



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

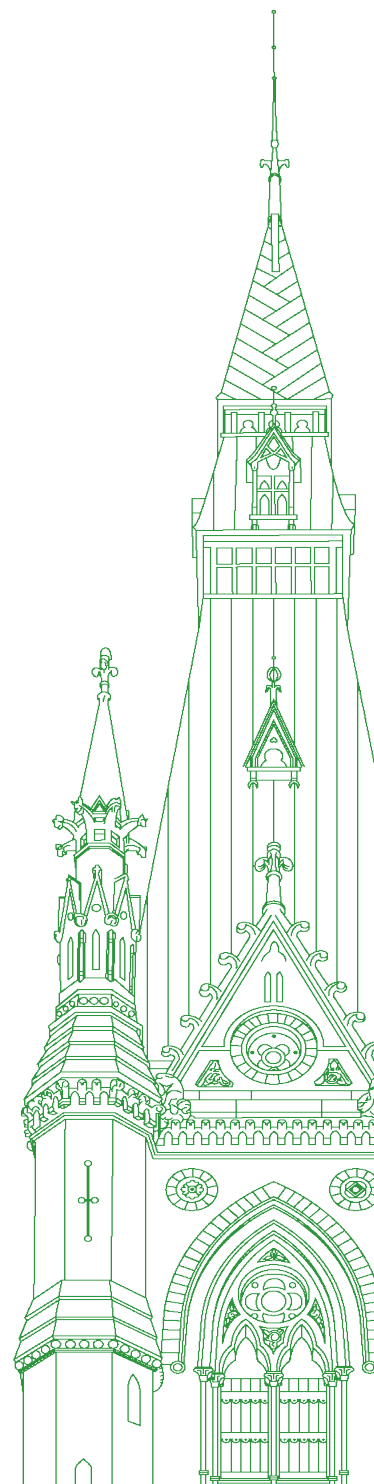
Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 011

Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Chair: The Honourable Marc Garneau



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• (1540)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon. Welcome to the 11th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[English]

We are gathered here today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe.

[Translation]

Today, we are continuing our second study, which focuses on the effects of the housing shortage on indigenous peoples across Canada.

[English]

Presenting to us in our first panel today are Herb Lehr, president, Metis Settlements General Council; Richard Derocher, vice-chief, Meadow Lake Tribal Council; and Stan Delorme, chairperson, Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement.

[Translation]

Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for physical distancing and mask use.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services in English, French, Inuktitut and Innu are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings. The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

Committee members, when you ask a question, please direct it to the specific witness you want to answer that question.

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

We will start with presentations by our three guests and will follow those with a question period.

It's over to you, President Lehr. You have the microphone for five minutes.

Mr. Herb Lehr (President, Metis Settlements General Council): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this committee, for the invitation to speak today.

My name's Herb Lehr. I'm the elected president of the Metis Settlements General Council, MSGC. I think it's critical for all of you to understand that the Métis settlements are unique [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] by any other Métis group in Canada. We are the only legislated land [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] from other Métis people. That brings with it challenges, but, more importantly, opportunities. That's what I want to focus on today: the opportunities.

Let's not talk about the past. I'm certain you've been flooded with information that shows the efforts of the past have not served our people well, however well-intentioned. Your own agency, Statistics Canada, contains the evidence that housing in our communities is inadequate.

One of the flaws of focusing on statistics is that they don't demonstrate that the problem of housing spills beyond the borders of our communities. Rundown homes and a lack of housing force our people to leave their communities, and homelessness follows them wherever they go.

In Canada, Métis has the fastest growing population. Fifty-five per cent of our settlement populations are under the age of 20 and 28% are under the age of five. Without access to housing, we lose these young, vibrant people who are full of potential from our communities, and we know it contributes to serious child welfare issues, as well as other social problems.

If we look beyond these statistics and see the promise of our young people, and if we take the opportunity to look at housing differently and holistically, we can reinvigorate our communities from the ground up. The current system sees only one type of family: the nuclear family. Building codes reflect this bias, so our non-nuclear families, with multiple generations sharing this type of space, suffer as a result. Overcrowding, mould [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] infrastructure plague our communities, forcing our people to leave and to seek something better, but they find that it is no better. Far too often, it is worse. Away from their families, communities and support systems, our people are alone and vulnerable.

Our communities have always been forced to address housing in the most reactive and cost-efficient ways, very often in times of crisis. This is because the existing housing was not designed to withstand our remote, rural and extreme environments. The result of this is that our people are living in trailers and modular homes that were supposed to be a band-aid until something better came along, but nothing better has come.

I'm here to ask for the chance to plan our homes and communities using new technologies that better align with our traditional values. We want to have the latitude to have Métis homes built by Métis people. We want any funding provided for housing to include funds for capacity, so that our people can be trained to build these new, culturally relevant and sustainable homes. We not only want the long-term homes that our people deserve; we want to stimulate our communities' economies in ways that tap into the existing skills of our members, but also recognize the potential of those young people who haven't yet chosen a path.

New agreements and programs must recognize the true cost of building homes in remote and rural communities. We need to be able to stock materials, take advantage of bulk buying and have materials at hand when they are needed.

There needs to be a recognition of the fact that our people don't live cheek to cheek with their neighbours, so supporting infrastructure is more costly. We need housing that recognizes that many of our people have disabilities, so our homes require accommodations. We need housing that recognizes that our elders are cared for by their families at home for far longer than is common in non-indigenous communities. We also need to address older homes in need of renovations and repairs, and require an overhaul of the aging infrastructure that supports these homes.

In addition, we want to look at innovative, environmentally friendly solutions, like solar energy and hemp homes, aerated concrete homes that are mould-resistant, fireproof and have a lifespan of 100-plus years. While we are moving forward with our federal framework agreement, immediate funding is needed if we are to address the housing shortages that the settlements have faced for far too long.

In closing, thank you again to the committee for the invitation to speak here today. We will provide some housing data later this week, so that you will leave with the big picture and have all the details.

I would now be pleased to answer any questions you may have. [Technical difficulty—Editor]

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, President Lehr.

We'll hear from the other speakers first. Vice-Chief Richard Derocher, you have the microphone for five minutes.

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher (Meadow Lake Tribal Council): Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for the opportunity to speak before the committee.

To Mr. Lehr, you did a wonderful job on your presentation.

First of all, I am the Cree Vice-Chief of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, MLTC. The Meadow Lake Tribal Council is in northwest Saskatchewan. We comprise nine first nations, five of which are Cree and four of which are Dene. Our land base takes up just about all of northwest Saskatchewan. We have a population of about 16,000 people. The growth in our territory, the growth of different communities, is very different. Some communities are growing economically; some are not. Some are growing in wellness; some are not. I serve a wide variety of where people are at in their communities.

I want to talk about housing specifically in regard to budget.

I was a councillor in Flying Dust First Nation for 18 years and a band manager for four years, so I know my particular first nation, a Cree first nation. The Flying Dust First Nation has had the same budget for over 30 years in housing.

That is one issue we have. Other than the indexing that we get, there has been no increase in the housing budget for the last 30 years. I believe in Flying Dust it's just under \$300,000, and to insure their homes is about \$180,000 a year, which leaves approximately \$100,000 to \$110,000 to build or renovate. I'm sure it's no different for all other first nations in the territory, the MLTC territory.

That leaves us with a definite problem: How do you accommodate housing situations in our first nations when you're building with \$110,000?

Remember the area we're in. We're in northwest Saskatchewan. The cost for building is about 20% to 30% more than in southern Saskatchewan. Even close to where I am in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, the cost is about 20% to 30% higher.

The price to build the average house in northwest Saskatchewan is about \$230,000, and that's for a three-bedroom bungalow. You can't even finish off a house with that. How do you also look at your renovation list? Our houses are getting depleted and there are no monies to put them into the way housing should be. Therefore, in regard to housing, the chiefs and councils of those communities are very boxed in.

There is another huge impact on housing. With the new bills that are coming, like Bill C-3 and the different membership cases that have been presented by Canada and put into the first nations, our population is growing, not only because of normal population growth but because of new members coming onto the first nations either by the grandmother clause or any other new membership cases. That makes the situation even harder, because now there are new members with expectations of on-reserve housing because that's what they see, which then puts more pressure on the chief and council.

I want to talk to you about overcrowding in houses as well. The average home in the Meadow Lake Tribal Council has 7.9 people per house.

I'm going to use Flying Dust as an example, because I am from there and I'm very familiar with the numbers. Flying Dust has 2.2 people per house. Flying Dust has quite a good housing program, but the shortage is still there. There are only 2.2 people in the houses we do have mainly because of small families and because Flying Dust made what we call an "elders' lodge", which houses 10 elders in single dwelling units. They are not elders' lodges as you know as long-term care facilities. They are more levels one and two, where they can look after themselves or are looked in on frequently by the nursing staff and family visits.

• (1550)

The overcrowding, as I indicated, is just over 7.9 people per home, I believe. This creates mental wellness problems, especially for our teenage children.

Young adolescents or teenagers get into an arguments with their parents. All of us who are parents know this happens. They get into a little scuffle with their brother or sister or parents. In a normal house, that individual gets to go into their bedroom, sort things out and get their thoughts together. In our homes, that's not possible. They're sharing rooms—sometimes two and three children or maybe two teenagers to a room—which doesn't give them that space to get their thoughts together.

What happens in this case is the young people leave the home frustrated and mad. They go and look for other options, which usually leads to alcoholism, drug addiction and seeking friends. Sometimes it's gang related.

That's the reality of being in northern Saskatchewan and having no place to get your thoughts together. That's one that I speak of often—

The Chair: Mr. Derocher, I'm going to have to ask you to wrap up now.

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: For options, CMHC seems to work fine for the communities that want to use CMHC. It gives the opportunity for low-income housing. It gives the opportunity for families who want to live on reserve. I have some families who pay \$1,200 a month on reserve. For the first nation mortgaged house, that \$1,200 a month is a lot of money for the economy in northern Saskatchewan.

An option I see is to have more CMHC housing in our communities. Once again, the budgeting for housing in first nations country hasn't increased in over 30 years, which causes problems.

With that, I would like to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to speak this afternoon.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Vice-Chief Derocher.

We'll now go to Chairman Stan Delorme.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Stan Delorme (Chairperson, Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement): Good afternoon. Thank you very much to the committee today for allowing me the time to do a presentation, and thanks to the two presenters who came before me as well.

My name is Stan Delorme. I'm the chairperson of the Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement. Our council consists of four council members plus the chair.

Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement is situated in the northeastern part of Alberta, the gateway to Fort McMurray, near Lac La Biche, Alberta. We are one of eight Métis settlements and we're unique to Canada. I believe we're the only Métis settlement landholders in Canada.

Buffalo Lake is located approximately 200 kilometres northeast of Edmonton, which is the major centre closest to Buffalo Lake for any kind of shopping. Buffalo Lake has a population of approximately 700 adults, not including the children who are 18 years of age and younger. We have approximately 240 dwellings, which indicates that there is a critical shortage given the number of people we have on settlement land.

We estimate our on-settlement population to be, at any given time, around 1,200 people who reside on Buffalo Lake, and we've witnessed an increase in the last while due to COVID, with families wanting to move home. Some would like to move back, but unfortunately there's a housing shortage that prevents them from doing so.

There's a severe and critical shortage of capacity to build homes and to accommodate basic housing needs. Provincial housing dollars have decreased, leaving our organization to apply for federal housing programs such as the rapid housing initiative program. To meet the criteria for these funds, modular units are only transitional in nature since they are smaller than normal modular long-term sustainable housing units.

As I said, Buffalo Lake has approximately 240 homes, and its housing stock, if you want to call it that, is basically getting old, with the last batch of houses built back in 2008 and only a few new houses built in recent years. I must add that people are still living in homes that were built in the 1970s and early 1980s. As well, a large percentage of homes were built in the 1990s.

Some of our infrastructure consists of 160 kilometres of gravel roads. We have a water treatment plant that's getting outdated, and it's obviously costing the community a few more dollars than we had really anticipated. We have two water delivery trucks that haul water to homes on a daily basis, which raises our operational budget costs as well.

The effects of the housing shortage include illness due to mould—I believe Herb Lehr spoke about that to some degree—and an increased cost of infrastructure and budget for water and sewer and for water deliveries. Generally families are deprived of rest and sleep, and there is a loss of education due to the high cost of utilities, which has increased dramatically in the last number of months. Sometimes families have to choose between heating and lighting their homes and buying food.

• (1555)

Our population is young. We have young families with one and two children who are living with their parents, and sometimes with their grandparents. These are multi-generational families. We also have seniors who are at risk of being homeless. We're finding any alternative available, such as living in recreational trailers over the winter months and hooking up to power in their family's yards.

Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement held a housing consultation with our members back in July of 2019 and received feedback on our housing. The feedback relayed the need for housing for single families living with their parents and grandparents and for the seniors who lack housing and are homeless, meaning that some of the homes they had to move out of were basically not proper living accommodations.

We have some large multi-generational families living in one home. For example, one family home has 13 people living in it. Can you imagine having 13 people in a two- or three-bedroom bungalow? There are grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren all living in one home.

We are currently—

• (1600)

The Chair: Mr. Delorme, could I could ask you to wrap it up, please?

Mr. Stan Delorme: All right.

We currently have 40 people on the waiting list. Affordable housing is needed in our settlement. Our settlement is largely a low-income community and, compared to many Canadian indigenous communities, our unemployment rate amongst our young people is high, as many of the young people have not moved out of their parents' homes. Some have gone to college and university to begin their careers, but because of the high cost of living and education, and with the lack of education dollars, the young people can't really afford to leave. Therefore, they just basically stay at home with their parents or grandparents.

I have more here, but I can probably squeeze it in with the questions that the panel has.

With that, thank you very much to the committee for hearing us out today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Delorme.

We'll proceed with the first round of questions and start with Ms. Stubbs.

Ms. Stubbs, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the presenters who are here today.

I will focus my questions around Métis settlements. I am so grateful that Stan and Herb can be here today. As Stan mentioned, Métis settlements in Alberta are unique in Canada, with eight of them in total and half of those in Lakeland. I'm pleased, too, to be joined by our NDP colleague for the day, whose many relatives and friends I represent and am proud to represent.

Because of that reality, I have made it my mission to fight just as hard for all of the indigenous communities and for the people living on Métis settlements in Lakeland as I do for every other resident.

Stan, just to give more of a sense to our colleagues here and to Canadians, I wonder if you can expand a bit on infrastructure details for Métis settlements and for Buffalo Lake. Last Friday, the minister was here and didn't know the answer as to how much money has actually gotten to Métis settlements. I understand that housing has been lumped into the infrastructure component by this government, which in 2021 committed \$40 million to Métis settlements, but not a dime has been received.

Could you give us a sense of your annual infrastructure budget and how much you actually received from the federal government this year and also touch on how revenue is generated in your community?

Mr. Stan Delorme: Thank you very much, Mrs. Stubbs.

On the infrastructure that you're talking about, we look at it as two categories. One of them is basically building roads and adding on to our water treatment plant. That's the one infrastructure budget we do have. We don't have a housing budget as such, but our annual infrastructure budget runs around \$1 million per year.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: How much did you receive from the federal government for infrastructure this year or last year?

Mr. Stan Delorme: We haven't received any infrastructure dollars from the federal government other than the grant that we applied for through the provincial programs that are available.

• (1605)

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Do you have the capacity within the settlement to build homes, or do you have to bring in outside contractors?

Mr. Stan Delorme: We do have the capacity here to build homes. We've trained tradespeople in years gone by. We have the capacity to build a home, but as for the capacity to install utilities such as the electrical part of it, the power lines and the natural gas lines, we don't have the capacity to do that yet, but tradespeople can provide in the event that we do have a housing program.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: If governments ensured that the big announcements they make about dollar amounts got to local communities, that could create jobs.

To give even more of a sense of the unique challenges that your council faces, Stan, would you comment on economic activities in Buffalo Lake? How do you ensure that people in the settlement have jobs and revenue through natural resource development that help meet your infrastructure and housing needs? How do carbon taxes and other taxes impact the real dollars of Buffalo Lake people and elected officials like you trying to provide the needs for your community?

Mr. Stan Delorme: We are obviously challenged with the employment part of it, if that's what you're asking, Ms. Stubbs. We generate a few job shares through our entities, through our development corporation and our sand and gravel businesses that we have, which employ just a small number of individuals on a full-time basis.

To generate any other kind of revenue at this point in time, we're only limited to a small amount of workforce that's out there right now. We're in the process of trying to get into the oil and gas business. We're currently talking to some oil companies to do the exploration and development in our settlement, which hopefully will create more employment for our members as time goes on.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: You aren't exempted from paying taxes, so additional costs like the carbon tax and other tax hikes hurt the people in your communities just as they do all other Canadians.

I wonder, both Stan and Herb, if you might comment on when funds are promised to other organizations for housing or infrastructure, say for the Métis National Council. Maybe you can explain how much of those funds your community receives and whether or not....

How do you feel about those announcements when your community doesn't receive that funding and whether or not it's discriminatory?

The Chair: I'll ask you to be brief in your answer, because the time is up.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Stan Delorme: Okay. I guess I can kick-start this thing.

I keep hearing about the dollars that are provided to these nations, the Métis nation, the Métis National Council and those kinds of organizations, but as land-based people, the Métis people like us, who own their own land, have not been provided with any kind of funding and have not got a share of whatever the Métis Nation of Alberta might have been provided with. Therefore, we're left holding the bag as far as any kind of dollars coming into our communities from the federal government and its processes are concerned.

The Chair: Mr. Lehr, did you want to comment?

Mr. Herb Lehr: Sure.

The Métis National Council and the Métis Nation of Alberta have never devolved money to the Metis Settlements General Council. They go there to Ottawa. They say they speak on our behalf, even though we've never given up that ability. We say we're autonomous unto ourselves.

We have an arrangement with the federal government, a framework agreement that we've signed, but because of COVID, we haven't been able to pursue it. It was just the national organizations that have received any funding as far as I know, though I heard that Northwest Territory Métis did sign a new deal and are getting funds as well now. We're hopeful that we will change that.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Atwin, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my fellow committee members, and to Chairperson Delorme, Vice-Chief Derocher and President Lehr, thank you so much for your time today.

I'm from a Wabanaki territory, where Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqey communities.... It's a privilege, and I feel grateful to learn more about Métis communities, particularly about those land-based rights.

On December 17, 2018, the Metis Settlements General Council signed a framework agreement with the Government of Canada, and the framework agreement provides for a negotiation process, with a view to, among other matters, jointly develop a government-to-government relationship between the Crown and the Metis Settlements General Council that advances reconciliation between the governments. One of those priorities for negotiation includes exploratory discussions around the unique needs and the existing structures dealing with housing on Métis settlement lands.

For President Lehr, since the signing of the framework agreement, what progress has been made, if any, on the priorities of Metis Settlements General Council, specifically those around housing?

Mr. Herb Lehr: Nothing at this point in time from the federal government when it comes to the housing component.... This has actually been the first move that we've heard of anything to deal with it. We did deal with infrastructure a little earlier, but again, that really didn't fall under the auspices of the framework agreement. COVID of course stopped a lot of the conversations that were supposed to be transpiring, and we did get some COVID relief funds to our communities, of which general council took less than 1%, and made sure that 99% went to the communities.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

For Chairperson Delorme, through the rapid housing initiative, last month, the Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement was allocated \$4.3 million for funding for housing for vulnerable residents in particular. Could you share with the committee the plans for the funding, the rollout and the allocation process?

Mr. Stan Delorme: First of all, I must say that we are grateful for the dollars that have been provided for the transitional housing program, which is greatly needed here for our settlement. The only problem with that is that these units are a lot smaller, and they're only meant for transitional purposes, for families who are on a waiting list for a housing program, for example. It's obviously welcomed with open arms.

We're just in the process of building the units. We hope to have some here within the next month, on Métis settlement land. We're looking to utilize that housing program to its fullest, and hopefully, we can provide those units to families after they settle here in Buffalo Lake through this program and help them out into bigger and better homes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

For Vice-Chief Derocher, you mentioned an elders' lodge, and we've heard a lot from communities about the needs around senior care in particular, and culturally responsive care. I would love to hear more about the process of setting up your elders' lodge and how it serves your community.

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: Our elders' lodge started with a partnership with Habitat for Humanity out of Lloydminster. It was a 10-apartment complex. Flying Dust ended up doing it by themselves, because Habitat for Humanity were going to come to the table with some donations and that didn't bear fruit. Habitat for Humanity's heart was in it 100% and they stayed with us right until the end, but we took all of Flying Dust First Nation's own-source revenue to build that 10-apartment facility. Unfortunately, the general public didn't donate as we thought they would to the project.

As I indicated, it is a home for people over 65 who still have the ability to look after themselves. They may have issues, health-wise. We have our nurses and our health staff going mostly on a daily basis to go check on the elders and such. The majority of that—in fact all of the money—came from own-source revenue from Flying Dust First Nation.

Thank you.

• (1615)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

We know that the federal government supports housing the best that it can. There's certainly a role to play for own-source revenue and for communities, but there are barriers there as well.

President Lehr, if you want to address that, what kind of barriers exist in increasing own-source revenue or for funding opportunities for housing in your community?

Mr. Herb Lehr: It's quite massive. I have to say that in the legislation that we have provincially, there needs to be some vacancy created for our section 35 rights. We're in a trilateral arrangement, where we have the province, the federal government and the Metis Settlements General Council sitting at the same table.

Sometimes, the provinces and the territories—through the NR-TA, when they were given authorities—are a bit leery of giving up some of these authorities. Our people are the same. You get used to doing things one way and change is scary.

We look at the Supreme Court decision of 2016 and we say that as settlements, we're very different from anywhere else when it comes to the Métis. It's really a specialized commitment to move us forward to attain the rights, and the funding and programs that should be available to us.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Atwin.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses, Mr. Delorme, Vice-Chief Derocher and Mr. Lehr, for their presentations.

I have questions for each of them.

I want to talk about housing. I know witnesses have highlighted how cost, community remoteness and isolation, and labour affect the problem. We talked about those factors with the ministers a week ago, and we were told that the increased costs of building housing in remote communities were finally being taken into account.

Since that isn't necessarily what I'm hearing across the board, I'd like to hear what each of you has to say. The reason I'm asking is simply so that we can make specific requests to the appropriate departments to address the issue and, of course, ensure you have access to housing that meets your needs.

Someone mentioned that you had \$110,000, I believe, to build housing in certain communities. That would be impossible to do in my riding, so I imagine the same is true for you.

That is what I would like to hear more about.

[English]

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: Who is that directed to?

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: The question is for everyone.

You can go ahead, if you like.

[English]

The Chair: Let's start with Mr. Derocher, and then we'll go to the other two.

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: Absolutely, the northern factor is weighed into everything, from buying diapers and milk to housing.

As you know, my constituents go all the way up to La Loche, to the Clearwater River Dene Nation, which is 430 kilometres north of Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, is the largest centre in our territory. It is approximately 330 kilometres from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, which is the centre of our province. That gives you an idea of where we are geographically.

It costs about 10% more to build homes in Meadow Lake than in Saskatoon. The further north you go it gets worse and worse, with up to 30% more in the Clearwater River Dene Nation, Birch Narrows Dene Nation or Buffalo River Dene Nation, which are our most northern communities. This includes English River, as well, which is the end of the road on the other side of our area.

You see how that affects our ability to build, because instead of spending \$100 you're only spending \$70. As I indicated, in Meadow Lake it costs about \$215,000 or \$220,000 to build an average home, a plain three-bedroom bungalow—so times that by 30%. As I also indicated the funding hasn't increased in over 30 years. La Loche has about 2,000 people so with a community of that size you're probably looking at a budget of about \$330,000. One house will blow your budget, and you have no money for infrastructure or renovations.

That gives you an idea.

• (1620)

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

That was a fairly thorough answer. You set the stage geographically, and you talked about the challenges you run into. Those challenges exist in my riding as well.

I'd like to delve a bit deeper.

You illustrated that the funding doesn't cut it. I had heard the opposite: that geographic distance and remoteness was being taken into account.

Would you agree that the funding should reflect all the challenges you run into? In particular, the funding should be equivalent to that allocated in more southern areas, where communities are connected by roads and where materials are available and cheaper?

As I said, the committee was told that those factors were already being taken into account, but perhaps it's being done in a very general way with only minimal regard for community distinctions. The situation seems to be more serious, from what I'm hearing today.

I'd like to know whether you agree. If I'm reading the situation wrong, feel free to correct me.

The Chair: Was the question for one witness, in particular?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Yes, of course.

The question was for Vice-Chief Derocher, whom I was just speaking with. I'd like him to build on his previous answer, if he wouldn't mind.

[English]

The Chair: That's to you again, Mr. Derocher.

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: In my tribal council we received \$2.7 million—that's for all nine first nations. That breaks down to an average of about \$300,000 per community, depending on the size of the community. That is \$2.7 million, and we haven't received any increase in the last 10 years for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council's distribution of housing.

That shows you that I'm a bit puzzled by your comments on increases. There has not been any housing increase in the band budgets from the department in over 30 years. We had \$2.7 million at that time; we're still getting \$2.7 million at this time.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'll just clarify what I meant, Vice-Chief Derocher.

I wasn't saying that your budget had increased. I was referring to the fact that the committee had been told that all the funding was being adjusted to reflect the needs of first nations and the higher costs. Clearly, that isn't the case for you.

I just wanted to validate the information, and you've done that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have six minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank my honourable colleagues. I especially want to thank Shannon for making sure that we work co-operatively to address these serious issues. I also want to thank Michael, who's worked on this issue with Métis settlements in the past. I want to thank all of you folks—Jamie and Gary, I know we've briefed you as well on this issue—for making sure that we continue to work on what's really necessary for these communities.

I want to make a special mention here of something that's close to my heart. I'm from the Fishing Lake Metis Settlement. I'm from one of these communities. It's the honour of my life that I was raised in one of these communities, and that I have and enjoy the great rights and privileges that come along with being a Métis settlement member. But I'm also very proud to be representing Métis people elsewhere, here in this Parliament and of course in this committee as well.

I want to focus on how unique these communities truly are. It was mentioned previously how these communities are not the Métis National Council. They are not the Métis Nation of Alberta. They are very unique in that sense. The current framework of “distinctions-based policy”, which you might hear from the government bench all the time, doesn't exactly include these communities, but I also want to make a very special caveat and really ask my colleagues to pay special attention to how unique this is.

These communities are actually established by an act of the Alberta legislature. This creates a very specific nuance, but also the reason and impetus as to why the Supreme Court challenge in 2016 is so critical and important for the government to take seriously. A very similar case has come to our Supreme Court. In 1930 the Inuit came to the government asking for relief for their population. The government at that time said no, and it was simply because they did not satisfy, at that time, the government's definition of "Indians" as per section 91.24 of the Constitution Act. In 2016 the exact same case took place for Métis people.

However, we have this outstanding provincial legislation. This provincial legislation did make very special note. The legislature in Alberta, under a section 43 constitutional amendment, did include a provision to release these communities if the federal government were to take its responsibilities seriously and address these communities as truly indigenous and Métis. That work is outstanding from 1990. That's what the MOU and the framework mean to do—that is, make sure that we reduce the jurisdictional barriers that are currently wholly within the Alberta legislature.

I'd like to ask my good friend and president Herb Lehr to describe how his relationship with the provincial government is going in light of the fact that they have four pieces of that legislation. Members of the other communities mentioned funding being an issue. Métis settlements being wholly under provincial jurisdiction falls flat in the face of the provincial government. They need to truly look at their responsibility here and work collaboratively at a tri-lateral table.

President Lehr, can you describe how the relationship with the province has gone? Is it satisfactory to ensure that the communities' needs are met? Should the federal government intervene?

• (1625)

Mr. Herb Lehr: Currently, we have a long-term agreement with the provincial government that expires at the end of the next fiscal year. The amount that we should be eligible for is \$5 million a year. Of that \$5 million a year, zero is available to the settlements. A portion of the money goes to infrastructure. A portion of it goes to the RCMP for policing, which, as some of you may or may not know, just increased by \$300,000 for us through their collective agreement.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*], and in the end, of that \$5 million, it's all spent. There is no money that I can send to each of the eight settlements to help them with their essential services or their governance at the community level. That is part of the problem we have right now.

There was a change in Alberta, put forward by the Government of Alberta, called Bill 57. It made changes to even the ability for us to get access to our own funds in what we call our Future Fund. We have approximately \$20 million left in it. The legislation was changed to say that all eight communities must be in agreement to get access to that fund. Historically, we only needed six settlements in favour on a financial matter like that for an FAP. The provincial government changed it to eight.

So we are getting no money for housing from the province and very little infrastructure money from anybody to move forward

with. We are getting no governance or essential services money from the province at this time.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you.

I'd like to spend this minute really focusing on this issue, Herb, which you might be able to elaborate on for us.

The reality is that since 1990 until today, the provincial government has had a tremendous influence, and almost exclusive jurisdiction over the Métis settlements.

In your opinion, as president, has that relationship been able to satisfy the needs of the Métis settlements?

Quickly, please.

Mr. Herb Lehr: I think it was the best deal that our people could cut at that point in time.

Now, with the 2016 decision through Powley and through the Supreme Court of Canada decision on Daniels, there isn't money available in Alberta for us and we have to move federally. In fact, we're in a very precarious position if we don't get access in this current fiscal year.

• (1630)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Herb.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desjarlais.

Committee members, we're squeezed for time because we have to be out of here by quarter to six at the latest, but I would like to try to squeeze in a quick second round.

Mr. Vidal, you have three minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have three minutes and so many questions. I'm going to be really brief.

Sometimes I think people in the Ottawa bubble can lose the perspective of what I call people on the ground, so I really appreciate all of the witnesses being here today because I think you offer that perspective of people who are dealing with it on the ground every day. Thank you for being here.

My first question is going to be for Vice-Chief Derocher.

In your role you talk about representing nine first nations in the northwest region of Saskatchewan. You talked about some of the differences of the conditions of the states of housing, even in the nine first nations that you represent.

Just on a fundamental level, can you talk about what, in your opinion, is driving some of the differences? What are some of the key drivers to some of those differences?

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: Definitely, economy, Mr. Vidal.

For instance, Flying Dust First Nation, which butts up against Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, the biggest centre in our territory, has opportunity for an economy there. That first nation has a little brighter chance of challenging the housing issues that we have.

As I indicated, we have young people paying \$1,200 a month in Flying Dust First Nation for rent, although they're making only \$16 to \$18 an hour, which takes up about 45% of their income just for rent to live on the reserve, in comparison to the city of Meadow Lake.

The further north you go the economic opportunities aren't as great. They're remote communities. The only employment is through the first nation or else through people going across to northern Alberta and living away from home for two weeks at a time and then being home for a week. Those are the opportunities that are available in northern Saskatchewan.

It's based on economy, of course, and I always speak of building our own economy.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I don't want to cut you off, but again, time is limited.

One of the solutions I'm hearing from you is to create more opportunity in some of the northern and remote areas and take advantage of some of those opportunities to create the ability for people to participate in a prosperous economy, which you've seen in your own local first nation of Flying Dust. Is that a fair conclusion from what I am hearing from you?

Vice-Chief Richard Derocher: That's very fair, as well as the ability to have more CMHC housing.

Now I have caught on to the lady's question from before. We did get an increase of 10% from CMHC for all the first nations in our riding, but we do need an economy in order to make affordable housing work in northern Saskatchewan.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I have one really brief question if the chair will let me.

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're tight, but that was a good try.

Mr. McLeod, you have three minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the presenters today for a very interesting discussion.

I understand that the Metis Settlements General Council currently has a budget request for emergency interim funding.

I want to know what will happen to the Metis Settlements General Council and to the settlements if they don't receive any of the emergency interim funding?

Maybe we could get the Metis Settlements to describe the emergency and how serious this issue is.

Mr. Herb Lehr: Thank you very much, Mr. McLeod.

We do have a request for \$50 million per year as a stopgap measure in front of the federal government. We have had it there for a couple of years. We know the LTA is expiring. Bill 57 just got implemented.

Currently, the Metis Settlements General Council that I work at last year had a [Technical difficulty—Editor] budget of [Technical difficulty—Editor] million dollars. Going into this next fiscal year I

have \$850,000. Two hundred thousand of that is required to keep the lights and gas on in the buildings we own.

At a central level, we are just decimated. At the community level, some of our communities have a little bit of money put away to be able to provide essential services. Some communities are very limited, and for some, perhaps by the end of this next fiscal year, we will not be able to deliver water, and we will not be able to keep the roads graded or anything unless we move forward with the federal government.

• (1635)

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have a quick question. This government has announced many different programs for indigenous people and indigenous governments. Why are some of the current funding programs that are out there now are not working for the settlements?

Mr. Herb Lehr: Our settlements get housing programs [Technical difficulty—Editor] quickly, so their expectations of being able to build a house in our communities doesn't happen. We end up having to buy trailers and modular homes and bring them into the communities. We lose all economic opportunity from doing construction, and from getting our people to feel as though they are part of it, and all we are doing is stimulating the economies of the municipalities around us and not truly helping the people in the community with a mechanism that could do two things, two for the price of one—you get an economy and you get a home.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill. You have two minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had a chance to speak with Vice-Chief Derocher earlier, so now, I'd like to hear from Mr. Delorme and Mr. Lehr on the same topic. I want to know whether you have seen an adjustment and increase to your funding to reflect your needs. I am putting the word "increase" in quotation marks.

For instance, would you say your funding covers the rising costs of materials and transportation?

Go ahead, Mr. Lehr and Mr. Delorme.

[English]

Mr. Stan Delorme: Sure. Thank you very much for the question.

The experience that we have had here for the last couple of years for sure is that there is a high cost of materials, high cost of delivery, high cost of everything, and high cost of fuel, which basically factors in there as well.

One of the things we have experienced with the transitional housing program we have, for example, is that we had to go to smaller units to accommodate, among other things, the amount of money that was provided to us by way of this grant. There were other costs that factored into that as well, for the water and sewer part of it and the utilities. Those are costly to install as is putting the driveways into the sites.

Those are all costly. When you're looking at the costs, they're very high, and, therefore, we're forced to go with smaller units.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have two minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to read an excerpt from the Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act, so that everyone understands an outstanding constitution obligation on behalf of Alberta. It begins:

Whereas the Metis were present when the Province of Alberta was established and they and the land set aside for their use form a unique part of the history and culture of the Province; and

Whereas it is desired that the Metis should continue to have a land base to provide for the preservation and enhancement of Metis culture and identity and...to attain self-governance under the laws of Alberta and, to that end, Her Majesty in right of Alberta is granting title to land to the Metis Settlements General Council; and

Whereas Her Majesty in right of Alberta has proposed the land so granted be protected by the Constitution of Canada—

Dramatic pause.

—but until that happens it is proper that the land be protected by the constitution of the Province...

That is Alberta.

We have an outstanding constitutional obligation on the part of the Province of Alberta. It's massive. When we look at Manitoba, for example, they had an outstanding obligation to the Métis. They went to court in 2013 for over 1.4 million acres of land. The Supreme Court decided that the province must return that to the Métis.

We have a job here as parliamentarians to make sure that Alberta's constitutional amendment under section 43 is adhered to. Albertans have fought hard to recognize the Métis people. Métis people have fought hard so that Canada recognizes them. I'm proud to be the first member of a Métis settlement ever elected to this place. I'd be remiss if I did not ensure that this constitutional imperative was understood by Canada and that we had true action to make sure that this land is protected by our Constitution in the highest law.

To President Herb Lehr, do you have any comments on the Constitution and your desire to see our lands protected by the Canadian Constitution?

• (1640)

Mr. Herb Lehr: That was the dream of our elders who signed this deal with the province that we're currently under. It was that this deal would be a stepping stone. The way the elders talk about it is they wanted two horses pulling the cart, with the provincial and federal governments working concurrently together for the greater good of [Technical difficulty—Editor] and the continual dream to have our land protected by the Constitution [Technical difficulty—Editor].

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Desjarlais.

On behalf of the committee's members today, I'd like to thank President Herb Lehr, Vice-Chief Richard Derocher and Chairperson

Stan Delorme for their presentations, answering our questions and giving us their insights. This will help us a great deal as we work on the study of housing in indigenous communities. Thank you very much for being present today.

To all of the committee members, we're going to suspend for a minute or so, as we move to the second panel. Thank you.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1640)

(Pause)

• (1655)

The Chair: Colleagues, we will resume.

We have only one of the three witnesses so far, but we'll start. Hopefully, the other two witnesses will join us very shortly.

[Translation]

I'd like to welcome Nina Malek, councillor for the Conseil des Innus de Pakua Shipu.

We will start with you, Ms. Malek. You have five minutes for your opening statement.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Nina Malek (Councillor, Conseil des Innus de Pakua Shipu): [Witness spoke in Innu as follows:]

Eshe, ma teu anite auen e ashu-uitamatshet e innu aiminanut?

[Innu text translated as follows:]

Yes, is there anyone who would like to translate?

[Translation]

Is someone going to read the brief I sent?

The Chair: Do you have an opening statement, Ms. Malek?

Yes, okay. Go ahead. We are listening.

Ms. Nina Malek: Reading my brief in French is going to take a while.

Good afternoon. My name is Nina Malek, and I am a councillor with the Conseil des Innus de Pakua Shipu des Premières Nations.

I am here today on behalf of our chief, Guy Mestenapéo, and my fellow members of the Conseil de Pakua Shipu.

I'd like to thank the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs for the opportunity to share our community's views on such an important issue: the effects of the housing shortage on our indigenous peoples, the Innu people.

We are a 400-member Innu community on the Lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence River, in Quebec. Specifically, the community of Pakua Shipu is located in Nitassinan, the unceded territory of the Innu first nations. The vast majority of us, nearly all, live in the community, and we are an especially young population. Nearly half of our members are under 25 years old.

We live in a remote community 500 kilometres east of Sept-Îles. Our community is isolated because we are not connected to the rest of the province's road network.

Our village does not yet have official reserve status. Administratively speaking, we are an indigenous settlement. The federal government has been slow to move on the matter.

We have initiated processes to create a reserve and expand our village perimeter. We hope to be able to carry out projects in the short term.

Our most recent data indicate that we have 70 housing units in our housing stock. The average occupancy rate of each unit is 5.1 community members, which is significantly higher than the provincial rate, which is approximately 2.3 people per dwelling.

That illustrates the overcrowding problem faced by our community. Many dwellings are occupied by more than one family. Sometimes two, even three, families live in the same unit. In many cases, these are multi-generational households, where grandparents, parents and children all live under the same roof because they have no other option. Most of those dwellings are located inside the community.

As you no doubt realize, if the average occupancy rate in our community is 5.1 people per housing unit, some units have seven, eight, nine or even more people living in them.

• (1700)

The situation affects a variety of problems we face locally. One effect of the housing shortage in our community is that it makes us very vulnerable in exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown changed people's lives all over the country. In our community, the past two years have been marked by an unusual wave of suicides. I'm not sure whether it's possible to draw a direct link, but it must be recognized that someone has committed suicide in the same space as someone else. After months of lockdown, this is an unusual situation in a community of just 400. Overcrowding leads to challenging family dynamics and sometimes unfortunate events because of the close quarters in which people live.

I won't dwell on the negative impacts. I prefer to come at the issue through a positive lens. In other words, decent housing fosters healthy individuals, a healthy social environment and good academic performance. Our living conditions are not conducive to any of those things.

The housing situation in our community has been well documented for more than two decades. Thanks to the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador and our people who work in housing, we have reliable data that show at least 50 additional housing units are needed in the next five years to put an end to overcrowding in our

homes, replace inadequate housing and meet the needs of the growing population.

• (1705)

The Chair: Ms. Malek, could you kindly wrap up your presentation? Are you almost done?

Ms. Nina Malek: Yes.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Ms. Nina Malek: I also want to point out that more than half the homes are in need of renovation or repair, not to mention the water system infrastructure associated with the construction of new housing. Our 2018 estimates put the cost at \$22 million. Significant isolation exists today for the reasons you are familiar with.

With our current funding, the most we could build is two houses a year, when we actually need to build 10 houses a year.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Malek.

We would now like to ask you questions. The Innu interpretation is now available, so you can answer questions in Innu.

My apologies for the difficulty.

[English]

Colleagues, we're hoping to have Ms. Clayton with us very shortly.

Alvina Paul will not be with us. There was a miscommunication of some sort, so we really only have two witnesses.

We can start now with the questions. You were looking for the other witnesses. I know Madame Gill would be interested in asking questions.

[Translation]

Mrs. Gill, you may start. You have six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Member spoke in Innu as follows:]

Tshinashkumitin ishkueu Malek.

[Innu text translated as follows:]

Thank you, Ms. Malek.

[Translation]

While you are with us today, please feel free to interrupt me if I'm speaking too quickly for the interpretation.

You said in your opening statement that you wanted to come at the issue through a positive lens. I am very glad and proud to welcome you to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, along with my fellow members. We will benefit from your unique insight...

Mr. Chair, I'm hearing an echo, and it's making it hard to concentrate.

The Chair: Do you want me to suspend?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: No, it's fine now. The problem is fixed. I like the sound of my own voice, but not that much, Mr. Chair.

That brings me back to you, Ms. Malek.

What are the positives you would like to share with the committee about communities like Pakua Shipu?

Also, could you tell us more about the community? You told us where it was located, but can you talk about all of the challenges your community faces? After all, those challenges have to be overcome if housing that meets the community's needs is to be built.

If I understood correctly, you have another major concern, the renovation work that a number of dwellings in the community of Pakua Shipu need.

Tshinashkumitin.

Ms. Nina Malek: May I speak in Innu?

• (1710)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: You can speak in Innu, Ms. Malek. I believe Ms. Mesténapeo will be interpreting your remarks.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Malek.

Ms. Nina Malek: You want me to describe my community's situation, the current housing situation in Pakua Shipu. Is that correct?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Yes, that's correct.

Tell us what you'd like us to know. What do you think the answers are? What would you like to see? Feel free to answer how you wish, talking about what you see as important.

Ms. Nina Malek: Right now, we are isolated. You have to travel a long way to get here. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the construction is really slow. Adding just one more house a year is not enough.

In the community of Pakua Shipu, you often have 15 members of the same family living in one house. It takes a long time to get new housing. It happens only once a year, and it's not a lot. We receive material every year, but it's really slow. We are isolated right now.

The ability to build a lot more housing units more quickly is very important to me, so that members of the community can settle in Pakua Shipu. There are 400 of us now. There are 60 to 70 houses in Pakua Shipu. All the kids go to school outside the community. We have a few students who have finished school, but we don't have enough housing for members of the community who return after they graduate. The biggest thing is that we don't have enough housing. We have nowhere for our college and university graduates to live. They are still living outside the community. They are working outside the community while they wait for us to find them housing.

Twelve community members wanted to return to Pakua Shipu, but we didn't have enough housing. The young people who finished their schooling are working outside the community, in English or French. The members who left want to return to the community to

work here, to grow the village, to have a place to live; they want housing and all the rest.

I never really graduated. I was a slow learner, so the housing wasn't available for a long enough period and the school year wasn't long enough for me to finish. A lot of people gave up on school before 1990, and even before 1984. I dropped out of school. It wasn't possible to go to school without leaving the village.

We need housing because we don't have enough in the community. People complain because we can't provide housing. We need it desperately.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I don't mean to interrupt you, Ms. Malek.

If you want to hear the Innu interpretation, you can choose that option on your screen.

You talked about solutions. The most important thing for you is to obtain funding. I think it's helpful to talk about it here, in the committee. As a result of this problem, members are leaving the community because you don't have anywhere for young people to live when they return. You can't make the village bigger. There's no housing for people to start families.

I see you nodding. The first thing you need is money, and then, you can provide people with adequate housing. That said, the current pace of construction isn't working for Pakua Shipu, Unamen Shipu or other communities along the North Shore and in Labrador. Is that about right?

Ms. Nina Malek: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

I notice that with us we now have our second witness, Eva Clayton, president of the Nisga'a Lisims Government.

Welcome, Ms. Clayton. Thank you for joining us. We'll try to get this back on the rails.

You were probably told that you would have five minutes to make an initial presentation. If you're ready to do that, please go ahead.

• (1715)

Ms. Eva Clayton (President, Nisga'a Lisims Government): Thank you. My apologies to the committee for my late arrival.

First of all, good evening to the House of Commons standing committee. It gives me great pleasure to appear before you today to provide you some context on the issue of the housing shortages in indigenous communities and, in particular, the Nisga'a Nation.

By way of background, I'm here as the president of the Nisga'a Lisims Government, representing the Nisga'a Nation. The Nisga'a Nation will be celebrating its 22nd anniversary since the—

The Chair: Ms. Clayton, I'm sorry to interrupt you. We're not hearing you very well. It's difficult for the translation.

The Chair: It's not working.

[English]

Unfortunately, colleagues, I think we're going to not only have to suspend but to adjourn. We'll have to catch this up at another time, I'm afraid. We're having difficulties on both scores.

[Translation]

Ms. Malek, thank you very much for your participation today. I apologize for the technical difficulties, but I'm going to have to end the meeting.

Ms. Nina Malek: I'll send you copies of my brief, if you'd like.

The Chair: Yes, that's a great idea.

Ms. Nina Malek: I have photos as well.

The Chair: If you have a document you can send us, that would be great.

Ms. Nina Malek: All right.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Malek.

Ms. Nina Malek: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Before you hit the gavel, I'm wondering through you to the clerk if they could potentially reschedule Ms. Clayton at a future meeting, if possible.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Did you already say that, and I missed it?

The Chair: No, I sort of said it, but I agree.

Colleagues, it is pretty unanimous that we missed not only Ms. Clayton but also Alvina Paul today.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes.

The Chair: We should try to find a way to reschedule this.

Is everybody in agreement with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, that is unanimous. Thank you.

It didn't quite work out. I see Mr. Weiler was ready with all his questions, but perhaps he'll have another time.

Thank you, everyone.

This meeting is adjourned.

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