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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number seven, on Thursday, November 28. This meeting is televised.

Appearing before us this morning is the Honourable Chris Alexander, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. He has some of his colleagues here.

We're here today to discuss the supplementary estimates (B) under Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Welcome, Minister. This is your first appearance before the best committee in the entire House of Commons.

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Chair, and congratulations on your reappointment to this enormously prestigious position. If it is the best committee, and I firmly believe it is, that is in large measure because of your exceptional leadership.

The Chair: All right, you've got 10 minutes.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Chris Alexander: I apologize for having come down the hall a minute or two late. We were under the misapprehension that a certain vote was still happening.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here to present my department's supplementary estimates (A) for fiscal year 2013-2014 and to answer your questions together with two very talented deputy ministers from my department.

[English]

I am pleased to put the supplementary estimates in the context of the many positive reforms that we continue to implement to Canada's immigration system. These changes will help ensure that immigration has a more direct and positive impact on our economy. They will continue to reduce abuse of our immigration and asylum system and modernize the security dimension of our immigration system as the demands placed upon it by immigrants, by visitors, by students, and by business people continue to grow—and indeed need to grow for us to realize the growth potential of this country and to seize the moment that we are all very conscious deserves to be seized.

Supplementary estimates (B) include allocations that will help us continue to implement some of these important reforms, among

them, and perhaps the most consequential, being an \$8.4 million allocation to support the implementation of electronic travel authorization, or eTA. The eTA is a very quick online form for travellers who don't need visas to come to Canada. This simple process will help us to prevent criminals and terrorists from entering Canada and will protect the vast majority of legitimate travellers from being tied up in the bureaucracy and scrutiny that these higher-risk groups need to be subjected to.

Travel authorization for all visa-exempt passengers before ticket purchase will buttress Canada's security systems. It's a best practice. Many of our partners—maybe not many, but several—have it in full measure.

As you know, Mr. Chair, under the action plan on perimeter security and economic competitiveness, we committed to work with the United States to enhance the security of our borders, and eTA will allow us to screen visitors from countries that do not require a visa and who travel by air to Canada. The exception, of course, would be our American neighbours, who are with us inside the perimeter. Working together, our travel authorization systems will not only help to address possible security threats to North America, but they will also help us ease the flow of travellers who do not pose any potential risk to our countries. That's because we'll be able to identify and screen out inadmissible individuals while they're still overseas rather than when they arrive at a Canadian port of entry, which potentially represents a considerable cost savings as well.

Another commitment under the beyond the border initiative involves Canada and the U.S. working together to establish and coordinate entry and exit information systems. I know you have discussed these arrangements in this committee, and they have been raised at Public Safety as well. Under this initiative, Canada is developing a system to exchange land traveller information with the U.S. so that a record of land entry into one country is considered a record of exit from the other.

Once this system is in place, we will know who entered Canada and when they left, which is invaluable information when one is tracking the integrity of one's immigration and visitor visa system. This will provide my department with valuable, objective travel information that will assist with the processing of cases and identifying instances of fraud across multiple business lines.

[Translation]

Citizenship and Immigration Canada's supplementary estimates include an allocation of \$1.2 million to upgrade our IT system to access entry and exit information.

• (1110)

[English]

To further protect our borders and safeguard our asylum system, \$3 million is being allotted for the global assistance for irregular migrants program. This program furthers our government's commitment to combatting human smuggling, which regrettably and sadly is a profit-driven criminal activity that exploits vulnerable people and poses a threat to the integrity of our borders.

Through the program Canada is providing support to migrants who are intercepted as part of the destruction of a human smuggling operation. The program will also help manage the basic needs of intercepted migrants, ensuring that they have food, water, and shelter, as well as facilitate voluntary returns and reintegration in their country of origin.

As you know, Mr. Chair, under the 2012 budget implementation act passed by Parliament, CIC is terminating applications and returning fees paid by certain federal skilled worker applicants who applied before February 27, 2008. The elimination of this large backlog of applications will allow the department to focus on new applicants with the skills and talents our economy needs right now—talented people from around the world who will most successfully contribute to our future prosperity.

[Translation]

It also sets the stage for Canada's move from passive economic immigration to active recruiting under a new application intake system.

[English]

This relates to the dramatic reduction in processing times that we've seen for the federal skilled worker program, from seven or eight years at its peak in its legacy form we inherited from the previous Liberal government down to approximately one year now.

Mr. Chair, our number one priority remains the economy. Immigration is a key part of the government's plan to grow it, to spur job creation, and to ensure long-term prosperity for all Canadians. Our immigration plan for 2014 will help meet our economic needs by maintaining the highest sustained level of immigration in Canadian history.

[Translation]

As we continue to welcome record high numbers of immigrants, we are also committed to transforming the immigration system into one that is faster, more flexible and focused on meeting Canada's economic and labour market needs.

[English]

Let me emphasize that many of the immigration security measures being implemented by transfers made under these supplementary estimates (B) flow out of recommendations of this committee. If you look at electronic travel authorizations, the need for biometrics, migrant smuggling prevention, exit and entry, all of these relate to

your previous studies, to your input, and so they are a matter of a high level of consensus within this Parliament and across Canada.

We have completely transformed the federal skilled worker program with new criteria to select skilled workers who will be better positioned to succeed and contribute to the Canadian economy. Let's keep in mind that the economic outcomes from our federal skilled worker program remain among the best we have, superior to almost every other immigration program in the country. We want them to stay that way.

We've also created new economic immigration programs that respond to emerging economic trends. Two have been launched this year alone. One of them is the start-up visa program, unique to Canada. It's a step to ensuring that entrepreneurs, particularly in the technology field, but anyone who wants to be part of this start-up nation, are cleared to become a permanent resident once they do a deal with a venture capital partner, an angel investor, or an incubator. This gives us a particular focus on innovation and entrepreneurship.

The other is the federal skilled trades program, created only in January in response to requests from Canadian employers to more quickly and efficiently bring to Canada skilled tradespeople to work in construction, transportation, manufacturing and service industries. The first ones, as you know, arrived in August.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, these programs and our immigration system as a whole are vital to Canada's long-term economic health and to our competitiveness on the international stage and our long-term prosperity.

[English]

Immigration itself is a competitive field. The measures we are carrying forward with these estimates help us remain successful as we compete with other industrialized countries who must also rely on immigration to help fuel their economic growth. We want the best people to come here and not go there.

Our government fully believes that Canada can and should compete actively to attract the best and brightest newcomers to resettle here. To that end, as you all know, we've been working on a brand new recruitment model that will select immigrants based on the skills and attributes Canadian employers need. We're consulting the provinces, territories and employers on this new way of managing economic immigration applications that will create a pool of skilled workers to be matched to employers and who benefit from expedited processing.

We've discussed it here before. There will be two steps: firstly an indication of interest step, which will involve providing information electronically about skills, educational credentials, language ability, work experience, and other attributes. Those who meet the eligibility criteria will have their expressions of interest placed in a pool, placed in priority order, and ranked against others in the pool. Only the best candidates, including those with in-demand skills or job offers, will be invited to make a formal application for permanent residence.

It will be faster. We will only be inviting those in numbers we have the capacity to process. It will make our system dramatically better. Because candidates can only submit an immigration application if and when they are drawn from the pool and invited to apply, backlogs will become a thing of the past. We'll certainly be able to match application intake more efficiently to capacity and speed processing times

● (1115)

[Translation]

but that will be done through a well-established partnership with the provincial and territorial governments and with the private sector.

Mr. Chair, this new recruitment model is an effort to move from a passive approach to an active one, from the mechanical processing of applications in the order we receive them to the proactive selection of the people our economy needs from a very large pool of candidates—in other words, the best candidate, not the first one who applied.

Needless to say, it will be more responsive to Canada's ever-changing labour market needs and will help ensure that newcomers achieve greater success and make positive contributions to Canadian society as soon as possible after their arrival.

[English]

With these changes, Mr. Chair, we will remain on track to continue updating Canada's immigration program, modernizing it, and tailoring it to the needs of the 21st century economy, which moves at the speed of business and in which we compete with other potential countries with active immigration programs.

Thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to present. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister, for your presentation. The committee members will have some questions and comments.

Mr. Menegakis.

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

Thank you, Minister, for joining us today and for your testimony.

I also want to thank our officials for joining us today. I look forward to hearing from all of you.

Let me begin by wishing all of our friends in the Jewish community who are celebrating today a *Hag Hanukkah Sameach*.

Minister, in your testimony you referred a fair bit to backlogs and the significant actions that our government has taken to reduce those backlogs. Could you tell us if no actions had been taken what the backlog would be today compared to what it is now?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for the question.

To take one very concrete example, which comes up a lot in our constituency work across the country, in the case of Chandigarh, backlogs are still an issue there, but the approval rate was also an issue. Until we reformed the regulation of consultants and strengthened our partnership with India to make sure integrity was on the agenda from both sides, we had a very low approval rate—34% in 2004. I'm proud to report that in 2012 it was 53% and it continues to rise. There has been a 19% increase.

On backlogs, in 2006 we inherited a backlog across the board, across all programs, of 843,434 applications, the better part of a million. It went up and peaked at a million before we had fully implemented the measures we now have in place, and since that peak it has steadily declined to the point where in 2013 we are at 475,000 with continued declines projected for next year and the year after. If no action had been taken, if we had remained on the same path, we would certainly be in the neighbourhood of 1.7 million in the backlog now, moving to two million and above next year.

Above and beyond that, Mr. Menegakis, as you know, we would be continuing to break faith with applicants, because we would be accepting applications that realistically we had no capacity to process. So the date when they would be processed would be ever further ahead. We've all read novels from great artists with famous names like Kafka and Orwell in which these kinds of things happened. They should never have happened in Canada, and we are proud to have made progress in ensuring they never happen again.

● (1120)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Minister, can you comment on the wait times, now that our government has sustainably reduced the backlog in family reunification? How has the average waiting time changed?

Hon. Chris Alexander: For which kinds of applications? Visitors, immigrants...? Let me give you an example and then you tell me if there are other areas that are of interest.

With respect to the federal skilled workers program, there are hundreds of thousands in the backlog and a peak wait time of seven or eight years. Imagine an engineer who applied in 1995, 1994, 1999 to work in aerospace engineering, advanced manufacturing, or the oil sands, only to be told that his or her application would be processed in seven or eight years. The engineer won't be accepted necessarily, just processed. How do you plan your career in that case? How do you know what the Canadian economy will look like in seven or eight years? How do you know what to do in the interim?

No one plans his life like that, and we were wrong to expect that we would get the economic immigrants we needed with such a long backlog.

Today, following the measures your committee has helped us take, the waiting time is one year. The points system has been changed. The assessments of our labour market are improving, and the match between federal skilled workers and the real needs of employers is tighter than ever.

Under expression of interest, it's going to go from one year down to six months. We hope it will go below that, but let's start with six months. That will be a major improvement and also put us in a very competitive frame.

With regard to parents and grandparents, there has been some controversy. When we came into office, it was 64 months or more. Then, because the policy was in place, more applications were coming, not enough were being processed, and the wait time went up. We are proud to say that now the backlog for parents and grandparents is smaller than it was when we came into office. It was 108,000, and now it's something like 90,000, or will be by the end of this year. The wait time is 64 months or less, and last year, 2012, this year, 2013, and next year, 2014, we will have admitted a record number of parents and grandparents, while managing the intake of new applications so that we're not taking them under false pretenses. We are also positioning ourselves to re-open to a limited number of new applications in 2014.

In addition, while trying to restore trust with families who want their parents and grandparents here and who have a right to expect reasonable processing times, we've innovated. Not every parent and grandparent wants to come as an immigrant. We put in place the super visa, which has proven to be more popular than anyone anticipated. More than a thousand are being issued per month, not just in India, but around the world. We have multiple-entry visas, secure access for weddings, visas to help with child care. These serve all kinds of purposes, without putting an enormous additional cost on the Canadian health care system, because the families themselves assume the cost of health insurance.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much, Minister. That's a very thorough response that covered everything.

I'm done, Mr. Chair, with my questions.

The Chair: You are indeed.

Mr. Cash.

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the members of your team, Minister, for taking the time out of what is no doubt an incredibly busy schedule to be here before this committee.

As I listen to you, it almost sounds as though your government hadn't been the government for the last eight years and that wait times were simply and exclusively caused by the former government. For anyone listening to this deliberation at home, immigrants waiting years and years to get word on whether their parents or grandparents will be able to unite with them here in Canada, your deliberations today offer cold comfort, as they do for the parade of people who come to our offices asking for help.

Through these estimates, we see that CIC is getting extra funds for operating expenditures. What isn't clear is how these funds are going to reduce wait times for families waiting to reunite or for live-in caregivers waiting to get their permanent residency. There are outrageously long waits for those in that program. The moratorium on parent and grandparent applications will continue in January, with a limit of 5,000 applications per year. People are already facing excessive wait times to reunite with their families. According to your own website this morning, the waits are more than eight years for countries like China, India, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

If the CIC is receiving more money for its operations, why is this cap in place? How are wait times going to come down for those who have been waiting for years for permanent residency through the live-in caregiver program or for their parents and grandparents?

• (1125)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you, Mr. Cash, for the question.

Everything we do is focused on reducing those backlogs and wait times, and we have brought them down overall by 50% or more, and even more dramatically in the federal skilled worker program. For parents and grandparents, I went into some detail about what we've done; and yes, the backlog is not gone, but those in the backlog are being processed at an unprecedented rate.

I hope that when Canadians, whoever they are, applicants or relatives of applicants, come into our offices as MPs, they get this information. It's certainly there on our website. It's certainly there in the testimony in front of this committee that 25,000 parents and grandparents—a record number—were processed in 2012, that even more will be processed this year, and that the super visa is available. We want families to have those options and we want that backlog to come down.

Yes, we opened up a limited number of new applications last year, but that's because we're processing 20,000 more applications from the backlog. You won't find any other country, in any jurisdiction, that is as generous to families as we have been, and rigorous in protecting and processing the applications of those submitted in this case.

What we don't want is a return to the dark days when we were accepting applications under a misapprehension. People thought we had the capacity to process them and would process them right away. In fact, we were piling them onto inventories. We're no longer doing that.

Mr. Andrew Cash: I just want to get to the point about our not having the capacity, which you've repeated twice now. Do you mean you simply don't have enough people to process the applications? Might not that have something to do with cuts, right across, on the government's side?

What are you talking about when you say you don't have the capacity? What does that mean?

Hon. Chris Alexander: This government has put more resources into Citizenship and Immigration than ever before—

Mr. Andrew Cash: But what does it mean when you say you don't have the capacity?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We are processing the largest sustained levels of absolute numbers of immigration in Canadian history, and we have the resources to do that. What we don't have the resources to do is more than that.

If we accept applications that would justify twice or three times the immigration we're getting, we wouldn't have the resources to process those. We have the resources to process our immigration levels planned for 2014, which are at the same levels we've had in recent years. In fact, the target is slightly higher: 63% economic immigration; 26% family reunification, a very strong number; and 11% refugee and humanitarian cases, which is still a strong number. We have the resources to do that, but we don't have the resources to process applications that are not part of that plan. Yes, some of that plan involves processing applications that are in inventories.

On live-in caregivers, if I can just respond to your earlier question, we are also taking action. It's not part of the supplementary estimates (B), because we have those resources already in place under our levels plan, but we are committed to processing 17,500 live-in caregivers from that backlog, which also grew under the Liberals and continues to grow and which needs to come down.

• (1130)

Mr. Andrew Cash: Okay.

You mentioned the EOI system again today. I appreciate that this is a brand-new system you're rolling out in 2015, but I want to ask you about it again, because you've made the remarkable statement that for federal skilled workers you're going to bring these wait times down to six months.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Exciting, isn't it?

Mr. Andrew Cash: When are we going to see the ministerial instructions outlining the invitation criteria? When are we going to see that criteria and turn this from a campaign slogan into some real policy here?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Well, anyone who's been following the estimates process, the budgetary process, the legislative process, will know that we are engaged with the budget implementation act, which we discussed last time, in our third round of legislative changes to support expression of interest. A lot of what we're doing with backlogs and so forth is to prepare the ground for expression of interest. On the exact timing of ministerial instructions to govern the final criteria, I will defer to my colleagues.

But keep in mind that expression of interest is not a new program. There is a tendency to say the criteria are changing and the collection is changing—

The Chair: We have to move on, gentlemen.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'll just say that it's a framework for the existing programs. For the federal skilled-worker program, the criteria changed in May. You all know about that. It's in force. Those will remain the criteria unless we change them, and we don't have a current plan to change them. Under the EOI, it's January 1, 2015.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to the minister and his officials for being here.

I think it was Mark Twain who originated the phrase, "Lies, damned lies, and statistics", which I think characterizes well the highly selective exchange between the minister and Mr. Menegakis.

This is not a question. I just want to repeat for the record that while backlogs and waiting times are related to each other, what matters for real people is waiting times. Under the watch of this government, waiting times for the family class increased from an average of 13 months in 2007, which is when this government was in power, to 34 months in 2012—and even longer if you take the last 12 months. And the waiting times today are five years or more for the family class, the investment class, and entrepreneurs, and three years-plus for live-in caregivers, etc. So those are the true facts coming from the government's own website. But I don't want to belabour this point because we've had this exchange before.

My main issue I want to raise is my contention that the United States is obviously way bigger than Canada and has advantages over Canada, but Canada, as a smaller country, can only compete with the United States if we are nimbler and more agile. But in terms of admitting visitors, I would argue the U.S. is far more agile than Canada, which has deleterious effects on our economy, on our business, on our tourism industry, on families, etc.

Recently we saw the ambassador from either Mexico or Brazil, or both, complaining in the press of the huge forms that people had to fill in to come to Canada, which ask questions like where your mother was born and other irrelevancies. I know the United States interviews visitors, but we've compared waiting times, and for the countries I've examined, the waiting times are significantly longer for Canada. The worst cases would be 50 days for Islamabad versus 16 days for the United States; 37 days for Colombo versus 3 from the U.S.

I know we have security concerns, but the U.S. had 9/11, not us, and we seem to be far worse than they are. Given the damage this does to our economy, to new Canadians, and to our tourism industry, why are we so much worse than the Americans in allowing visitors into this country?

Hon. Chris Alexander: First of all, we are not necessarily worse, Mr. Chair.

Hon. John McCallum: Well, that's what the numbers show.

Hon. Chris Alexander: No, but let's not gloss over the intrusiveness of an interview. Most visitors to Canada do not undergo an interview; everyone does in the case of the United States. In many cases, people wait up to three months for that interview to take place. That is in addition to the other paper-processing times, document-processing times, which can be quite substantial.

There is room for improvement on our visitors' side. None of us is disguising that fact. You saw some of the numbers in processing times move during the withdrawal of services we had from one of our public sector unions over the summer. We are sensitive to growth spikes in demand in different parts of the world. We can't necessarily move resources around as easily as we would like to do. We are studying this, and we want to continue discussing potential improvements with the committee.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay, if I could—

Hon. Chris Alexander: But can I just complete the answer? We have online applications—

• (1135)

Hon. John McCallum: Well, my time is running out. I have the numbers here showing that U.S. times are substantially [*Inaudible—Editor*] than Canadian times—

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, U.S. times are slower, I agree—

Hon. John McCallum: I don't think that's acceptable for a small country, which has so many disadvantages relative to the giant of the world, the United States.

But I want to ask one question about the Philippines and Typhoon Haiyan. One of your officials, Diane Burrows was here. I asked her whether the government would release to Parliament the information about expedited entry for Filipinos, because we applaud the sentiment but we think from the experience of Haiti that the results have not always been good. So will you tell us the results? Diane Burrows said:

I certainly hope that will be the case, sir. That will be something that we would put forward to the minister for consideration. We're prepared to do that.

The Chair: You're running out of time. Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum: Will you do that? If so, when, and what information will you give us?

Hon. Chris Alexander: The results are good. Manila is truly processing those applications we wanted them to give priority to. If anyone has information on applications that haven't gotten priority but deserve it, they should let us know.

On visas, online applications, they're now 30% of our workload. Multiple-entry visas are going to become more and more prevalent in our system. If we have backlogs, Mr. Chair, across the board, it is because those backlogs started under a Liberal government. This is what we never hear acknowledged by Mr. McCallum or other Liberals. It's a nightmare we inherited and we are trying to awake.

The Chair: I'm going to stop there, Minister, and move on to Mr. Weston.

Mr. McCallum, you'll have to withhold yourself.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks as well to the minister for being with us here today.

I have two questions, which are directly related to those asked by Mr. Cash and Mr. McCallum, but first I would like to say this: regardless of the government in power, it is always good for the people for a minister to have professional training and experience

that correspond to his work as a minister. Given your experience in the diplomatic service, Canadians are confident that you will be able to carry out the projects you have discussed today.

My two questions concern the allegation that we have not improved processing rates or times. What has been the acceptance rate of applications submitted to your office in Chandigarh since 2006? I hope you have that information to hand.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, I have it, Mr. Weston. Thank you for your question.

Since 2005, we have tripled the number of visas issued by our mission in Chandigarh. Only 3,300 visas were issued in Chandigarh in 2004 compared to more than 17,000 in 2012. The approval rate also rose from 34% to 53% between 2004 and 2012.

Mr. John Weston: Does that mean there was an improvement or growth in the approval rate? What is the difference between the approval rate and the number of visas actually issued?

Hon. Chris Alexander: The overall approval rate for visitor visas has increased to 82%, which is a very high rate. Furthermore, since the improvements we made were introduced, that rate has not stopped rising. Despite the challenges we face, we issued more visitor visas in 2012 than ever. The growth rate for 2013 is very dynamic and rising sharply.

We have also removed the visa requirement for 11 countries such as, very recently, the Czech Republic. As you have noticed, Canada now has many more foreign students and temporary workers, who are governed by our system in that area, tourists and business people. We are proud of the growth rates in all these areas.

• (1140)

Mr. John Weston: Mr. Cash just said that most people are not concerned about the backlog, but that they are concerned about the processing delays. I heard that someone on a talk show in Vancouver said

[*English*]

that processing shouldn't take much time beyond the given limit. Visitors' visas take only 14 working days from New Delhi and Chandigarh, while super visas could take eight to 10 weeks. Family class visas from India take eight to 10 months, but could be much faster.

[*Translation*]

I think it is extraordinary that the processing time is so short. Would you like to say something on that subject?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We are providing improved service around the world. In Mexico, there is an express lane for business people, students and tourists. People are increasingly using it. The same is true in Delhi. We also have major initiatives that are a great success in China. One-quarter of visitors who come to Canada on a visa come from China. Most obtained their visas in Beijing.

We are proud of this innovative spirit, which is apparent throughout the system. We are proud that economic immigration and applications are being processed faster than ever. However, we cannot conceal the fact that there are still backlogs. We have not eliminated them. We have cut them in half, or perhaps a little more, but we must introduce initiatives to eliminate them completely. We will definitely be having important discussions with you on that topic.

[English]

Mr. John Weston: It's certainly not for me to give advice to my friends in the Liberal Party, but I always think it's a mark of credibility when one can simply say, yes, you've done well, instead of criticizing where no criticism is due. Then when in fact there is valid criticism to be had, it's more credible.

I just can't understand the point of Mr. McCallum's statements. How can anyone deny that there have been clinical, clear improvements in processing times, which continue under this government?

Hon. Chris Alexander: People can deny, but no one can deny it if they've looked at the facts. Compare the first five years in office of the Liberal government to our first five. They cut landed family members by 38%. We increased landed family members by 8%.

We have increased the annual number of family sponsorships by thousands. You would never know that from what one hears from the Liberal members. They cut immigration by 32% during their time in office. We increased immigration by 7%, despite the world's worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

On settlement services, they froze service for 13 years. They froze services to help our immigrants integrate. This is something that the Liberal government paid lip service to, talked about, but did nothing to actually implement. In our time in office we have tripled settlement service funding to \$600 million across the country. We are renewing it. We're kicking the tires. We're making sure that the provinces and our settlement agencies across the country are offering the best service to make sure immigrants get to work quickly, orient themselves quickly, find the services they need and realize their individual and family potential in this country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Ayala, it's your turn for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today, minister.

Our colleague just asked you a lot of questions about visas. We see in the budget that the proposed changes generally focus on security. I would like to know how the confidentiality of the information that Canada receives from all these people filing visa

applications from various countries will be protected and guaranteed in view of the fact that, in the present circumstances, Canada visa application centres, private organizations, are the first to gather the information. This is not currently Immigration Canada's responsibility.

I am going to tell you what troubles me. Canada currently entrusts information centres with very important information from citizens around the world. When those people apply for visas, they trust that Canada will keep their personal information confidential. For a visa application, you have to provide your bank account number, credit card number and family history.

Since private companies control this, what does the government think it will do to prevent potential abuses, particularly thefts of information?

• (1145)

Hon. Chris Alexander: All the initiatives and programs we are introducing at the department are developed, implemented and managed in close cooperation with the Information Commissioner and the Privacy Commissioner. Canada has very high standards for the protection of personal information, and we meet those standards at our department.

Ms. Paulina Ayala: The departmental officials who appeared on Tuesday told us that the expression of interest and the visa application first went through the Canada visa application centres, which are private organizations that work in each country together with the Government of Canada. The Department of Immigration takes over the files once those organizations have verified that the information contained in the documents is truthful.

So this means that the information is forwarded first to private organizations in every country, not here in Canada. When I was in Venezuela last year, the ambassador confirmed that his applications did not in fact go through his institution first, but rather through a private organization. That is a problem.

Abuses have already occurred in England, where the same system is in use. So this is troubling. We are investing in security, but we could be exposed in the long run to civil lawsuits from other countries for failing to protect their personal information. This troubles me.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Our contracts for managing the Canada visa application centre network around the world include a very important component on supervision of the processing and management of personal information. We believe that the conditions of those contracts are being met. I do not think we need to fear the private sector when this is an initiative designed to provide better service to a growing clientele.

Ms. Paulina Ayala: Yes, but we are talking about a private sector that is not Canadian. These are people from elsewhere. That is what is troubling. There have already been abuses in other countries.

Hon. Chris Alexander: In this case, the private sector is bound to the Government of Canada by contract. It is required under that contract to comply with Canada's Privacy Act.

Ms. Paulina Ayala: Yes, but a disgruntled worker who has just been dismissed may steal information. There is a danger in that respect.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Without these centres, it would be impossible to process the number of applications we receive.

Ms. Paulina Ayala: I know this helps cut costs, but there is a danger in that respect. However, I would like to move on to another question.

There is a \$3-million vote in the supplementary estimates.

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala: I would like to talk about refugees.

We have tightened up the criteria so that access to the country is reserved for real refugees, but does that not increase the number of illegals? Furthermore, now we are required to invest more in border control. Illegals who are in danger put their lives at risk in order to enter Canada simply to protect themselves.

Is there not a connection between those phenomena?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brown.

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Alexander, for the energy that you've certainly brought to the immigration department. Obviously the success with the processing times should be evident to everyone. I certainly hear about these improvements in my riding in the City of Barrie.

I wanted to know if you could touch a little bit further upon the different ways you have modernized the citizenship program to improve service standards and processing times.

• (1150)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you very much.

We've done the following. First, we allow applicants to rewrite their citizenship test if they're unsuccessful the first time. We think that's only fair, given the more demanding test.

Earlier this year I also announced—it was actually Minister Kenney who announced it, but I have also reinforced it—a move to cut wait times. If applicants miss their test or interview after receiving a final notice, their case will be considered closed.

This puts responsibility back onto the individual. We have to make sure they aren't able to just be absent, often outside of Canada, and miss appointments again and again, eating up valuable resources in a field where, after all, we have a lot of applications to process and a backlog to deal with at Citizenship Canada, partly because citizenship is now such a popular goal for so many immigrants. We've also appointed more citizenship judges.

But faster processing is also occurring as applicants who failed their first citizenship test can now rewrite it, rather than wait for an appointment with a citizenship judge. This is a common-sense move. Not everyone does their best on their first try on a test. Since June 2013 individuals who fail the test have the opportunity to take it again. Preliminary results on retesting show an average pass rate of 70%. Those who fail a second time have the opportunity to demonstrate they can meet the knowledge requirement during an oral interview with a citizenship judge.

We are also requiring applicants to provide evidence of language proficiency up front as of late 2012, so that the assessment of their official language capacity is more objective and speeds up decision-making by citizenship judges during processing.

Over the coming years we're looking at other modernizations, such as online applications and electronic knowledge testing of clients conducted by a contracted third party. The money that is received via budget 2013, combined with other modernization efforts, will reduce the processing times.

You know as well as I do, Mr. Brown, as do your constituents in Barrie, that the new study guide has been extremely popular. Applications are now processed more effectively thanks to amendments that require this language ability to be proven.

Just as another example, under the Liberal system you were allowed an unlimited number of no-shows. You could just not show up, not show up, not show up, and your application would be.... We will not stand for that pattern of individual irresponsibility. We want our citizens to be responsible, to show up for their appointments. If they can't make one, they can come to a second, but they don't have an infinite number of options.

We have a budget of \$44 million over two years for these kinds of improvements. We will also be coming forward with new measures, as you know and as we've signalled in this committee, to ensure that the backlog in citizenship applications comes down sharply, smartly, in the months and years to come.

Mr. Patrick Brown: How have these changes affected the integrity of the citizenship program, and how have you continued to combat the fraud that sometimes happens within the application process?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Well, citizenship and residency fraud have been increasing concerns for decades, and as a result, we have taken strong measures to detect the fraud, eliminate it from the system, and deter fraud. We have increased our focus on citizenship revocation. Just since we began that initiative, we've investigated more than seven times the total number of revocation cases processed since 1977, and there are 3,100 people currently suspected of having obtained citizenship by misrepresenting themselves through the citizenship application process. There are 1,900 individuals linked to large-scale investigations, who have withdrawn their applications, so they will not become citizens because of the measures we've taken, and 5,200 permanent residents suspected of residency fraud have been flagged for additional scrutiny should they attempt to obtain citizenship.

So we're doing a better job of tracking the people, who are often linked to organized crime, who are trying to game the system, trying to beat the system, trying to obtain citizenship without even living here, and given that we all agree that the responsibilities of Canadian citizens are as important as the rights, that is a sign of deep irresponsibility. Preventing these people from becoming citizens is a huge improvement in the system, and we're proud to have undertaken it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Daniel has the floor.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here

I just want to change the subject a little bit and talk more about passports.

Minister, last week you appeared on the budget implementation act, and I would like to thank you again for your time. I understand the machinery of government change transferred accountability for the passport program from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

Can you explain to us how this has impacted the passport services for Canadians?

•(1155)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks very much.

First, to finish on citizenship, demand for citizenship has increased by 30% and we're averaging now 200,000 new citizens each year. So that's the net. In spite of our integrity measures, the number of citizens and the service delivered to them continues to improve.

On passports, we are driving towards even better service. It was good when the passport office was with Foreign Affairs. We're going to make it even better. Canadians expect that, as they travel more and as they rely on their passports as a tool of business and family life and communication. They will continue to receive access to the same passport services they received previously, despite the transfer, and passport services have improved continuously under our government. Indeed, service is the priority in a just-in-time passport system, and 5.1 million passports were issued in 2012-2013. And as I think you all know, the 10-year ePassport that was launched this year has been picked up at a record pace, beyond our expectations, with an 85% take-up rate and a million issued in a couple of months.

So we in Canada have one of the highest levels of service. We are respecting those service standards in 99% of cases. Since 2008, the number of Canadians with a Canadian passport increased by 20%—not after 9/11, but since the downturn in 2007—and is forecasted to reach 70% by 2013. That's a very high level. On average, Canadians can obtain a passport in 10 business days. Expedited services are offered for an additional fee, and as you know, 100 countries or so have ePassports in one way, shape, or form. Our new passport has enhanced security measures, an electronic chip that is the gold standard in this business, and we're also moving more services online, to make forms available electronically, and moving towards having more points of service. We have our passport offices. Many people use the mail. Many people use MPs offices, but we are driving towards Service Canada as a natural partner because it is already in many, many times the number of locations. I think it's in 330 locations, compared to the 34 passport offices we have across the country.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Thank you for that, Minister.

I'd like to follow up on that further. If I understand it correctly, taxpayers are not subsidizing the application fees for passports. The fees themselves will actually cover the costs, etc. Can you explain?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Correct. This is a very important point. Thank you for raising it, Mr. Daniel.

It is full cost recovery. These are fees, not taxes, nor anything else. They are fees for the cost of the service. They're adjusted according to the cost of the service. They are higher if the service is expedited—and Canadians tend to zero in on the best value for money. A 10-year passport, which has a high security value, is fewer dollars per year of passport validity. That's one of the reasons why this new passport has been very popular.

But why have we succeeded in offering such good service on passports? It's partly because there is a revolving fund authorized by Parliament—formerly in Foreign Affairs, now in CIC—that allows the fees we receive to be matched to the services we deliver. So if we get a spike, an unexpected extra demand for passports, we can immediately improve the service and deliver that benefit to Canadians.

We do not have that system at the moment, let me remind everyone, when it comes to visitor visas. We do take visitor visa fees in, obviously, but we don't have the ability to redeploy those resources when there is excessive demand in support of better service. I would argue—on a personal basis at this point—that there is a model in the passport office that deserves consideration in some of our other service lines.

I know that your committee will be considering options in that respect.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Daniel.

Mr. Minister, the committee agreed at past meeting that you could be excused at 12 o'clock, because I understand you have another engagement. So you are excused. We will eagerly await your return at another date.

•(1200)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for appearing before us.

We will suspend.

•(1200)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1200)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will reconvene.

The minister has left the room. We've agreed that the deputy minister and her colleagues will continue to answer questions.

Their names are before you. They are the deputy minister Anita Biguzs, associate deputy minister Wilma Vreeswijk, and assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer Tony Matson.

Mr. Linklater, who of course seems to come to this meeting every other meeting, is the assistant deputy minister of strategic and program policy.

Mr. Orr is of course another regular attendee. He is the assistant deputy minister of operations.

Welcome to you all.

I've agreed, Ms. Biguzs, that you have approximately three minutes to make some opening comments. I'm very strict, I might add.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Anita Biguzs (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I'll be careful.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to join you today for the first time. Since late September, I have held the position of Deputy Minister at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. I do not have any formal remarks to make following the minister's presentation. However, with your permission, I will offer a few comments and thoughts on the good work my department is doing.

•(1205)

[*English*]

In addition to the very ambitious policy agenda that has been under way to ensure that our immigration activities are more responsive to our labour market needs and more nimble, I want to stress the level of effort that has been under way in the department to modernize the department's processes and activities. I'm very conscious of all your questions, on processing times, in particular.

We're very conscious of the fact that the world is changing at a rapid pace around us in terms of global restructuring, competitiveness, and the information revolution that is changing the traditional

model of how we work. The objective of our modernization work has been to ensure that we are adapting and optimizing all aspects of our activities and business processes to be as effective and efficient as possible, and our relevance depends on this.

It means we've been looking at how we manage our workload, how we manage our workforce, and how we manage risk. Fundamental to this effort is making sure we move forward in a way that provides good client service while maintaining program integrity. So while it's still early days in this modernization journey of ours, we actually are in the process of implementing a number of measures that are bearing fruit, and I wanted to review a few them with you.

We've been developing new ways of processing by defining and separating the more routine and straightforward processing from the more complex through centralization of some functions. Our new global case management system, which provides a more advanced information system, makes it possible to move work across the network, which would not have been possible previously. The bottom line is that this is helping us to improve processing.

The department has also been deploying third-party service providers in the case of visa application centres around the world. By 2014 we will have over 130 VACs in 96 countries. The VACs provide improved client service by helping ensure that applications are complete, which reduces unnecessary delays or refusals.

I want to mention that I had a chance recently to visit one of our VACs in our missions abroad, and I'm astounded actually by the difference it makes in service delivery. I saw the photographs of the lineups that were weaving outside the door everyday outside our mission in Delhi, people waiting to submit their applications, and I saw the VAC in action as well. They have a service standard of a 10-minute wait time for people. They are not decision-makers; they basically help to receive the applications, make sure the applications are complete, that all the documents have been submitted. They package them, they triage them, and they submit the files to our mission. What that does for our visa officers in our missions is that they are focusing on the value-added work, which is actually reviewing applications to make decisions, rather than just doing the paper processing part of it. It's quite impressive and quite outstanding, and I think overall around the world this will actually ensure better service to clients.

We've also—oh, the time is up, sorry.

The Chair: Mr. Cash.

Mr. Andrew Cash: She could say goodbye, because just as she was wrapping up I took a bite out of my sandwich. Excuse me.

Thank you again, Deputy Minister and the rest of the team, for being here, and congratulations on your new post.

Of course, when we have the minister in front of us, his comments and the ensuing discussion often raise more questions for us than they answer, so we look forward to an opportunity to dig into some of these specific things.

We talk about the VACs, and we see that CIC recently signed a contract with VFS Global worth \$51 million to facilitate the VACs. First off, I'd like to know what specific services have been privatized like this by CIC. Are there more planned, and if so, what other kinds of planned privatization should we expect from the department?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Thank you for the question.

I'd just say that the process of moving out.... It is a contractual arrangement we have with these visa application centres. This is a model that has been used by a number of other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, as a mechanism for ensuring better service to clients via front-line delivery in more locations and the ability to make sure applications are complete when they are submitted. So it speeds up client service from the point of view that it reduces the number of refusals that might be provided because of incomplete documentation.

Certainly, as I say, the VACs have been seen as a very positive cost-efficient mechanism. Our own staff, our own people, have also given us feedback on the extent to which it's ensuring that they can do value-added important work rather than doing paper processing.

I think in my remarks I said that we are going out to 130 visa application centres, and it means that overall, in terms of our processing times, we should be in a better position to be able to actually focus on the value-added work of making determinations on visas.

• (1210)

Mr. Andrew Cash: I just want to follow up on a couple of things. The Minister said that with the new EOI, CIC will be moving to a six-month wait time. At what point would we get to a six-month wait time?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The intention of the government is to actually move forward with the expression of interest system in early 2015. I think the government has indicated January 2015, so we are actually putting in place the systems and managing our workload inventory in such a manner that we would hope as soon as the expression of interest system is implemented in 2015, we will actually provide a six-month wait time in terms of processing.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Thank you.

There's a moratorium on parents and grandparents that's going to be lifted after two years and then there's going to be a cap of 5,000. There's a long backlog, and I understand the minister's perspective that on a go-forward basis this is what we're going to be doing, but for families living in Canada, who are trying to get their grandparents or parents in and have been trying to do so for a long time, what measures will the department take to deal with this? They're real people. They're living in our communities. They're not part of this go-forward 5,000 cap. What are we doing for these people, for these families?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, the efforts that we've made to date have basically reduced the inventory by almost 50%, so we actually have been making headway with the inventory of parent and grandparent applications. The government has also announced additional funding of \$44 million over two years, which will be applied to enhance processing to make sure that we can work through that inventory.

There's also the super visa, which basically provides for a 10-year entry visa for parents and grandparents, which we think will certainly facilitate the ability of families to actually bring over their parents and grandparents for visits. The government has increased admissions, I think as the Minister had indicated, to 50,000 between 2012 and 2013, which is the highest number that we've ever had in our levels plan. The intention is to actually reopen applications as of January 2014. The idea is to actually cap them at 5,000 so that we won't in fact be dealing with a backlog and a large inventory, and we can actually give individuals some sense of certainty and expectation that we're not growing a backlog and people will not have to wait much longer.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

Ms. Bateman.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our all our witnesses.

[*English*]

I've got a number of questions, Madam Deputy Minister, but I found your comments, particularly about the process flow improvements and the client service improvements that you've initiated, so interesting that if you want to take a little bit of my time to recap those important client service improvement pieces, I'd appreciate it.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: I may ask my colleagues to join in.

As I said, I certainly witnessed first-hand the benefits of the visa application centres. Certainly, we will be in many more locations than we could possibly be in our own missions abroad. From a client service point of view, there's a very rigorous framework under our contracts with these visa application centres in terms of the service, the expectations they have to provide, and also in the quality assurance, oversight, and monitoring.

The other issue is that we have introduced e-applications, online applications, for temporary resident visas, so it will actually be easier for people to apply for a visa coming to Canada. We've actually also moved to e-medicals, so that where you require certainly a medical certificate, we're actually doing that online as well, which certainly has saved time in these kinds of assessments. We've introduced multiple-entry visas, which means that we're reducing the number of applications that have to come in for single-entry visas.

As the Minister mentioned as well, we actually have introduced things like the business express program, and the travel student partnership, which again actually give streamlined, facilitated access to come to Canada, in addition to the super visa. These are many initiatives, and with our global case management system now, which is the basic IT platform, we can work around the world with our caseload and our application intake. We can move workload around the country or really anywhere in the network. So if you have downtime in one, you can move some of the caseload to other parts of the system. In that sense it is helping us to move forward in improving our process times.

These things also actually take time to be able to implement. We're still, as I was saying in my comments, in the early stages of implementation of some of these initiatives. We're looking at going further with online applications, certainly in terms of the permanent resident category as well. Our hope is that we will be going online in that area as well, and ultimately with passports as well, which will be another improvement to service.

As I said, I just wanted to say that we really are embarking on a pretty ambitious agenda of modernization in trying to facilitate movement to Canada in a timely manner.

• (1215)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: All right. I appreciate that.

Now I'm going to ask my questions, whichever of them I am allowed.

In December 2012 our government introduced a new asylum system to accelerate processing of refugee claims, to deter abuse of the system, and to help the people who need the help.

Could you elaborate on what new measures have been put in place to achieve these goals, again with a client-service focus and to help people who need help?

Mr. Les Linklater (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I can respond, Mr. Chair. I think as we come up on the one-year anniversary of the implementation of the new system, we have a good set of numbers behind the results we've seen to date.

Through the major reforms, we introduced timelines to ensure that individuals were being heard at the IRB at the first level within specific time periods. Whether they were claiming at a port of entry or after having been in Canada for a certain amount of time, we found that the timelines were being met in the vast majority of cases. That has resulted in people getting positive protection decisions sooner than they had under the previous regime, which could have taken 21 or 24 months, for example, with people waiting in limbo for that kind of certainty.

The new system has also streamed applicants from certain countries so those who come from what are termed designated countries of origin, which don't normally produce refugees, are given a fast-track system, which basically mirrors the previous system in that there is a hearing at the IRB and recourse to the Federal Court.

Those who come from other countries that are not designated have access to a new refugee appeal division that has been established at the IRB, which adds that second layer of review for those individuals, plus there is the Federal Court as the final recourse after that.

The CBSA has been given funds to launch a pilot project on assisted voluntary returns, which they are administering out of Toronto with the International Organization for Migration. There have been very positive results after the first 16 months. We're seeing a great deal of take-up by people who have had a negative decision or who have decided they want to abandon their claim and return voluntarily to their country of origin. It helps lower removal costs downstream. It actually helps provide in kind assistance to these

people who decide voluntarily to leave, and the IOM then is able to help them once—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Linklater.

Mr. Weston is next.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us here today.

Ms. Biguzs, you just said that

[*English*]

we're going online ultimately with passports.

[*Translation*]

That may also be an example of what the modernization program is accomplishing within the department.

Can you tell us more specifically what our desire to modernize what we are doing means for the Canadian passport program?

Could we opt for forms that involve using the Internet? Would that help save on costs to taxpayers?

[*English*]

Ms. Wilma Vreeswijk (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I can perhaps answer that question.

• (1220)

[*Translation*]

The passport program is currently on the website, but there is a form in PDF format.

[*English*]

So it's a PDF form that you would download.

As the deputy indicated, we are leveraging the global case management system, and we would be moving the passport system by using that kind of a system within for passports, so that you could have, over time, end-to-end automation of the passport application.

In that way someone can renew their passport simply and easily, so that over time the whole thing will be automated.

When you have a system with a PDF type of form you have to download and fill in, you may forget information. If you send it in and there's a problem with your application because you've left some information out, then there's a recommunication with the client. All of those steps take time for the client and they are also costly. So by going to a fully automated end-to-end transaction type of system, we expect that over time the cost per transaction should come down.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston: Can you tell us when those changes will be in effect?

Ms. Wilma Vreeswijk: The changes to the passport program processes have just been made. This is a transition period for us. We are making plans for the program's transformation. We want to ensure that the system we use is safe. We expect that will be done over the next few years.

[English]

So while we're transforming the program, we want to make sure that passports' record of high quality service is continued. So we want to make sure we manage that carefully.

[Translation]

Mr. John Weston: Earlier in the meeting, we compared what we are doing now with what we were doing a few years ago. Can you compare the current costs that visa and citizenship applications processing represents for Canadian taxpayers?

Mr. Les Linklater: We have done a fair bit of work on that, but I do not believe we have those exact figures to hand. However, we will be pleased to forward them to the clerk as soon as possible.

I can say, however, that Canada is in good shape relative to competitor countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

[English]

So when we look at the fees that we charge, basically we are very competitive among those five countries for the range of services we offer.

Mr. John Weston: What about the costs to us as Canadians? That's a harder comparison, isn't it? Is it possible to make that comparison—not the cost to the applicants, but the cost—

Mr. Les Linklater: Whether or not it's full cost recovery?

Mr. John Weston: Yes.

Mr. Les Linklater: We have done some work there as well and we would be able to share the results of that with the committee through the clerk.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, all.

The Chair: We'll have one more speaker for round four and then we'll start all over again.

The final speaker is Ms. Sitsabaiesan.

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

Thank you all for coming, our return guests, and our new guests.

Congratulations to you, Ms. Biguzs.

The supplementary estimates outlines transfers from CBSA to CIC, or from CIC and Transport to the RCMP for activities related to the 2015 Pan Am and Parapan Am Games.

But what we don't actually see are credits to ensure that refugees and immigrants continue to have fair access to health services for family reunification, services that some would argue actually help refugees and immigrants integrate into our Canadian society.

Could you help inform the committee which programs and administrative services are having money taken away from then in order for these transfers to happen?

• (1225)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Thank you for the question.

Just for clarification, the transfer from the Canada Border Services Agency in the supplementary estimates is basically a cost from

decommissioning an old, what we called, field operation support system, and integrating it fully with our global case management system. So there's no loss of data and the system will be fully efficient and integrated and will actually allow for improved information-sharing.

There are supplementary estimates here for access to health services for refugees per se, because that is covered under the main estimates expenditures for the interim federal health program. I don't think the estimates are showing any kind of a reduction to the interim federal health program per se, but the government did announce changes to that program, largely to align it with comparable services that are provided to Canadians and that Canadians are eligible to receive. So the majority of refugee claimants and successful refugees will continue to receive services under the interim federal health program for hospital and doctor services until such time—because it's a temporary program that bridges to provincial-territorial health programs—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Sorry, I'm just going to interrupt you because I only have five minutes and we are familiar with the interim federal health program. That is actually where I'm going with my next question, so it was a perfect segue.

A recent report by the Wellesley Institute entitled “The Real Cost of Cutting the Interim Federal Health Program” has outlined issues and recommendations for the interim federal health program. Their assessment is that the changes in the IFH have had negative effects that Minister Kenney assured us would not happen. The information collected in their assessment indicates the following:

...the new system creates confusion, lessens access to health care services among vulnerable populations, leads to inconsistency in care across Canada, and results in poorer health and avoidable illness for refugees and refugee claimants.

This is from the report itself.

As you mentioned in the main estimates, how can CIC ask for additional funding to support their interim federal health program, which as you mentioned right now provides temporary health care for refugees, while stakeholders are reporting how many people across the country are actually suffering from the cuts?

My question is, weren't these cuts made so that the moneys spent on the program wouldn't increase? So now we're trying to spend more money on the interim federal health program, but actually are providing less service and there are more cuts to the services being provided.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If I can just clarify, Mr. Chair, the majority of refugee claimants and successful refugees continue to qualify for services, for hospital and doctor services. The intention of the program was that services and benefits should not be provided at a level more than Canadians would have access to. In the case of rejected claimants, they no longer receive coverage unless there are public health, public safety issues, because they do not have legal status in Canada. We understand that the change—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: If I may, just to understand you, that also includes pregnant women and people going through labour as well, if they are rejected?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If they're a rejected claimant. That's unless, as I say, there are public health or public safety issues.

We understand that with any kind of a transition in a program it can create confusion about what services are covered, what benefits are covered. To respond to that, we actually have ensured that our call centre is able and equipped to answer any calls. We also have a portal that actually has lots of information and questions and answers for health practitioners.

So we have tried to ensure that information is provided, certainly with P/T governments as well, about the nature of the services and the benefits provided. We understand that during a period of transition there may be some confusion about what's covered and what's not covered, but certainly the majority of refugee claimants and successful refugee applicants will in fact continue to receive hospital and doctors' services.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister. That concludes the fourth round.

We are now starting again on the first round.

Mr. Wallace.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our guests for being here. Just as the deputy minister is new, so am I to this committee, so I did a little work from the previous year just to get up to speed on a few things.

Part of the estimates process, as you know, is the plans and priorities documents that are produced every year and normally presented shortly after the mains are out. I was reading them and there was one thing of interest to me that I thought maybe you could clarify for me.

One of the priorities as part of the estimates process is strengthening the outcomes based on management as a priority, which seems sort of motherhood and apple pies—obviously what we should be doing. But it says the CIC's new program alignment architecture, the PAA, and the performance measures framework, the PMF, was to be introduced as of April.

I'd like to know how it's going. What are your expectations of the outcomes from this? Does this mean that if a program is not working and isn't meeting the goals that we set for it, you're going to bring it forward and that maybe we should either restructure it or get rid of it? Could you explain what that means?

• (1230)

Mr. Les Linklater: Thank you for that very good question.

To put this in appropriate context, each department has a program activity architecture. We are, with Treasury Board guidance, able to then outline for public consumption, and for parliamentarians in particular, our various lines of business down to what we call activity level or subactivity level. This helps us with our planning and our budgeting process to understand where our resources are going in terms of meeting certain program objectives.

Within those subactivities, we do look at performance indicators to be able to measure our success in terms of delivering outcomes for Canadians. What you're referring to from CIC's RPP relates to essentially our performance measurement strategy and our data strategy to support our ability to measure our work and to be able to then report on outcomes so that we have a good evidence base for future policy decisions.

So as we move forward and are able to make the links to available data sources that can then be applied against our programs, we're then able to support evaluations.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Did that not exist prior to April 1?

Mr. Les Linklater: This priority was first introduced with the PAA in 2011, and it was renewed in 2013-14. I would say that we have always tried to use best available evidence in developing our policy and programs, but the PAA rigour and the performance measurement strategy, the data strategy underneath, now brings a comprehensive coverage to our range of programs, which might not necessarily have been the case in the past.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Could I just add to that? Under the government's evaluation policy as directed and guided by Treasury Board, every department is required to perform evaluations. That certainly was an activity of the department well before 2011 in an ongoing process whereby we evaluate each individual program. We have a five-year plan to identify what we evaluate.

I think what Mr. Linklater was referring to is that we're now talking about a more comprehensive, integrated framework across the department.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thanks. I have been active on a previous committee, the government operations committee. The estimates are my thing here on the Hill and have been interested in them.

We are moving. I must admit that I appreciate the work that Treasury Board is making you guys do in providing better information with these estimates compared with supplementary estimates (B) from last year. You'll see I don't have as much writing on this one, because I can understand it more easily.

At that committee, we have indicated that we would like estimates to be in a program format more than the system that we have now, and we are moving in that direction. That will mean your program outcome evaluation should match up nicely for us to be able to say that we're meeting our outcomes, or no, we're not, and do we need more money or less there.

On that, the one area that always drives me crazy is horizontal funding, and for your department, which is fair, there is lots of integration with other departments in providing programs, no doubt about it.

Who decides who's in charge and who's responsible for those programs? Is it the largest funder or is it...? How does that work?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, normally when you have an interdepartmental initiative involving a number of departments, usually at the outset of the initiative it's clearly determined at the policy stage which department is the lead department. Part of that process, both on the policy process and also when you have to go forward to Treasury Board to seek the detailed expenditure and program authorities, also includes the need for a performance framework that identifies the roles and responsibilities of various departments.

Usually one lead department is assigned the responsibility to pull all of it together and make sure there is a consistent framework that integrates all the pieces. Then you're able to determine and assess whether you're meeting the intentions and the objectives that have been set for the program.

●(1235)

Mr. Mike Wallace: When you bring out your fall performance report, does it indicate what your role was in that particular program, even if it's a shared program?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: It should. Every department should report on its programs in terms of the DPR, and the performance achieved.

Mr. Mike Wallace: It's not in these estimates but from the previous estimates—and it may happen in future estimates—I don't understand why it still costs us money when we no longer require a visa from a certain country. I saw that in supplementary estimates (B) last year. I have no idea why not requiring a visa now costs the taxpayer money.

Can somebody explain to me why that is?

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): In the long run, there are savings from that, but initially there can be an issue of foregone revenue. For instance, we are charging a certain amount per visa and that money is no longer coming to the Consolidated Revenue Fund. That is one significant issue.

Then there is a second part. There is a lot of infrastructure to deliver a visa program. We work with Foreign Affairs on that, but if we withdraw the visa officers or close a visa office, we may not receive those savings immediately. It may take some time until we are out of a rent situation and so on, and so in the long run, yes, but in the short run we may not see the savings.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Okay, I appreciate that. I may be back.

The Chair: It's Mr. Cash's turn.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to get back to a couple of questions around the VACs and VFS Global. The deputy minister mentioned that this type of program is being used in the United Kingdom, but you also know that in 2007 VFS was involved in a security breach of personal information in the U.K. that prompted an independent investigation.

Given its current involvement with visas and biometrics as seen in these estimates, we need to know what level of accountability is built into this deal that has been made between the government and this private company to deal with personal information. This is in the context of an increasing awareness of the difficulty across government programs to secure private information.

So now we're talking about farming this stuff out to a private company that is potentially subcontracting to smaller companies, which is another question I want to get to, and there's no sense here that we have proper transparency, accountability, and the security built into this so that Canadians and families, immigrants, and their loved ones who are making these applications can know that their information is secure. Can you give us some assurance? Tell us what measures the government has taken to ensure the privacy of these individuals.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The nature of the contracts that we have for the visa application centres, in fact, includes very stringent provisions related to the protection of information, the management of information, and the security of that information. So we have to be satisfied that the contractor has appropriate security processes in place to protect that information.

We work very closely with the visa application centres and our missions abroad, and there is oversight in terms of the kind of control mechanisms that would apply to those visa application centres. So there is oversight and there is monitoring of how the visa application centres are conducting their operations to ensure the privacy and the security of that information.

I can ask my colleague, Mr. Orr, but I believe as well that there are provisions in the contracts in terms of penalty clauses. In fact, if we have any concerns that aspects of the obligations that have been contained are somehow being compromised or violated.... But perhaps Mr. Orr can fill in on that.

●(1240)

Mr. Robert Orr: The deputy minister I think has covered all the principal issues. There are regular audits. There are regular visits by our visa officers to the various visa application centres to ensure that the appropriate practices are in place.

I'll just give you a couple of examples. For instance, the visa application centres have no role in the decision-making process and so on.

Mr. Andrew Cash: We understand that.

Mr. Robert Orr: But it is to the point that, when a passport is returned to them, they have no idea whether a visa was issued or not. They hand over a package to the individual and are completely unaware of what the decision was on any particular application.

In terms of taking biometrics, there's a video camera that is running the whole time that biometrics are taken and, indeed, in Ottawa we can monitor and watch what has happened during the entire process.

These are the sorts of very practical ways that we are able to monitor what is going on in VACs.

Mr. Andrew Cash: So you can watch every taking of biometrics?

Mr. Robert Orr: That's correct.

Mr. Andrew Cash: That's videotaped and given to your office and stored?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

Mr. Andrew Cash: For how long?

Mr. Robert Orr: I'm not sure how long it is retained, but it's a few months. I could provide that specific information to you.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Okay.

The Chair: Provide it to the clerk, please.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, certainly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Tell us about the subcontractors. Are you aware of whether VFS Global is subcontracting to other outfits?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: I'm not aware of that.

Mr. Robert Orr: No, I'm not aware of that happening, but I can confirm that again, Mr. Chair, through the clerk.

Mr. Andrew Cash: The other question around these VACs is this. What are the extra fees for applicants that didn't exist before? Can you tell us what they are?

Mr. Robert Orr: There is a fee for taking the biometrics, which includes the visa application centre fee, of \$85. For dealing with the visa application centre, there is a fee as well.

Our experience is that where people have had the option of either going to the visa office or going through the visa application centre, they have overwhelmingly chosen the visa application centre. There is much better service provided, and in their language.

So our experience has been that our clientele have very much welcomed the visa application centre and have seen it as a significant client service improvement.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Let me just get this straight: to save some money and potentially please the people who are using the service, you subcontract it out, but then you're allocating staff to monitor this office. Is this extra staff or is this the same staff that's doing other work? How is that working?

Mr. Robert Orr: Largely it is the same staff who were doing it previously. They're visa officers who would be involved in monitoring the work with the visa application centres.

It is a client service initiative that has proven itself significantly. The deputy minister made reference to the lines outside the Delhi office, as an example. They developed their own industry, as people were outside selling things to people in the lineups—

Mr. Andrew Cash: With the greatest respect, I understand that there are lineups there. We have lineups in our constituency offices in Canada for these situations.

Mr. Robert Orr: Certainly.

Mr. Andrew Cash: I think we all understand that there are lineups.

If I might just say something parenthetically here—

The Chair: You're already over, so please be quick.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Okay.

I have to say that the reference to people as clients rather than as members of families who also live here in Canada is something that I want to raise and put on the record as being a concern to us. The language around immigrants and applicants for visas concerns us.

We're looking at them as clients and economic digits as opposed to members of families who live here.

That's the essential issue that we're dealing with at this committee. Family reunification is bringing families together, and that's the great, great frustration. When I hear that we're allocating funds for a private company but then also taking resources that we need—

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. Cash, I'm going to have to move on. You're way over time.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Okay. Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the officials.

First of all, I want you to know that the somewhat negative tone of some of my questions to the minister doesn't change the fact that I do recognize you're working very hard in the department to improve services.

I guess my difference with him is mainly on the interpretation of certain statistics. My first question has to do with that. He said that in 2012 Canada was admitting a record high number of parents and grandparents. But that is not true, because the department's own statistics show that the number admitted in 2012 was 21,815, and in 2002 it was 22,502.

I think what the minister was referring to was the upper end of the range for admissions, which was 25,000. That may well have been a record high, but that's a high end of the range; that's not an actual number. What is important is the actual numbers admitted.

I'd ask you to comment on that point.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The commitment that the government made to parents and grandparents was to admit 50,000 over a two-year period. At this point in time, our indications on where we are to date are that we are on track to meeting 50,000 over that two-year period.

As I say, you have to look at it in terms of what the numbers may have been one year over the other year, but the total over two years will be 50,000. We are confident that we are on track to meet that commitment.

Hon. John McCallum: But that's the high end of the range, 25,000 a year, and the actual number for 2012 is not 25,000 but 21,815. Would you agree that the number is less than the number in 2002?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: As I responded earlier, the commitment is to 50,000 over two years, and we are confident that certainly the number of admissions in 2013 will lead to a 50,000 commitment over that two-year period.

Hon. John McCallum: But can you answer the specific question? The actual number in 2012, \$21,815, is less than the actual number in 2002 of \$22,502.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: We'll have to get back to you, Mr. Chair, with the 2002 numbers. We don't have that information with us, but we'd be happy to provide that feedback to the committee after we leave the meeting.

The Chair: Once again, Deputy Minister, provide that to the clerk, please.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

With regard to the Philippines and the additional assistance provided to expedite Filipinos who were adversely affected by the tragedy there, I'm wondering what form that help will take. For example, there must be parents and grandparents who would like to come from the Philippines to Canada, but applications are not now allowed until January 1, I understand, when 5,000 will be allowed.

Is there any move to make an exception for Filipino parents and grandparents, given the gravity of their situation?

Mr. Robert Orr: Thank you very much for the question.

We have a variety of measures in place to try to respond to the tragedy in the Philippines. Certainly we are providing priority processing to clients, which is already underway, and we are trying to contact applicants in a proactive manner, people who have an address in any of the affected areas, and we are trying to move them to the front of the queue.

We have a dedicated phone line, electronic mailbox, and so on to try to respond to that through the Foreign Affairs watch line. We have also 24/7 coverage on that.

We've issued a number of passports to people in the affected area, and we are trying to respond in a compassionate and flexible manner.

Hon. John McCallum: Again, that's not really my question. For parents and grandparents who are not yet in the queue, would there be a possibility of admitting them to apply in view of the situation in the Philippines?

Mr. Robert Orr: There are means for them to make themselves known to us, and we will deal with them on a case-by-case basis.

• (1250)

Hon. John McCallum: So are you saying that they might be allowed to apply, even though generally such people are not allowed to apply at this time?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Maybe I'll just jump in here as well. They do have access to super visas that would actually allow them to come into Canada. We are prepared and ready to facilitate super visas for family members to come to Canada. We're also prepared for extensions to the visas of people who are already in Canada whose period of time may be running out. We are looking for various means to facilitate this and to make sure that we can have family members reunited.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

Mr. Brown, go ahead.

Mr. Patrick Brown: Thank you.

I want to follow up on a point that Mr. McCallum was talking about in terms of the Philippines. I have a large population of Filipino Canadians in Barrie. I was at a function on Saturday night, and obviously a lot of the talk relates to the tragedy there.

I know your department is doing lots of incredible work in dealing with this very difficult situation, but I guess there's a dual challenge: trying to process as many as possible to help as many of the connected families as we can, but also balancing the need for security, which is obviously very important as well.

In the midst of this challenge, how is your department dealing with that?

Mr. Robert Orr: There are ways that we are able to expedite applications and put them to the front of the queues so we are able to get through them, but certainly our concerns about the safety, security, and health of Canadians remains paramount, and we will only be issuing visas when we are satisfied that those measures are in place and that we have done appropriate processing.

Mr. Patrick Brown: We had an immigration committee on Tuesday, and there was a variety of academic witnesses. There was one from the University of Waterloo. I made a note of some of the comments he made.

First of all he commended the government for getting all the international students to school on time despite the challenge of the strike. But he talked about and discussed the need to bring the brightest international students to Canadian universities while at the same time expanding the numbers. He sort of probed the discussion of getting the best possible students being the number one goal while the secondary goal was numbers.

I know the colleges and universities in Canada tremendously appreciate the emphasis we have put on the recruitment of international students. I think of my own college in Barrie, Georgian College, that has seen its numbers triple. Obviously that helps build bricks and mortar, and it enhances the fabric of the college.

Could you talk a little bit about what Citizenship and Immigration is doing towards the goal of more international students and attracting the best?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Perhaps I can begin by saying that our department is processing more international students than ever before. From the period of 2006 to 2012, the number of applications increased from 155,000 to almost 228,000. In 2012, over 145,000 study permit applications were processed overseas. That represents a 37% increase over 2008. Certainly, the department made great efforts this summer at the time of the withdrawal of service to make sure that we were giving priority attention to student applications. In fact, we processed more student applications this summer than we did in the year previous, and again met our service times in terms of our turnaround times.

We are also actively engaged. In terms of the international student strategy, the government certainly has been engaged and will continue to be engaged in ensuring that we are attracting the best and brightest to come to Canada. We are actually ensuring as well that we are working with provinces and territories, in terms of the linkages, in terms of how we can encourage students to come to Canada to study in our educational institutions.

So we actually do have many measures under way in terms of encouraging students to come to Canada.

I don't know if you want to add to that, Mr. Orr or Mr. Linklater.

Mr. Robert Orr: I think you've essentially covered it, but one of the various things that we at Citizenship and Immigration can do in particular is to maintain good service standards for our students, and we are doing that.

•(1255)

Mr. Patrick Brown: Georgian College is twinned with campuses in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad, India. I've talked to some of the staff members of Georgian College on their recruitment efforts. They have told me that some of their primary competition is with schools in the U.S. and Australia.

How do you feel we stand in comparison with the U.S. and Australia in processing times? Obviously, they get a huge number of foreign students, and sometimes the climate is a little better in those countries when trying to get students from India or Asia. But obviously, Canada is a very welcoming place. The students I've spoken to in Barrie feel they fit in very well and are welcomed in a very friendly Canadian way.

How do we stand versus our international competitors for foreign students?

Mr. Robert Orr: Thank you for the question.

Obviously, if someone is considering which country they're going to go to, there will be a number of different factors, processing being only one of those. Frankly, I do not have the specifics of processing, particularly in Chandigarh, for instance. I do know that Canada is the only country that does processing in Chandigarh, but I do not have the comparison of timing with other countries. I know Canada is

fairly competitive on that score, but I don't have the specifics. We could track those down—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brown. I'm sorry, but I have to cut you off short because we have to vote.

I want to thank you, Deputy Minister Biguzs, and your colleagues, for coming and answering the questions of the committee. You are excused. Thank you.

Members of the committee, we have to report on the supplementary estimates. I have a number of votes to requests of you.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Department

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$8,963,563

Vote 5b—Grants and contributions.....\$3,000,000

Vote 7b—Passport Canada Revolving Fund.....\$1

(Votes 1b, 5b, and 7b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the supplementary estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: And that, too, is on division.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

This meeting is adjourned.

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