the crew of the *Athabaskan* sent over several cases of beer to the dry U.S. Navy ship to help the crew relax. Talk about helping out a friend in need.

Honourable senators, that allyship between Canada and the United States has been threatened lately, not by the men and women who wear the uniform, but by politicians, and it pains me, as a veteran who has seen Canadians step up time and again, to hear someone say that America's allies, especially Canada, have not been there with the United States in all of our times of need.

Canada was one of the first countries on the ground in Afghanistan, and more than 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel served there during the over-ten-year mission — including myself — all proudly wearing the Canadian flag, muted as it may have been, but still there. In 2005, at the NATO Force Generation Conference for Afghanistan, the Canadian representative said three simple words that would have an immense impact on Canada: "We'll take Kandahar."

This was one of the most complex and dangerous areas of responsibility in Afghanistan and a known hotbed for the Taliban insurgency. Taking responsibility for Kandahar was a monumental undertaking for the Canadian Armed Forces, but it spoke volumes about their professionalism and showed what Canada is willing to do for an ally.

Colleagues, in my office hangs a painting of a Canadian flag. It was painted by a fellow veteran and friend, Petty Officer 1st Class (Retired) Derrick Nearing. He was a physician assistant and served on multiple coalition combat tours, including multiple times in Afghanistan. If you haven't seen it, affixed to that painted Canadian flag is a series of plastic soldiers, those little green men that kids tend to play with, and near the very top of this canvas, with this background of the Canadian flag, is a soldier falling downward, the largest symbol. This represents the events of September 11, 2001, and the Twin Towers falling. If you look in the very middle, based on a very thin azure-blue background, there is a straight line in the middle, of little figures painted gold. These represent the 158 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who were killed in Afghanistan. More sobering is what is below that line. In an area covered in darkness, a chaotic affixing of plastic soldiers represents those countless Canadian Armed Forces members who have lost their lives to suicide since coming home.

And it didn't have to be like that. Canada was not directly attacked by al-Qaeda or the Taliban on September 11, but we as a nation decided to step up and stand shoulder to shoulder with our closest friend and ally, the United States — the Canadian and American flags side by side.

In one social media post sent to me recently by a friend and fellow Canadian veteran, an American veteran described Canada's decision to take responsibility for Kandahar as:

. . . akin to a welterweight in a rowdy bar fight crew taking on one of the big tough guys from across the room.

In that same post, the retired U.S. Army colonel pays tribute to the Canadian Armed Forces, describing us as “raised to fight while wearing ice skates” — and, I would add, all the while bearing the Canadian flag proudly on our shoulders.

The retired colonel also recognized the sacrifices of Canadians in Afghanistan. In particular, I want to recognize Master Corporal Byron Greff, the last Canadian soldier to die in Afghanistan. Colleagues, I was there, and I remember the day Master Corporal Greff was killed. It was October 29, 2011, in Kabul.

I was with my team of American and Canadian medical personnel working at the Afghan National Military Hospital. Despite the explosion being kilometres away, I could see the plumes of smoke rising from the blast site where the suicide bomber targeted a NATO bus that contained Master Corporal Greff. Fearing a secondary attack, I was required to lead the evacuation of my team to the safety of our camp, which I note was the United States Forces Afghanistan headquarters camp. When I think back to my time in uniform and to days like that, I know that America's friends and allies did step up for our once-shared values.

I would proudly look in the eyes of the loved ones of the 20 multinational personnel and one dog killed on that bus that day in 2011 to say thank you for all that NATO stepped up to do, but especially to my Canadian colleagues. Canadians proudly wear our flag and continue to serve this great country, and I cannot help but mention that this past Monday, Gunner Sebastian Halmagean, who died last month in Latvia, was laid to rest in his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. Just before the casket was lowered into the earth, the Canadian flag, which had been draped over the casket, was ceremonially folded and presented to Gunner Halmagean's family as a sign of respect from a grateful nation.

You see, colleagues, not only do the members of the Canadian Armed Forces wear the Canadian flag on our shoulders — as it's a rallying point for pride, belonging and togetherness — but those who die in service of Canada also come home draped in that flag. The flag is the one constant in the lives of those who serve, even in death. It is under the maple leaf that Canada's sailors, soldiers and aviators serve, reinforcing the fact that, first and foremost, the Canadian Armed Forces serve and protect not the government but Canada and Canadians.

Senators, in an Olympic year, I think we need to end on a high note. It's very appropriate that we close with the last two verses from “The Maple Leaf Forever,” and no, I will not be singing. I did that once and will never be the same again. Those verses are:

Oh, Maple Leaf, around the world,
You speak as you rise high above,
Of courage, peace and quiet strength,
Of the Canada I love.

Remind us all our union bound,
By ties we cannot sever,
Bright flag revered on every ground,
The Maple Leaf forever!

Thank you.

Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

(On motion of Senator White, debate adjourned.)

BUSINESS OF THE SENATE

Hon. Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Legislative Deputy to the Government Representative in the Senate): Honourable senators, pursuant to rule 16-1(8), I wish to advise the Senate that a message from the Crown concerning Royal Assent is expected later today.

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, rule 16-1(8) provides that after the Leader or Representative of the Government, or the Deputy Leader or Legislative Deputy of the Government has made such an announcement:

. . . no motion to adjourn the Senate shall be received and the rules regarding the ordinary time of adjournment or suspension, or any prior order regarding adjournment shall be suspended until the message has been received or either the Leader or Representative of the Government, or the Deputy Leader or Legislative Deputy of the Government indicates the message is no longer expected. If the Senate completes the business for the day before the message is received, the sitting shall be suspended to the call of the Speaker with the bells to ring for five minutes before the sitting resumes.

These provisions shall therefore govern proceedings today.

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

ROYAL ASSENT

SITTING SUSPENDED TO AWAIT ROYAL ASSENT

The Hon. the Speaker: Honourable senators, the Senate has completed its business. Pursuant to the order of February 12, 2026, the sitting is suspended to await the receipt of a message from the Crown concerning Royal Assent, with the bells to ring for five minutes before the sitting resumes.

(The sitting of the Senate suspended.)

(The sitting of the Senate resumed.)

• (1730)

ROYAL ASSENT

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

RIDEAU HALL

February 12, 2026

Madam Speaker,

I have the honour to inform you that the Right Honourable Mary May Simon, Governor General of Canada, signified royal assent by written declaration to the bill listed in the Schedule to this letter on the 12th day of February, 2026, at 5:07 p.m.

Yours sincerely,

Ken MacKillop

Secretary to the Governor General

The Honourable
The Speaker of the Senate
Ottawa

Bill Assented to Thursday, February 12, 2026:

An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (*Bill C-19, Chapter 1, 2026*)

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION ADOPTED

Hon. Pat Duncan: Honourable senators, with leave of the Senate and notwithstanding rule 5-5(k), I move:

That, when the Senate next adjourns after the adoption of this motion, it do stand adjourned until Tuesday, February 24, 2026, at 2 p.m.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

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

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)

(At 5:36 p.m., the Senate was continued until Tuesday, February 24, 2026, at 2 p.m.)

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