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Mr. Norman Doyle

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• (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC)): Order, please.

We will get our meeting going and welcome Stewart Mussel Farms. Stephen Stewart is the owner, from Prince Edward Island. He has his own operation over in P.E.I.

It's good to have you here today, Stewart. You have an hour, between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., or however long it takes. It could be half an hour, it could be 45 minutes, or it could be an hour. We have up to an hour if you require it.

I know you have an opening statement, so you go right to it.

Mr. Stephen Stewart (Owner, Stewart Mussel Farms Inc.): All right. I have some history with the temporary foreign worker program. I just wrote up a couple of pages about the situation and what happened to my company.

On May 6, 2007, I went to Halifax to pick up 11 foreign workers from Sri Lanka whom we'd arranged to have come to P.E.I. to fill a labour shortage on our mussel farms. We spent \$20,000 renovating a house we own next door for them to live in, and we agreed to purchase a 12-passenger van to transport them to work, the bank, the grocery store, and so on. We began the process of bringing these foreign workers to Canada in December 2006. We were told that we had to provide them with return airline tickets, which totalled \$21,000. In return, they signed an employment contract agreeing to work for Stewart Mussel Farms Inc. for a period of eight months.

We had a few hurdles to overcome, such as problems with language barriers and the change in temperature and culture, but things seemed to move along quite smoothly. We made it a point every evening to visit with them to make sure they understood everything and to answer any questions they might have. We made sure they got bank accounts set up and social insurance numbers, and we made sure they were able to wire money back to their families. They told me that what they made in less than a week working for my company was more than they could make at home in a month.

On Friday, June 8, a month after they arrived, none of the Sri Lankan workers showed up for work. They had all disappeared. After I contacted the RCMP on their disappearance, officers came to search my property. They brought in police dogs to check for drugs and explosives. After they left, I contacted some local cab companies and found out that at approximately 3 a.m. these 11 workers left in two taxi vans, with no passports, only the clothes on their backs, to head to Ottawa.

I was told by the cab company that they had inquired about the cost of this trip two weeks before they actually left. They had left all their luggage, clothes, and family photos behind. Later the same afternoon we located them on the west side of Montreal by talking to the cab company. After reporting their whereabouts to the RCMP and Citizenship and Immigration, we were told that they were breaking no laws. The work visa stated that they could only work for Stewart Mussels Farm, Inc., but they were free to roam and travel where they wanted until April 2008, when their visas expired. And as long as they worked for no one else, they were okay.

I asked if they would be intercepted and questioned, and I was told that they would not be. At this point I was getting very annoyed and asked the question, "What if they're on the way to blow up the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa?" The answer was that then someone would be in trouble.

Once Citizenship and Immigration got involved, we were told that this kind of thing happens all the time. The foreign workers disappear, never to be found again. This was news to us. If this was the case, someone in government should at least have given us a heads-up that this happens all the time. We don't understand how this is possible. They signed employment contracts with us, but because of the way the Canadian laws are written, these foreign workers are free to roam the country for the length of their visa, and we were now worse off than before bringing these workers here. We were now short 11 workers and down the \$50,000 we had spent to bring them here, house them, transport them, and so on.

In the months since the workers left, there have been numerous messages from Sri Lanka left on the telephone at the house they were living in. One man's wife was crying over the phone, because she had no idea where he was. One of them has kept in contact with us on a fairly regular basis. He's living in Toronto, working as a dishwasher. He knows where the rest of them are and what they're doing. Another has phoned looking for his T4 slips. He told us very proudly that now that he is living in Canada, he has to file taxes.

Many stories have emerged as to why they left, but it boils down to their not wanting to go back to Sri Lanka when their visas expired. We have even had calls from Sri Lanka wanting to know if we need any more workers. When I told this to one of the guys who left, he laughed and said, "Yes, everyone wants to come to Canada now." In other words, it's too easy to get here and stay. Canadian immigration seems to be a joke to them.

•(1315)

We've been criticized locally for bringing foreign workers in to work. Some have even commented that we got what we deserved. We felt this was the only way to fill the shortage of workers. If there were people here who wanted to work, we'd hire them. Some people are not cut out for labour work, and others just don't want to do it.

Our labour market opinion, which we had to work hard to get, has expired, and now we have to start the entire process again if we're looking to bring in workers. The bottom line is that we have mussel farms that need workers who want to work and will show up.

I'm not against immigration. I believe our country is in need of a greater workforce for labour jobs. I feel Canadians need to realize how easy it is for foreign workers to come to Canada, leave the company they were supposed to work for, and travel freely around Canada without worrying. As long as they don't legally work for anyone else, they aren't breaking any laws. This is not acceptable to employers like me who spend thousands of dollars to bring the workers here, or to Canadians whose tax dollars help to support the workers while they are here living in Canada.

In conclusion, in my opinion there are some serious flaws in the foreign worker system that need to be fixed. This country was built on the dreams of immigrants coming here to work and get a better life for themselves and their family. This is the way the foreign worker system should work, not as a joke to the ones back in the home country looking for a quick way to beat the regular immigration process.

The Chair: So Stephen, you spent \$50,000 in preparation for these people to come to work for your company?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: That's right.

The Chair: They had an eight-month contract.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes.

The Chair: And, they just up and left in the middle of it all. So did you contact Immigration when that happened?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes, I did on the day they disappeared.

The Chair: Have you had any contact from Immigration as to what might be done, what could be done, what you should do?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: They came out and confiscated all the passports and stuff that we had in our safe. Other than that, there was no recourse, nothing we could do. As I said, they're breaking no laws. Provided they didn't work for any other company in Canada, they were free to do what they pleased for the length of their visas.

The Chair: Under the contract you had, you were paying them comparable wages to what you would be paying somebody from P.E. I.?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes, they were being paid the exact same wage.

The Chair: It's unfortunate. How many were involved here?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I brought in 11 people. We were planning to bring in 12, and then at the last minute, for some reason, one couldn't make it.

The Chair: So obviously the foreign worker program hasn't worked too well for you.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: The big part for me was to be told by Immigration, the day they all disappeared, that this happens all the time, and that people come to Canada and disappear, never to be seen again. I really felt that I should have had a bit of a heads-up on this before I spent six months going through the program, getting registered, and getting the approval from the government to bring these people, only to have them tell me that afterwards.

The Chair: Yes, because really, once they are here, you don't have any control over keeping them here, because a fellow can get up any morning at all and decide to leave the job and leave the province and go somewhere else. I'm just wondering how it could be a little better controlled, because obviously a contract didn't work.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I understand that if foreign workers are going to come into any country, then obviously they have to be looked after and protected to make sure they're not being mistreated and abused and that kind of thing. But by the same token, there needs to be a bit of protection for the employer who's investing all the money to bring them here.

The Chair: Yes, I see your point.

Mr. Telegdi.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I hope we can get the researchers to contact Immigration to find out how often this happens—that would be a nice figure to have—so we can get that before we meet again.

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: You advertised locally for local employees, and you didn't get anybody?

•(1320)

Mr. Stephen Stewart: No. Most of the people have gone west. If you think about it, we all teach our kids now to stay in school. Computers and office work are what we train everybody to do now. It doesn't seem to matter. Anybody who used to be around to work in our industry has gone west.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Mr. Chair, I'm so amazed. When I first got into Parliament back in 1993—Madame Folco can probably attest to it also—the Atlantic members were forever saying that we have to preserve the jobs in aquaculture; we had high employment, and it was a terrible situation going across the country, with worker shortages everywhere. Clearly, that's not the case in Canada anymore.

How long was the work visa; was it eight months?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Their contract was for eight months, but the way the system works, their visa was good for a year.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: The visa was good for a year.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes, and I had the option to renew their contract and keep them longer if I wanted to.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Yes.

You mentioned that they ended up saying they were concerned that once it expired, they'd have to leave.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: To the best of our knowledge, that's what happened.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Well, let's suppose for a minute that their motivation is correct. Then it would be somewhat helpful, when people come here, if they knew that it wasn't a one-shot deal and that if they were to work out, they would get to extend.

I'll give you the example of the nanny program. People come over, and if they're employed two out of three years, then they can become landed. If that were put out—

Mr. Stephen Stewart: It's the same with this type of operation as well.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: They could? Then I guess the fact that they were worried about being removed after eight months or one year was not valid, or they didn't understand it.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Well, the contracts they signed were presented to them in Sri Lanka in their language, so they should have understood. Most of these people were extremely smart people with experience—everything from forklift tickets and training to mechanics. They weren't just people off the street; these were people who had experience and knowledge to bring to Canada.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: This raises another question, then. They sound as though they have skills and can be employable and can be absorbed by other parts of the economy. What we tend to do is put over-qualified people into jobs they don't need all those qualifications for.

What comes to mind is that Tim Hortons recently hired 100 people from the Philippines, all university graduates, and they're working at Tim Hortons in Alberta at \$12 an hour. I wondered about the advisability. If I were running Tim Hortons, why would I want university graduates employed for a year, when I know full well that once the year expires I'm going to lose them? If I didn't have university graduates, the chances are that I would probably have a better chance of retaining them.

I raise that because it points to the fact that we need menial labour, which takes some skills, but when you require too much in the way of qualifications, you might have this happen.

Could you provide the committee with a copy of the contract you had with them? I would really like to see it. I think it would be useful for the committee as we study this and make recommendations.

What they've done is almost assure themselves that when the visa expires, they either go underground or they'll leave the country.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: They've all claimed refugee status.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): It's not all that easy to get refugee status from Sri Lanka. There are some pretty hard and fast rules these days.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: One of the guys called two weeks ago and offered to come back now and work at my processing plant, because he said he had the okay to stay for the next four years. He was all prepared to come back to work, now that he has the okay to stay.

● (1325)

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: The other thing we should be doing, Mr. Chairman, is to find out from the department how much information the department makes available to employers who hire temporary foreign workers.

Obviously it was a big disappointment for you, and you learned. But I wonder whether it would have been useful, had you known that these things happen all the time, for the department to have told you—if you had been forewarned. I could see you being in a real lurch after you had made a \$50,000 investment, which I'm sure is not easy for a small business to absorb.

I'm surprised—you had a 12-seat van—that they didn't take the van, that they left it there.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Well, I own the van, and part of the deal was that I would provide transportation to get them to the local town at least once a week for their shopping and groceries and to wire money back to their families.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You are going to share some time with Madame Folco.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As a complement to what my colleague Andrew Telegdi has said, there is another thing I'd like to check. Some of the questions Andrew was asking have to do with you personally, and what has happened to you.

I've worked with refugees and I've worked with people from Sri Lanka, but this is the first time I've heard of this. I should have known, human nature being what it is, but it's actually the first time I've heard such a story, and I wonder whether we could ask the researchers to check as to whether Immigration Canada follows up on this kind of abuse—because it is abuse, abuse on the part of these employees who use the system to their own ends, and we know that this system is used by a lot of people.

I wonder if Immigration Canada keeps a file so that if an individual who has worked for Mr. Stewart, for example, disappears and then figures he's going to be asking for refugee status—well, hold on a minute, there's a file, and we know that he's.... That's one thing. Then we could also check in the file if that man tries to come back to work for another employer in two or three years' time. His name should be kept on file so that we know if he's already done something that may not be against the law but is certainly against the rules as we all understand them.

The Chair: When they come, the employer could make them aware that a file is being kept, and that if they should violate the terms and conditions of the contract, the file would go to Immigration for future reference.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Exactly.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: We were very surprised that they left and didn't take a change of clothes. They didn't take anything. We had their passports and all their personal information in a safe, to keep those things safe for them.

One of the things Immigration told us was that this would be their plan, and that if we had not located them through my work in talking to the taxi drivers, Immigration offices in Ottawa and wherever would not even have been expecting these people to leave their employment with me.

Officials told me that in this type of situation they walk into the office and complain and identify themselves as somebody they're not, so that their names are not in the system. I was told that a typical story would be that they came from out west, where they were being abused, and that they took off and were now claiming refugee status.

Only because we pursued the matter and tried to locate them, because we were genuinely concerned for what had happened to them—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Mr. Stewart, this is something they don't know, but I happen to have worked on the Immigration and Refugee Board and I can tell you that you don't just walk in and say you're a refugee. That doesn't work.

Some people can take advantage of the system, yes, but just so you know, if one of these individuals had shown up and said that he worked for an employer who was not behaving as he should have towards an employee—for example, in terms of living conditions, or whatever—then people would check up, you know. We would ask for the name of the employer and check up on the employer and do that kind of thing. If he comes with another name, then you have to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, and it's not always easy.

The thing is, there is another individual between you and the employee. In French we call that person *un intervenant*. That is the individual who actually hired these people in your name, who went and got them in your name—this entrepreneur, if you like. My impression of those I've met is that once the employees get on the farm or wherever, that's the end of the entrepreneur's responsibility. If you got hold of the entrepreneur to say that these guys had walked out on you and asked the entrepreneur not to deal with them if they asked to come back, I'm not sure it would even be worthwhile.

I think what would really hurt these people is for Immigration Canada to know. I would even suggest that you write a letter to the minister or to the chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board in Ottawa mentioning the names of these people and saying you have heard they intend to ask for refugee status, and explaining what the situation is. The names of these people would be put on the record in their file, and if they ever tried, something would light up on the computer. That's what I would suggest you do.

• (1330)

Mr. Stephen Stewart: We wrote many letters to every department we could think of, right through to the Prime Minister's Office. I even had a call from Stockwell Day.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: You had a call from Stockwell Day? And what did he say, apart from no?

Mr. Stephen Stewart: He was quite surprised these loopholes could exist, where these people could have a contract to work for me and then.... He acknowledged there were some issues and that they needed to be addressed. That was the extent of it.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Well, I've been in a situation that has some points in common with the one you're living through now. I wrote a

letter to the chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board. I said, these are the people and this is what has happened; I've heard that these are the people intend to apply for refugee status, and I would appreciate it if you would make sure that what I am telling you in the letter is taken into account when they apply. Do you see what I mean? You can't say to refuse them, but you can say that these are the facts.

If you would like, one of the researchers can get you the name and the address of the president or chair of the board—who is not a minister, by the way; they're totally at arm's length. That's what I would suggest.

If these things were better known, I think—

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I still think we need to be able to address the whole issue of.... It doesn't matter where the worker is from, in my opinion, if they want to come to Canada and they want to work. We fully understood, going into this, that if they were here for two to three years, they could apply for permanent residency. We were very well aware of that fact and we had hoped that they would be able to continue to work for us for that two- to three-year period.

If they're great people, why shouldn't they be allowed to stay in the country? And then they're free to go off and pursue whatever interests they want. We knew that going into this, but I really believe that it doesn't matter if it's me or anybody in Canada; as employers, we need some kind of system so that the workers, whatever country they're from, understand that if they're signing a contract and coming to work, they have to fulfill their contract, as long as they're not being mistreated. To be able to go and roam the country for a year, at my expense—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Perhaps I could ask one more question.

The Chair: They didn't seem to have any concept of what a contract really was.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I really don't think they ever planned on staying, anyway. Two weeks after they were here, they were already pricing their trip to Ottawa. Obviously it was a master plan before they ever came here.

The Chair: Yes. Very good.

Madame Folco, thank you.

Mr. St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Thank you very much.

Thank you for coming, Mr. Stewart. If I understood correctly, your company is in Prince Edward Island. Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Correct.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I have never been to Prince Edward Island. I am told that it is a very beautiful place. I can't understand why people would want to leave Prince Edward Island, especially to go to Toronto. That's my personal opinion.

On a more serious note, you mentioned that these individuals have left your business. They left and as long as they do not work for another company, they are not acting illegally. Obviously, we all know they are not staying in Canada as tourists. They're working in restaurants or elsewhere. Are these individuals working under the table or are they officially working elsewhere? According to you, some of them say they received T4 slips and that they pay taxes. Surely they are on someone else's list of employees then.

• (1335)

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: It's quite a story. We had numerous calls from different cities by Sri Lankans who lived in Canada. People would call. I was even advised at one point by a Sri Lankan who called from Ottawa and said that I really needed to drop this whole issue because of the whole Tamil Tiger situation, that waves were being made and that there were things I probably really didn't want to get into. Yes, they were working, and people knew where they were: they were working underground.

At one point we decided, well, perhaps it's time to let it all die, based on what people were calling about and telling us.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: As far as you know, these individuals are all working underground. No one is working legally.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I believe the majority of them now—I can't speak for them all, because the ones who have been in contact with us seem to know where the rest of them are—have applied for refugee status. I really don't know how the system works. They have some kind of temporary status whereby they're allowed to work now. They're no longer under my employer contract because of however they applied to stay in Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: We really need to shed some light on this. Even if they have filed a refugee claim and they're working elsewhere, they still have a responsibility under the contract they signed with you. Therefore, if they are working somewhere else and they are declaring that income, then the government can trace them and remind them that they have a contract somewhere else and they have to fulfill that contract first.

Furthermore, you appear to be saying that you want to move on and not carry this case on forever. However, if you were to be able to trace these individuals, you wouldn't be able to receive compensation from them. On the one hand, you can't find them and on the other hand, they probably are not making enough of an income to reimburse you for the amounts in question.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes, actually just a week and a half ago, a particular individual's T4 had already been mailed out—because we have to send out the T4s—and he e-mailed a second time inquiring why he hadn't received it yet. And yes, I did e-mail him back and said, "It's in the mail. And by the way, the cost of your plane ticket was this much, and we'd greatly appreciate your refunding the money that we paid to get you here."

You talked about letting it drop. From what we were told by the people who called us, the issue of trying to get them sent back, because I was mad, that whole idea or that side of it... Yes, we just decided there was nothing we could do about it. Then we got involved with writing letters to the people we thought could help change the system.

I really feel that in the years to come, we're going to have no choice but to go down this road again. So our goal became to try to fix the system, to protect people like me for the next time.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: What I find surprising is that this is the first time this has been pointed out to us since I have been on this committee. Yet, department officials discussed several problems with us. I'm pleased that you came to speak to us about your case. I think that everyone is surprised. Now we need to see whether this is a common problem and I look forward to hearing the department's comments.

The most surprising statement you made is that this happens all the time. Why is it that an attempt has not been made to find a solution?

What this demonstrates more broadly is that when a system does not work, when it is rotten, as ours currently is—let's be frank—when waiting periods are extremely long and when the process makes no sense, people try through any possible means to bypass the law or the system.

Individuals who have testified before us have told us that some people apply for refugee status rather than immigration simply because processing a refugee application is faster than processing a standard immigration application. What we're seeing today is individuals using this program to come into the country, and then once they are here they leave and go elsewhere.

I have no more questions but it is not because I don't find this interesting. It's so new. We heard your testimony and I am now looking forward to hearing what the Department of Citizenship and Immigration will have to tell us about this issue.

• (1340)

[English]

The Chair: I'll take some questions from Mr. Carrier, and then go back to Madam Folco.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Good afternoon, Mr. Stewart. I'm pleased to see you here. I would like to correct something my colleague said: we have often been told that it was easier to obtain temporary worker status than to go through the immigration process.

So these aren't refugees, as you stated, but rather temporary workers. We have been told from the very beginning that the process is simpler and faster and that employers were generally happy with it. This is the first time that we have heard of a case like the one you have described today.

Did you use a recruiting firm to hire the workers you signed a contract with?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Actually, numerous firms had called, and this kind of adds to the strange part of the story. A local person from Sri Lanka, who had lived in P.E.I. for close to 10 years, knew that I was looking for workers. He was quite an honourable person. He was the head chef at the local hospital in Charlottetown, he was the local head chef at a nice hotel in Charlottetown, and he was a very smart individual. When he knew I wanted to bring in 12 people, he was trying to bring in his brother. And his brother was actually the one person who did not come at the time. He basically sold us on the entire program, that it was better not to use a service, because a lot of times the service keeps half the workers' money and they don't get all the money they're paid.

So this particular individual is who we used to identify and access the workers. Even when I checked into him with the local government, he came with a good background, and everybody thought he was a great guy and that this was the way for us to go to access our workers. We used a local person who was from there.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: We were told during other testimonies that temporary workers sign their contracts in their countries of origin in their language. They were therefore aware of their contract provisions before coming here. That is how they accepted coming to work here.

In your case, you used the assistance of a friend. Was he dealing with an established firm, in the workers' country of origin, that explained to the workers the contract they would have to comply with?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: When the contracts got signed, the Canadian government dealt with the government there. Those people had to go through security clearance, and they all had to be approved by the Canadian government in Sri Lanka in order to even come to Canada. So they were well informed and signed their contracts at the office, wherever the office was, in Sri Lanka.

• (1345)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Was that the first time you used temporary workers?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: You had a bad experience. Without being an expert, perhaps I could say that the process you followed resulted in a negative outcome. Regardless, these contracts were authorized by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and were signed following an agreement with that department.

That is why I'm surprised that the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, who were informed about the situation, did not compensate you or take responsibility. They could tell you they're responsible, that they apologize and will find an alternative, or compensate you for the investment you made.

According to what you said earlier, the only response you obtained was that it often happens and that you would have to deal with it alone. Is that the response you were given?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Pretty much. I'm also the vice-president of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance, so I'm in Ottawa quite often for meetings with government on aquaculture issues, and this is one thing that's always on the table—the temporary worker program. And I've been told on more than one occasion, “There's nothing we can do for you. Do a better job next time. Think harder about who's coming and hope they work out better for you next time.”

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: If I understand correctly, you would like the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to shoulder its responsibility regarding this type of program, that it in fact administers. Did you expect the department to act more responsibly with this program?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you, sir.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Folco.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I hate to be very negative here, but in fact the immigration department has no responsibility in this matter, as they will tell you very easily. All they do is stamp the visa saying that an individual can come to Canada for a given time to work for this person.

So in fact the contract does not include the immigration department. The contract has three parties to it: the employer, who in this case is you, Mr. Stewart; the employee; and this entrepreneur, or middle man—that's the word I was looking for before—with whom you obviously didn't deal. You thought somebody else was going to be able to answer your needs without going through all that.

So there is no legal responsibility on the part of the department. We might want the department to have legal responsibility, but at this time they don't have it.

Obviously we have no answers for you, Mr. Stewart, as an individual. However, I think the importance of your being here this afternoon is to point out this aspect to us, to show us that in fact these people can disappear out in nature, as we say in French—and then nothing is done.

I would have thought, for example, the RCMP might have been interested in a number of Sri Lankan people coming to Canada and disappearing, given that—I think I read about this only this morning—the RCMP raided a place in Montreal that was raising money for the Tamil Tigers. We know that a lot of people are involved in this. I would have thought the RCMP would have been involved in that. You tell me that they had already gone through security; I don't know.

The important thing here is that you have identified a problem. This is something that we are going to look into, certainly. We're going to get the numbers, just as Mr. Telegdi suggested, and see whether or not there's anything we can recommend to the government by way of giving some protection to the employers. Recommending to government is what this committee is supposed to be doing.

We've looked in the past at giving protection to employees, because in many cases they do need protection, but you've brought up the opposite point of view, that employers also need protection. I think this is something we must look at.

• (1350)

Mr. Stephen Stewart: One last thing I'd like to point out is that I've met since with probably three or four different companies in the business of providing workers. Regardless of whether you use an individual, as I chose to, or you use a company, the workers can still take off and disappear. One thing the companies bring to the table is that they guarantee you—by whatever means, I don't know—that these people will not leave, and if they do leave, you will have somebody else to replace them immediately.

So the system still applies. There might be better protection to use a company that will guarantee, somehow, that they will not leave, but the same system is there. The same loopholes exist.

The Chair: Andrew, do you have a question? Go ahead.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Just as my colleague said, yes, until you came forward, we weren't presented with the other side.

One thing I thought about as I listened to you—so this comes off the top of my head, certainly—is that it seems to me we could issue conditional visas. I mean, if somebody is allowed into the country to work, they're allowed into the country to work. Obviously if the person gets sick or they're taking a legitimate holiday, that's fine, but the main reason the visa was issued to the individual was to come in to work. The conditions of the visa could be amended to make sure they comply with the purpose of their visit.

So if they say they are coming to Canada to be a tourist, then the determination is made on that basis when they're issued a visa. The visa officials try to ensure that they have a way of supporting themselves while they are in Canada so that they don't end up on social assistance.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: In my area there are quite a few people from Mexico who are working on different farming operations. A lot of people have asked me, "Why wouldn't you bring people from Mexico? They're great workers."

I tried to bring people from Mexico. I was informed that they were not approved to work in my industry, that it was a Mexican government law that they could work only in industries where they could gain knowledge and take it back and apply it at home. So I was not allowed to have Mexican workers.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: There's aquaculture in Mexico. They have a lot of coastline.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: That's what I was told at the time.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: I think it's one of the possibilities we could be looking at so we don't give an open-ended reason, as such.

The last thing we want is to have the programs that are designed to bring in temporary workers abused, just as much as we're concerned that the rights of the workers when they get here are not abused.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Carrier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Given the information we have obtained concerning the response that the department gave to Mr. Stewart, that is that this happens frequently, that it was of no great concern, I would like to have statistics from the department on the number of temporary workers who leave their employer before the end of their contract.

[*English*]

The Chair: You mean the employees, yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: I would like to have the statistics on workers who leave their job in this way.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: This is the first case we have heard of but it would be interesting to find out whether or not this is a real problem, a situation that occurs throughout Canada. Could we obtain that information?

[*English*]

The Chair: You're right. Stephen has put a new twist and a new perspective on what we've been hearing on this. We need to check it out from the employer's point of view.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: I think a lot of people just don't want to acknowledge the fact that they've been burned.

There's a big lobster processing company in P.E.I., Ocean Choice International Inc. They're based in Newfoundland. They've had workers who have disappeared. There have been numerous cases in the news of people from Russia heading back home and not getting on the airplane. They leave the airport, and where are they? It's in the news.

• (1355)

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Carrier, we're going to make every effort to get that information for the committee.

In the meantime, I believe Mr. Telegdi asked you to get the committee a copy of the contract you were operating under.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Yes.

The Chair: The clerk will give you his card so you can send it off to us. What you've told us today is very interesting, and we thank you for it.

Mr. Stephen Stewart: Thank you.

The Chair: Hopefully we can make some good recommendations to help you with these problems.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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