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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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•(0855)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

This meeting is televised. We're studying the main estimates. If you look at number two on the agenda, we're also looking at the supplementary estimates, even though they were deemed to have been passed. You're free to ask questions on the supplementary estimates as well.

We have before us the Honourable Jason Kenney, who is the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, along with members from the department to assist him.

Good morning, Mr. Minister. You have up to 20 minutes to make a presentation to the committee. Thank you very much for coming to us.

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism): Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm accompanied by Deputy Minister Neil Yeates; Les Linklater, ADM for policy; Robert Orr, ADM for operations; and Amipal Manchanda, who is the chief financial officer at CIC.

Thank you very much, colleagues.

I think the estimates before you are straightforward and self-explanatory. However, I thought I would focus my remarks on a critical issue, which was the subject of a study of your permanent standing committee, and that is the question of backlogs. We've made enormous progress in backlog reduction.

You all know that one of the most vexatious problems in our immigration system for many years has been that of enormous backlogs, which reflected a certain degree of dysfunctionality in our immigration system. You'll know that a couple of years ago our total immigration backlog had capped out. It was plateaued for two or three years at about one million people waiting for decisions on their applications, in many cases for over seven years, across a range of our programs. We have taken determined action to reduce those backlogs in order to move from a slow and passive immigration system to one that is fast and flexible, and better connected to the needs of our labour market, our economy, so that we can do a much better job of using immigration as a tool of economic growth.

One thing I'd like to remind committee members of is that backlogs were not and never have been a function of operational inefficiency. When I hear some members suggest, even after having

studied the question of inventories and backlogs for months, that if we were simply to hire more staff to generate more visas, as if this were some sort of remedy, I'm disappointed. I think after the study this committee held, surely members would understand that in fact backlogs have not been a function of operational resources.

Indeed, for the past seven years this department has been achieving its operational targets, and has been admitting the number of permanent residents that we planned to. Rather, it was a function of policy, whereby we were required to receive and ultimately process a potentially unlimited number of applications in a world where, of course, we limit the number of immigrants we admit.

Consequently, year after year we were, as I say, overselling the plane, as it were, to Canada. We were selling more tickets than there were seats available.

I think the best possible metaphor for the development of backlogs is to imagine Immigration Canada running an airline, which has a capacity, let's say, of 255,000 seats, but every year we were selling something in the range of 400,000 tickets. We could have tripled the number of flight personnel. We could have hired more pilots. We could have hired more flight attendants and gate attendants, but there were still just 255,000 seats on the plane. There were still a limited number of opportunities for permanent residency based on the immigration plan, which in turn is based, in part, on the government's understanding, at least, of the public consensus for the practical limits of immigration.

The real problem wasn't how many staff were running that airplane, because we were filling it up year after year, we were occupying every available seat. The problem was the 150,000 people to whom tickets were sold and for whom there were not seats available.

That happened year after year. That was a function not of operational inefficiency on the part of the department, although it could and always does seek additional efficiencies, it was rather a function of bad policy. We, the politicians, have to take the blame for that. Really, I think ultimately that policy mistake was made in IRPA, and it wasn't helped, frankly, by subsequent judicial decisions.

To the previous government's credit, it actually did try, following the adoption of IRPA, to take measures to reduce the backlog, at least in the skilled worker program, which were ultimately unsuccessful at court.

We ended up with a backlog of one million people. You'll see this in the deck.

Mr. Chairman, this is the point I'd really like to emphasize with you.

[*Translation*]

Had we not taken action, we would have had a total backlog of 2.23 million people by 2015. That means that, in two years, we would have a backlog of 2.2 million people, with ridiculous wait times.

[*English*]

That's the direction in which we were headed.

Some people, Chairman, suggest that the solution to all of this could and should have been simply to increase immigration levels. Let's expand the airplane. Let's buy another airplane. Let's add seats on the airline by increasing the immigration levels. At least that proposed remedy sort of addresses the mathematical problem of backlogs but inadequately.

You can see on one of these slides—I don't have the number here—that had we increased immigration levels to 1% of the population, which has been advocated by some political parties, that is to say increased levels in the range of admitting 340,000 permanent residents rather than say 260,000, and done that without limiting the number of new applications and without more aggressive backlog reduction, the backlog by 2015 would stand at 1.28 million. The backlog would have continued to grow. You could increase levels massively from 260,000 to 340,000, but if you didn't limit intake of new applications, the backlog would continue to grow.

This is a challenge.

● (0900)

[*Translation*]

In fact, Mr. Chair, by proposing an increase in immigration levels, it might be difficult to resolve the problem of growing backlogs.

[*English*]

You'll see on the next slide a huge backlog reduction. We've gone from a total backlog at the end of 2011 of just over 1 million to a backlog last month of 616,000, a 40% reduction, Mr. Speaker. You'll see the largest production there is in the economic classes, a reduction from 688,000 to 326,000, and in family class from 238,000 to 202,000.

I find it interesting, Mr. Chairman, that after all the criticism the government has taken for its robust efforts to reduce these backlogs so we could actually have an efficient immigration system, I've been criticized for having gone too far into backlog reduction on the economic category. Now people are asking why I've neglected the family class and why I haven't more aggressively reduced the backlogs there.

I find that somewhat ironic because in fact legitimate criticism can be directed in my direction for not having taken firmer action faster on backlog reduction. But quite frankly, every single measure we took, from limiting the number of new applications, to putting moratoria in place for several programs, to of course the legislative decision to return applications to some 280,000 people in the federal skilled worker queue, all of those were opposed.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding that opposition, we see that enormous progress has been made. I'll just run you through how some of that is happening. You'll see on the next slide the total immigration backlog again. We would have been on track to well over 2 million persons had no actions been taken, which would have been massively irresponsible. I estimate that at that point we'd be sitting on average wait times of well over 14 years, and of course, it would just keep growing ad infinitum.

Instead, as you can see, with the introduction of the action plan for faster immigration in the end of 2008, which was essentially to begin using the new tool of ministerial instructions to limit new applications, in the case of the federal skilled worker program, we've managed to plateau the growth of the backlog. Then in 2011, you'll see the impacts on the moratorium on new applications for the immigrant investor program, the entrepreneurs program, the moratorium for new applications on the federal skilled worker program, and the two-year temporary pause in applications for the parents and grandparents program.

Then, ultimately, you'll see the impact of the legislative reduction of old pre-2008 FSW applications bringing us down to 436,000. Then you'll see the differences broken down by program.

Just to run you through these very quickly, on the federal skilled worker program, had no action been taken, we'd be on track for a backlog of 1.58 million persons with a 15-year wait time by the end of 2015. Instead, you'll see that we are now at under 100,000. We're at about a 90,000-person backlog with about a 12-month wait time, on track as promised to a just-in-time system that processes new applications for skilled workers in months rather than years, with a working inventory. That is to say, an inventory that's smaller than the projected annual level of admissions.

Similarly, on parents and grandparents, you'll see that in the third quarter of 2011 we introduced the action plan for faster family reunification, which has helped us to take a 167,000-person backlog with an eight-year wait time down today to 125,000-person backlog with a five-year wait time. If we continue with this policy approach, which involves a higher than ever level of admissions, admitting 25,000 parents and grandparents per year—that is, by the way, a 60% increase over the average level of admissions in that program over the long term—and we continue with limited numbers of new applications, we will be on track to a two-year wait time by 2015.

I'll tell you this, Mr. Chairman. If you're applying for your parents to come to Canada, a two-year wait time is a heck of a lot better than an eight-year wait time growing to a 15-year wait time, which is where we would be, frankly, had we followed the advice of some and taken no action.

The business categories, you'll see, involve essentially the entrepreneur and investor immigrant programs. Again, we were capped out at a backlog of 107,000 with a nine-year wait time—that was just last year—and we were on track for a backlog of 250,000 and 20-year wait times. Yes, you heard me—20-year wait times—but with the pause on new applications, we're on track to see a gradual reduction in that program.

One program on which we have not taken any action yet is the live-in caregiver program, and this is a concern that I point out to you, colleagues. We are now sitting on a backlog of 45,000 people with their permanent residency applications in the queue. There's a five-year wait time, which, to me, is unacceptable. In fact, that doesn't really disclose the whole truth, because there are also the caregivers who are currently here on a temporary status and have not yet qualified for permanent residency. If we count those two inventories together, we are looking at upwards of 80,000 people and about a 10-year inventory.

We've also made enormous progress not through limiting new applications but through other measures such as the introduction of the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act, which, of course, limits access to the humanitarian and compassionate application process for failed asylum claimants, replacing it effectively with the new fully fact-based appeal at the refugee appeal division for the vast majority of claimants.

We've also, as you know, restricted access to H and C for certain kinds of very serious criminals such as terrorists and members of organized criminal networks. As a result of those measures, you'll see that the backlog, which was bouncing around the 25,000 level, is going to come down to a couple of thousand. That is to say we'll be processing those H and C applications very quickly rather than over the course of 18 months or so.

Finally, I have very good news. It's not in this chart, but as a result of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act and its implementation last December, together with additional resources that we gave to the IRB and the CBSA to deal with the asylum system, we have seen a dramatic reduction in the asylum claimant backlog.

• (0905)

It had capped out about 18 months ago, at the beginning of 2012, at 60,000. We're now at about 28,000 claimants who are waiting for their asylum hearings. That's very good news, because with the better than expected results of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act, with a 65% reduction in the number of new claims, this means that we are even further accelerating backlog reductions. Should current trends continue, we will be on track for a working inventory, as it were, meeting the new timelines of the new asylum system within a couple of years.

[Translation]

We have seen enormous progress in almost all areas of our immigration system when it comes to this acceleration. It is not just a matter of figures; it is a matter of lives and people. We want to give qualified individuals reasonable access to Canada.

I would remind my colleagues that we are competing for the talent of the best potential immigrants who could help us build Canada. New Zealand and Australia accept qualified immigrants in a matter

of a few months. We cannot contend with that competition when we have a system that takes a number of years to do the same thing.

Furthermore, to link potential economic immigrants to available jobs in our economy, in our labour market, we need an accelerated, fast and flexible system. We are in a very good position. We will soon have a new expression of interest system, in other words, this huge reform of the economic immigration system, which will be in place by the end of 2014.

• (0910)

[English]

I intend to bring forward legislative amendments—hopefully in the second budget implementation act, Mr. Speaker—for legislative authorities for the expression of interest system, on which I have briefed this committee and which we hope to put in place by the end of 2014. That system is predicated on a fast and responsive system. Thanks to the enormous progress we have made and will continue to make on backlog reduction, that new system will be in a position to work and to deliver results for Canadians.

[Translation]

Thank you for your attention. I would be pleased to answer your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Kenney.

Mr. Opitz.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for joining us this morning.

Gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today.

Minister, as you stated, on May 4 the new FSW program with the updated criteria will be open for applications. You recently announced that there's going to be an eligible occupation list and there will be a limited number of applications accepted. Can you please explain why you choose to proceed in this way? Second, is this part of the government's plan to ensure that large backlogs are not allowed to be created in the system again?

Hon. Jason Kenney: As I mentioned, Mr. Opitz, we're now at a backlog in the federal skilled worker program of just a little over 90,000. Given our plan to admit about 55,000 federal skilled workers this year and the fact that a certain number of the applications we process are refused, this means that we're right around a one-year processing inventory for the federal skilled worker program.

You know, some could make an argument that we should not reopen the program for new applications until we're down to less than a 12-month inventory, but as you know, we've made some major policy changes to retool the federal skilled worker points grid. We changed the grid after extensive research, analysis, and consultation. For example, it will place greater emphasis on younger applicants, those with higher levels of language proficiency, and those with Canadian work experience.

But perhaps even more importantly, effective as of the new intake, we have introduced the requirement that applicants for the skilled worker program attach to their applications an evaluation of their education, done by a designated body. This seems modest, but I think it's one of the most important immigration reforms in immigration policy in decades in this country, because finally we will be able to assess whether the education of applicants for economic immigration is at or close to the Canadian standard. We will now know whether the degrees and diplomas of applicants are likely to be accepted by Canadian employers, and indeed perhaps by Canadian professional regulatory bodies, before admitting those applicants. This will dramatically reduce the number of new immigrants who end up facing the survival-job problem.

Because of those policy changes, frankly, we wanted to open the skilled worker program to a limited number of new applications—in this case 5,000 in total—to essentially do a test run of the new selection criteria, including the educational assessment. So I think there was a strong argument to open the door to a limited number of new applications, put them through those new criteria, and see how the educational evaluation is working and what kinds of applicants we're getting based on the new points grid.

Finally, we decided to go with an occupational list—we selected 28 occupations—based on HRSDC data that project the most in-demand occupations in the future, and on consultations with provinces.

Also, Mr. Opitz, I wanted to avoid receiving applications from certain kinds of licensed or regulated professions where immigrants have a really hard time getting their licences, such as physicians. We have a huge surplus of people with medical degrees versus the number of residency positions available for them. There are Canadian medical grads from our medical schools, Canadians who have medical degrees from abroad, and immigrant physicians all vying for a finite number of residency positions. I didn't think, just to take that one example, that it made any sense to increase that surplus of foreign-trained medical grads over the number of scarce residency positions. I thought we could avoid that pain for those people by limiting the number of professional occupations.

• (0915)

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you.

The opposition has been critical of the step the government has taken to modernize the visa application process, and they've claimed for months that this is going to negatively affect Canada's ability to process and attract visitors such as students and others. Yet a month or two ago, Minister, I saw that you announced that 2012 was a record year for the number of visitor visas and student permits that were issued.

Could you please explain, sir, how the modernization of the application process is actually having a positive impact for Canada?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, thanks. Together with all the policy changes we're making, there's an ongoing process, as you say, of modernization on the operational side of the department, the most important element of which was the adoption and global rollout of our new IT platform, the global case management system.

Because of that we are getting more efficient. For example, we are now accepting temporary resident visa applications globally online. We're accepting those applications online. The number of online applications is still relatively small, but as our visa offices become more familiar with processing online applications, we believe that will enhance efficiency, as it has done for other countries that have done the same.

But I would actually say, Mr. Opitz, that the substantial increase in the number of temporary resident visas that we issued—the record number—is largely a function of demand. We have seen a huge growth in demand for people visiting or studying in Canada from places like China and India in particular, and other countries as well. Brazil has had very large growth. In China we have seen a tripling of the number of visitor visas, largely driven by tourism in the past couple of years.

Actually let me be very transparent with the committee. We're struggling to keep on top of the growth. Based on our projections we continue to see the same velocity of growth in markets like China for tourism to Canada. We are going to have a challenge to maintain our reasonable processing standards for those TRV applications, which is why I'm pleased that budget 2013 has included additional resources for my department to accelerate processing of temporary resident visas in critical markets like China, Brazil, and India, which will be offset by a slight increase in TRV fees.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sims.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Thank you very much.

Minister, it's great to have you here, and for such a length of time as well.

Minister, I am sure it will come as no surprise to you that I want to begin this morning talking with you about the Conservatives' mismanagement of the temporary foreign worker program. I want to ask about that program and some of the many problems with it, because I see nothing in votes 1 or 5 indicating money has been designated toward improving it or overhauling it.

Minister, when you were scheduled to appear before this committee on March 7, I planned at that time to begin with this same topic by referring to the HD Mining International debacle in my home province. Last month the Federal Court agreed to a judicial inquiry into the process that allowed HD Mining International to bypass qualified Canadian workers and instead hire 21 workers as temporary foreign workers.

Minister, we can point fingers at HRSDC, and indeed we should because that department is responsible for inaccurate labour market opinions—LMOs and ALMOs—but it is CIC, your department, that granted the work permits.

Then your visit was pushed forward to today, and I can also reference a scandal from this month. That is RBC's capacity, within the bureaucracy of this Conservative government, to fire skilled Canadian workers in exchange for cheaper foreign labour. Again, Minister, it is your department that would have granted those work permits.

The last time we had the opportunity for a formal exchange, Minister, was at heritage committee last November. At that time you mentioned a departmental review of the temporary foreign worker program by referring to a press release on the CIC website. That press release is dated September 2011.

Minister, can you tell me what became of that review initiated 18 months ago? Who was consulted? Who will be consulted? When will it wrap up? How was any real investigating done without moneys allotted to improving it? Also, can you tell me how many work permits are issued annually for fields that do not currently require LMOs or ALMOs?

• (0920)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I'll correct one thing. I don't appreciate the characterization of "the bureaucracy of this Conservative government". The public service is professional and non-partisan regardless of the elected government, and I think we should recognize and appreciate their good work.

In terms of the consultations that the member asked about, there have been multiple consultations. The one to which she refers was started in 2011 and there's been a second round of negotiations recently, conducted by both my department and HRSDC. Minister Finley and I, together with other members of the government, met with stakeholders. I would be happy to provide Ms. Sims with a list of those who made submissions, but I could tell you that, for example, I met with a round table of union leaders and representatives of various business and employer groups. We tried to obtain balanced input on the program.

We recognize that we need to constantly calibrate the temporary foreign worker program to make sure it's working in the best interests of Canadians and the Canadian economy. Nobody wants to displace available Canadian workers through accessing people from abroad. However, we all recognize that there are acute labour shortages in various regions and industries.

I know Ms. Sims recognizes that because when I saw her at the heritage committee she and her colleagues were demanding that we

provide faster and more streamlined access to temporary foreign workers to work in the video gaming industry. That was just one particular interest that they happened to be responsive to because, I guess, they'd been lobbied. But Mr. Chairman, there are multiple industries like that with evidence that they are facing acute labour shortages right across the skills spectrum.

In answer to the member's second question, I can say that labour market opinions were required in terms of the number of entrants into the temporary foreign worker program in 2011. I'm sorry I don't have more recent data. Among those workers, 70,000 came in on the basis of labour market opinions and 120,000 were exempt from labour market opinions. Those include the spouses of some temporary foreign workers, those coming in under free trade and provincial and territorial agreements, and people such as university researchers and those with intra-company transfers. But the largest category is people coming in under youth mobility agreements. That was about 55,000 people in 2011.

I think people perhaps don't really understand the breadth of what we call the temporary foreign worker program. Kids coming in from Australia for 10 months to work as ski instructors on their working holiday at Whistler are considered temporary foreign workers. They don't come with the intention of staying permanently. They're filling available jobs, and these are reciprocal agreements. That constitutes the single largest portion of the TFW program.

• (0925)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you, Minister.

I did not mean to say anything negative about the staff at CIC or anywhere else my term bureaucracy covered. They follow the rules that ministers and governments give them.

Minister, on Tuesday I met with executives from ACTRA, CAEA, the teamsters, and others. What became very clear is that many occupations do not require either ALMOs or LMOs for work permits and there's a list of occupations that require neither LMOs nor work permits.

The Chair: We're going to run out of time. Maybe you better let him comment here. I'll have to cut him off.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I'm aware of those concerns, and my deputy advises that senior officials in my department met with ACTRA this week to discuss those issues. The government's been very clear that we will make changes to the temporary foreign worker program. One of the changes we are looking at is to review the list of occupations that are LMO-exempt. That includes the performing arts.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to comment on three different areas. Let me start off by commenting on what the minister feels very boastful about this morning, and that is the reduction in backlogs.

Mr. Chair, as opposed to patting the government on the back, I think it's important that Canadians realize that this minister, unlike any other Minister of Immigration, felt the best way to deal with the backlog was to push the delete button. You don't deal with a backlog by wiping out tens of thousands of applications. I think it's important to ensure that this is on the record. The minister hit the delete button and hundreds of thousands of individuals were deleted. That's how he dealt with the backlog.

Mr. Chair, another way in which he attempts to deal with the backlog is that he puts a freeze on the parents of someone who has come to Canada, and after being in Canada for a number of years, quite often wants to be able to sponsor their parents. In this case, the minister is saying no. We anticipate, and I'd be interested in knowing from the minister at some point, likely not today because of the time constraints, when he's going to take that freeze off parents so they can once again be sponsored.

I want to comment on the citizenship issue. The minister has probably been the worst Minister of Immigration and Citizenship in dealing with the issue of citizenship. The waiting period for a landed resident to get citizenship is unacceptable. We have 338,000 individuals in inventory today who are waiting two-plus years, many of whom, Mr. Chair, could have their residency called into question. It's been estimated that it could range anywhere from 5% to 20% of total applications, where they are having to wait four, five, six-plus years in order to be able to get their citizenship. It's almost as if this particular minister has completely ignored the citizenship portion of his file.

Mr. Chair, yes, he put \$40 million into this budget but it doesn't really say that much, when you take a look at it. When the Liberal government was last in office we saw that—

The Chair: Stop the clock.

There is a point of order from Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): I know my good friend, Mr. Lamoureux, usually has a lot to say before he gets to his question, but I do think it's important. There are a lot of places for him to categorize his views on the minister from a personal perspective. I don't think it's here at committee. I understand if he wants to speak specifically to the issue but getting personal and making accusations against the minister, I think that should be on his own time, not on committee time.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: On the same point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm sure that Mr. Dykstra is familiar with the rules. The Liberal Party gets five minutes in order to have a question and answer. If I choose to have a question at four minutes and fifty-five seconds into my five minutes, I'm entitled to do that. This is a time in which we would like to send a clear message to the Minister of Immigration—

• (0930)

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Lamoureux, it's your dime and you can talk for five minutes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: So we're going to continue the clock now?

The Chair: Yes. Start the clock.

I have another point of order from Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): It is on the same point of order.

I was going to let the minister respond, but in case he doesn't, it was said by Mr. Lamoureux that the minister “deleted” applicants, which is, I'm sure, the wrong choice of words.

The Chair: Let's not get into a debate here.

Mr. Lamoureux has five minutes to either ask a question or make a statement. It's true, he has to be courteous to the minister and hopefully he'll keep that in mind. But at this particular point, he's free to talk for five minutes if he wishes. If he doesn't ask a question, that's his business too.

Mr. John Weston: It's patently wrong.

The Chair: Mr. Weston, Mr. Lamoureux has the floor.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

You'll find that everything I'm saying is actually quite accurate. It just doesn't have the Tory spin on it. That's the primary difference.

If you take a look at the citizenship file...as I was saying, 338,000, it's far too many. They're waiting far too long. The minister talks about how, yes, they're putting in a sum of money. Paul Martin's government did designate some \$60 million to try to shorten that processing time.

I've asked the minister inside question period to deal with this issue, Mr. Chairperson, and, at the end of the day, the minister has failed to recognize it.

What the Liberal Party would like to do is to see the minister at least make a commitment to get that processing time under 12 months. He was not able to demonstrate that. I would look to the minister, whether it's today or some other point in time, to address the House or the committee and make that commitment. That is that for at least 80% of those individuals who have landed in Canada, who have met the time requirements and other eligibility requirements, they will be able to get their citizenship within the 12 months. That is something that's reasonable, and I think most Canadians would respect that fact, if the minister would make that sort of a commitment.

The other point, which is a major issue, is in regard to the temporary foreign worker program. Like the NDP, I also met with some of the teamsters and actors and actresses who expressed concerns, but I also met with pilots and have had many discussions with constituents. At the end of the day, this minister is responsible for the issuing of temporary work permits. There's no way we can justify a need for 338,000 foreign workers here in Canada.

This is not something that's completely new. The minister has been aware of it, Mr. Chairperson. At the end of the day, he has to take responsibility for the 338,000-plus. What we would like to be able to do is to see the minister make the commitment, a serious, genuine commitment to fix the program.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. James.

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister Kenney, and to the department.

I also want to ask a question regarding the temporary foreign worker program. I know there have been a lot of questions from the opposition on this, but I want to speak specifically to a certain proposal that's out there. Proponents of a proposal, in fact, I believe it's the official policy of the NDP, believe that temporary foreign workers should actually receive permanent residency here in Canada. It should be automatic.

Now, it is my understanding that a large proportion of temporary foreign workers are actually low-skilled workers. If it's our government's position to find Canadians jobs first, I guess I'm leading up to a specific question. When I think of the temporary foreign worker program, it says "temporary" for a certain reason, it shouldn't become automatic permanent residency.

I'm just wondering, if we were to take the advice of the NDP and other proponents of that proposal, what it would actually mean if the Canadian labour market were permanently flooded with over 340,000 additional people.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I have a hard time getting my head around the position of the party to which you've referred. They criticize the temporary foreign worker program, supposedly as displacing Canadian workers, yet they want all of those people to stay in the Canadian labour market permanently. It seems to me that the alleged displacement effect would be even greater. It seems to be rather obvious. I just can't get my head around that.

For example, I was at the heritage committee where members of the official opposition were demanding that we accelerate access for video game manufacturers to temporary foreign workers in that industry. I think they were basically asking that we make it LMO-exempt. They were criticizing us for the checks and balances that exist in the system as it applies to that particular industry. When I pointed out that the people coming into that occupation, because it's high-skilled, would probably be able to access permanent residency as a result of our reforms—like the introduction of the Canadian experience class—they criticized me, saying it would displace Canadian workers. I think their position is to be against whatever the government proposes, regardless of the policy.

We estimate that about 40,000 people who come here under work permits ultimately obtain permanent residency, or PR. That would include essentially all of the qualified live-in caregivers under the current program. It would include many higher-skilled people who come here on work permits, and now if they do 12 months of skilled work they can obtain PR through the Canadian experience class. But it would most significantly include people who get PR through the provincial nominee programs, typically at mid to high-skill levels.

In the western provinces, one of the reasons you've seen a very substantial increase in immigration levels is that people typically come in on work permits initially and then are offered permanent employment, and indeed permanent residency, by their provinces. There are many pathways.

I think there's a number of misconceptions here. For example, the two largest cohorts in the program are the youth mobility programs. This is the working holiday program, which has about 60,000 visas issued a year. These are open work permits for young people from

the ages of 18 to 35 years, for 12 or in some cases 24 months, coming from one of the 16 countries with which we have bilateral reciprocal arrangements.

These are developed countries. These people typically are not contemplating staying here permanently. A young Aussie or Kiwi, or a young French man or woman who comes here on their working holiday visa are coming to experience Canada, perhaps learn a different language, and to work for a few months, typically in the service sector, while they're traveling across Canada. If they get a skilled job for 12 months and they want to stay permanently, they can, in principle, now do so through the CEC. To suggest that all of these people are somehow vulnerable temporary workers who are exploited and working under the thumb of these terrible employers, and all desperately want to stay permanently, is ridiculous.

Similarly, the other largest element of the program is the seasonal agricultural worker program. This represents 34% of the entrants under the labour market opinion streams for the TFW program. There are about 24,000 visas issued a year.

Let's be clear. If we were to shut down the seasonal agricultural worker program—I don't know, but I think that's the policy of the opposition to shut down the program—we would be shutting down huge elements of the Canadian agricultural industry. If you're interested, I would invite you to call as witnesses, representatives of the grape growers in Ontario, the orchard farmers in the Okanagan, the greenhouse operators in Quebec, or the Christmas tree operators in the Annapolis Valley. They will tell you that they find it virtually impossible to hire Canadians to do this work but that the seasonal agricultural worker program works extremely well.

Again, it operates on the basis of bilateral agreements that Canada has with a number of countries, typically in Central America and the Caribbean. They pre-qualify workers. They help to train them. They make them aware of their rights. Those foreign governments ensure the integrity of the program.

● (0935)

They then come here for a few months and make substantially more here than they could back in their home countries. They save up and then go back home for the winter with enormous savings that can help them build houses and start small businesses. Many of the participants are so pleased with the seasonal agricultural worker program that they do it year after year. These are not people who are applying for permanent residency or come here with the expectation of it, but without them our agriculture industry would receive a body blow.

It's all well and good to demagogue this program, but when we actually unpack it and begin to look at the different elements of it... Yes, there are problems that need to be resolved but we should also recognize that many elements of the program are essential to the Canadian economy, and those people are not seeking PR.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Groguhé.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the minister for being here.

To begin, I would like to make a clarification regarding something Ms. James said. The NDP has no intention of giving permanent residence to all temporary foreign workers. We have basically insisted that the conditions and rights of these workers be studied more carefully in order to improve them.

Mr. Minister, my question has to do with a statement you made in 2011 regarding refugees: “We pledge to increase the number of refugees we resettle by 20%”.

For 2012-13, Canada missed its quantitative target for the number of refugees received by 25%. Worse still, that number dropped by 26% over the previous year. By 2015-16, you will reduce refugee protection funding by 16%, in addition to cutting 385 additional positions at CIC.

How are you going to meet this 20% commitment?

Hon. Jason Kenney: First of all, Mr. Chair, I would remind the member that the government announced in 2010 an increase of 20% in our targets for refugee resettlement. That means increasing the number of refugees resettled from 11,500 in 2010 to 14,000 to reach our target last year, and that was a gradual increase.

Unfortunately, as the member said, we missed our target last year because of the war in Syria. In fact, our largest refugee resettlement program was for Iraqis in Syria, with a target of 4,000 a year, for the government's private sponsorship and resettlement programs. Because of the civil war in Syria, we had to close our immigration office in Damascus. It was the largest in the global network for processing the applications from resettled refugees. It enormously hindered our ability to process those applications. That is why we were only able to admit about 2,000 Iraqi refugees last year, compared to our target of 4,000. So, it is true that we missed that target.

I also want to point out that we had some operational challenges in East Africa, particularly at the Nairobi immigration office, which covers 18 countries with an enormous number of refugees. However, I am working closely with the two departments to find operational solutions for resettled refugees from the Middle East. For example, I increased our targets for Iranian and Iraqi refugees in Turkey, with those files being processed in Ankara. We also moved most of our operational resources for refugees from Damascus to Ankara. We are also working with the UN to identify other priority populations for refugee resettlement.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Minister, I would ask that your response be brief because time is limited.

I have a question about a current situation. I was contacted by the Haitian community in Montreal. A certain number of refugees came to Canada after the earthquake in 2010. The community is currently concerned because it is afraid that a significant number of refugees may be deported. Could you tell us about the situation and how we can reassure this community?

● (0945)

Hon. Jason Kenney: There is a temporary moratorium on the removal of Haitian nationals. Because of that policy, no removals are being carried out, except for Haitian nationals who are ineligible due to serious criminal behaviour. The moratorium on removals does not affect foreigners who are ineligible because of serious criminal behaviour. The rumours are not correct.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to quote from an editorial. It's not common that national editorial boards make the kind of statement that we've seen from that of the *National Post*, but this is just one from a year ago:

Not one of these moves is anti-immigrant.

It is referring to Minister Kenney's long line of changes that have resulted, among other things, to the reduction of the backlog.

Indeed, during Mr. Kenney's time as Immigration minister, Canada's annual intake of immigrants has risen by over 15%.

What Mr. Kenney's changes have done—

In this case, we're talking about the changes to the refugee program.

—by removing fraudulent and meaningless claims for asylum and by placing an onus on newcomers to adapt to Canadian society—is restore the value of Canadian citizenship.

That's the type of statement that has been made by many objective observers who might have tended to be critical. With that context, Minister, we thank you again for being here, and for your hard work that has received acknowledgement from all around the House on many occasions.

I'd like to refer to another quote. This is from a university professor, who said that he would like to take a year off, but unfortunately for him, and I'm paraphrasing, he says every time he goes down to his basement to get something he comes back up and a new change is announced in your ministry, Mr. Minister.

Your changes have been transformational and comprehensive. I know that at one point you actually placed on your website a summary of them so that we could keep up with what has happened.

What are you hearing from the experts? What would be your comment in terms of what the immigrant communities are saying about these transformational changes?

Hon. Jason Kenney: There's no unanimity on these matters, but I think my general impression, Mr. Chairman, is that there is fairly broad recognition that many aspects of our system had become dysfunctional. We were seeing, on the whole, relative declining economic results for newcomers to Canada. We saw these out-of-control backlogs and ridiculous wait times. We saw the absurdity of admitting large numbers of newcomers to an economy with labour and skill shortages, many of them to be unemployed and underemployed. I think that's the experience of many newcomers.

That's why, generally, I have found that the changes we have made, both to make our economic immigration system more responsive to the economy and to reinforce the integrity of our system, and to ensure that it is characterized by the consistent application of fair rules, those two themes, in my experience, have been widely accepted.

Quite frankly, like all of you, I'm elected, and we couldn't have embarked on transformational immigration change if it weren't accepted broadly by Canadians, including new Canadians.

Mr. John Weston: I think that's a very critical sector that you have to respond to.

Can we switch the topic to exit information?

I've noticed in the main estimates there's funding for information and sharing with the United States as part of the perimeter agreement. Could you elaborate on how the sharing of that information will be beneficial to Canada?

Hon. Jason Kenney: In December I signed a treaty with U.S. Ambassador David Jacobson, which we will table shortly in the House of Commons as a precursor to its ratification, a comprehensive information-sharing agreement with the United States that is part of our beyond the border action plan between the Canadian and U.S. governments.

This information-sharing agreement will massively improve the quality of our immigration security screening, because it will allow us to share, initially, biographic data on applications for temporary residency in Canada from around the world, and eventually, biometric data as we put in place our new fingerprint system later this year.

Those records, those names, and eventually fingerprints will essentially be, to put it in common parlance, "pinged" against the U.S. databases, which include records on tens of millions of foreign nationals. So their databases are far more robust than ours are.

That is to say that the United States has much more robust databases that include foreign nationals who may represent a security risk, who may have been deported from the U.S. for criminality, who may be on watch-lists for national security purposes.

So by pinging these names, and then fingerprints, against the U.S. databases, what will happen is that if there is a match, if they see that their records have someone on a watch-list, or someone who was previously deported, that match will come back to us as a positive hit. Then the CBSA will basically pick up the phone and call the Department of Homeland Security to do a manual verification of the identity, to make sure it's not a false positive, and then find out whether or not the person is admissible to Canada.

As a last point, this will all conform to Canadian privacy laws.

● (0950)

The Chair: You have four minutes, Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thought the minister was here for the full time.

The Chair: He is, but we went over on this, when your colleague....

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Oh, I see.

The Chair: And the clock's still ticking.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: I understand.

Thank you, Minister, and thanks to your officials for being here with us once again.

Minister, I have a series of questions here, although I'm not sure I'll be able to get to many of them in the four minutes.

It boggles the mind to hear the member of the Liberal Party, in his rampage and preamble, in the five minutes he had, go on and speak about backlogs as if his party were totally innocent, completely ignoring the fact that we inherited some 800,000 people for whom the Liberals kept pressing the plus button on their computer and adding to the list.

Hon. Jason Kenney: It was 840,000, to be precise.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Minister, I know your time is very valuable, and I deeply appreciate the fact that you take the time to come so often to this committee. I want to give you an opportunity to respond to some of the inaccuracies that were spewed by the member opposite not some half-hour ago.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I appreciate that since, in my 16 years in this place, it's the first time I've seen a member during the testimony of a minister, not actually allow a question to be answered. I appreciate the opportunity.

First of all, Mr. Lamoureux suggested that all of the backlog reduction was a function of the legislated elimination of the 100,000 files in last year's budget implementation act. In point of fact, as you see, the backlog has gone from over one million to just over 600,000, a reduction of 400,000.

About 280,000 of those persons—not 400,000—were affected by the legislated FSW backlog reduction last year. The balance was thanks to pauses or limits on new applications, which were opposed by Mr. Lamoureux's party, and by an increase in admissions.

The average number of permanent residents admitted between 1994 and 2005—that is to say, during the tenure of the previous government—was 222,000. The average number of permanent residents admitted from 2006 until 2012 has been 256,000. There has been a 14% increase in total admissions, which has helped modestly deal with inventories, but most importantly it has been....

But here is the point. Had none of those actions been taken, we would be on track, as I've pointed out, for a total backlog of over two million.

Mr. Lamoureux may have another opportunity on this committee and I would ask him to explain what he would have done to prevent a backlog of two million from developing in the current system.

I would also point out to him that the previous Liberal government, when Mr. Coderre was in my position, sought also to eliminate hundreds of thousands of backlogged applications in the federal skilled worker program, when he sought to retroactively apply new selection criteria for the federal skilled worker program in 2003.

So the Liberal government sought to—in Mr. Lamoureux's words—“delete” hundreds of thousands of applications from that backlog. Oh, it did. It's remarkable that he doesn't even know what the Liberal government sought to do. But Mr. Chairman, the difference is that they did it incompetently, because the Federal Court said that the way they attempted to apply those rules retroactively was illegal.

However, I would point out to this committee that the Federal Court responded to an application for judicial review of our legislative backlog reduction just two weeks ago by confirming its legality, that this was a legitimate application of the law. So we have successfully and competently done what Mr. Lamoureux's government unsuccessfully and incompetently sought to do.

I would also point out that he talks about the parent and grandparent program. He doesn't like the fact that there has been a two-year temporary pause. He never mentions the 60% increase in admissions in that program. He never mentions the super visa, which is an excellent alternative that 16,000 people have so far availed themselves of.

I again challenge him to tell us what the Liberal Party would do with the parent program, because without the temporary pause in applications we would be on track for an estimated backlog of 251,000 people in that program by the end of 2015, with a 15-year wait time.

The Chair: We have to move on.

• (0955)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

The Chair: We will have Ms. Sims, then Ms. Freeman.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: I want to thank the minister for the history lesson to show that both the Conservatives and the Liberals really went out to delete the files of people who not only applied to come here but played by our rules, the rules we made, and we not only deleted their files but we did shatter many people's dreams and aspirations.

But moving on, Minister, as you and I are both keenly aware, Maricon Gerente became a Canadian permanent resident this past Tuesday.

For the benefit of the committee, I will give a brief synopsis. Ms. Gerente was granted permanent residency while comatose in a hospital bed in Oakville. She is brain dead and will die soon. Only life support is maintaining her. In lieu of a signature, officials went to the hospital and took a fingerprint, and I want to recognize those officials.

Ms. Gerente came to Canada in 2008 through the live-in caregiver program. She applied for permanent resident status in 2011.

Minister, Ms. Gerente's dream was cut short. She dreamt of becoming a permanent resident so she could give her daughters the opportunity for a life in Canada. Now she has been granted permanent residency within hours of her death. This will not help her daughters because, just hours old, the permanent residency will die with her.

Minister, the wait times are long—in this case, tragically long—and we know the program as it currently stands needs improvement. Even you have said as much, even in your opening statement today.

What are your plans to improve the live-in caregiver program—namely, to curb the abuse we know some nannies are encountering; to process permanent residency applications more quickly, and preferably not on someone's deathbed; and to prioritize family reunification?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you.

First of all, Mr. Chairman, we have tried to be very responsive to extraordinary cases of this nature. I don't know whether it's statistically true or not, but it certainly seems, in my anecdotal experience, that in the live-in caregiver program there have been a disproportionate number of caregivers who have unfortunately become very ill during their tenure in Canada.

That's one of the reasons, Mr. Chairman, that in the reforms to that program that we made in 2011 we effectively waived the requirement for a second medical evaluation to be done, so that if caregivers became very sick during the period of their temporary residency, that would not disqualify them from obtaining permanent residency on grounds of medical inadmissibility. That is an important change that has allowed, for example Ms. Gerente, to become a permanent resident.

I recently met with representatives of organizations advocating on behalf of live-in caregivers to discuss potential further changes to the program in addition to the broad package of reforms we introduced in 2011. We recognize that the inventory is unmanageable, ungovernable, as I said before. There are currently 45,000 people with applications in the system who are waiting for permanent residency, in addition to another 40,000 temporary residents in the program who eventually, we anticipate, will make PR applications.

We are looking for solutions, and if the member has ideas, I'm very keen to hear them. The challenge is that the program constantly cycles through people, so as soon as people get permanent residency they leave live-in caregiver work.

• (1000)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you, Minister.

I mentioned earlier the meetings that we had with the arts community, and one of the things that really became obvious, which I wasn't aware of before that time in the same kind of detail, is that some of the permanent exemptions were there to facilitate tours, such as Bruce Springsteen or The Beatles or whoever, coming in. But however unintentionally, these parameters are described so broadly that they include all theatrical productions. In most instances there is no, or very little, labour market shortage in this country for cast and crew in the area of theatrical productions.

Are you going to be reviewing that list of exemptions in the near future?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Could I just point something out? Mr. Lamoureux amplified the objections of ACTRA. The labour market opinion exemption that people in the performing arts category benefit from, of course, was implemented under the previous government. We're just continuing the Liberal policy right now, but we are looking at revising it, Ms. Sims.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Minister, my advice is that sometimes you shouldn't follow that policy.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sims.

Mr. Leung.

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and staff, for being here.

Immigration contributes to Canada's prosperity and therefore should be a net benefit for Canada. As we heard in a previous discourse, it has created the economic drain on our treasury.

Perhaps you can explain how the measures that were put in during your administration of immigration have contributed to the savings in our estimates. What does this do in terms of maintaining our control over the cost of immigration as we go forward?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I can say, Mr. Chairman, that our department has gone through two rounds of seeking efficiencies, initially through strategic review in 2010, where we reduced overall expenditures by 5%, and in the second round of the deficit reduction action plan, where we also found another 5% in operational efficiencies. Part of this was facilitated through greater operational efficiency and better use of technology.

As I've said to this committee before, a decade ago, even five years ago, our department was operating in almost a 1980s world in terms of technology, with a huge number of paper-based applications.

Think about this. Every time a member of Parliament put in a request to one of our embassies for a status report on an application, an officer would have to get up from their desk, go down into the basement, wheel through huge stacks of files, go in and find a paper application, bring it out, go back to their desk, open it up, and review it—taking 15 or 20 minutes just to check the status of an application. Now, with GCMS, they can, in principle, do it instantly online. If you multiply that by tens of thousands of files, you can see the efficiencies that we're realizing by applying new IT. That means we can make more decisions in less time at lower cost.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Could I ask you also to expand on how the implementation of the new assignment system has contributed to our efficiency, plus the super visa for parents and grandparents?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you.

When we first proposed the new fair and balanced asylum system, we estimated that it would realize savings for taxpayers, primarily provincial governments, of some \$1.6 billion over five years. In fact, we now anticipate that the savings will be substantially larger, with perhaps an additional \$400 million in estimated savings, because the number of new claims being made in the new system is down substantially, by some 65%. We were anticipating a reduction of

only some 10% of the number of new claims under the new system, but in fact the reduction so far has been in the range of 65%.

This is a bit of a shot in the dark, but our best estimate is that over the course of five years, should the current trends continue, we will see something in the range of \$2 billion in cumulative savings, primarily for provincial taxpayers, because there will be fewer people making claims and false claimants will be staying for months rather than years, meaning huge savings in terms of access to provincial welfare. Of course, there would also be savings through the interim federal health program and various other social benefits.

The other area was parents and grandparents. Well, we actually haven't made a cost estimate on that. Let me put it this way. We estimate that an immigrant senior who arrives at the age of 65 likely will consume approximately \$125,000 in lifetime publicly funded health benefits if they arrive as a permanent resident. A couple likely consumes in the range of a quarter of a million dollars in public health benefits for the duration of their lives in Canada as permanent residents, in addition to other social benefits. For those who instead choose to come through the super visa, obtaining private insurance, a couple at the age of 65 would represent an estimated cost savings, just to the health care system, of a quarter of a million dollars.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Weston.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, Chair.

Going back to the temporary foreign worker program, I speak as one of 308 MPs, but I recall that soon after I was elected in 2008, and in accordance with our government's priority on economic growth and job creation, you came to the riding I represent. You heard directly from the Whistler Chamber of Commerce that the number one priority for them in federal policy was improving the processing of temporary foreign workers. In fact, businesses were going to go out of business if they didn't have people in, because they needed people to fill the jobs. In order to be able to employ Canadian workers as well.... I don't know if you recall that, but it was a very important thing for the riding I represent.

Moving back to the refugee program, Minister, you've spoken several times this morning about that. Looking ahead, I wonder if you might comment on how the improvement in our situation in dealing with asylum seekers may indeed affect some of our bilateral relations with some of the countries we deal with.

Hon. Jason Kenney: As you know, Mr. Chairman, in the past when we had serious challenges to the integrity of the immigration system because of large waves of unfounded claims from particular countries, we had only one tool in our tool kit, and that was visa imposition. A good example of this would be the difficult decision I had to take in summer 2009 to impose a temporary resident visa on Mexican nationals.

Mexico, of course, is a very important trading partner, friend, and ally of Canada, and therefore it was not desirable to have the burden of a temporary resident visa on Mexican nationals, but we had received over 1,000 asylum claims a month from Mexico in the first six months of 2009. About 90% of them were ultimately deemed unfounded claims by the adjudicators at the Immigration and Refugee Board. So something had to be done because this wave of unfounded claims was creating a huge backlog in our asylum system, and frankly, was massively undermining the integrity of our immigration program. The only thing we could do was to impose a visa. Quite understandably, Mexico reacted negatively to this imposition of the visa and continues to raise this as an irritant.

I know you are the chairman of the Canada-Mexico parliamentary association, and you hear this all the time from Mexican legislators and government representatives. That is partly what motivated us to pursue fundamental asylum reform so that we could have other tools in the tool kit to address unfounded waves of asylum claims apart from visa imposition.

The success of the new fair and balanced asylum system will allow us, in due course, to more responsibly consider visa liberalization—I've been explicit about this—including Mexico. That's not a guarantee or a timeline towards a Mexican visa exemption. We want to continue to monitor progress in the new system. But at least so far the indicators are very positive.

Let me just add that the new asylum system, plus our planned introduction of an electronic travel authorization system in 2014 or 2015—I hope the former, not the latter—will together massively increase our options apart from visa imposition. The ETA, the electronic travel authorization, will be a light, online, virtual screen for people who might not otherwise be qualified to come to Canada. This is what Australia has done, the United States, and certain European countries. Those two reforms together will, I think, allow us to pursue a policy of visa liberalization quite broadly.

• (1010)

Mr. John Weston: For the tourism sector, those are welcome words. We know that in Mexico the visa-processing system has become increasingly efficient, thanks to your direct responses to pleas from the tourism sector. So those are big improvements.

Also, from the tourism sector, you brought about changes relating to the inadmissibility of people for aged criminality records. Would you care to comment on that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weston. I'm sorry, but you're out of time.

Ms. Sitsabaiesan.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The supplementary estimates include a transfer from the Treasury Board to the IRB. I was heartened to actually read that the IRB office here in Ottawa was originally set to close at the start of this month and it has now been delayed until the end of the year. But delaying the closure doesn't actually fix the eventual consequences that it will force lawyers, legal staff...and require many refugees, who have very limited means to travel, to travel to Montreal within two months of arriving in Canada for their hearings.

Legal Aid Ontario has suggested that it might be able to fund the lawyers' travel, at least temporarily, and I wonder if that's even fair, shifting the burden onto the province. But what do you say to those refugees without the means of making the trip? Video conferencing is an option that you seem to be encouraging elsewhere. New facilities in Winnipeg and Edmonton suggest as much. But here in Ottawa, plans to close the video conferencing room still remain.

Why does it seem that refugees are the targets of so many cuts?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Not surprisingly, I disagree with that characterization, Mr. Chairman. I would point out there are a very limited number of IRB or Refugee Protection Division offices and limited capacity to hold hearings across Canada. If you are a claimant in Victoria, you have to go to Vancouver. If you're a claimant in Edmonton, you go to Calgary. If you're a claimant in Winnipeg, you go to Calgary or Toronto. If you are in Quebec City, you go to Montreal. In Halifax, you go to Montreal. Ottawa is two hours from Montreal, four hours from Toronto, so it's more approximate to places where there are robust resources at the Refugee Protection Division.

Last year we only had about 500 new claims being processed at the RPD in Ottawa. With the 65% reduction in the number of new claims as a result of refugee reform, I would anticipate that we'll be seeing only about 200 claims a year here in Ottawa. We simply can't justify the infrastructure of a permanent office based on that number of claims. Although as Ms. Sitsabaiesan has intimated, in order to address the legacy claims that are here in Ottawa, we have worked with the IRB to extend the closure of the office in Ottawa until the end of this year, and the IRB is looking at other administrative options as well.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you, Minister.

In February, you visited Syrian refugees in Turkey, inciting a great deal of hope among those Syrians and their loved ones living here, not to mention many Canadians who are absolutely heartsick over their plight. The illusion was that you were visiting to assess how Canada might help these displaced people, but when pressed you've indicated that until the UN declares they are refugees, your hands are tied. The Syrian Canadian Council keeps calling my office to say that you're ignoring their phone calls. People are being killed by the millions and are being displaced. Canadians are worried about the safety of their family members.

I see in the estimates that there is a \$410,000 transfer from DFAIT. Can I be optimistic and assume that the transfer will serve to expedite the processing of Syrian refugees? How many have been extradited so far? What about family reunification? Can't some of them be evaluated on those grounds as well?

•(1015)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

In terms of family reunification, beginning 14 to 15 months ago, we had already put in place accelerated treatment for applications for family reunification of Syrian nationals who have relatives in Canada who had sponsored such applications. My department tells me that by the end of next month we will have completed all the family reunification applications that were in our inventory for Syrian nationals.

But in terms of refugee resettlement, let me be clear. I was explicit about this when I was in Turkey in mid-January that we were not proposing a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees, but I did announce very clearly an increase in our resettlement targets for government-assisted refugees in Turkey, primarily Iranians and Iraqis. These are people who are already waiting for resettlement opportunities, have been referred to us by the UNHCR, and have no durable alternative in the region.

I spoke to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, who told me in December, and whose representatives continue to tell us, that they are not referring Syrian refugees for resettlement. There is an immediate humanitarian crisis, some two million displaced persons, over a million IDPs, internally displaced persons, within Syria itself. The UNHCR always says to the resettlement community in such circumstances that it would be a misallocation of resources to begin the work of referring people for resettlement, when they are desperately focused on housing, tents, shelter, food and clothing, and safety for the people who are refugees in the theatre.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Menegakis, we are now back to the seven-minute round.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I see in the estimates there are investments in biometrics. It's something we've discussed before with you here.

Can you please update us on the implementation of biometrics?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Menegakis.

I'd also like to thank the committee for its positive recommendations with regard to biometrics in its recent report on immigration security.

I can report to the committee that we are moving forward with the implementation of the first tranche of biometrics this fall. Following an exhaustive tendering process, we have selected a supplier, a vendor, for the biometrics technology, and our officers are currently being trained in the first 30 countries for which biometrics will be a requirement for TRV, temporary resident visa, applications.

I'll ask Bob Orr to give a further update.

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): The implementa-

tion of biometrics is going ahead very rapidly right now. This is in combination with the opening of a number of visa application centres. We are increasing the number of visa application centres we have across the world to 131 over the coming months. That will allow us to collect the biometrics at these centres across the world, plus a robust network within the United States in addition to that.

Biometrics will be in place. It's being phased in. There are three different periods for the 30 countries when it becomes compulsory. The first three countries come online on the 4th of September.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Overall, when will biometrics become mandatory?

Mr. Robert Orr: By the end of the year, for the 30 countries it will be a mandatory requirement.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Then in due course we will assess the effectiveness of the system based on the first tranche of countries. We'll learn technical lessons from that and then we will proceed, at some point in 2014, with the rollout of the second tranche of countries. Eventually the objective is universal application of the biometric visa requirement for all countries from which there is a TRV requirement.

•(1020)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: So it's fair to assume that the visa application centres are being equipped—or have already begun—from now until some time near the end of the year. Is it fair to say that?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct. In fact, the first three have already been opened and it's a very aggressive program over the coming months to open those visa application centres.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Minister, what is our government doing to ensure that the applicants from the countries from which we collect, or will be collecting, biometrics are aware of the new requirements?

Hon. Jason Kenney: We intend to make people aware. My deputy has something to say about that.

Mr. Neil Yeates (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Yes, I can just add that we've been doing outreach already through missions abroad, through Canadian embassies abroad, so we've been in contact with those countries and are briefing them on the biometrics process. So far so good.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I would just point out that this isn't entirely new for those countries. If they're frequent travellers—many of them would be going to the United States—they will already have enrolled their biometrics to get to the United States, Australia, the U.K., so there is already a high degree of familiarity with this process, certainly amongst frequent travellers.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Minister, we've often heard in the House in the last few days—and I'm actually getting some questions on this from my constituents—from both the NDP and the Liberals who claim they have problems with the temporary foreign worker program, but they write to you asking for TFWs for their ridings. Could you comment on that?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I do find it a bit peculiar that we should be criticized for allowing the temporary foreign worker program by people who have asked for faster access to temporary foreign workers, including Mr. Lamoureux, who actually wrote me, as did Mr. Trudeau, who wrote officials seeking streamlined access to temporary foreign workers for “his father's favourite restaurant” in Montreal.

I have a large stack of such letters. When those MPs approach me, especially MPs from the New Democratic Party, I always say to them, are you aware of your party's policy that you want to shut down the program? Are you sure you want us to facilitate this movement? And they'll say, yes, absolutely, it's essential for this business in my riding, without it they might have to close down.

What can I say? I think actions speak more loudly than words.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: I just think it's important for Canadians to understand that the, pardon the expression, dog and pony show that happens with some of these questions in the QP are considerably different from the reality of what is happening. It takes a certain amount of audacity to write to a minister to ask for something and then stand up in the House and criticize the very program that you are asking for. That also boggles the mind.

Minister, I want to ask you a question on the start-up visa. Do any other countries have a visa program like the start-up visa?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, Australia and the United Kingdom have analogous programs but those programs only grant temporary residency with conditions. Effectively, the business has to be successful in order for them to get permanent residency. What is a competitive advantage in our start-up visa is that it will grant immediate permanent residency to successful applicants. We do so in the full knowledge that not everyone who arrives through the start-up visa will see a success in their first start-up venture here.

The point is that if they've been selected by a Canadian investor, venture capitalist or angel investor, and they meet our human capital criteria, which includes intermediate English or French language proficiency, and at least one year of post-secondary education, we are confident that they have the level of human capital that indicates success in the long term. They may not succeed in their first business effort, but are very likely to do so in the long run. Also, many of these people will be coming in with IT backgrounds and will be able to work if their first business doesn't succeed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Sims, then to Ms. Freeman.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you very much.

First of all, let me make it categorically clear that the NDP is not opposed to a temporary foreign worker program that addresses genuine labour shortages where no Canadians are available to do the work. We've been very clear about that, and I just wanted to reiterate it so that my colleagues across the way hear it loud and clear.

Minister, I see nothing in votes 1 and 5 that indicates money towards reducing wait times at CIC. You have indicated to us that there has been a 73% reduction in the number of permanent residents receiving Canadian citizenship under this government because there are fewer people to process more applications. Yet we learn of office closure after office closure, with no money dedicated towards clearing the backlog. We have constituents across the country who are permanent residents telling us that they are now being quoted wait times of up to four years to obtain their citizenship, where previously they were quoted 12 months.

Can you tell me, Minister, is four years the new wait time that a permanent resident can expect when awaiting citizenship, and how can you possibly consider this acceptable? When will you introduce measures to reduce these wait times?

• (1025)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Allow me to clarify that while these estimates do not include additional resources for the citizenship program, we did announce additional resources in our economic action plan of 2013, which you will find in supplementary estimates (B). It allocates \$44 million over two years to help us address the backlog in citizenship applications. That will be offset by an upward adjustment in citizenship fees, which have not been changed in 15 years. It costs us in the range of \$650, if you can believe it, to process a citizenship application. But the current fee plus the privilege fee generates a total of \$200 per application in revenue. We're running a \$450 shortfall on every application that we process.

So the member is right. We're concerned as well about the backlog, and my department is working on an action plan to address it. To answer the question directly, no, the average wait time is not four years. Four years is the worst-case scenario for someone who's received a residency questionnaire, which is a more detailed analysis of whether they in fact meet the statutory residency requirements. The average processing time is less than half of that.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you, Minister. Let me tell you, when I visited our local citizenship ceremonies, the judge there took me into a room that was just solid with files of people for whom, according to him, it would take at least four years.

I'm going to pass the rest of my time over to Ms. Freeman.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Minister, the report on plans and priorities states that 385 positions are being cut. That is an 8% reduction in personnel for refugee protection, family reunification and permanent residence applications in general.

We know that visa offices like the ones in Nairobi, Islamabad and Dakar are experiencing serious problems with processing times.

How many foreign positions will be cut? Will other visa offices be closed?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I don't have the exact figures. I would ask Mr. Orr to respond.

[English]

Mr. Robert Orr: Over the course of the last year, we have closed 10 visa offices abroad. There were no foreign service officers who were cut as a result, but there were a number of other positions cut in the process. In addition, about 233 locally engaged staff positions were cut.

That's being offset by new ways of processing applications and centralization of a lot of work. Some of the work is now being done now in Ottawa that had previously been done overseas. Because of the new electronic tools, which the minister made reference to earlier, there are new opportunities. No longer are we restricted by where the people and the paper are. Because of these new tools, we are able to move work around our international network and indeed our domestic network, so that we can move the work to where there is a capacity to deal with it.

• (1030)

Ms. Mylène Freeman: If I may ask, what is being done to reduce the wait times in the offices I mentioned, or what will be done, what is planned on being done?

Mr. Robert Orr: In many of those offices, what we are looking at is trying to reduce certain types of work, remove certain types of low-risk, straightforward work where we don't need local knowledge, particularly, and where we're able to do some of that work in other parts of the network. This is still a work in progress, but we're making very real strides.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I just want to point out how much time it actually takes a visa officer to process a PR application. Half an hour, an hour? We can't really compress that time. The 90% or more of the wait time for permanent residency applications is a file just sitting in a queue. That's why the backlog reduction is so essential, because that's about cutting those queues.

We're actually compressing the time as much as we can with technology for the actual decisions to be rendered. It was the years that people were waiting to move up in the queue that was the problem.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: All right, Minister, I'm going to keep going, if you don't mind, so we can get more questions in.

[Translation]

The report on plans and priorities for this fiscal year mentions continuing to monitor and review the conditions in countries as well as the applications received by the Immigration and Refugee Board

of Canada to support the new policy on designated countries of origin.

Following the report by the U.S. State Department on Hungary published last Friday, are you going to review the presence of Hungary on that list? Do you still believe that country to be safe?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Freeman.

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's interesting. I did write a letter to the Minister—if he actually read the letter and I assume he did—regarding the temporary worker program. You have an individual who comes to you and says, "Look, I'm establishing a business here. We want to bring in some machinery from overseas, and he wants to come in and set up that machinery." So he's looking for someone to come over to help him set up the machinery and then ultimately go back to China.

The Minister uses that as an example. I have news for you: it's called being a member of Parliament. You represent the interests of your constituents. You're supposed to be doing that. Having said that, I should also remind the minister that the program is a Liberal initiative. The difference between a Liberal government and a Conservative government is that we know how to manage the program whereas this government has abused the program. That's the difference, Mr. Chairperson. Canada does not need 338,000 temporary foreign workers, no matter which way you want to cut it, Mr. Minister.

The issue of the global case management system is, again, something that was initiated under Mr. Chrétien's term, and I appreciate the minister raising how effective that particular program has been, and we would expect that as technology is brought forward. We should pay compliments to our civil service who do an outstanding job, whether it's within Immigration, Revenue Canada, or OAS. All of these technological developments allow us to provide improved services in many different ways.

Then there is a responsibility of the minister, on the other hand, to ensure that there are feet on the ground. Trying to get immigration services or talk to someone live can be a challenge. We have a 1-800 phone number that is very difficult. The last time I tried it, I was literally waiting 45 minutes, depending on the day of the week. They recommend you call on a Thursday or Friday because then you don't have to wait the hour or however long it might be.

There's an issue of providing service to people who really need the service. The government's response to that has been cutting services. You've cut many offices all over the country from individuals who do need these services. I would be interested at some point, maybe not today, to get a response to that particular question.

I raise the issue of citizenship. I asked and emphasized how important it is that the minister deal with the issue of the processing times with Citizenship. It is, today, completely unacceptable. I'd like to give the minister a question, and hopefully he'll actually stay focused and try to answer this specific question. Are you prepared to commit to a minimum target of processing citizenship applications to within 12 months?

I recognize that we're not talking about 100% of all applications. We're talking maybe a minimum of 80%, but will the minister, at the very least, make that commitment today? Will he say to Canadians that he's going to take the issue of citizenship seriously, because he has been negligent, and will he make that commitment today?

• (1035)

Hon. Jason Kenney: I appreciate the fact that Mr. Lamoureux has actually allowed me to answer a question.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Let's see whether you answer it now.

Hon. Jason Kenney: The answer, Mr. Chairman, is yes. I'd be delighted to have a processing time of 12 months or less for citizenship applications.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: When could we anticipate seeing that put into place?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I don't have an exact timeframe, Mr. Chairman. We have additional resources coming through—\$44 million over two years—and we're looking at other operational changes.

Although Mr. Lamoureux says we have neglected the citizenship program, we've done the opposite. We have fundamentally retooled the program to ensure that the statutory requirements of the Citizenship Act are being respected, because in the past, we saw a large number of—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: That's only because of timing, Minister.

The Chair: Order.

Go ahead, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Jason Kenney: In the past we saw a large number of applications from people who did not meet the residency, language, or—

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux has a point of order.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: On a point of order, Mr. Chairperson, I know the minister likes our asking actual questions rather than making statements. If the minister consumes time answering a simple question, that prevents us from asking questions, because he talks out the clock. That is one of the reasons that we have to conclude with four or five questions.

If the minister wants to have questions during this period of time, he should try to keep his answers short and concise. Then he'll likely get short and concise questions.

The Chair: Is that a promise?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: That's a promise, for my part.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, you asked a question, and the minister is entitled to attempt to answer the question.

I will allow him to attempt to answer the question. We will start the clock again.

Hon. Jason Kenney: To finish my sentence, we saw far too many applications in which people did not meet the statutory requirements. This is why we made policy and operational changes to ensure that, through third-party language testing, through the new knowledge test, and through more vigorous screening of the residency requirements, we now have a much better capacity to ensure that people actually meet the statutory requirements.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. James, we have five minutes for you, because we have a couple of votes at the end.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again I sat here and I listened to the member from the Liberal Party spew out a whole bunch of things without giving the minister proper time to answer those questions, including his denial that members of his party, including the leader of the Liberal Party, have written to the minister to ask for more temporary foreign workers for their ridings, for various reasons.

I have several questions that I'd like to ask, but I'm wondering whether you need more time to address those accusations and other denials from the opposition.

Thank you.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I think they speak for themselves.

I guess I would point out only one thing, which is that Mr. Lamoureux takes credit for the previous Liberal government's having created the temporary foreign worker program. In fact, as long as we've had an immigration system we've had work permits.

Essentially, the temporary foreign worker program is not really a program. It is a category that includes virtually everyone to whom we issue work permits. This includes intra-company transfers, when a Canadian company is bringing up one of their people from the U.S. to work for a couple of months. It includes the kids from Australia who were working as part-time ski instructors in Mr. Weston's riding on a working holiday. It includes people who come up for six months to work in agricultural industries for which Canadians are not applying.

It's a huge, broad category. I would point out that in that broad category, by far the largest growth in the past five years has been in the youth mobility program—the working holiday program. These are young people from such countries as France, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and so forth, who are coming on reciprocal open work permits.

If Mr. Lamoureux and his party think that these nice young people on their working holiday programs represent some kind of existential threat to Canada, its labour market, and its immigration system and want us to shut that down—which represents one-quarter of temporary foreign workers and by far the largest growth in the program—let them tell us so. I think it's a pretty benign subset of the temporary foreign worker program.

• (1040)

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you. I'm just going to switch over to the federal skilled worker program.

In your opening remarks and in the written statement that I have here, you've indicated that people who arrive with a pre-arranged job in Canada are earning almost \$80,000 as income after their third year, which is much higher than the average.

Also in your opening remarks you talked about changes to the new federal skilled worker points grid program, which focuses on language proficiency and youth—bringing in more younger people to Canada. I've been to many round tables in which representation around the table is very diverse. There's a common thing that everyone around that table says, and that is to succeed in Canada, a person needs to be able to easily integrate into Canadian society. At the top of the list for requirements is proficiency in either of our two official languages.

I welcome that change and I think it's long overdue, but I wonder. You talked about \$80,000 for pre-arranged jobs for people coming into Canada. Do we have any statistics for people who have proficiency in either of our official languages, or who might be younger and able to integrate into Canadian society?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes. I don't have the exact figures with me, but I would refer you, Ms. James, to the comprehensive evaluation of the federal skilled worker program done by my department two years ago, which is on the CIC website. It indicates a very strong correlation of language proficiency and youth with economic outcomes for workers.

In fact, all of the research—not just that done by my department, but that done by independent academics—comes to the same conclusion, which is that official language proficiency, and frankly and more specifically, English-language proficiency, is the single largest factor in economic success for immigrants. This is not to say it's the only factor and not to say that people with limited language proficiency can't and don't succeed on occasion. But statistically, it's the single greatest indicator, as is the relative youth of newcomers.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

Could I make a simple request? The minister has pointed us to a CIC website for this information, but could it be provided to this committee so that each one of us doesn't have to go independently and look it up?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, we'll forward that to the clerk.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. James. The time has expired.

Mr. Minister, on behalf of the committee I thank you for giving up two hours of your time, and your members of the department as well. You've survived another session of the immigration committee. Thank you for coming.

The witnesses are excused.

Before you leave, ladies and gentlemen, let me advise that there will be no meeting on Tuesday or Thursday of next week. The subcommittee will meet—a notice will be sent—on Thursday at 9:30 at a locale to be determined. The purpose will be to discuss the future and possibly—hopefully, by that time—discuss what we're going to do if the House approves the report we sent to the House.

Shall vote 1 under Citizenship and Immigration carry?

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Department

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$552,534,566

(Vote 1 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall vote 5 under Citizenship and Immigration carry?

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Department

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$949,945,536

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Those opposed—?

• (1045)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Can I have a recorded vote, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, we'll have a recorded vote, Mr. Lamoureux.

You're going to have to hurry on these things, Mr. Lamoureux, because I'm giving you a break. You've done this to me before. Technically the answer is no, because we've already called the vote. I will do it, but this is the last time—ever.

(Vote 5 agreed to: yeas 10; nays 1)

The Chair: Shall vote 10 under Citizenship and Immigration carry?

Immigration and Refugee Board

Vote 10—Program expenditures.....\$108,427,292

(Vote 10 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall I report these votes on the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That carries.

This meeting is adjourned.

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