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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call to order meeting number eight of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today we will be going through the main estimates for 2020-21 as well as the supplementary estimates (B) for 2020-21.

Appearing before us is the Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. We also have officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration: Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Marian Campbell Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister, operations; and Hughes St-Pierre, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and comptroller.

Before we begin, I have some health and safety reminders for everyone. I remind all attendees in the room to physically distance yourselves from others by at least two metres and to wear a mask unless you are seated and you are more than two metres from anyone else.

This is a hybrid meeting. Some members are appearing in person in the parliamentary precinct and others are appearing remotely. I remind all members to please speak at a pace slow enough for interpretation to keep up. The meeting is being webcast and is available on ParlVU.

We have the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship for the first hour....

Madame Martinez Ferrada, your hand is raised.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a point of order.

The routine motions outline that remarks take a total of five minutes. I want to request that in case the minister's remarks go beyond five minutes, the time be added to the overall time at committee in order to maintain the same time for questions from members at committee. For example, if the minister's remarks go one minute beyond the five minutes for remarks, an additional one minute is added to the minister's one hour of committee.

Would that be okay with all the members?

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Martinez Ferrada.

We know that through the routine motions we provide five minutes to the witnesses, so for this request by Madame Martinez Ferrada, we would like to have unanimous consent.

Is that okay with everyone?

For those who are in the room, is it okay with everyone?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Leif-Erik Aune): There is no objection in the room, Madam Chair.

The Chair: There is no objection. That is good. We will proceed.

I welcome the Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, to the standing committee.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing—

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Sorry, Madam Chair, I want to go back to the motion that was just moved. I want to get clarification before we proceed.

This means we would possibly run longer in our meeting, but does that mean that the full second hour, where we have officials before us, would be intact and not be compromised?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We started the meeting at 3:35 p.m. Madame Martinez Ferrada has requested that if the minister goes beyond five minutes for his opening remarks, he will stay for additional time. For example, if he goes two minutes over five minutes, he will stay for two additional minutes beyond the one hour he is supposed to stay here.

• (1540)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand, but I am also thinking of the next hour with the officials. Our committee meeting is scheduled for two hours. I don't want to lose time for the officials, because it will bump back time. Will we be able to run our meeting a little longer with the officials in order to accommodate this change?

The Chair: Is that okay with everyone?

I see heads nodding. That is fine.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Minister, thanks for appearing before the committee. It's always a pleasure to have you at the committee. On behalf of all the members, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all the work you are doing on behalf of all Canadians.

The floor is yours.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

[Translation]

Good afternoon, everyone.

[English]

I'm very pleased to be able to offer remarks on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's main estimates for 2020–21.

We convened during a year that has been unlike any other in living memory; 2020 will forever be etched in history as the year of COVID-19. This global pandemic has upended every dimension of life, and immigration is no exception. In fact, given that the movement of people across international borders is the *sine qua non* of immigration, one might easily conclude that few other portfolios within government have been more impacted by this dreadful virus.

Amid a second wave, the need for ongoing travel restrictions, quarantining, social distancing and reduced capacity in workspaces remains obvious. Cumulatively, there is no doubt these necessary measures, which are designed to protect Canadians, have had an effect on immigration.

Yet operationally we have made quantum leaps from where we were last spring to the present day. I want to be clear: This has been a challenging period, especially for the people and families who have been touched by the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

[Translation]

This past year has certainly been difficult for all of us. With worldwide border closures and travel restrictions, COVID-19 has significantly impacted our immigration system.

[English]

However, we've taken concrete action. We've kept immigration going despite the pandemic. We've continued to land economic immigrants, reunite families and resettle the most urgent refugee cases. We've prioritized work permits for those in the most crucial sectors, like health care workers, emergency service providers, and our farmers and food processors, to make sure our front lines have the reinforcements they need to keep us healthy and to keep food on our tables.

We've reunited thousands of families and loved ones by creating pathways at the borders. We've managed to do this by investing resources where they are needed most, by going more digital, and by streamlining our policies, all with the help of our hard-working public servants.

[Translation]

I'm very pleased to speak to you today regarding IRCC's 2020-21 Main Estimates, as well as our 2020-21 Supplementary Estimates (B).

[English]

For 2020-21, IRCC's main estimates include a total of \$2.8 billion across all votes. Our supplementary estimates (B) include new funding of \$324.7 million.

[Translation]

Measures were introduced to extend the stay of temporary residents who were unable to leave Canada because of travel restrictions. We also put in place facilitative measures to address the concerns of international students and the designated learning institutions that depend on them.

● (1545)

[English]

With regard to our top-line mandate, we have introduced innovative measures to continue landing permanent residents in Canada. In fact, our virtual landing process has actually reduced the time it typically takes to welcome a permanent resident. Those PRs who wish to sponsor their spouses will be pleased to know that we have stood up a special team to accelerate and prioritize the processing of up to 49,000 applications before the year's end. This, too, will help bring together more families.

While we are exhausting every effort domestically, it is also important to recall that IRCC has a significant operational footprint abroad, which has been impacted by the sovereign decision-making of the countries in which they are located. However, we are starting to see visa application centres reopen around the world as local restrictions allow.

Many visa application centres in key countries, like India and the United States, are beginning to reopen, including some just this week. The fact that our partners, both domestic and international, are resuming operations bodes well for continuing to make progress with regard to our processing times. For instance, in the week ending November 14, we issued 80% of final decisions compared to a similar period in 2019. Several streams exceeded production compared to last year, including the provincial nominee program, which was at 232% year over year, and protected persons, which was at 557%.

The pandemic has also spurred us to innovate when comes to citizenship. With all large public gatherings off the table for the foreseeable future, we've taken citizenship ceremonies online, welcoming new Canadians at thousands of virtual ceremonies. As of mid-October, IRCC had sworn in or affirmed over 43,000 new Canadian citizens in 8,800 ceremonies. We are also currently finalizing the development—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. Again, we have the same issue. If you can change the language on your screen as you change what language you are speaking, that would be easier.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I am on English. I have not touched it.

The Chair: Yes, and if you are speaking in French, then please change it to French.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I have not spoken French yet. When I do next, I will move to French.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: May I resume?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We are also currently finalizing the development of a new online platform that will allow us to safely and securely resume citizenship testing online. Finally, beginning January 1, 2021, citizenship applications for applicants aged 18 to 54 will be accepted electronically, which is a big step forward.

We have been efficient and nimble through this most challenging period, and these lessons will serve us well as we continue to welcome newcomers and to strengthen Canada through immigration. Many of the innovations created will have a lasting impact on our processing times. That is important because we have seen throughout our history that immigration is a driver of economic growth and job creation, and we know that it will continue to play a critical part in both our short-term economic recovery and our long-term prosperity. That is why our recently released immigration levels plan will gradually increase immigration over the next three years at a rate of about 1%.

As I am sure you are all aware, travel restrictions and other constraints led to a shortfall in admissions this year, which is why our increases over the next three will make up for it.

[Translation]

While Canada's immigration system has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we remain committed to bringing newcomers to our country.

We continue to accept applications and are processing them as quickly as possible, and we know that we must continue to innovate and evolve our business in order to meet targets.

• (1550)

IRCC will continue to find unique solutions in response to the challenges presented by the pandemic and border restrictions.

[English]

Immigration speaks to who we were, who we are and who we hope to be. We're choosing to be open, vibrant and prosperous.

Thank you all very much for indulging with the technological difficulties. I would now welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thanks a lot, Minister.

On behalf of the committee members, I want to apologize for all the interruptions we had. The technical issues are not in our hands.

We will now go into the first round of questioning.

Ms. Dancho, you have six minutes to start your round of questioning.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your remarks.

I want to start off by asking how many national interest exemptions you have approved.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I will tell you that we have a process in place to issue national interest exemptions. For the precise number, I will defer to my officials.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So you can't tell me how many you have personally approved. Do you have an estimate—a hundred, 500, 1,000?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I will defer to my officials for the precise number rather than just giving you an estimate.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: My understanding is that there are five cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, who can approve these, so I'm a bit surprised that you have no idea of how many you have personally approved.

The reason I ask, of course, is that we have Canadians who see that a number of very elite Americans have been granted these exemptions and have not had to quarantine. I'm surprised that you're not aware of how many you have personally approved.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's not what I said, Ms. Dancho. I said that I would defer to my officials for a precise number rather than giving you an estimate.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Minister, Mr. Mills has that number for you.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Madam Chair.

In mid-November, we approved some 1,300 exemptions to travel to Canada.

• (1555)

[English]

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you very much to the officials for that answer.

Minister, can you tell me how these conditions are enforced by your government? There seems to be a lot of concern that they're not being enforced very well and that a lot of elitists have access to these and others don't, particularly those who are looking to reunite with their families.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm sorry. The sound was not very good, Ms. Dancho. Could you repeat your question?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: If there is going to continue to be sound...I just want to verify that the last 20 seconds will not be taken off my time.

The Chair: I will make sure. I'll stop the clock.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Can you tell me how much time I have remaining?

The Chair: You are at one minute and 45 seconds right now, and we have an additional 20 seconds for you.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: You can resume.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm going to move on from this, since I'm not quite getting the answers I was looking for from you, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: By all means, please pose your question again, Ms. Dancho. Because of the technical difficulties, I could not hear the first part of it.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm going to move on to the next section of my questions, and maybe we'll circle back.

I wanted to ask you about the ambitious target you announced a few weeks ago, the 401,000 permanent residents for next year. You've hinted in the media that you may grant those who have temporary resident status, such as asylum seekers, permanent resident status to provide for this 400,000 you're hoping to bring into the country next year.

Can you tell the committee how many asylum seekers you're planning to grant permanent resident status to?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Over the course of the next three years, as you know, we hope to welcome 401,000, 411,000 and 421,000. We've also set up some objectives to welcome a number of resettled refugees in the range of 36,000 per year over the next three. We will strive very hard to reach those goals.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right, but how many asylum seekers are you planning to grant permanent resident status to—specifically asylum seekers? I ask because you've hinted at health care workers. I'm wondering if you can specify how many you're planning.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: This builds on the announcement I made last summer in Quebec regarding the “guardian angels”, who made exceptional contributions on the front lines of our hospitals, and health care workers. I think we will continue to look at those immigrants who are already within our borders and try to broaden the pathways to permanent residency where we can, particularly in those essential sectors where contributions have been vital to providing the health care that Canadians need.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

I want to ask you specifically in the context of Quebec. We know that the vast majority of asylum seekers irregularly—many say illegally—cross the border into Quebec at Roxham Road. Are you going to be providing jurisdiction to Quebec to decide who those permanent residents will be from the asylum seekers?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As you know, Ms. Dancho, the federal government retains the jurisdiction when it comes to refugees, but we work very closely with the Quebec government. That also includes the guardian angels program, where I have a very good rapport with my counterpart, Minister Girault. We will continue to

work in close collaboration with them to achieve this important work of providing a safe harbour for the world's most vulnerable.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, the reason I ask—and since you've confirmed it now—is that I'm wondering if that process encourages more individuals to irregularly—or illegally—cross the border and circumvent the streams that we're seeing have massive delays. I'm wondering if you're creating a very dangerous precedent for folks to go around the backlogged immigration streams and just walk across the border. Are you concerned about that at all?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: On the contrary, Ms. Dancho, we've invested in our borders to ensure that we have one of the best asylum systems in the world, and that includes reinforcing integrity at the borders.

Far from encouraging, we discourage irregular migration. We have made significant progress on that front, and that is also in close collaboration with the Quebec government and—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'll have to interrupt you, Minister. I was at the public accounts committee the other day, and they confirmed that 800 criminals who illegally crossed the border claiming asylum are in this country—not valid asylum claims, but they also happened to be criminals.

I'm a little disappointed that we're having this conversation, when I feel it's quite important to set a very clear line that those who come across the border and illegally claim asylum are not going to be granted permanent resident status before those who...like expired permanent residents, like the—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Dancho, we have one of the best asylum systems in the world, and that includes rigorous screening when it comes to inadmissibility. If people are—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We were not hearing that at the public accounts committee.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): A point of order, Madam Chair.

I didn't want to interrupt my colleague, but there's no French interpretation.

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Ms. Dancho, you can resume, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay. I think I only have about a minute left.

Is that correct, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, I'm just going to ask you about this 14-day processing deadline. Your officials have told my office that in fact it's a processing deadline of 21 business days before we can ask them, so I'm a bit concerned about the deadline. You said 14 days first, and now we're hearing 21 days, and of course it has been much longer for many who applied at the beginning.

What I did want to tell you is that I have here a list of over 100 individuals who applied and have not heard anything from your office. I'd like you to commit to the committee today that you will personally look at this list on behalf of the families who are looking to reunite and who were promised from you that they would be processed within 14 days. Can you commit to looking at that list personally?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Of course, Ms. Dancho.

I acknowledge your advocacy and the advocacy of many MPs on this issue. I'm certainly moved by those families who have not been able to reunite yet, but we're working very hard to reunite them. We've already reunited thousands, and we'll work on those cases as you bring them to our office's attention.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. The time is up.

We will now move on to Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Dhillon, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Good afternoon, Mr. Minister. Welcome to our committee. Thank you for being here.

As you know, this committee has been studying the pandemic's impact on immigration. We have heard from witnesses and advocacy groups. Each had heart-wrenching stories that moved us all, and I know they moved you, as well.

The spousal sponsorship program has been a source of hardship for many families. I know that this issue has been at the centre of the government's concerns and that there have been incredible efforts to improve this program.

Can you explain the changes that are currently taking place?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question.

It's important to keep families and loved ones together, especially during difficult times. That's why we've launched a process for compassionate cases and for reuniting extended families and couples over the long term.

When this program was created, we set a 14-day service standard, and that standard hasn't changed. That's clear. We set up a working group specifically to handle requests and answer questions. Our dedicated public servants continue to process requests as quickly as possible.

Our government will continue to reunite families while protecting the health and safety of all Canadians.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Of course, the pandemic was a major blow to operations, both nationally and globally. One of the main barriers to newcomers has been the impact of the pandemic on our country's citizenship process.

Mr. Minister, could you please provide an update on the status of citizenship in all sectors?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We have taken some steps to move forward on the citizenship process. Since the beginning of this initiative, we have presented more than 40,000 virtual ceremonies. The next step will be to see what other elements of the process can be done digitally and virtually, such as citizenship planning and testing.

• (1605)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Perfect. Thank you.

With respect to immigration and refugee claimants, after March, the IRB was forced to close its doors in response to the pandemic. However, we were pleased to learn that hearings would resume and return to normal processing.

Can you help the committee to better understand the changes that took place at the IRB when it closed?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question.

We have invested more money and resources into the panel to improve the arrears situation. I have great confidence in the panel. We are continuing to process refugee protection claims.

As you know, around the world, Canada enjoys a first-rate reputation for all work related to receiving refugee protection claimants. We carry out this work in collaboration with all our provincial partners, including Quebec.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: You're at 4:50, so you have one minute and 10 seconds left.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Mr. Minister, could you tell us about the other changes planned because of the pandemic?

How can things be improved for immigration applicants?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As you know, with respect to immigration, we have adopted a plan for the next three years. It focuses on jobs, to strengthen our economy and to address all of our long-term demographic challenges. We continue to move forward on this plan in collaboration with our provincial partners.

So I'm very optimistic and very confident about Canada's future.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister, but your time is up. We will have to move to the next member.

We will now move on to Madame Normandin.

Madame Normandin, you have six minutes. The floor is yours, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the minister for being with us today.

I'll begin by asking a few questions on the changes in officers' assessments for granting visas to people awaiting sponsorship.

I'd like to know if the new dual intent criteria that have been announced for sponsorship applications are currently in effect.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Normandin, could you clarify your question?

Ms. Christine Normandin: Officers assessing visa applications from people in sponsorship situations have been given new guidelines for analyzing dual intent.

Are these guidelines currently in effect?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes. As you know, as part of the process, all applications are assessed on merit by our public servants. It's an impartial process carried out by our independent staff, who work to assess all applications fairly and objectively.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I was telling you about the new criteria and asking if they are in effect at the moment.

I would like to know if it's possible to obtain a written copy of the guidelines given to officers for the application of these criteria.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes. The guidelines are published and we can get you a copy, for transparency purposes. Most importantly, all criteria are applied in an impartial, fair and transparent manner.

• (1610)

Ms. Christine Normandin: That's great. Thank you.

My next question is about the members.

There were no in-person hearings until August 3. The virtual hearings of the various IRB divisions resumed on June 29. I sent the written question to the department, and I understand that all members received their full remuneration during the crisis.

I'd like to know whether they were asked to use up their unused vacation and sick leave.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'll turn the floor over to representatives from the department so they can provide a more specific answer.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Ultimately, I'll ask them when it's their turn.

I'd like to hear from you on the issue of people working in the restaurant industry and low wages. There's just been a directive that

applications for labour market impact assessments, or LMIA's, and work permits for people in the restaurant industry will no longer be considered because unemployment is too high right now and they want to use the local workforce.

I'd like to know if you've discussed suspending the processing of these applications with Minister Qualtrough.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm working with Ms. Qualtrough on this matter.

The labour shortage is a challenge for all provinces, even for the Quebec Experience Program. IRCC deals with sectors where there are labour shortages, such as health and agriculture. We have a plan to address the labour shortage.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Currently, work permit and LMIA applications from people in the food service sector are no longer being processed.

Does the minister agree with me that it's possible to have high unemployment and a labour shortage at the same time?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We've made the permit application system more flexible for foreign workers. This is a project in which my department and that of my colleague Ms. Qualtrough are participating, along with our partners in Quebec. This increased flexibility in the system allows these workers to change jobs when necessary. For example, in the agricultural sector, there are jobs and a lot of labour, despite the pandemic. This is a good example showing that IRCC is there—

Ms. Christine Normandin: Mr. Minister, please allow me to interrupt.

We were told that processing of work permit applications had been discontinued. The question had arisen at the time about foreign agricultural workers. If the unemployment rate became too high, consideration was given to discontinue the processing of these applications.

I'll repeat my question. Does the minister agree that we can have a labour shortage and a high unemployment rate at the same time?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said, IRCC is addressing the labour shortage. We have made our system more flexible for foreign workers, working with all provinces and employers in critical sectors.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Some work permit and labour market impact assessment applications were discontinued. Was this a way to relieve the pressure on IRCC?

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Madame Normandin. Your time is up.

We will now move on to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the minister for coming to our committee.

I'm going to follow up on the question around dual intent. The ministerial enquiries division has confirmed that the information newly posted on the government website about dual intent is essentially an internal memo to provide clarification to assist in interpreting dual intent, but it is not considered an actual policy.

Will the minister consider suspending the use of paragraph 179(b) for sponsorship applicants applying for a TRV with dual intent, and will the minister consider issuing a special TRV, similar to that of a super visa for parents and grandparents, for spousal sponsorships?

• (1615)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, as you know, I have said that I remain open-minded to exploring flexibilities where necessary. The important thing to recall is that we do have a pathway that allows individuals who are qualified under the family exemption class to come and reunite with their relatives here in Canada. That is not prohibitive of those same individuals also seeking permanent residency status.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The reality is that many of the people seeking to come and visit are blocked. In fact, the fact that they have family members here.... The closer the ties they have, the more likely, actually, is the reality of their being rejected. The notion of dual intent does not really work in practice, because it's still subject to the interpretation of the agent in interpreting that.

Family members are seeking for the government to suspend the use of paragraph 179(b), in addition to providing them with a special TRV. I hope the minister will actually consider that, because it's not working. Dual intent is not working.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, I understand, and as I said, we'll keep an open mind. Each case is evaluated on the merits, but I understand your position.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The 14-day processing for extended family reunification that the minister announced is not being met. In fact, Faces of Advocacy has been updating the minister regularly. As it stands now, they have self-reported over 100 people who are not getting their application processed. When my office inquired about it, in fact, we were told that the deadline is not going to be met, because the system is overwhelmed. The minister's own staff actually said to an MP office to not bother inquiring, because the unit is overwhelmed. What is the minister going to do about this?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, Ms. Kwan, I would express my gratitude to you and to all the advocacy groups who have been advancing the cause of family reunification. As a result, we've created a pathway that has reunited thousands of families, and that's a good thing. That's notwithstanding the challenge of the pandemic. Where we have complicated cases, including incomplete applications, we work with all members of Parliament, including your office, to try to troubleshoot them. Our goal here is to reunite as many families as possible—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —without compromising the health and safety of Canadians.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, I'm just going to interrupt. On the 14-day application issue, it is not because they are missing docu-

ments. In fact, what we learned from IRCC is that they don't even know if the application exists in the system. If they don't know, they have no way of expediting or looking into these applications. When you phone IRCC, the agent says, "Look, we're just overwhelmed. Don't phone us." That is the reality. I ask the minister to look into that.

On the issue around processing certificates of PR, we have yet another problem as well, where certificates of PR expired during this pandemic period and people cannot get them renewed. The IRCC agent has told us that there's no system for them to deal with this effectively. Consequently, people are stuck in limbo, unable to get to Canada. Will the minister also, then, address this issue and actually maybe just honour the expired certificates of PR so people can get on with life?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, you and I are very united in this cause. That's why we've introduced flexibilities around the COPRs by allowing them to be extended because of the disruption caused by COVID-19. That's what our plan does. It seeks to maintain the commitments to continue to grow this country through immigration, including through our express entry and family reunification programs for PR.

We've mitigated and we will continue to work through those cases where there needs to be work done.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have three constituency cases right now where people's expired certificates of PR are blocking them from getting to Canada. In fact, there's one person who's an essential worker, and the employer is a hospital. She's a registered nurse. The hospital has delayed her start time from November 2 to December 7, and now to January 4, only because they cannot get the certificate of PR renewed.

I'll contact your office with these cases and hopefully they can get resolved, but hopefully not just these cases. Just honour these certificates of PR so you can then really move forward.

I'm going to move on to another area: post-grad students. International post-grad student work permits are not renewable, and many of them are expiring or have expired. I believe the minister has received a petition with 16,000 names on it. Will the minister take the unprecedented step to extend their work permits as a COVID measure?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We recognize that international students are a group of immigrants who need support. That's why we were very pleased to revive the pathway that allows international students to pursue their education here, in conjunction with schools and provinces, so that it's done in a safe and orderly way. We're also allowing students who were here before COVID-19 arrived to extend and restore their status. We encourage them to start that process as quickly as possible.

I also just want to clarify that no international student is going to be removed by virtue alone of having an expired visa. We will allow a period of time for them to restore that status, because we recognize that COVID-19 has caused disruption.

• (1620)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Does this apply to the post-grad international students as well?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It would certainly apply for those post-graduate students who are here and who are endeavouring to secure employment.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

We will now move to Ms. Dancho for our second round of questioning.

Ms. Dancho, you have five minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, I just want to ask a few questions about your Hong Kong announcement last week.

Your officials said that those work permits, and I assume also the accelerated study permits, will begin to be available in December. Can you confirm that?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Dancho, again, your sound is not coming through very well. I apologize.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, I wonder what I should be doing here. Is there any other option?

The Chair: I'll stop the clock.

Mr. Clerk, can you look into it?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Maybe it's the microphone.

The Clerk: Our indication is that the audio at our end is fine. I've sent a message to you and to the department on how we might address this moving forward, but as far as we know, there's nothing wrong with Ms. Dancho's microphone.

The Chair: It was good with Ms. Kwan's six minutes before.

Ms. Dancho, can you please try again and we will see?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, are we restarting then? It's just that it's only happened to me. Would you mind if we restarted? I was at 17 seconds.

The Chair: Yes, you can restart.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, please let me know if you can hear me. I am going to try to talk very loudly, and we'll see if that works.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I can hear you now. It's not just you. It's happened to me on translation, so you're not the only one.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, it's been a bit of a disjointed day for all of us.

Okay, I am just going to start this again.

I am just going to ask you that again. With regard to your Hong Kong announcement a few weeks ago, your officials said that the work permits—I assume that means also those accelerated study permits—are going to be available beginning in December. Can you confirm that this will be the case?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'll reaffirm that the plan is to begin welcoming eligible applicants under this Hong Kong initiative in early 2021.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, thank you. So not until January. In January, we can expect people to start coming. Great.

I want to ask—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Just to be clear, early 2021 was my answer, Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right, so it may not be in January, but maybe in February or March. Okay, so it's not this year. Understood. Thank you.

I want to ask you about 200 young pro-democracy activists who were arrested in Hong Kong. Their travel documents were taken, and then they took a boat. They fled Hong Kong and took a boat to Taiwan, which is a 600-kilometre journey by boat. I can't imagine what that must have been like for them.

I'm just wondering.... My understanding is that they wouldn't be eligible for anything that you announced two weeks ago. Can you confirm that? Is there anything that we can do for them?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I wouldn't make that assumption, Ms. Dancho. Each of these cases will be evaluated on its merits. The point of the Hong Kong initiative is to invite an opportunity to bring talent and experience here, which we richly need for our economy.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I completely agree.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I was very pleased to be able to make that announcement.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Minister, but my question is this: How do we help them? How can we get them a study permit if they don't have access to travel documents to come here? How could they claim asylum if they can't travel here? I just don't understand what we can offer pro-democracy activists who have already fled Hong Kong to Taiwan, because it doesn't seem like we have anything. There is not even consular access in Taiwan.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I would just clarify that we have, again, one of the best asylum systems, if not the best asylum system, in the world.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: But they have to get here first. Is that correct?

• (1625)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We have continued to resettle the most urgent cases, notwithstanding the challenge of the pandemic. As I have pointed out, we have added some additional protections to the Hong Kong announcement to ensure that our asylum system upholds human rights—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Is there anything specific you can think of right now that can be done for those 200 students in Taiwan?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: What I would say, Ms. Dancho, is that we are leading the world when it comes to upholding human rights on the strength of an asylum system that has been recognized by the United Nations as being top-in-class for two years in a row.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Minister. We have to move on. I'm really not getting an answer from you, unfortunately, for those students, but we'll try another question.

You clearly said a number of times when we met last week at the China committee that no one charged under the national security law or convicted of attending a peaceful protest would be barred from coming to Canada, which I think is very good. However, there's a lot of uncertainty there, and it's been discussed in *The Globe and Mail* and in other national news, the questions that remain therein.

I'm just wondering if your declaration sort of includes these pro-democracy activists. In particular, I'm thinking about Joshua Wong, who was 17 when he started the Umbrella Movement back in 2014. I'm sure you're aware that just recently he pleaded guilty to the charge of unlawful assembly, which, as you know, is also a crime in Canada. This was in a Hong Kong courtroom. He pleaded guilty and is facing five years in prison for a crime that's, again, also a crime in Canada.

I'm just wondering what your Hong Kong announcement is going to do for Joshua Wong. Does it include something for Joshua? Is there some way that we can help him? I mean, he's exactly the type of person that your announcement should have served, but I'm not clear that it will.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Dancho, we lead the world when it comes to upholding human rights around the world through our asylum system, and each of these cases will be evaluated on its merits. It ensures that people who have the skills, the experience and the talent to come to Canada, who wish to start that next chapter of their life...and it certainly does not foreclose those who are seeking safe harbour in Canada by virtue of having—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: What should Joshua Wong do? What can he apply for? He might go to jail for five years, so is there anything he can apply for in Canada right now?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I would say, broadly speaking, that the Hong Kong initiative speaks to the opportunities and the strength of the people-to-people ties between Canada and Hong Kong, and everyone who is eligible for this program will have an opportunity to apply for it.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: So that's a no.

Thank you, Minister. We have to move on. I have to move on to my final question.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Canada-China committee, stated that Chinese Canadians who are subjected to threats or acts of intimidation at home on Canadian soil by agents of the Communist Party of China should call their local police. I wonder if, for the committee and those watching, you can walk us through how the RCMP would handle that and how that comes back to your department. Presumably it would, since many of these are immigration issues.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: What I can tell you is that we have an asylum system that is truly the best in the world. It has been recognized—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister, but the time is up.

We will now move on to Mr. Regan.

Mr. Regan, you have five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Welcome, Minister.

My understanding is that it's been necessary during the pandemic to have some modernization of the department's system and that, in some ways, the pandemic has, on the one hand, shone a light on areas where more work is needed, and on the other, led government to revise or add to measures already under way to develop an update of the system, as large and as complex as it is.

What new processes and innovations to alleviate the strain on the system from COVID have brought about the most change that you've seen? What other methods are you considering to create a more efficient system, for this time and for the future?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I thank you for the question. It allows me to again highlight many of the lessons we've learned throughout COVID-19, including our ability and our capacity to leverage technology and innovation as a means of becoming a more efficient immigration system.

Of the two that readily come to mind, one is citizenship ceremonies, which we have moved to digital, and that in no way takes away from the uniqueness and special quality of that moment. One of the best functions I get to exercise as minister is welcoming aspiring Canadians to our family of citizenship. We look forward to moving online the part of the process that requires testing, in very short order.

The other is the process of landing permanent residents. Here in particular we have taken processes that have been conventionally done exclusively on paper and through in-person meetings, and we are beginning to transition those processes into digital and virtual space. As a result, I'm very confident that, going forward, we will be even more efficient than we were prior to COVID-19.

At the end of the day, Mr. Regan, I envision an immigration system that will continue to be lauded as one of the most efficient and most integrated immigration systems in the world, as the OECD has recognized.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Minister, let me ask you about the issue of consultants. The supplementary estimates have seen an investment of \$12.4 million for the initiative of protecting people from unscrupulous consultants. It was announced in 2019. Earlier this week, there was an immigration consultant who came before the committee as a witness, who lauded the changes to the profession this will create. This person sees the government's action as a welcome step in helping newcomers.

When will the new regulatory system for immigration consultants come into effect?

• (1630)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: This is one of the mandates I've been given. We're moving full speed ahead to ensure that enforcement is there. I will say that, as a former federal prosecutor, I am always concerned about bringing to justice those predators and unscrupulous individuals who would seek to take advantage of aspiring Canadians. That is why we've invested over \$51.9 million to protect Canadians from this kind of fraud. It is an issue. It is one that we're moving with great alacrity on, and we will continue to bring them to justice so Canada continues to be a top destination of choice.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Minister, you spoke earlier about the plan to increase numbers over the next few years to make up for this year. I can tell you that Nova Scotia—and as you know, the Halifax area in particular—has been a great example of how immigration is good for our economy. I think the government has recognized we need more people, especially skilled young people, to overcome the demographic challenges we face as a country.

How do you plan to achieve these objectives?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: For one, I want to thank you for hosting me and taking me to your community to meet some of those immigrant business owners. It is their narrative and their stories that I think drive our agenda of growth through immigration forward.

That's why it's so important that we continue to invest in the Atlantic immigration pilot, where we are working so closely with local business owners who are driving solutions. It is through the collaboration of the AIP that we learn more about where those shortages are and about where the economic needs are locally. This is very important in Atlantic Canada, which is a part of the country that is aging a bit more rapidly than the rest of the country.

By having a plan that is focused on economic growth and on partnering with local business owners and chambers of commerce, so we can learn about where those shortages are, I'm confident we will be able to leverage the Atlantic immigration pilot so we are stronger than ever coming out of the pandemic.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, Minister.

I think my time is almost over, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think that's fine. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we will move on to Madame Normandin.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'll come back to the labour shortage. There are businesses in my region that have slowed down, not because of COVID-19, but because of a labour shortage. In many cases, we're talking about low-wage employees. I just want the minister to tell me if he's going to refuse to stop processing work permits and LMIA's on the grounds of high unemployment.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: This isn't correct. As I said, we are continuing to work with the Quebec government to address labour shortages. Immigration is one of the solutions right now, but we respect the skills—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. We'll have to stop the clock. There is a sound issue. I think the translators cannot hear you properly.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Is it because the minister has EarPods instead of the mike?

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, what is the issue the interpreters are having?

The Clerk: They're not receiving audio quality that's high enough, either in the clarity or in the volume. I'm not sure what we—

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: It's the EarPods. He has EarPods.

The Clerk: I can only convey what information I have, but I know that the members and the minister are doing their utmost under the circumstances. I don't want to further delay your proceedings.

The Chair: Okay.

Minister, you can start, please. Maybe try to speak a bit louder so that the interpreters can get your voice.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's not a request I receive very often, Madam Chair.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

• (1635)

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm just wondering if some of these problems are because the minister is not wearing that sort of official headset. Does he have that available?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I do, but not on this device.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm not sure that's a good excuse, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm certainly endeavouring to be as clear as I can, Ms. Dancho, and I've had the same issue with your microphone, unfortunately.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Is there nothing we can do?

The Chair: Minister, you can resume, please. Try to be a bit louder so that we can see if the interpreters can get it.

Please resume.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We'll try again.

I was saying that this isn't correct. We are continuing to work with the Quebec government to address labour shortages in the economy. Immigration is one solution.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. There is no interpretation.

Mr. Clerk, can the interpreters get the voice?

The Clerk: Where the audio quality is not sufficient for interpretation, they might be compelled to suspend service. We know that this is an issue, but unless we have different hardware and can look into that, the issue might persist for the duration of the meeting.

I'm following up with the department. We'll do our utmost to provide full support to the members and to the department and the minister's office to make sure they have everything they need for future meetings. I regret the interruptions this has caused.

The Chair: We will start again and see if we can get it.

Minister, please try again.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The other option is that I can attempt to answer in English. If the English translation will come through in French, then we can proceed that way, but I'm in the committee's hands, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Maybe you can try that. If you can speak in English and there's translation happening.... Yes, please.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: What I was saying, Ms. Normandin, is that I don't agree. We are working very closely with the Quebec government to address labour shortages in those critical parts of the economy where immigration has proven to be a lifeline. At the same time, we respect the jurisdiction of Quebec to choose its immigration levels. We will continue to collaborate with Quebec in this important area.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: From what I understand, processing of applications for work permits and LMIA's will continue.

My next question concerns the announcement about the 6,000 sponsorship applications that would be processed per month. I'd like to know how many new officers have been hired or re-assigned to process sponsorship applications.

[English]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Normandin, if you're referring to family sponsorship and reunification, we have stood up special teams for the purposes of the travel exemptions during COVID-19. As I've said, we've reunited thousands of families, which is good news.

With regard to sponsorship under the permanent residency pathways, we are going to process 49,000 applications by this year's end. My department has been working very hard. This is important work and we will continue with it.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: You were told, Mr. Minister, that the number of files processed would be increased, which implies an increase in the number of employees.

How many were hired?

[English]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We're ensuring the resources that are necessary to continue to accelerate and prioritize family reunification. That is the bottom-line commitment we have made to ensure that we get to 49,000 by this year's end, and not only that, but to continue to do more work on family reunification under our plan for 2021 to 2023. It's work that I'm very proud of.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Do I have any time left?

[English]

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: The current processing time for work permit applications is 137 days and 127 days for permanent resident card applications. This is purely administrative.

What is the minister going to do to speed up the processing of these applications?

[English]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Two of the things we are doing already are moving our processes—

• (1640)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

We will move on to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes. Please start.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Caregivers, too, have been significantly impacted by COVID. Many of them are not able to fulfill their 24-month work requirement to apply for the PR card, and some of their children are now going to age out.

Will the minister count the interrupted time towards their 24-month work requirement and freeze the age of their children so they can still apply for their PR card as a family unit?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I've said in the past, Ms. Kwan, and as you know, we have endeavoured to introduce policy flexibility to minimize the disruption of COVID-19 so that it does not count against those applicants who are endeavouring to become permanent residents.

We will continue to ensure that we take that principle and apply it to the caregiver program. Their work experience does not have to be consecutive; I would like to clarify that as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I know that, but still, they've basically lost a year, which is a significant impact. Even if the government allows them to take three years to meet the 24-month work requirement, the impact is still there and is still felt. I'm saying they should not be penalized because of COVID. I urge the minister to consider counting that interrupted time and also freezing the age of the children so they don't age out.

On a different question, regarding the processing of PRs, one of my constituents urgently needs their PR card renewed so they can visit a dying mother, or in another case, a grandparent.

We found that the processing time is three weeks and that IRCC is now only opening packages from February 10. Even if they get their package opened, they would only consider urgent processing if the person has bought an urgent ticket, which is hugely problematic, on two fronts.

What can the minister do about this situation?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said, we will continue to make progress by adding resources and leveraging technology and streamlining our processes. We have made quantum leaps, Ms. Kwan.

When it comes to landing PRs, we will endeavour to continue making progress to make up for the disruption—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, this is renewal of PRs. Will the minister ask his staff to consider processing urgent applications without having them buy a ticket so they can in fact get their application processed and visit dying family members?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Certainly we are looking at every option to minimize that disruption. For those who are trying to get here for a tragic event like a funeral or an end-of-life event, we also have the compassionate cases pathway as well, as a means to bring—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, sorry, it's the other way around—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up.

Minister, we had some disruptions. Are you okay to stay for 10 minutes so that we can finish the second round?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Of course. Yes, I'm happy to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for giving us the time.

We will go next to Mr. Hallan and then end with Mr. Dhaliwal.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming today.

My first questions will be based on some of the PR questions we get in our offices. Throughout this entire pandemic, we've seen what some may call low-skill.... We know that all work has dignity behind it. Truck drivers have been risking their lives in providing life-saving supplies to everyone from coast to coast. We're not seeing a pathway for them to PR. Is there something we can do for those people to provide a pathway for them to PR?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Hallan, for the question. As part of the immigration plan, which I tabled a little more than two weeks ago, I said that we will continue to grow through immigration. As well, I believe we have a unique opportunity to look at the workers, students and asylum seekers who are already in Canada, whose status may be temporary, as you point out, but whose contributions are lasting.

I think we are at a moment when it behooves us to determine whether or not there are ways to broaden the pathway and accelerate the pathway for those workers who are contributing in essential parts of our economy so that Canadians get all of the support they need through COVID-19.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Minister.

You know, we've heard from witnesses, and in my eyes this is very low-hanging fruit. These people, as you said, have been contributing to the Canadian economy. They pay taxes. They've contributed in many, many different ways. When we look at trying to meet the quotas, would it not make sense to target the low-hanging fruit first and give them a good pathway?

• (1645)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I think we will look at the talent and skill set within our borders and draw from a range of different skills. That will be very much part of the exercise of reaching the goals that have been set out in our immigration plan.

Certainly, the way I envision this exercise unfolding is looking at those parts of the economy and our workforce where we are in dire need. For example, in the health care sector, our doctors, our nurses, our pharmacists and our support workers have been working flat out to try to treat Canadians. I think we can take a look at that area to see whether or not we have workers, students and asylum seekers, as we have already done, and determine whether or not we can accelerate their pathway to being permanent residents.

I believe Canadians in those circumstances will broadly embrace that idea.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Moving on to grandparents and parents sponsorship, we know that a delay happened right before the pandemic even happened. Essentially, what we saw was the lottery system; that was the exact same thing that came out. Right now I'm getting a ton of questions from my constituents and people from all across about the transparency behind this program. There are just so many questions behind the criteria. When will they get some answers? How many numbers do you guys have so far?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I appreciate the question. It allows me to highlight just how unique and one-of-a-kind the parent and grandparent program is around the world. It's a program that contributes to our already historic work on family reunification.

I'm also proud of the fact, Mr. Hallan, that we have been able to keep this program going notwithstanding COVID-19. As a result, we have 40,000 allocated spaces over the next two years, the greatest number over that period of time, and it's a very important step—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: But do we have any timelines around that, Minister? Most of the anxiety from the people constantly messaging me and calling me is based on the fact that there's no timeline. They don't know what's going on right now. It was closed weeks ago. They just don't know what's going on right now. There's no transparency.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Our intention is to begin to ensure that people are made aware, but it is important that we continue to reunite families. The parent and grandparent program and the 40,000 allocated spaces over the next two years are a demonstration of our commitment to bring many loved ones together throughout the pandemic.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I'd like to defer my last question to Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, can you confirm how much time I have left?

The Chair: You have 31 seconds.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Minister, I just wanted to confirm what the process is.

If someone—a Chinese Canadian—is being intimidated by a Chinese Communist operative on Canadian soil and they report to the local police, what happens after that concerning your department? I want you to be clear on this.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, if a complaint is lodged with law enforcement, it will be up to law enforcement to investigate. For any other issues regarding immigration, we work very closely with the public safety enforcement agencies to ensure that all national security issues are addressed.

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

We will now move on to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you have five minutes, and that will end the round with the minister.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the minister and the officials for the hard work they do even during these pandemic situations.

Minister, I want to commend you for another thing, which is clearing the mess the Conservatives left, particularly if we look at the waiting times for the parents and grandparents class. It took almost seven years under the Conservatives and now it's come down to two years. On the spousal cases, it was taking more than two years and you brought it down to under one year. Not only that, Minister, but when I look at the number of applications your department accepted, it's four times more than what the Conservatives were accepting—5,000 versus 30,000 next year. This is a credit to you, Minister, on that.

Minister, I also want to echo Mr. Hallan's idea on the low-skilled occupations—not only trucks drivers, but also the front-line workers, tradespeople and many of the other trades. I would love to see you and your department find a way for these temporary workers to obtain a pathway to permanent residency, even though in 2019, 74,586 out of 340,000 permanent immigrants were temporary workers.

The other question I have for you, Minister, is this. Just last week, I had the opportunity to meet with members of the United Refugee Council Canada and heard their concerns on behalf of refugees who have been in Canada for many years. Many of them are working on the front lines—in food processing, the trucking industry and health care—and all those can also speak English and French very fluently.

I would like to see you find a path for them to become temporary workers, and then from the temporary worker status ultimately towards a path to permanent residency. Would you see if it can be done?

• (1650)

The Chair: We can't hear you, Minister, sorry. Are you hearing us?

Mr. Clerk, is it anything from our end or from the minister's?

The Clerk: We understand that the audio on our end is fine. It might be the battery at his end.

The Chair: Minister, we can't hear you. Is it the battery from your end, as the clerk is saying?

The Clerk: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. I'm limited from where I am to further assist. I regret this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, maybe we can add something in the chat box. Maybe he can't hear us either. Maybe send him a message.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, can one of the Liberal MPs call the minister and ask him if his battery is the problem? Can somebody do something about this, please?

The Chair: Yes. Let me find out.

The minister can't hear us either, so he will disconnect and then connect back. We will just do one last try, and then we will proceed.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Chair, while we wait, I'd like to move that the committee vote on a motion. It would be to ask the minister that his next appearance before the committee be in person or, otherwise, that he use the headset provided by the House.

[English]

The Chair: What we will do at the end, after we hear from the second panel.... Let him log in. Otherwise, we will look into another option.

He's logging in. Let's see.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Hello?

The Chair: Yes, we can hear you.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Eureka, Madam Chair. It's wonderful to be back.

The Chair: Did you hear Sukh's question?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Unfortunately, I caught just the first part of it and did not hear the tail end, but if you can summarize it, I'd be happy to respond.

The Chair: Okay.

Sukh, can you quickly summarize?

• (1655)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Minister, basically I said that I echo Jasraj's comment, but not limiting it only to the truck drivers. In fact, there are many front-line workers, tradespeople and the transport industry that all provide valuable services. Can you see if you can help those temporary workers to gain a pathway to permanent residency, even though in 2019 only 22% of permanent immigration came through the temporary stream?

The second question I asked was in regard to.... Just last week, I had the opportunity to meet with the members of United Refugee Council Canada, along with Anju Dhillon, and heard their concerns on behalf of the refugees who have been in Canada for many years. Many of them are working and are in front-line food processing, health care and transport, and they can speak French and English fluently. I would like to see if you and your department can find a pathway from being a refugee asylum seeker to the temporary worker stage, and ultimately to a path to permanent residency.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Dhaliwal, and thank you for your advocacy as well.

As I said, we're at a very critical moment where we can look at many groups within Canada, as a result of the measures that we've had to take at the border throughout the pandemic, to see for those who are contributing to COVID-19 in the essential sectors whether or not there is a way to accelerate their pathway to becoming permanent residents. That includes workers, students and, as you pointed out, asylum seekers.

I know that your advocacy has been instrumental in putting forward some of these proposals. I look forward to working with you and all the members of the House on continuing to ensure that immigration will drive our economic recovery coming out of the pandemic, and our long-term prosperity.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Madam Chair, do I have two more minutes?

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Minister, again, I commend your work on the PGP stream and the 30,000 applications that you are going to take next year. Are you going to see a different stream that will satisfy a lot of people who have issues with the lottery system?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As you know, the parent and grandparent program is an important demonstration of our government's commitment to reuniting families, with 40,000 spaces over the next three years, the most ever for that period of time.

I know that there are questions raised sometimes about the way in which we receive expressions of interest. As I said, I've always kept an open mind to ensure that we are creating a level playing field for what is a very popular, high-in-demand route or pathway

to reuniting families. I look forward to working with you and all members on this issue.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Again, thank you, Minister, for all the great work that you have done in cleaning up the mess that the Conservatives left behind.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Dhaliwal.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I'm sorry about all those issues we had from our end or your end. We'll make sure that we look into those next time.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I think we should have a bit of a discussion about the next time the minister comes to committee so that he has the proper equipment. Can he commit to that?

Maybe that will resolve some of these problems, but otherwise, I don't really know what we're all doing here if we're not going to have the equipment that we're being sent. I know it's not pleasant to wear, but we all commit to wearing it when we're doing virtual Parliament. If the minister has come unprepared—and I suspect that's part of the problem—can he commit for the next time he comes, in December, to having proper equipment?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Dancho, I've used this equipment to appear before committee. It's worked reliably up until today, but of course I'm always prepared to work with you and all members of the House to ensure that we can have a good conversation, as we did today. I thank you for your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we will end this panel. We will suspend for a minute so that we can allow the officials to be with us in the second panel, and if there is any sound check to be done the clerk can do that.

Thank you, Minister, on behalf of all the committee members. Thanks a lot for appearing before the committee.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much.

• (1700)

The Chair: I'll suspend for a minute so that the clerk can have [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] if there is any sound check to be done.

• (1700)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1700)

The Chair: For the second panel, we have the officials. We will not have opening statements. We will move into the round of questioning and we will start with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Dancho, you have six minutes for your round of questioning. Please start.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the officials for being with us today.

I have a question about expired COPRs. All members of Parliament, I'm sure, are getting bombarded with this, as I am. I know that the NDP and the Bloc members have mentioned this as well. I want to know how this is working. My understanding is that they were permanent residents who were approved. They've sold their homes, sold their businesses, bought their plane tickets and were scheduled to come to the country, and then the borders closed. Now they've been stranded in their home countries since the borders closed in March and their COPRs have since expired.

My understanding is that what could be done is that the minister's office and the Department of Immigration could provide an authorization letter to those with expired COPRs. Is that correct?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: If I may, Madam Chair, I will just back up slightly.

With many who have expired COPRs, these were issued before March 18. They are authorized to travel, but for many reasons, including conditions at home, they have chosen not to travel and not to come. Now their COPRs have expired and we are working to find a way to put them back into validity.

We've worked through two populations. We worked first through families who are in this situation, and now we're working through the economic class who find themselves in this situation, because we would very much like them to land.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

I don't necessarily agree. My understanding, from those who have contacted me, is that it's not been up to them. They have wanted to come here since March, but they need an authorization letter or something of that nature, is what we're being told. If they didn't need certain paperwork from your department and from the minister, they would be already here, but they're stranded in a country of origin with no home and running out of savings. I'm not clear why there's nothing being done for them.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Well, there's lots being done. Typically, confirmation of permanent residence is valid for about 12 months. There are some changes, but it's about 12 months, and those have expired. What we're doing now is a process. We go back through, individually, to reach out to contact people and to issue additional letters so that people can travel and people can come.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I don't mean to keep hammering on this, but my understanding is that they do need this authorization letter and they're not receiving it from you, and it's been nine months. I'm just wondering what the holdup is. You're saying you prioritize families before singles. Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: The issue with expired confirmation of permanent residence is that they haven't all expired at the same time, so we're working our way through. One thing we've done is define a pathway so that we can issue a new letter. We can reissue things inside of our global case management system so that people

can arrive at the border and be welcomed to Canada, which is what we want.

Now we've had to go back through this. We haven't really dealt with expired COPRs before, so we're reaching out individually. It's a pretty labour-intensive process. We're making sure that people still intend to travel, because some people who have let their confirmations expire do not intend to travel, for a variety of reasons. For those who do, we want to be able to turn that back on and issue the letter and move it through. We've been moving through them since September.

I'm just going to double-check with Mr. Mills on that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I see him nodding.

Sorry, just to confirm, you mentioned that you were first focusing on families and now others. Are you focusing by region at all? Are there any specific areas of the world that you're looking at first, and others that you're not?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'll double-check with Mr. Mills on that, but no, we're going through them, I think, really in order of how the files have come to us.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

I'm going to switch topics to adoption for my last few minutes. I'm sure you're very familiar with the Muth family and the Thiessen family, and a number of other families that were caught in the middle of this pandemic. They were stranded abroad when they were trying to adopt children in Africa.

What we've heard from these individuals is that they felt abandoned by their government. I know the Muth family was there. They just got home now. I believe they were there since December, so it was nearly a year. They hadn't heard anything for six months. They had to have a media campaign, email campaigns. It was the same with the Thiessens, who were not quite as badly off as the Muths, but at the same time did not hear anything for months.

Given what's happened with this pandemic, is your department planning to do a comprehensive review of how Canadian parents are treated when they go abroad to adopt children? We're hearing that couples in the Netherlands received documentation much more quickly, were in a very similar situation with border closures, and yet they were able to return to the Netherlands very quickly.

Are you considering a comprehensive review of how you treat adoptive parents?

• (1705)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, thanks for the question.

International adoptions are a complicated business because so much depends on the host country. The member is right; it is causing us to look at how we work through our business and what we do. I hope we can continue to do things a little more smoothly.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

Just to conclude, my understanding was that—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: —there was no confirmation, no communication from the Canadian government to them for about a year. I don't think that's a foreign problem, but thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

We will move on to MP Serré. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the departmental officials for the long hours they work. Canadians are very proud of our immigration system.

We have heard from Collège Boréal and other francophone organizations that we are having difficulty in meeting immigration targets.

Are there things we can do, as a country, to increase francophone immigration targets for people from African or francophone countries around the world? What can we do, as a government, to ensure that more francophones settle throughout Canada?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I greatly appreciate the question. I'm from New Brunswick.

Is there a problem?

Mr. Marc Serré: No, it's fine.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We've made a change in our express entry system. We have given more points to candidates who speak French or are bilingual.

[*English*]

I think this will make a big difference for those coming through, particularly international students who come through Canadian institutions, and those additional points will help raise their point score within express entry and let them land, let them become permanent residents in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: It was mentioned several times that international students come to Canada. What more can be done to ensure that these students stay here and become permanent residents of Canada?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

With the opportunity that the 401,000 target brings for us for next year, I think there are many things we can look at with respect to students in terms of pathways to permanent residence. We're analyzing those right now. However, I'll remind you that 25% of those economic immigrants who landed last year had been here as inter-

national students or had Canadian student experience, and I think that's really positive.

The other item, if may, Madam Chair, is the tremendous work we have done to try to make sure that students can continue to study in Canada and that their time continues to count to the post-graduation work permit. We work very closely with colleges and universities and with provinces and territories to find ways around this, so that we can maintain Canada as a destination of choice for international students.

• (1710)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

Can you talk a bit about the process for the provincial nominee program? For example, in Ontario, there are roughly 6,700 positions or placements, but in northern Ontario, we get 50. We get very few from the provincial nominee program; thus, we set up the national pilot project for immigration in rural areas. I want to thank the officials for doing that quickly in the last year or so.

Can you comment on the provincial nominee program and some of the limitations we have on that, and then, with respect to the comments on rural immigration, how we can expand that program?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, thank you for that.

The provincial nominee programs continue to work really well. In this COVID time, where processing has been challenging—our border has closed—we are overprocessing, so to speak, around provincial nominee programs. I'm happy to see those numbers and to see how it's working. However, I believe that the member is correct. In many cases, the provincial nominee programs still create some problems with moving more immigrants and new Canadians out to rural communities and to smaller centres.

On the new pilot that we have in place, we are really pleased, and the first results are starting to come in now. We have a lot of experience with the Atlantic pilot. The first results under the rural and northern pilot are starting to come in, and they're very promising.

The next one to come will be the municipal nominee program. We've spent this period consulting and working with municipalities and PTs. I'm optimistic that we should be able to launch something soon, and to work with municipalities to have this up and running.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you for all the work you do.

I believe my time is up.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, MP Serré.

We will now move on to Madame Normandin.

Madame Normandin, you have six minutes. The floor is yours.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses who are on site. I hope to have a little more clarity than I had for my last questions.

I'll come back to the issue of LMIA's. There is currently a directive on the Government of Canada website that says that if you are looking for a work permit for a restaurant or retail business in an area where the unemployment rate is over 6%, the application will not be processed.

Are you aware of any other areas that may soon be covered by the same ministerial directive?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, I'm going to ask Ms. Campbell Jarvis to answer that.

Ms. Marian Campbell Jarvis (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question.

In the COVID context, we are triaging how we are looking at the work permit application, starting, obviously, with health and other essential services. It doesn't mean that other work permits are not being looked at, but there is a triage in the pandemic context.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My second question is about processing the IMM0006. We have heard that it takes 14 business days to process them, which then became 21 business days. When we call the immigration officers, they say that they don't have access to the files. As members of Parliament, we cannot have access to the information for our constituents.

Will the situation be resolved soon?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

[English]

The standard is 14 days. I am sorry for any confusion that has been relayed to you on the part of the call centre. We are pleased that we have the service standard back within the 14 days. I think it's 11 days and eight days, depending on which category we're looking at.

We have had to create a special program to do this. We've received about 50,000 email inquiries or email applications for family reunification. Not each of those represents a specific case, but each of them needs to be looked at and examined. For us, part of the problem—or part of the opportunity—that this provides is that a lot of them deal with U.S. clients, who typically are not clients who come into the global case management system. We've had to stand up something special to be able to do this.

We now have close to 100 decision-makers working on this. We have increased overtime considerably around this to make sure that those service standards stay within the time.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My next question is very specific. If, however, you don't have the answer now, I would very much appreciate a written answer in the future.

If I look at the statistics for 2019, I see that approximately 20,000 applications for permanent residence were processed per month in the economic class, which includes Quebec skilled workers. During the crisis, in April, the number of applications went from 20,000 to 1,000. Then, in May, the situation improved to almost 6,000 applications. In June, almost 10,000 applications were processed, but the number subsequently dropped to 2,000.

Why did the processing of skilled worker applications for permanent residence stopped?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

I will ask Mr. Mills to answer it.

Mr. Daniel Mills: Thank you for the question.

Actually, we have not stopped processing Quebec's applications. When we resumed our activities in May and June, we were ready to finalize a lot of decisions and files, because we were processing a lot of applications before the pandemic, as you mentioned. Many were therefore almost fully processed and we were able to complete them when we resumed our activities. That is why there was a significant increase at the beginning.

Subsequently, with the reintegration into the workplace during the summer and the amount of paper files, we had to reorganize our resources and limit the number of people who could be physically on site and there was a drop in productivity.

However, I can assure you that all files in Quebec are being processed at the pace that our capacity allows.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

As for the fact that employees were unable to work, I know that the members could not hear cases until July and August. Since they received their full pay in spite of everything, was it suggested or requested that those who had accumulated vacation or sick leave use it first during the crisis?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

[English]

Just to be clear, when it comes to the Immigration and Refugee Board, it's arm's length from IRCC. Therefore, I'll leave that for another time, when you have Mr. Wex before you.

From our own perspective, we have worked hard to make sure that employees are equipped and able—

The Chair: Madame Tapley, I am sorry for interrupting. Your time is up, so we will have to move on to Ms. Kwan now.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

First, I wonder if the deputy can advise me. Have all the offices, locally and abroad, resumed their operations, and which offices are not operating at their capacity from prior to the pandemic?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks for the question.

I'll start domestically, in Canada. All our offices have resumed operations, but as you can imagine, it fluctuates up and down and we don't all have in-person capacity at the same level as pre-pandemic. For example, in Vancouver, we're at about 30% capacity of people working in the office. The rest have now been equipped to work from home and we're working through that.

We've resumed some of our in-person services, but just this week we've had to make some changes and adjust our protocols for those who have now moved within critical zones. For employees working in our Mississauga office or working in Calgary or Edmonton, we've now had to reduce our footprint for in-person offices that are—

• (1720)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps the deputy can provide a list to the committee so that we know what offices are at what capacity, doing what, and who's working at home and who's working at the office. Thank you.

Of course, part of the issue is that the applications need to be taken from the mailroom and then input into the system. Is there a dedicated stream of people who are doing that work for all the different mailrooms?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: The short answer is yes.

The longer answer is, boy, would I ever love a system that was able to digitize files so that we could move them around more quickly, but we have people back in. We are moving through the accumulated files that have been there that are paper-based files. We have also reached out to add some additional capacity by a third party to help us PDF-fy, or digitize, those files so that we can move them around the network more seamlessly and also work on them from home.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I want to follow up on my question to the minister on the expired PR cards. He seemed not to understand my question.

My situation is that when people's expired PR cards are not being renewed and they are here in Canada, if they need to go visit loved

ones who are dying and very ill, they are reluctant to leave the country, for obvious reasons. There seems not to be an ability to process these applications quickly. There's no urgent processing, because they can't get through the mailroom, and even if they do, my constituents have been told that they have to have a plane ticket in order to get their application expedited.

What can we do about that?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I am happy to look into that and the issue around a plane ticket. The member is correct. This is one of those cases. These are paper applications. They're in Sydney. We're trying to work through them as quickly as we can, and we will certainly look into the issue of people being told about the plane ticket.

Mr. Mills, do you want to add anything?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We have allocated resources to deal with the situation. However, as the deputy minister said, we are talking about paper applications and they are in Sydney, Nova Scotia. There were other priorities and we had to adjust our operations.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll be in touch with the deputy about these cases, because people cannot buy a ticket. It is very expensive and now, as we know, they can't get refunds. When they don't get their card, they can't travel and they don't get refunds, and that's a huge problem at this time.

I want to go quickly to a question about post-grad students. Is the minister saying that people with post-grad work permits that are expiring will have implied status or have their work permit renewed? They are not allowed to be renewed. Is the minister saying that they are now able to be renewed as a COVID measure?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I guess it's one step at a time with students. We worked our way through making sure that you're still eligible for your time overseas to be included with the post-graduate work permit. We've worked through designated learning institutions. We're now at a point where we can welcome students back into the country with appropriate plans on the other side.

The next steps will be some of the issues that are now coming up on post-graduate work permits that are expiring. People have been affected by the pandemic and not been able to work as much as they would have liked or in their chosen profession. That's a problem that we're examining now.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, is the deputy saying that the minister's suggesting that they will not have their status expire is incorrect? What does it mean?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Perhaps I misunderstood, Ms. Kwan, but I think what the minister said is that some type of implied status will be there while we work our way through what the most appropriate way to look at this problem is—Is it to extend the work permit? How big is it?—just as we're able to put things around it.

● (1725)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Those with expired work permits will not be deported; they will not lose their status. They can just stay here and wait until the government has sorted out extending their work permit. These are for post-grad international students.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, can I just get a quick answer on that?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that yes or no?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: With that, the first round comes to an end.

Based on the time we have left—we have to vote in the end, and we have a little committee business—we can have two minutes for each party. We have Mr. Saroya, and then Ms. Martinez Ferrada, Madame Normandin and Madame Kwan. Each member will have two minutes.

We can start with Mr. Saroya, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the panel.

Deputy Minister, this is a typical day. I've seen two people on the decision-making of the immigration department. One of them is working here. The security is checked, everything is checked, but the decision has been pending for a number of months. The second one was a parent-sponsoring case going back to 2013. The whole thing is done, from what I understand from calling your office and calling the immigration office.

When will these decisions be made for these people? This is a typical day for us on the front line here.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think it depends on a number of circumstances. One is that we tried to put a priority on processing for those who are here or who can land. If cases were approved before March 18, to have them come here on March 18, whether people are in Canada and are able to stay in Canada.... Those have tended to be the priorities that we've placed, whether it's on family or whether it's economic.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Those people with the file sitting since 2013, I'm not sure what to tell them. Is there anything you can advise me to tell them? It's the parent application.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: If it's a parent application, I'm very sorry to hear that it's been sitting since 2013.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Yes.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: There may be an issue around a specific case, and we are happy to follow up on that.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Okay.

Question number two is about the provincial nomination program. A number of people and a number of employers are here, especially in Ontario. Every restaurant, every transportation agency, Uber, you name it, is done by students and temporary foreign workers. In real life, is there anything the Department of Immigration can do to get them citizenship?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: This is an interesting question, and the—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up, and I have to move on to the next person.

Now we have Madame Martinez Ferrada.

You have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My thanks to the officials from the department for joining us today.

I would like to congratulate you for all the work that you have been doing since the beginning of the pandemic. It must have been extremely demanding for IRCC's activities.

I have two quick questions.

The 2019 annual report shows the highest number of family reunifications ever recorded, at 91,311 people. Is it possible to send the committee members a record of family reunifications over the past five years? We would like to see how this has evolved over the past five years. That is my first question.

Second, I would like to come back to IRCC's operational challenge. You talked about digitizing and modernizing your operations. I would like to give you an opportunity to tell the committee members how important this is for the future.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I would be happy to forward the numbers to the committee.

Thank you very much for asking the second question.

● (1730)

[*English*]

We have a legacy IT system. That's the global case management system. It has served us well. In 2019, we managed to hit records in all our categories. However, it's a system that was built when VHS was cutting-edge technology, and we're in a Netflix world.

The pandemic has shown us that when you have digital files, and part of our operations are digital—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

We will move to Madame Normandin.

Madame Normandin, you have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Tapley, I would like to take the time to thank you for the clarity and precision of your answers. It is much appreciated.

We have heard from a number of people about their problems because of the current closure of visa offices and embassies. International workers and students are not able to obtain their biometric data. That's often the only thing missing from their files.

What is your position on the possibility of having their biometrics collected when they arrive in Canada in some cases?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

[English]

As a rule, it's important that biometrics are done and are used as something to confirm identity. It's important that this happens before people come to the country. We use this as a security feature.

However, we understand well the frustrations, because many of our visa application centres have been closed. I'm happy to say that most of them have reopened. This week has been important. Visa application centres in India reopened this week. This is a big deal. There will be two priorities in India, one for students and the other for family. We will be able to work through the biometrics in India for those two in our visa application centres so that we can complete those applications.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Some constituents and foreign workers have told us that they could not be reimbursed for their permit applications. It was for landscaping work and their file was processed too late. Their permit is no longer useful to them now, because there is no lawn to mow in November.

What is the department on the issue of refunding applications that were processed too late to be of use?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I am not sure, but I think this is an Employment and Social Development Canada issue.

[English]

The Chair: With that, your time is up. Thank you.

We will move on to our last round of questioning.

Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'd like to go back to the issue of the certificate of PR. The deputy said there's a system in place. Our experience so far is that whenever we phone about a case like this, we get contradictory information. Sometimes we're told to go through this process. Other times we're told to go through a different process.

This comes from the Toronto Star:

According to an immigration department spokesperson, 15,786 applicants who received their visas before March 19 have had their documents expire as of the end of October. About 2,700 principal applicants filled out the webform and more than 120 received authorization.

As you can see, this is indeed very labour-intensive. The person has to contact IRCC and sometimes go through several web forms before anybody responds to them in order to try to get their certificate of PR renewed and to get that authorization letter happening. What about giving yourselves a break and actually moving forward with a process of giving people a letter automatically? If they don't need it, they won't use it. It doesn't harm the system. That way, peo-

ple can in fact get through quickly with the authorization so that they can come to Canada.

Is that being considered?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, as the member has described.... We flipped it on its head. Now we're reaching out to contact people individually to ascertain whether or not they want to come, to issue the letters and to work through the problem that way.

On this point, it may be frustrating that it's taking us a few weeks to do this, but I think in the end it's probably better client service and I think it's probably better for the Canada Border Services Agency as well, just in terms of having that certainty.

Mr. Mills, do you want to comment as well?

• (1735)

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Thank you for the question.

We have contacted people directly. We still have about 7,000 people to contact. We are trying to have a more dynamic and effective strategy to communicate with them, whether by email—

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The whole point is that it's very labour-intensive, so finding a way to do it so it's less labour-intensive and more efficient for scarce resources—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the time is up.

If there are any clarifications, Madame Deputy Minister, that you or your officials would like to provide, you can provide them to us after the meeting.

With that, our second panel comes to an end and we will have to vote on the main and supplementary estimates. I want to thank all our officials for appearing before the committee today. On behalf of all the members, I want to thank you for all the hard work that you have always been doing, but especially during this pandemic. I know you have been working very hard to make sure that you can serve the needs of all Canadians and those who are planning to come to Canada as new immigrants.

Thank you to all the officials.

We will now have to vote on the main estimates for 2020-21.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....1,053,523,784

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....16,071,270

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....1,553,909,417

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....254,185,563

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Now, we will move on to the voting on the supplementary estimates (B) for 2020-21.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....49,470,463

Vote 5b—Capital expenditures.....3,619,117

Vote 10b—Grants and contributions.....270,548,189

(Votes 1b, 5b and 10b agreed to on division)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1b—Program expenditures.....1,905,000

(Vote 1b agreed to on division)

The Chair: With that, we come to the end of voting.

We will now move into committee business for a few minutes. I wanted to have members' input on the meetings for next week. The officials can leave. Thank you once again, and we hope to see you sometime soon.

Mr. Clerk, are we okay to move on to committee business?

• (1740)

The Clerk: Yes, by all means, but if you could ask if the committee wishes you to report the main and supplementary estimates to the House, that would be helpful for our records, please.

The Chair: Thank you.

Would the committee like me to report the votes on the main estimates and the supplementary estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, we will do that.

Now we will go to committee business.

As all the members know, the fiscal update will be on Monday, November 30, at 4 p.m. Our committee also happens at that time, so I wanted to have everyone's input on whether all of you want me to proceed with scheduling the meeting on November 30, or whether the members would like to attend the fiscal update and we should not have the meeting. Rescheduling that meeting would not be possible, because it doesn't seem that we have more spots available to reschedule the meeting at some other time.

Is there any discussion or any input from the members? I will go as the majority of the members wish.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, can you confirm whether we have witnesses on Monday? My understanding was that there were some issues with witnesses on Monday.

The Chair: We have scheduled the witnesses.... I can ask the clerk to please clarify.

The Clerk: The committee has confirmed six witnesses and is in the process of confirming a seventh for November 30.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, I think that if we have six witnesses confirmed and we're not able to reschedule that meeting it would not be polite or respectful to those witnesses. I believe we should have that meeting on Monday, but I'm open for discussion. Those are my two cents.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho, for your input.

It's open for discussion if anyone wants to say anything further on that.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Madam Chair, I think Madame Kwan has had her hand raised for quite a while.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Madame Kwan. I didn't see you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No worries. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Just to offer my thoughts, I understand that on the one hand it would be good to be able to listen to the economic update, but on the other hand we also have a lot of work before the committee. If there's no way to reschedule the meeting, either by finding another date to replace this committee meeting or by adding hours to lengthen existing meetings to make up for this time, I would be very reluctant to cancel the meeting, just because we have so much work ahead of us.

Then of course, as Ms. Dancho indicated, witnesses have already been lined up, so I think that would be a challenge as well.

If there's no way to reschedule, then I would not want to see us cancel the meeting.

The Chair: Mr. Allison, did you want to say something?

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Normally, when there is a fiscal update, we should probably attend that, but given the fact.... I'm going to agree with Ms. Kwan and Ms. Dancho. If we already have witnesses scheduled, I would be inclined to hear the witnesses, given the fact that we're under some tight timelines and we are unable to reschedule. That's my two cents.

The Chair: Is there anyone else?

As it appears from the discussion, I think we will go ahead with our meeting on Monday. It is scheduled for 3:30. Are there any further comments?

Mr. Clerk, you can schedule the Monday meeting.

Thank you to all the members for understanding that and agreeing that we move ahead with Monday's meeting.

I apologize to you for any technical issues we had. I will work with the minister's office to make sure that the next time he appears we don't have these technical issues.

Thank you to all the members once again.

The meeting is adjourned.

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