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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (0800)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 49, on Tuesday, May 26. This meeting is televised. We are here today to study the main estimates.

We have as our guest this morning, the Honourable Chris Alexander, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, and his colleagues. Mr. Alexander will be with us for the first hour and his colleagues will be with us for the second hour.

Mr. Minister, I trust you have a presentation to make to us.

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration): I do.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the chance to be here again. I apologize for the early hour, but I must say you all look fantastic underneath the Fathers of Confederation who are watching us all.

I'm delighted to be here today to present my department's main estimates for the fiscal year 2015-16, which is already upon us, obviously. I want to focus on some of the notable allocations contained therein that will help our department meet its goals.

[Translation]

I am very pleased to report that CIC's main estimates have an overall increase of \$79.3 million from the previous year. As you know, immigration plays a key role in Canada's long term prosperity and our competitiveness on the international stage. Without strong and targeted immigration, we would not be the Canada we are today, and we would not have all of the opportunities and economic growth we enjoy.

The government is continuing to manage Canada's immigration system in an efficient and responsible way—making it faster, more flexible and more responsive to our country's changing needs, while protecting the safety and security of Canadians. This year we expect to introduce new measures aimed at making the system even faster and more flexible.

[English]

To ensure our immigration system is meeting the needs of Canada's current business landscape, as you know, this past year we introduced a new immigrant investor venture capital pilot program. The introduction of this program also required the elimination of the long-standing backlog of applications in the federal immigrant

investor and federal entrepreneur programs, legacy programs we've had since the 1980s and 1990s, respectively.

Eliminating this backlog of applications will allow the department to focus resources on immigration programs bringing maximum benefit to our economy, but to refund the balance of approximately 9,000 fees for returned applications, we are requesting \$16.5 million in additional funding. I think this literally reflects the fact that we're able to refund faster than was initially anticipated.

[Translation]

Of course, a crucial part of our immigration system was rolled out this past January with the successful launch of the new Express Entry system. Express Entry is already proving to provide significant benefits for our country and newcomers. That is because we are only selecting immigrants who are best positioned to succeed, instead of those who are first in line with their application.

For the first time we have the opportunity of comparing immigration candidates before even receiving and processing their application. Also, employers can now meet their labour needs directly via this system, when there are no available Canadians or permanent residents already in Canada to do the job.

[English]

Let me underline that point. For employers who have sought recruits across Canada, who have tried to find someone for a specialized job across Canada and who cannot find that person in the country, there is the possibility to get a labour market impact assessment free of charge without the \$1,000 fee and to use that labour market impact assessment in the context of express entry to ensure an immigrant is recruited to do that job. Some employers have already taken advantage of this.

Applicants invited to apply for permanent residence under the new system can expect processing times of just six months in the majority of cases. This is a significant improvement over the former system, of course, which took several years in many cases to process applications. We've started to see the impact of express entry in very concrete form. In April, the first three landed permanent residents to Canada through express entry joined some of us in Toronto to share their experience. Two of them had been students in Canada and gone through the Canadian experience class; the other came through the federal skilled work program.

●(0805)

Just last week two more express entry permanent residents in British Columbia were part of an event that we did at a very exciting business in Gastown, in Vancouver. One of them was the first landed permanent resident to be nominated under the provincial nomination stream. I pay particular tribute to British Columbia in this respect, because they've started to use provincial nominations with an express entry more than any other province so far, although Nova Scotia is doing quite well for their size too. It's clear that express entry is successful in serving labour market needs of employers and provinces alike.

To continue the success, our main estimates request funding of \$5.7 million in 2015-16 to ensure we can meet our six months or less service standard for processing applications. Zoe, the Irish woman who was with us in Vancouver, a software engineer, had been processed in two weeks. That is an extraordinary record that I don't think we expect to imitate in every case, but we really do want 80% or more of express entry candidates to be processed in six months or less. This funding will let us achieve that.

The department's main estimates for this year also include an increase of \$15 million for the electronic travel authorization, eTA, which we're implementing under the Canada-United States perimeter security and economic competitiveness action plan.

[Translation]

As you know, Canada's electronic travel authorization, or eTA program, will require citizens from countries who do not normally need a visa to obtain an online authorization before applying to Canada. Of course, our neighbours in the United States—who have already successfully implemented a similar system in their country—will be exempt from this new eTA requirement.

[English]

Canada is making every effort to ensure that eTA does not inconvenience affected travellers. On the contrary, we want it to facilitate more legitimate travel by tourists, visitors, families. Applications for eTA will be made online through the CIC website. The eTA application process is quick and easy, at a low cost of only \$7 Canadian, and will often be granted within minutes. It will also be valid for up to five years. As we prepare to launch eTA, this funding will help support program integrity measures, communications to prospective visitors, and implementation support to ensure a smooth transition to the new system.

To further help facilitate travel and trade to Canada through the eTA, our budget this year, economic action plan 2015, is allocating \$12.4 million over five years and \$1.1 million in ongoing funding. With this new funding we will work to expand eTA eligibility to low-risk travellers from Brazil, Mexico, Romania, and Bulgaria, to be launched after the initial eTA initiative has been fully implemented in March of next year.

What does that mean? We're proposing to extend eTA not just to those countries outside of North America that already are free of the visa requirement, but also to some very large countries—Brazil, Mexico—as well as our two remaining partners in Europe who are not yet visa free: Romania and Bulgaria.

The entry/exit initiative is another commitment with the United States under the perimeter security and economic competitiveness action plan. Under this initiative Canada is developing a system to exchange land traveller information with the U.S. to establish a record of land entry into one country as a record of exit from the other.

It seems common sense that we would record entry into North America in the United States and have that record of entry and exit shared between partners that are as close as we are with our main economic partners, but to date we haven't had this system, so entry/exit is extremely important. This increase of \$1.4 million, mostly reprofiled funds since 2013-14, will be used for IT system requirements and to develop reporting tools and governance with our partners. Funding will also be used for upfront residency checks, analysis, ongoing reporting, and corporate support.

The passport program was transferred, as you know, to Citizenship and Immigration in July 2013. Our main estimates are increasing by \$52 million due to changes in the planned volume of passports as well as adjustments to the passport business plan. Because the amount is going up, I think it means the number of passports is going down slightly.

●(0810)

In the 2013 Speech From the Throne, the Government of Canada committed to contributing to the success of the 2015 Pan Am/Parapan American Games that will be held in Toronto this summer.

[Translation]

CIC's role is to ensure the applications for entry into Canada by athletes and spectators are processed in a timely manner while we continue to uphold the safety and security of Canadians. I can confirm that our work in this regard is very advanced.

[English]

Our commitment is to waive the application fees for athletes who require visas or temporary resident permits, which will result in approximately 7,780 multiple entry visas. Our main estimates are increasing by \$1.6 million to process these applications.

[Translation]

Finally, there is an allocation for \$20.6 million in additional funding to meet our obligations under the Canada-Quebec Accord on Immigration. As you know, this accord gives the Government of Quebec responsibility to administer settlement and integration services, with an annual grant from the Government of Canada.

Mr. Chair, our government is committed to improving the immigration system by reducing backlogs, improving processing times and meeting labour market needs.

I am happy to answer any question the committee may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

There will, indeed, be questions.

Mr. Leung is first.

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for appearing this early in the morning.

I wish to go a little bit into our Canadian immigration successes of recent times. Immigration plays a very important role in Canada's long-term prosperity and our competitiveness in the international marketplace. I am an immigrant who came here initially as an international student in the 1960s. While the previous government under the Liberals had cut immigration by 32% in the first five years in office, we have welcomed the highest sustained level of immigration in Canadian history.

From what you have told us here today, we're moving into this express entry system. The express entry system will move away from the cyclical temporary immigration designed to meet short-term needs and to redouble our efforts to permanent immigration that will attract skilled workers who will make real contributions to the Canadian economy.

How do you see this express entry truly benefiting Canada in terms of meeting our labour manpower requirements with our economic needs? Are all of our immigration streams going to be facilitated through this express entry? Interestingly enough, the way the program is designed in express entry, there's a computerized background to it which we call...you know, when you want to search for a record, in computer science there's a technique called bubble sort. The bubble that is the greatest, the best, rises to the top at a much faster rate, whereas compared with the old sequential or random search method, you don't get that type of efficiency.

Perhaps you could go into this aspect of our new system.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Let's look at the context in which we're rolling out express entry. What has changed for Canada in the field of immigration?

First, we have reduced backlogs. They're not totally gone. We still have a parents and grandparents program where we've reduced the backlog enormously, but it's not gone. On spousal sponsorship there's still some work to do. On the humanitarian program there is work to do. But in our economic programs, we have eliminated our legacy backlogs. The system was already working faster, attracting more people, and comparing very favourably with the United States, where it's very hard to become an immigrant reliably in anything less than a decade, depending on the stream, and certainly, comparing with our European and Asian partners that don't have permanent economic immigration programs on the same scale.

Second, Canada's economic fundamentals, since the crisis especially, have called attention to the strength of our economy. We have created 1.2 million new jobs. We have had a relatively low

unemployment rate. We have had growth when other countries have had anemic growth at best, and some have even slipped back into recession. That has meant more people are interested in coming to Canada for the size of our population than probably ever before.

What does express entry do? Instead of just obliging us to process applications as they arrive, it allows us to look at this larger group of people who are interested in coming to Canada and evaluate them on the basis of merit. How do we decide who comes to Canada as an economic immigrant? We have always operated on the basis of merit in one way or another. We've tried to select people based on their skills and their suitability for what the Canadian economy needs, and since the early 1960s we've had a point system. Now we're able to apply the point system in an updated, modernized form to a large population of interested candidates, find out early on before the application is submitted who ranks highest, and give priority to the people who rank highest.

I think that is an extremely defensible approach. It's one that Canadians strongly support, but it's also very attractive for immigrants because the best ones will benefit, the ones with the best education, the best skills, the right age, and the language profile for Canada based on our point system. For those who don't make it, we'll see how close they are and what they need to do to rank higher next time. It's not only faster and more flexible, but it is also fair in that there are objective criteria by which people, as you say, rise to the top. It also helps us continue justifying large-scale immigration. As you say, 280,000 this year is our target. We've only had an immigration level that high half a dozen times, I think, in Canadian history, once earlier under our government, once under Diefenbaker in the late 1950s, and then in that formative period before World War I when we had very high immigration under Prime Minister Borden.

●(0815)

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Okay. I was hoping to come to another point.

Minister, I see there's also some money allocated for refugee reform. On January 7, 2015, you responded to the UNHCR's latest appeal for 100,000 spaces by expanding our commitment to help Syrian refugees and resettling an additional 10,000 Syrians over the next three years. This brings Canada's total commitment to helping Syrian refugees up to 11,300, after successfully meeting an initial commitment to resettle 1,300 Syrians. As well, you also pledged to resettle an additional 3,000 Iraqi refugees by the end of 2015. This will bring Canada's total Iraqi resettlement community to 23,000 refugees by the end of 2015. Perhaps you wish to comment on that.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, I had the opportunity to meet with our sponsorship agreement holders in Winnipeg yesterday and to see the office in Winnipeg where Citizenship and Immigration processes private sponsorship applications for refugees from around the world. It's a very impressive operation and there's a lot of enthusiasm on the part of these private sponsors. I think the support for the Syrian initiative is growing. Let me give you an update in that respect.

We met the target we had set for 2013-14 earlier this year, but already we have 3,336 Syrian refugees that have received Canada's protection. Some 526 of them are government assisted, and fully 1,166 are privately sponsored. This does include the 1,300 from our previous commitment, but you can see the numbers are rising beyond 1,300 very quickly. Eleven are blended visa office referred cases; 110 are dependents abroad, and 1,523 are asylum seekers. More have been resettled as refugees than have come as asylum seekers, and the number of applications is many thousands now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We have Madame Blanchette-Lamothe, and then Mr. Sandhu.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us this morning.

Minister, your opening remarks focused on certain categories of immigration that are beneficial to our country's economy, and that is very important. However, I would like to talk about a category you did not mention this morning, and which is in my opinion as beneficial to Canadian society and our economy in a certain way. I am talking about family reunification.

I would like to know precisely what there is in the current main estimates to improve family reunification application processing times, in all categories.

• (0820)

Hon. Chris Alexander: We have nothing in the budget in regard to that challenge but we have not lost sight of it, quite the opposite. It is part of our priorities for this year. Why has there been an increase in backlogs and processing times over the past few months? Unfortunately that is because the number of family reunification applications, especially for the sponsorship of spouses, was far greater than we expected. So we have to find resources to process a larger number of applications than we had forecast.

In order to meet this challenge, we determined rather quickly at the end of last year that work permits had to be issued more rapidly to the spouses whose applications were still being processed. This year we are trying to find new resources in order to tackle those backlogs and see to it that the processing times for reunification cases and spousal sponsorship do not go beyond their current levels.

That said, we must not forget that sponsorship through the parents and grandparents program was enormously successful in the course of the last three years. We had to process 75,000 applications in three years, which was unprecedented in our history. The principle of family reunification remains absolutely essential in our programs.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you.

That is indeed an essential immigration category. However, if it were a priority it seems to me that the budget that is being presented to us today would have allocated funds to it. The good intentions have to be accompanied by resources.

You referred to the parents and grandparents program. There have been a great many discussions to determine whether this is really a success or not. A lot of people who are not included in the figures cannot even apply. But we can set that issue aside since in my opinion it is not central to today's debate.

As opposed to what you seem to be saying, the 2015-2016 report on plans and priorities indicates a drop of 12 million dollars in budgets and staff. In addition, that decline is going to continue in the years to come. When we recognize that on the one hand there is a...

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm sorry, I did not...

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: I'm talking about the family reunification category.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I see.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Whether we are talking about spouses, children, parents or grandparents, the situation is concerning because some people wait for a very long time. For instance, the time required for processing sponsorship applications for the spouses of Canadian residents has gone from a few months to more than two years. However, you say that your objective is to see to it that these waiting periods do not increase further. I think the objective should be to reduce these processing times rather than maintain them. Not only do the estimates we are studying today contain nothing on this, but the 2015-2016 report on plans and priorities indicates a further decline in the budgets.

I think that my colleague Mr. Sandhu has more questions to ask on the family reunification categories, and so I am going to yield the floor to him.

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you want him to comment first, or do you want to carry on?

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll carry on.

Thank you, Minister, for being here this morning.

I'm perplexed by the last statement you made. You said that your government is committed to improving the immigration system by reducing backlogs and improving processing times.

You've had nine years to do this. I remember back in 2005-06, the processing time for spousal applications was about three or four months. That was the top. I can attest to that because in 2003, I sponsored my own wife and it took three months. Nowadays, it's taking up to 16 or 17 months for some of the countries in Southeast Asia, and there are different times for other countries.

I have two questions. First, how can it be reducing backlogs when the actual times have gone up? Second, why is there a discrepancy? In some countries it's only two to four months, while in others it takes up to two or three years.

•(0825)

Hon. Chris Alexander: First, congratulations. You were lucky. My wife took 18 or 19 months to come through the spousal sponsorship program, and that was in 2009-10, so yes, the number has gone up slightly, but why is that the case? There are three reasons.

Demand has outstripped our capacity to process. We project every year how many spouses, how many dependent children, how many parents and grandparents we expect to have coming into our programs. Sometimes the number of applications exceeds. That is what has contributed to this growing backlog, and we will attack it and we will bring it down. I think the reasonable time for the processing of spousal sponsorship cases should be much lower. We've shown across the board our ability to reduce backlogs. We will do it in this area as well.

What are the alternatives? To reduce other backlogs, we have eliminated them by legislation, or we have ranked and sorted them on the basis of merit. Obviously in the case of spouses, we're not going to do that.

Every application is important. Every application will be processed, but we need to find the resources to do it on the scale where it is required now. We are getting these applications because of the strength of our economic immigration program. Because of the strength of Canada's economy, people want to come here, and they want to come here with their spouses.

We also need to attack some of the vulnerabilities in the spousal program. There is an issue of marriage of convenience. There is an issue of forced marriage, which we're dealing with, we hope, through Bill S-7. There is an issue of fraud and misrepresentation in the spousal program.

As we have tightened up the integrity of other programs, we have seen some people—

The Chair: We're going to have to wind up, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Chris Alexander: —a small number who are trying to get to Canada for the wrong reasons trying to do so through the spousal program. We really want to make sure that doesn't happen.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I would also like to talk about processing times, and I'd like to start with some data from your own department.

If you take the average processing time in the first year we have data for, which is 2007, the second year of your government, and compare it with the latest 12 months, we see for parents and grandparents it has gone from 11 months to 68 months. For spouses, partners, and children—and I see this in my office every day—it has gone from 11 months to 19 months. For refugees, it has gone from

25 months to 29 months. For economic immigrants, it has gone up by several hundred per cent for the various kinds of skilled workers. For live-in caregivers it has gone from 23 months to 42 months. The two most favourable components are those for which the federal government has the least control: Quebec skilled workers at 19 months and provincial nominees at 15 months.

After nine years of government, I think you would agree this is a deplorable record, and you cannot every year for nine years in a row see demand go up unexpectedly. I think you have to take responsibility for the full nine years. It can't be an unexpected shock every single year.

How do you explain this deplorable record, and what do you propose to do about it?

Hon. Chris Alexander: First, those numbers are completely inaccurate. For refugees from Iraq and Syria, the fastest growing portion of our refugee population, on average, we are processing applications in less than one year. I heard that from sponsorship agreement holders yesterday. They are amazed by this performance. For caregivers, we are reforming the program. A backlog of 60,000 will be eliminated in only two years, cleaning up a record of Liberal neglect in this area that really needed to be dealt with—

Hon. John McCallum: Excuse me, Minister. How can you say these numbers are completely inaccurate when they come from your own department?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I don't know which numbers you're cherry-picking from the website in 2013, or 2007, or 2008—

•(0830)

Hon. John McCallum: They are on your own website.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm talking about the service standards we have today.

Hon. John McCallum: Well, look. I have the numbers for refugees today from your website for the current processing times, and it says for refugees, government-assisted, 18.5 months; privately sponsored, 38.9 months. These are from your website as of yesterday, so I don't think you can be more up to date than that.

Hon. Chris Alexander: And I'm telling you that half of our resettled refugees this year will come from Iraq and Syria. On average, I would say 80% of cases, we are dealing with in one year or less.

Hon. John McCallum: Right, and with all due respect, you're cherry-picking favourable cases. I'm giving you the overall numbers.

Hon. Chris Alexander: No, I'm talking about—

Hon. John McCallum: I do have an alternative explanation. If you look at the processing times, they spike up in 2011. They go straight up after 2007. They spike up when you introduce the expenditure cuts under the strategic and operating review.

We've seen the effects of these cuts, and as your own backgrounder admitted, for citizen applications as well. A lot of this, I think, is resource-related, as the spike up starting in 2011 indicates. But your RPP doesn't indicate any new funding for this.

I'm at a loss to explain whether you care about these skyrocketing waiting times, or what, without the additional money, you propose to do about it.

Hon. Chris Alexander: We have increased the budget of this department and we have certainly increased settlement funding on a grand scale since 2006. Those initiatives are working. We are bringing processing times downwards. On—

Hon. John McCallum: You're not bringing them down. I just read the numbers.

Hon. Chris Alexander: We are. On citizenship—

The Chair: Mr. Minister, just wait a moment, please.

We have a point of order. The clock is stopped.

Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think when a question is asked, the minister should be allotted the time to respond without being interrupted. That's respectful of any witness we have here.

The Chair: They're both interrupting each other, actually.

To both of you, the record can't hear when both of you are talking at the same time, so try to oblige each other.

Mr. McCallum, you have about a minute left.

Hon. John McCallum: Oh. I thought I was finished.

The Chair: No, you're never finished.

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

I would come back to the same point. I don't know how the minister can keep saying the processing times are down when I've just read to him his own numbers saying that they are dramatically up since 2007.

When you've been in the government for nine long years, you cannot blame whatever action the government that left office almost 10 years ago might have taken. You have been there for nine long years. The record shows in each and every category a dramatic increase in these processing times. You can cherry-pick little cases where it might have been down, but overall your own departmental numbers show that they are dramatically and substantially up.

My question is this: what are you going to do about it?

The Chair: Your time is now up, sir. You took a minute to ask a question.

Mr. Shory.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Minister, thank you to you and to your officials.

I'll allow you to use some of my time to respond to Mr. McCallum's question, if you like.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks very much.

Mr. McCallum's remarks unfortunately demonstrate a complete lack of knowledge of the changes we've made to the immigration system. Processing times under our economic programs have not gone up. On the contrary, we introduced something called express entry, which has the fastest processing times ever for Canadian immigration, at six months or less.

I mentioned to you a candidate who had been processed in two weeks. This was never possible in the Liberals' time. It was not possible until now even under our government, because it took us some years to put this new system into place.

On citizenship we did have a backlog, and a growing backlog, because of strong immigration and because of a cumbersome system of approvals for citizenship—the three-step process and not enough resources. The Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act, which passed last year, has had a huge impact. There were 260,000 new citizens last year, and close to that pace again this year. Processing times are plunging faster than we even expected in this area.

Yes, we do need to keep attacking backlogs in the family area—this is part of the Liberal legacy we inherited—and we will continue to do that. We've made progress on parents and grandparents under the action plan for faster family reunification. We will make more progress on spouses.

I'm not hiding the fact that processing times for spouses have gone up slightly, but we've demonstrated our ability to bring backlogs under control. For Mr. McCallum to say that we have larger backlogs and longer waiting times for the federal skilled worker program is absurd. We have reduced the backlog for that program, which had become essentially stuck under the Liberal government with a huge backlog and multiple-year waiting times for people who arrived in Canada under the Liberals without the ability to go to work in their chosen fields. That backlog has been reduced by 97%.

● (0835)

Mr. Devinder Shory: Thank you, Minister.

I want to expand on express entry while we are talking about this.

We know it is vital for the government to respond to labour market needs and work with employers to do so. I'd like you to explain how express entry is engaging employers. Was CIC in contact with industry leaders leading up to the launch of express entry, and were they interested at all?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Shory.

Let's register a note of caution with regard to our waiting times and our service standards. I know all of my colleagues on this side are very conscious of the fact that the numbers on our website, the way we post them, do not fully reflect the reality. They often reflect the worst-case scenario for privately sponsored refugees, for example, and the statistical picture for every one of our programs is actually more complicated and it's hard to express with one number.

An easy application, an application that's been properly filled out, as most of them are, moves forward quickly. One where we go back and forth with the applicant to find out more information to complete the application takes longer, and those worst-case scenarios are often reflected conservatively in the numbers we have on our website, but we're working on reflecting the reality.

Express entry has been a success not only because it's faster, not only because it ranks large numbers of potential immigrants before they apply—and we're talking about 30,000 who are in the pool right now—while we invite recent rounds to apply, between 1,000 and 1,500 roughly in the latest round.... We really are selecting from a large number of highly qualified people. What else is good about it is that we now, as of May 2015, have full functionality for the provinces and close to full functionality for businesses in Canada, which means they can see online the people who want to come to Canada as immigrants when they register with us.

We have had thousands, I think close to tens of thousands, of companies register as part of the Canada job bank to be able to see who is coming to Canada through express entry, to have the opportunity to recruit them as they come, and even connect with them before they're invited to come as immigrants. That is a huge benefit for us, because we in government do not want to be choosing exactly who comes. We know we need accountants and we know we need software engineers, but we're not the ones to decide whether out of 10 software engineers these two should come, or these three should come. It is the private sector, it is employers, who must make those decisions, because it's part of their competitive advantage to choose the right person.

Express entry allows them to do just that. As well, when there is an LMIA, which as I say for permanent immigration they can achieve free of charge, they can literally bring people if not to the front of the line, close to it, under express entry when a Canadian is not available to do the job. We anticipate under express entry many more immigrants coming to Canada who have jobs, who are going to work immediately, who have been recruited by employers, which was not the case in the past.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Thank you, Minister.

As you know, the safety and security of Canadians is very important for me and all of us. In the main estimates for eTA you include \$15 million to develop and implement this important initiative under the Canada-United States perimeter security and economic competitiveness action plan. This was in the budget implementation act last year and we had a chance to study it in this committee.

How will this system allow CIC to verify whether or not tourists pose a risk to the health, safety, and security of Canadians? How will eTA work?

● (0840)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you so much.

This allows us to have a certain amount of information about those who are able to come to Canada visa free, and it looks like on the face of it, a burden, another obstacle to travel. It's actually a way of facilitating legitimate travel.

The United States has had this kind of system for several years now, and other partners have it. It's important that Canada have it, because not only does it give us that extra assurance that the large number of countries that don't, where visas are not required to come to Canada, are sending us people who are not criminals, who are not terrorists, who are not threats to Canada in some other respect, it also allows us to lift the visa requirement over time with other countries and with populations within countries that we know represent large populations of legitimate travellers. We want that to happen and it will happen, as you saw in economic action plan 2015, for Brazil, Mexico, Romania, and Bulgaria, but for other countries beyond that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Mathysen, we're now on five-minute rounds.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister. I have a number of questions.

My first has to do with CIC's modernization objectives. I have information that you're proceeding with the automation of passports and that renewals will be using passport numbers through the department's website. I'm wondering what the level of security is connected with that. How will the privacy of individuals be protected if they're going online? Is the data encrypted? What safeguards are in place in regard to the data?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm sorry, but in this echo chamber of a room I may have missed the last part. Was the question about online applications for passports?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes.

The Chair: There is a point of order. We'll stop the clock.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you.

I wanted to make sure that my colleague doesn't lose any time. If we can we allow her to start her question when the minister has his earpiece in, it would be very much appreciated.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I have it on now.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Do you want the question repeated?

Hon. Chris Alexander: No. I think I'm okay now.

First, on passports generally, the funding goes up a little bit because the number of passports issued this year is anticipated to go down. That's partly because of the extraordinary popularity of our new 10-year e-passport in the last 18 to 24 months, which blew away all expectations. We were never going to sustain that level of interest. But on—

Ms. Irene Mathysen: My question is about encryption and the protection of those who are applying.

Hon. Chris Alexander: On encryption?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes. Is the data encrypted and what safeguards are there in terms of making sure that this is a secure system and privacy is protected?

Hon. Chris Alexander: On the e-passport, a certain amount of data is there in electronic form in the chip, but it is the information that you see on page 3 of your passport, nothing more, nothing less. The record of when you have gone in and out of Canada or other countries is not in that chip and will not be in that chip, but the basic bio data—date of birth, place of issue of the passport, height and weight—as we have it on page 3 will be there.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

You referenced Bill S-7. We had the Canadian Bar Association here, and they said to scrap it because it jeopardizes women and children, that it exposes them to being shunned by family, and it exposes them to deportation and potentially to violence and criminality.

I'm wondering why you would proceed with Bill S-7 when there already are existing laws to address concerns expressed by the bill and the Canadian Bar Association has said to scrap it.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Well, if we had followed the advice of the Canadian Bar Association, we would never have reformed our citizenship program to make it faster and to ensure that we revoke the passports of people who have committed fraud. We would never have reformed our asylum system. We would have continued to give prominence in our asylum system to safe countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Mexico, to the exclusion of those countries where persecution and conflict are a day-to-day reality. If we had listened to the Canadian Bar Association, we would never have eliminated our backlogs in our economic programs.

They have been against every reform that we have undertaken. Perhaps many of them are card-carrying members of the Liberal Party and the NDP; I'm not sure. But—

• (0845)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I see that you're calling into question the integrity of the Canadian Bar Association, and that wasn't my question, but let's move on. I want ask about something else.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Allow me to answer the question.

They have taken—

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Calling them “Liberals” is not answering the question.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen—

Ms. Irene Mathysen: It's an affront to this committee.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen—

Don't stop the clock.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: That's fine, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Don't stop the clock.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: —but this is ludicrous. He's supposed to be a minister of the crown.

The Chair: He is a minister of the crown, and you have the obligation to be courteous to him. He's in the middle of an answer, and you have no right to interrupt him.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm well aware of their position with regard to Bill S-7, but we take a contrary position. I'm delighted that our Liberal colleagues, after some dithering and back and forth, have decided to support us on Bill S-7.

Forced marriage is wrong. Polygamy leads to violence against women and girls. Early marriage is unacceptable in Canada. We know that it happens, unfortunately, both to the Canadian-born and to some newcomers. We are giving ourselves the tools in Bill S-7 to make sure that it is prevented.

For there not to have been a minimum age for marriage in Canada up until now, outside of the province of Quebec, and for it to have been to some extent based on the common law, which meant that age seven or eight was, legally speaking, an eligible age of marriage in Canada, was absolutely ludicrous. I don't think anyone in the Canadian public would support that position, whether or not the Canadian Bar Association agrees with them.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: There were others who didn't support this bill either.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, thank you.

Mr. Eglinski.

Mr. Jim Eglinski (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I just want to correct a couple of things. I believe the lowest level of humanitarian and compassionate class intake in the last 15 years was in 2002, which was under the Liberal government. The lowest rate of family class immigration was in 1998 under the Liberal government.

Mr. Minister, you mentioned the entry/exit initiative, which is another commitment with the U.S. through the perimeter security and economic competitiveness action plan.

Could you please elaborate on why this is an important initiative?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Absolutely.

As you know, our government has been committed to opening markets around the world. We've been improving visa services around the world. We have lifted visas for countries like the Czech Republic and Chile even in my time as minister. We are liberalizing our border regime with Europe, with Asia, and with Latin America to bring more visitors here. It's essential that we have a reliable and predictable border with our principal economic partner, the United States. That's why we have the beyond the border action plan and the perimeter security action plan, which is a major focus for my department, for Steven Blaney's public safety department, and for the government as a whole.

We want to facilitate travel in the wake of 9/11 and in the wake of all the threats we know are out there, as well as facilitate the trade and investment that need to accompany travel. That is why the exit/entry regime we've started to put in place is absolutely important so that an entry into the United States is recognized and registered electronically with us in Canada. We are in one economic unit united by NAFTA in North America. That is why electronic travel authorization is so important, because the U.S. has had it for some time. It makes no sense for them to be seeing this basic data about legitimate travellers coming from Europe, for example, while we don't see that data. All the measures we're taking in today's estimates and in recent budgets to implement the beyond the border action plan are bringing us closer to the United States while ensuring that people, goods and services move safely between our two countries.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thank you.

I see in the estimates that there's an increase of \$52 million for Passport Canada.

Can you explain if this was due to changes in the planned volume of passports issued as well as adjustments to the passport business plan? The Canadian passport is a beacon of pride around the world, and I'm always proud to travel with my passport. Are you able to tell the committee how many Canadian passports there are out there and whether this number has increased or decreased?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Sure.

I'll leave it to my colleagues to give us the exact number of passports that are out there, because I don't think I have that at my fingertips.

Let me pay tribute to the service that this department gives across many programs, but especially in the passport office. It is fast and it is reliable. When people need passports on an urgent basis, they can pay a bit more and get them even on weekends. I think my colleagues provide extraordinary service. It has only improved, as have the integrity measures around the passport office, which are particularly important in this era when we're trying to stop Canadian travellers from going abroad to join jihadist groups.

There are 22.9 million passports out there in the hands of Canadians, and 63% of the population now has a passport. This is extraordinary, because only a decade ago, before 9/11, I think it was around 20%. We've seen these numbers grow, and they are extremely important.

I'd also like to pay tribute to the fact that this department has improved its performance on every front. We talked about private sponsorship for refugees. Syria and Iraq are very complicated.

I was in Winnipeg in the office that handles privately sponsored refugee applications, and there were three applications in the in-basket. All the others had been processed and sent back out into our international network for final approval. We are moving quickly and we are giving better service under express entry and under family reunification to refugees across the board.

We also, you will have noted, are not having a discussion about lapsing funds from our department, because last year the amount spent corresponded very closely to the amount budgeted. That is a very hard challenge to meet. I'd like to pay tribute to the deputy minister and associate deputy minister in particular, as well as to the whole team, for pulling off that feat.

• (0850)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Aspin.

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Thank you, Minister and officials, for appearing this morning.

As you mentioned in your remarks, Passport Canada was transferred to CIC from Foreign Affairs in July 2013, almost two years ago. Can you please give this committee an update on how this transition is going?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, I think it's going extremely well. The service has remained good and even has improved. The highlight since that time has been the very large number of e-passports issued. You've all seen that new passport with the different images of Canada on every page, which help to reinforce that sense of citizenship and identity even when we travel. Service standards are high. I mentioned that the number of channels through which passports can be received is greater than ever. The number of points of service across the country is greater than ever, and we're preparing to grow it even more through Service Canada.

It's the integrity measures that I think we are most proud of: measures to ensure that the Canadian passport can't be forged, can't be tampered with, can't be reused; measures to ensure that those abroad carrying a Canadian passport are beyond suspicion of affiliation with terrorist groups. That relates to our recent revocation and cancellation measures under the steps we will be taking soon to amend the Canadian passport order.

It has been a very prolific period for the Canadian passport office but one where service standards have only improved. I think there's a synergy between that office, which has to work so hard on issues of fraud and issues of integrity, with the other programs that we offer. We have the same issues with the Canadian permanent resident card. We have the same issues with citizenship, where we need to ensure that residency requirements and other requirements of the program have been met. We have the same—different but related—issues for the family reunification program where there are serious issues of fraud and even human smuggling, and we're able to pool our resources in CIC to look at trends in fraud and misrepresentation, to share views with our allies around the world, and to make sure that we're protecting the integrity of all Canada's immigration and passport programs.

Mr. Jay Aspin: Another program that was transferred in 2013 is the international experience Canada, or IEC program. This program is creating valuable skills development opportunities for those who use it. Can you tell us how IEC works and how many agreements we currently have?

• (0855)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, thanks very much.

It started way back in 1951 with Germany and now we have 32 countries around the world that have agreements with us to allow young people 18 to 35 years of age to come to Canada and work, and allow Canadians to work abroad in those countries in the same numbers. The goal is exchange. The goal is introducing young people from abroad to Canada and young Canadians to almost three dozen countries around the world. It has been very highly appreciated. In 2015 the quotas are close to 70,000: 68,890. We have some very strong programs with countries like France, Ireland, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, New Zealand—a very large program for the size of New Zealand—and in some of those cases we have reciprocity. Our challenge now is to entice more Canadians to go abroad. I invite all of you around the table to remind your constituents that they have the opportunity to get a work permit to have not only a travel experience but also a work experience in any one of these 32 countries. There's a lot of unsubscribed space there.

The program also reinforces one of the new trends in Canadian immigration over the last 10 years that I think is exciting and is helping us ensure immigrants adapt to Canada and succeed in Canada faster. We are recruiting more and more immigrants from people who are already here, who have studied here. There are 340,000 international students in Canada now. Those who complete diplomas or degrees get a work permit. We recruit more and more of our immigrants from that population, as we do from the temporary foreign worker population, especially this year when in the wake of our reform, many of those people want to transition from temporary to permanent status. This international experience Canada pool of close to 70,000 young people who want to come here, who get an experience of Canada, get interested in Canada and often go to far-flung parts of Canada can become our future immigrants.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Blanchette-Lamothe, you have two minutes for a question and answer.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask a brief question about the processing of citizenship files.

Earlier, you spoke about your Bill C-24, which concerns reforms to citizenship among other things. When you presented your citizenship reform measures, you said that this would lead to considerable reductions in the time needed to process files, and that was about a year ago. Now we are in mid-2015. Last year, the average processing time for routine files was 25 months and for non-routine files, that time was 35 months. This year the time frames are 23 and 36 months respectively.

Is this reduction of approximately two months in processing times the significant reduction you had promised us? May we expect more

improvement in that regard? How do you explain that after one year, things are still stagnant in this area? Do you find it acceptable that it still takes two to three years to process these applications? Do you intend to reduce the wait times further? What more are you going to do to keep your promise?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I am going to have to contradict the figures on our website.

Those figures concern the most complex applications we have received in years, and they require additional documentation on residency. There were thousands of cases involving residency, and the possibility that people who claimed to have resided in Canada for three years had not really done so.

If we set aside these complex cases, we see that there has been considerable improvement in processing times for citizenship applications. More than a quarter million applications were processed last year. This year, the processing rate and the progress in this area is very rapid. A new citizenship application submitted this year—as of now, for instance—will be processed in a time period that goes far beyond our expectations and is closer to a one-year processing time.

When we went forward with Bill C-24, we promised that the processing time for new applications would be 12 months or less as of the beginning of 2016. We are already getting close to that objective.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: When we consult the Internet...

• (0900)

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to have to conclude, Mr. Minister, unless you have a final comment. We're way over time.

Thank you.

We're just getting into some interesting areas. I'm sure in the next round Ms. Biguzs will solve all of our questions.

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

I'll conclude by thanking all of you for your interest and your work on citizenship and immigration and for the studies that you've done recently. I think citizenship and immigration programs do fully reflect the progress we have made in recent years.

There is a legacy of complicated applications that are taking multiple years to be processed. That legacy group is declining. New applications are moving much faster. We've set the objective of one year or less for new applications by early 2016. We're getting very close to that goal already, right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

These are difficult issues. I thank you for giving us your time this morning and talking about these many items. Thank you very much.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you.

The Chair: We will suspend.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (0905)

The Chair: We will reconvene.

We have less than an hour to proceed and we have with us the department representatives to answer questions or make statements about some of the issues that the committee has.

We have Anita Biguzs, who is the deputy minister; Wilma Vreeswijk, who is the associate deputy minister; and Tony Matson, who is assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer.

Good morning to all of you.

Then, of course, there is Mr. Orr, the assistant deputy minister of operations, who has been here forever, it seems.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I apologize.

We have Catrina Tapley, who is the assistant deputy minister of strategic and program policy.

Thank you, Ms. Tapley, for appearing before the committee this morning.

We have a list, and Mr. Aspin is first.

Mr. Jay Aspin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, officials.

As you may know, this committee is currently conducting a study on promoting economic prosperity through settlement services. We've already heard from various settlement organizations about the thorough and helpful services they provide. Could you please tell me if mission staff promote settlement services to new immigrants?

Ms. Anita Biguzs (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, under our settlement services program we have in fact started to promote more actively and to put resources into pre-arrival settlement services. It has been certainly identified through various studies and evaluations that there is a benefit to newcomers to actually provide services before newcomers come to Canada so that they know what to expect when they arrive in Canada. That helps them with a sense of job prospects, counselling services, communities, the life of communities in Canada, things like weather, and all sorts of things to help equip and prepare people. There are also issues around foreign credential recognition.

So, in fact, we do, and our mission staff abroad engage very fully, in addition to the work that they do in reviewing applications for newcomers coming to Canada, with the key part of their work making sure that newcomers are prepared in terms of what they can expect. In fact, we are allocating resources under our settlement services budget to pre-arrival services. We do that through our own mission staff abroad. We also use the International Organization for Migration, which is a very experienced organization that has been operating in the field for many years and, through the International

Organization for Migration, they do provide services on our behalf as well in terms of providing some of those pre-arrival services to help equip newcomers to Canada.

I will ask my colleague Catrina Tapley if she would like to add anything to that.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

Just to add quickly, this year we anticipate that we will spend close to \$24 million on pre-arrival services, which is a significant increase over what we've spent in the past.

We ran a call for proposals for overseas services. In addition to those services that are provided which the deputy minister mentioned, including the Canadian immigrant integration program, CIIP, we're also looking at enhancing that with a number of other service providers and to expand what we have overseas.

To come back to your first question, absolutely, our mission staff promote these services, promote what's available on our website, as well as the in-person services that are there.

We feel that we have some good evaluation results from those who have come through some of the services, certainly through the Canadian immigrant integration program, CIIP, where we find that within a year, 75% of those skilled immigrants who come through the program are not only finding work, but finding work within their occupation or within the field for which they are trained.

- (0910)

Mr. Jay Aspin: Thank you.

I was very pleased to hear from the minister about how successful express entry is. Is there more to do with developing express entry, and how will the department continue to work with employers to ensure that express entry is helping to meet labour market needs?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Perhaps I could begin, Mr. Chair, by saying that we just stood up express entry on January 1 of this year, as the minister indicated. The launch has been very successful and we've certainly been very encouraged by the take-up.

Through this phase, we're continuing to make sure that we're working out any glitches in the system. The glitches have been minor. We have fully engaged employers across Canada. In fact, before we launched express entry, we held many rounds of consultations, in many cases jointly with our provincial and territorial colleagues. We've worked with a number of business and industry associations as well, to ensure that employers are fully aware of the opportunities and the benefits that express entry provides.

In the meantime, we have also established what we call our employer liaison network, which will have CIC departmental staff across the country serve as an employer contact to promote awareness of the express entry system, to ensure that employers are fully aware of how to access the system, and to make sure that they see the benefits. Part of that is making sure they are aware of the opportunities of the new, enhanced job bank that has been set up by Employment and Social Development Canada, which has improved functionality. There are already well over 7,000 employers who have registered on the job bank site, so it means they will be able to do job matching with individuals who are in the express entry pool.

We will continue to work on refining the express entry system. Right now, we want to make sure that we've fully stood it up and that it is functioning at its optimal level. Then we will look at what more we can do with regard to expanding the functionality and the opportunities that express entry provides.

Mr. Jay Aspin: Thank you very much.

The entry/exit initiative is important for a number of reasons. This will allow CIC officers with objective travel history information to support an application or an investigation in its immigration, citizenship, and travel document programs. Is there an estimated timeline for this initiative?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: On entry/exit, Mr. Chair, the initiative was launched and announced in budget 2012, as members may know. In fact, the work consisted of four implementation phases. We have already successfully completed phases one and two of entry/exit, and that includes the exchange of biographical data for certain travellers at a small number of automated common land borders, ports of entry

The Chair: Okay, we're over time.

Madame Blanchette-Lamothe.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for staying one hour longer with us. We are very grateful for that.

I have another question about the processing times for citizenship applications.

I am not sure I understood everything the minister said, nor do I think we have all of the statistics. On the Citizenship and Immigration Canada website, can we find the processing times for routine files, and for more complex ones? Can you tell me whether these routine files are regular applications with no particular complications? Can you confirm to me that the cases on the website are what are known as routine files?

• (0915)

[English]

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, perhaps I'll open and then turn the floor over to my colleague, Mr. Orr.

Routine files are those in which we have a complete application, all documents have been submitted and there are no further verifications required. It's all very straightforward. What we call non-routine may be where there are documents missing and we have

to go back and forth with an applicant. Also we may have to verify the status, particularly on issues of trying to establish residence. Sometimes that takes a longer period of time. Also, in some cases, some of the documents themselves may raise integrity concerns. We have to make sure that the integrity of the system is always maintained, so we may have to follow up to make sure that the document integrity is, in fact, there.

I will turn to my colleague, Mr. Orr. I think he can explain it a bit more fully.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: That answers my question. I do not need further details. That is what I thought.

Perhaps Mr. Orr can tell me whether, according to what I saw on the CIC website today, the routine files are processed on the average in 23 months. Is that correct and do I understand the situation clearly? How can the minister talk to us about 12-month processing times if the department's website cites 23 months? Could you please enlighten me?

[English]

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, essentially the discrepancy in that is because we are dealing with a huge backlog. When you deal with a major backlog of applicants and are working through it, the processing times tend to go up before they come down. What we are in right now is that phase of when they're going up as we work through the backlog. We're going through it at a very fast pace right now, far faster than we anticipated, in fact. So very soon processing times will come down, both for complex and non-complex cases. We're committed by the end of March 2016 to be well under 12 months. In fact, if you were applying today for citizenship, your application would be processed in well under 12 months. That's already happening.

I think what you will see in the processing times reflected on the website, which are always a bit behind anyway, is the reflection of this going through the backlog, and then the processing times coming down quite dramatically after that.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you.

I know that you do very rigorous work and that we will probably see a decrease in application processing times soon. However, according to what we see on the website, the current processing time is still officially 23 months for routine files.

[English]

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, but as we're seeing at the moment, we increased the number of people who became citizens last year. As we said, it was a record number in Canadian history. We're also going to see very large numbers this year as we work through that backlog.

The reality is that if you're applying now, it's going to be well under 12 months.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If I may, Mr. Chair, I'd quickly add that we have actually put very effective efficiencies into the system as a result of the changes to the legislation in terms of what we call the decision-maker model. That is actually providing us with a lot of opportunities to optimize our processing, and it's what's helping to contribute to our ability to really decrease the processing times.

As I say, certainly, with cases that are coming in now, our commitment is to be able to process those within less than 12 months by the end of this year.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you. I wish you success in that regard.

I will tell the people I represent that it is normal for their files to be processed in 23 or 36 months. There are several people whose files are still being processed. I wish you success in this endeavour. I hope we will be able to quickly allow people to benefit from better results.

I also have questions about family reunification delays, more specifically for children and spouses.

Can you tell me in what offices and in which countries it takes the longest to process applications? I think that the Islamabad office is one of the offices that has the longest waits for the processing of family reunification files. If you cannot tell me now, could you send the information to the committee? Where are the processing times the longest for family reunification files?

• (0920)

[English]

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, I think it would be better to get back to you with the specifics on that. But yes, indeed, there are some discrepancies between certain offices that take longer than others. It's often a reflection of the situation in that country. Local circumstances change from country to country. We need to ensure there's full integrity to the program and we're satisfied that when we're issuing visas, it is a genuine relationship, and we're fully respecting that. Sometimes that takes longer in certain environments than in others.

Mr. Chair, we will get back to you with the specifics about the different posts and processing times for family reunification.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr. Send it to the clerk.

You have one minute left, Madame Blanchette-Lamothe.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you very much.

I have a brief question about the foreign investor program applications.

Thousands of files were returned to the applicants. I was wondering if anyone had sued the government because of such practices. If so, how much has this type of measure cost, approximately? There were some people who were very unhappy that their applications were returned to them.

[English]

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Perhaps I'll start with opening comments, Mr. Chair, and then turn to my colleagues on that.

Under the federal skilled worker program—and our estimates reflect this—the original estimate was that we would be returning about 98,000 applications, with an amount of \$130 million to be refunded. We have actually refunded 75% of those as of March 2015. For the immigrant investor category, the original estimate was about 19,000 applications to be returned, at an amount of \$34.5 million. We have 9,000 refunds remaining, and the estimates reflect an amount of \$16.5 million this year for those refunds.

I think there are a few instances where there has been a challenge in terms of the immigrant investor program, but I'm not in a position to be able to comment on what the status of that challenge is.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McCallum, you have the floor.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the officials for being here.

The minister expressed a desire to have more money for processing family class applicants, but there doesn't seem to be more money in the appropriations. I'm wondering where such money would come from.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, if I may say, there's been no reduction in the level of funding we have allocated in our budget for processing of the family class or spouses. In fact, on a regular basis as part of managing our department, we do make sure we can look at how we can manage resources across the various business lines and business streams to meet the volumes. The challenge, as the minister mentioned in his comments, is that we've had more spousal applications than space in terms of our levels plan. We have a managed migration system and that is a success in terms of how we manage migration.

The question is how do we accommodate and how can we accommodate the number of applications that we receive within that levels plan. We have tried to address some of the pressure by offering an open work permit. In Canada we've had almost 6,000 spouses who have taken advantage of that open work permit to permit them to work while they are here waiting for their application to be processed. In the meantime, we're making every effort to see how we can expedite, and make sure that we process, as many spouses as we can, because we certainly appreciate and understand the challenges that represents for people in this situation.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

On the question of data, we used open data from data.gc.ca, as well as the current website. I'm not clear why this should overstate wait processing times, since I understand only the 20% slowest cases are excluded anyway. It's only the 80% that are fastest. To give you just one example, for the last 12 months ending September 30, the average processing time for skilled workers under MI1, MI2, MI3—I think that's ministerial instructions—were respectively 35 months, 55 months, and 25 months according to the website yesterday. Those were the figures on which I was basing my questions. Are those figures, in some sense, misleading?

• (0925)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, I'll turn to my colleague, Mr. Orr, but first I'll say that the inventory of federal skilled worker program has been reduced by over 93% since 2008. What we have now is a working inventory that we're working through and it's the transition.... As we've introduced the new express entry system, which we launched in January, we've actually had an intake to make sure that.... We couldn't predict how successful express entry would be, so we wanted to make sure we had a working inventory in the federal skilled worker category. As we ramp up on express entry, certainly our working inventory we will work down through this year and, I think, a very small number into 2016.

Mr. Orr, perhaps you could add to that.

Mr. Robert Orr: Thank you.

I think as the deputy minister has indicated, we're in a period of transition right now where we have these cases that came through the ministerial instructions in the old processing system. As we get into express entry we will see faster and faster processing time to reflect it because under express entry we are doing it within six months for 80% of the cases. The numbers processed through that system are so small right now that it's not having a real impact on the processing times. For the older cases, yes, the processing times are probably reflective of what you quoted here, but as we get into express entry we're going to see dramatically reduced processing times.

Hon. John McCallum: My question also is that I don't quite understand how you can be in a transition period for nine years, because if you look at the numbers, they're steadily up each and every year for nine years. I don't understand why that can be such a terribly long transition period. It seems to me it has to do also with the cutting of resources in 2011 when you had the expenditure restraint, and that must have had an impact as well.

Mr. Robert Orr: The main issue is the inventory of cases that were there and why we were able to do it. We have to couple that with the levels plan we have every year, the number of cases, and the number of visas that we are allowed to issue every year. As you know, we have met our levels plan consistently year after year and that is, in part, the reason an inventory grows. As we bring that down now, and as we get into express entry, we will not have the issue of an inventory, and we will get into the six months processing. It's early days for express entry.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eglinski.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Thank you to the panel for being here today.

I said earlier that I took pride when I travel with my passport, and I know most Canadians do. I heard the minister say there has been a drastic increase in Canadians in the past year who have applied for passports. Could you elaborate on this, please?

The second part of my question relates to the adjustments to the passport business plan that the estimates discuss. Would you give me an answer on that too, please?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Orr, my colleague, but I'll just say that the passport program operates on a self-sustaining revolving fund, so the revenues, the fees that people pay, go into the revolving fund.

There is a business plan that operates over a 10-year period that takes into account the volumes. We try to forecast the volumes. It means that there are fluctuations in terms of the revenues that come in. The business plan also includes a strategy for investments to make sure that we're modernizing the passport system.

For example, we are migrating the passport program onto our global case management system. That requires certain investments, but it allows us to ultimately even go further in terms of online applications for passports. As I say, it also enhances the integrity by being able to actually put passports onto our global case management system and the synergies with, certainly, immigration as well in terms of citizenship.

I think that gives you an overview of the revolving fund. I'll turn it over to Mr. Orr for the specifics in terms of growth.

Mr. Robert Orr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In general terms, we're issuing about five million passports a year at the moment. As the minister indicated, we have about 22.9 million valid passports in circulation at the moment. Because we're going from a five-year passport to a 10-year passport, we anticipate there will be a drop in the number of applications very shortly. That is part of the calculation.

The passport fund, as the deputy minister indicated, works on a 10-year cycle, and we're very much on course with our predictions of where we will be in terms of volumes.

• (0930)

Mr. Jim Eglinski: In regard to electronic travel authorization, which will protect the safety and security of Canadians—and I don't believe it will harm the tourism industry at all—could you please inform the committee on how the eTA will work and what the projected timeline is for implementation?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: In terms of the timeline, perhaps I can indicate, Mr. Chair, that the intention is there will be what we call a voluntary enrolment period that will begin this August. The mandatory requirements for eTA will actually come into play only in mid-March 2016. This sort of voluntary period gives time for individuals, and also for the airline sector, to adjust and to adapt, to make sure we can stand up the systems we need to be able to implement the electronic travel authorization.

We are well under way in terms of the implementation, working very closely with our colleagues in the Canada Border Services Agency, which will be responsible for the actual mandatory enforcement of eTA. The investments that we're making are actually to ensure that we have appropriate program integrity measures as well, but also to allow us to communicate more broadly to allow individuals to know that this will be a requirement to come to Canada. We've modelled this very much on the U.S. system, the ESTA. Australia also has a comparable system.

There will be a low fee of \$7. It will certainly provide for a level of integrity that we have not had before the eTA. There will be a light touch, a light screening approach when someone actually books a ticket online to come to Canada. There will also be a prompt that will require them to fill out a very short form with their basic information. This will be submitted to our department where we will basically verify it and have the ability to verify if there are any concerns. That will be the basis for providing the airline industry, through CBSA, with a board or no-board decision before someone actually boards the plane.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: I see there is approximately a \$1 million net transfer to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development for our missions overseas. The staff of these various missions overseas are clearly important assets to Citizenship and Immigration. They are front-line officers, and they are often the first Canadians to face potential immigrants who are planning to come to Canada.

Could you please explain to the committee what staff CIC employs at the missions and what their roles are?

Mr. Robert Orr: Currently we have a little over 50 CIC offices abroad, and they do a variety of different things. Overwhelmingly they are involved in the processing of the full range of applications and making decisions on those applications. We believe, and we've seen this repeatedly, that the local knowledge by having people on the ground is critical to high-quality decision-making in these applications from both temporary and permanent residents. Indeed, as we do more though, moving applications around the network and doing some in a centralized way in Canada or elsewhere, they do more and more in quality assurance, risk tiering, and giving that sort of intelligence we need so we maintain integrity and high-quality decision-making.

It's not just processing. They're also going to be doing work on recruitment for express entry, for instance. They would be doing work on settlement as the deputy minister spoke about already. They are the migration experts in those countries. They're going to be liaising with local officials and they will also be reporting back on migration issues more broadly.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: These people that you're talking about, are most of them Canadians or are they foreign people who are possibly trained in our missions there or are they all ours?

Mr. Robert Orr: All offices have Canadian-based officers, but we do rely on locally engaged staff to support us in these roles.

Mr. Jim Eglinski: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Sandhu.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: Thank you for being here this morning.

I want to get back to the family reunification issue, especially the parents coming here. I'll start with my own family again. I immigrated to this country in 1980 and it took about 18 months. In 2003, 2004, 2005 it used to take about four or five years to get your parents here. Nowadays my constituents are still...many come into my office wanting to know how long it's going to take their parents to get here. Some of the applications have been there for six, seven or eight years and they're struggling trying to get reunited with their parents.

I'll again share another story. My cousin died waiting to immigrate to this country. The application was taking seven or eight years. I'm not talking about any of my other constituents. I'm talking about my own family. This has happened in my family, where parents are dying before they're able to immigrate because the wait time is eight or nine years. We've had a situation where the Conservatives have basically shut down family reunification, where only 5,000 parents and grandparents can apply under that class.

Last year, I had a constituent who made an application on January 1, which was a Thursday. He mailed the application on Friday, January 2. January 3 and 4 were a Saturday and Sunday. The application reached the applications centre on the Monday. I believe his application was number 6,000-and-something. Would that be correct that the quota for the applications for a visa or application for family class reunification gets filled up on the first day?

• (0935)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Perhaps I can open, Mr. Chair, by saying certainly we appreciate the concerns of the member, but we have welcomed more than 70,000 parents and grandparents just in the last three years. I think that's reflected in the level space that has been allocated for parents and grandparents. We also have an additional 20,000 as part of our 2015 immigration levels plan. Our inventory—

The Chair: There's a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Chair, I would like to go back to a decision you took earlier in the course of our work, concerning the rights and privileges of the members who sit on this committee.

You asked the members to give the witnesses time to answer their questions. Do the members have the right to ask witnesses to answer their questions in a direct manner? My colleague's question, even if it was preceded by a few examples, aimed to find out specifically whether the quota is frequently reached in the first few days. The witness could have answered that question in a mere few seconds.

We are trying to respect your request that we give the witnesses a chance to answer our questions. However, may we ask witnesses to answer more directly so that we have an effective exchange and obtain replies to our questions in the five-minute period?

[English]

The Chair: Keep the clock stopped.

Ms. Biguzs, and to your point of order, Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe, the chair has no control over how questions are answered, but her point is well taken.

I think the question was, how is it possible that for the reunification class, if the date is January 1, January 2, and January 3, it's gone? How is that possible? I think that was his question.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: To repeat my question, my question is that if the 5,000 applications are taken.... I had a constituent in my riding whose application was rejected on the very first day in January, basically, and my question is, is the quota filled on the very first day?

The Chair: On this point of order, I repeat that I have no control over how a witness answers a question. You may not like the answer. I have no say on that. It may be an answer to something else, but I have no control over that. If you still have time, you as the questioner can pursue that.

But I think the point is well taken.

Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Chair, to your point, certainly I heard Mr. Sandhu's question. He made reference to the 5,000 number, which is an additional number of new applicants who can apply on an annual basis. Ms. Biguzs was simply putting things in context by highlighting the number of parents and grandparents who have come here.

Now, Mr. Sandhu may not like the fact that this is a record number of 70,000 that have come over the last couple of years. It's a major improvement in dealing with a backlog. I think it's important to put things in context.

• (0940)

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Sandhu, the clock is still stopped. Ask your question again, and we'll see what happens.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: My question is very simple: did the 5,000 quota get filled up on the very first day?

The Chair: Ms. Biguzs.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: My apologies, Mr. Chair. I'll be very brief. Of course the cap was at 5,000 and it filled within the first few days in terms of the number of applications received.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: So how does the process work? The applications centre gets a whole bunch of applications through the mail; they go into a big box or bin; you pick the applications out of there, and after 5,000 are filled...? Which ones get first and which ones get second? My constituent actually wanted me to ask you this question.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: They come in as they come in, in terms of first come, and we have to make sure the applications are complete.

Those are the ones that we count, those that have all the documents necessary.

Mr. Orr, you may want to add to that.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes. We monitor very closely on a first-come, first-served basis, on the basis that we receive them. We then go through a completeness check, and it's the first 5,000 applications that are complete.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: For the record, Mr. Chair, the constituent I'm talking about did mail his application on January 2. The very first day it reached there, the quota was filled. His application was marked down as number 6,000 and whatever it was. The minister pointed out—

The Chair: For the record, the chair is having the same problem in his riding.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: Thank you.

My second question is that the minister pointed out earlier that when it comes to spousal applications, we've seen that the amount of time it takes to sponsor a spouse from another country has been steadily increasing. I don't want to blame the Liberals, because they've been out of government for nine years and they don't have any hope of forming the next government—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: —but we'll certainly be working towards reducing that time period.

I do want to ask this question on what the minister was talking about, which is that the department had difficulty in predicting the number of applications coming in and that somehow the applications have been more than anticipated. Would that be correct? Is the department having difficulty providing resources and predicting how many applications they're going to be getting? Has this been going on for just one year, or for two years, three years, four years?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: We try to forecast as best we can. Certainly, as I think the minister noted, in the last couple of years the number of applications that have come in certainly has been more than what we have in our levels space, in our annual immigration levels plan. The numbers are higher.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: What about the next year? What are the predictions? Are you predicting more than anticipated, or are you predicting more than the year before? Are there any additional resources that are being provided to your department?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: We can only assume that the number, as I say, may increase, but we do have an inventory now that we have to work through. We're trying to find space within our levels plan in terms of how we can put more effort into spousal applications.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shory.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To the department officials, once again, thank you for your hard work to reduce the backlog, and also, thank you for implementing innovative programs, like express entry, to ensure that we do not have to deal with backlogs in the future.

Before I ask questions on express entry, I want to clarify something Mr. Sandhu raised. I understand clearly that when we talk about 5,000 applications, those are applications, not the total number of potential immigrants. Is that correct? If yes, then approximately how many, in numbers, are we talking about for 5,000 applications? Would it be 12,000 immigrants, or 15,000, approximately?

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, we're talking about 5,000 principal applicants, 5,000 applications, and thus they would be coming with dependants. For parents and grandparents, it's probably just over two people per application.

Mr. Devinder Shory: The number is what?

Mr. Robert Orr: We'd be talking about 10,000 to 11,000 people.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Okay. How much time could we expect for these applications to be processed?

● (0945)

Mr. Robert Orr: Well, we continue to work through the applications on a first-come, first-served basis, so it may be some time before we are actually able to process those applications. We will be accepting, processing up to 20,000 parent and grandparent applications this year.

Mr. Devinder Shory: I understand that the 70,000 over the last three years, which Ms. Biguzs mentioned, includes the backlog and some work on the new applications as well.

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Okay. Thank you.

I'll come back to express entry. I know the department worked closely with New Zealand when developing express entry. Now that it has been launched, do you still talk to your counterparts there? Do you continue to consult with them as express entry grows?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, we consult very closely with our colleagues in New Zealand, and not just New Zealand but certainly Australia also. We learned many lessons from Australia's launch of the express entry system there.

As I say, we have an ongoing dialogue through what we call the Five Country Conference. We meet at the deputy level annually with our Five Country colleagues, which include New Zealand, Australia, the U.K., and the United States. We also have, below that, many working-level committees and groups that include my colleagues on either side. We have very close collaboration and we benefit from their experience, and they benefit from our experience in terms of how we launch these new programs.

We look overall, globally, in terms of the trends, in terms of the movement of people. We benefit from a very constant and ongoing dialogue across all the range of immigration activities.

Mr. Devinder Shory: The minister also mentioned the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games. We are very excited that we are hosting the 2015 games in Toronto. This is an exciting time for our country, of course.

How many visa applications do you expect? I believe the minister mentioned 7,000 and something. Does CIC expect this will bring revenue to our tourism industry and the Canadian economy in general?

Mr. Robert Orr: Indeed, it's going to be a major boost for the Canadian economy, and the Toronto economy particularly. Yes, we're very excited about hosting the Pan Am Games and look forward to doing that.

CIC's role in that is processing the applications from the individuals who are going to be involved. We anticipate probably around 23,000 individuals who are coming within the family.... We've already processed just over 13,000 of these applications through the process, and so far it's going very well.

There are a variety of processes in place to expedite the applications, and so far it's going well. The approval rate at the moment is 98.5%.

Mr. Devinder Shory: I want to go back to visas for parents and grandparents again.

Once the backlog is eliminated, how long do we expect it to take to process these applications?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, I believe there will continue to be some cases in the backlog, so I'm reluctant to put a particular time on it or to talk about what processing times will be.

We continue to work through the applications within the level space we allocate to the parents and grandparents category each year, and we make sure we reach that target each year. That is important.

I would also point out that there is the option for a super visa, which is issued to people as a multiple-entry visa for up to 10 years for individuals who would otherwise qualify in the parents and grandparents category.

We have issued 50,000 of those super visas over the last few years, and the acceptance rate is about 82%.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Leung.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Thank you, Chair.

My question is on citizenship.

We have the new Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act, which actually strengthens the value of Canadian citizenship and, I hope, will speed up our processing times. My constituents are telling me they feel that the application process for citizenship for new applicants has decreased year to year.

Can you comment on how we have handled the backlog with respect to implementing at the same time the new Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act?

How does it all come together and still maintain the previous budget?

● (0950)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Perhaps, Mr. Chair, I'll just open by saying that increased funding was provided two budgets ago, in particular a higher level of time-limited money for citizenship processing, so we've been able to actually put that into processing, certainly, the backlog and the inventory.

At the same time, legislative changes that were made actually allow us to have a different decision-maker model, which has allowed us to improve our efficiency in terms of processing, so there is that combination of additional resources, plus the efficiencies we're gaining as a result of the new processes we've put in place.

We've tried to make sure we're looking at the end-to-end process. We have, if I can call it this, the leanest process possible so that we don't have any kind of redundancy or overlap. That's enabled us to really optimize processing, which is why last year we were actually able to process a record number of citizenship grants, over 260,000, and we will continue to make those improvements to the system in terms of processing.

Mr. Orr, do you want to add to that?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think that largely covers it.

We are very much in a period of working through the backlog. There's very active work going on in our offices right across the country. We have increased the number of staff to get through this using the money we've received. Ms. Biguzs referred to the \$89 million over two years to increase the processing capacity.

We are absolutely on track to meet our target, so that by March 2016 processing for routine cases will take less than 12 months.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: What numbers are you forecasting for both 2015 and 2016 as compared to for 2014?

Mr. Robert Orr: In 2014 it was 262,000. I don't have the figure in front of me with regard to what we anticipate, but I suspect it will be something similar this year. We would have to get back to you on that.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Okay, that's no problem.

There appears to be a decrease in funding for the temporary resident program.

What are the current service standards for the TRV and how does CIC expect to meet these standards?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Quickly, Mr. Chair, I'll just say that we had received time-limited funding in the 2013 budget to actually help us address processing.

We've had volume increases in terms of the temporary resident visa application process, and I think what you see in the decrease reflects the ramping down of that time-limited money we have received.

At the same time, our processing standard, if I can put it that way, our service standard, is 14 days for temporary resident visas and for visitor visas. It's longer for student visas, which take about 30 days.

However, we have introduced a number of special facilitated programs, like the business express program in certain key markets, which basically makes our service time about five to seven days in

terms of processing known business travellers who have travelled to Canada before.

We also have the student express program, our CAN+ program, for people who have previously had a Canadian visa or a U.S. visa. As I say, those service standards are usually less than seven days for key markets, for example, Mexico and China, but overall the visitor visa service standard is 14 days, and in many places we're certainly well below that standard.

Mr. Orr, do you want to add to that?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think that covers it, frankly.

We've certainly introduced a number of facilitative measures. We have a multiple entry visa, which is now issued on a regular basis as a default for up to 10 years of the validity of the passport. We have visa application centres, 131 of them around the world, to support people who are putting in applications. We mentioned the facilitative programs, where we try to move the low-risk cases through the system as fast as we can. We've introduced electronic applications as well, which have been taken up by 35% or so of our applicants.

We have a variety of different methods to ensure that we stay within the service standards even though we're getting about an 8% to 10% increase in volume year upon year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Mr. Leung, the time has expired.

On behalf of the committee, Ms. Biguzs, I'd like to thank you and your colleagues for spending this last hour with us talking about some of the issues that concern our constituents. You are now excused. Thank you for coming.

● (0955)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now have some votes on the main estimates.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$566,527,428

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$993,529,386

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$99,542,732

(Vote 1 agreed to)

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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