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Chair

The Honourable Andrew Telegdi

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.)): I would like to call these hearings to order and let you know that the citizenship and immigration committee is almost at the end of our cross-Canada consultations. The issues we are dealing with are citizenship, recognition of international credentials, and family reunification. Today we'll be talking about citizenship.

I'm going to call on Alexa McDonough to say welcoming words to her part of the world, which is very beautiful. I just loved the view out of my hotel window this morning when I woke up and saw the bay and the boats going back and forth.

Alexa.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm really delighted to have an opportunity to be here this morning with the committee. I'm not the regular representative of my party on this committee. Bill Siksay, a hard-working member from the west coast, is, but I'm very happy today to be substituting for him.

I have the pleasure of welcoming not only the committee's chair to our beautiful city and province, but also the hard-working members of this committee's staff, which is really a very important part of the continuity in the work the committee does. I'm very delighted to be here to hear from witnesses who have many important perspectives to bring to bear on the particular issues we're dealing with. I look forward to hearing from you, as I'm sure the others do as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We were here actually last Tuesday, but we didn't think we were going to be here, because we thought we had to go back to the vote in the House of Commons, as you know. Last week we had six members here, but all the speculation about an election makes it difficult to get the members to leave their home ridings. It's great to be here.

We're going to ask you to speak for about five minutes, and then we'll go into questions and answers. Or you can go to seven; once you're approaching that time I'll just let you know, because usually you find that the questions and answers really help to shed light on things. I'm going to start off with Mr. Martin.

Mr. Stuart Martin (As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for being here for us this morning.

I'll just read the presentation I have, and then we can go into whatever after that.

My earliest memories are of Armstrong Court on Ferry Street in Sydney. This is where my grandmother lived and where my mother and I arrived from England in 1946.

The Chair: Could you move a little closer to the mike?

Mr. Martin Stuart: I was five months old. My mother and I arrived on the *Queen Mary*, accompanied by, as she would have it, most of the Canadian army returning home to Canada. I still have her original travel document with my name on it, with a landing stamp from Pier 21 in Halifax.

I started school in Sydney at Sacred Heart. Unfortunately, it's not there any more; it was torn down about two years ago. It was good to see it, but I was sorry to see it go. My father, Granger Martin, joined the army the day the Second World War broke out. He joined the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery and was stationed in Sydney. He eventually was sent to England, where he transferred to 2 Forward Observation Unit, Royal Artillery, which was a division of the 6th Airborne Division. They were stationed in Winterbourne Dauntsey, where he met my mother. He married my mother before returning to Canada after the war was over. She would have been pregnant with me at the time, and she waited for the birth before travelling.

My father had some difficulty settling down after the war. We were in Westmount for a short time, and then moved to Point Edwards, where he was in the naval fire service, and we eventually came full circle and went back to Armstrong Court on Ferry Street after my father took a job at the steel plant in Sydney. Growing up down by the tar ponds was hardly ideal by modern standards, but I still have fond memories of the place.

My father re-joined the army in the early 1950s, and from Sydney was sent down to Hammond's Plains here in Halifax. By now the family was growing, and there were seven children by 1955, plus my mother and father, both living in a very small army quarter in what was then the middle of nowhere. From Hammond's Plains we were posted back to Sydney, and my father for one reason or another took accommodation at Glace Bay for the family. We were at 407 Third Street in New Aberdeen. This was a mining community at that time, and we went to school at St. Joseph's. In 1958, my brother Granger, who was six years old at the time, was hit by a truck coming home from school and was killed, and he's buried in one of the local cemeteries in Glace Bay.

In 1959 my father was to be posted to the Northwest Territories, and it was then that a decision was taken to move the family back to England. My father left the army, and that same year my mother, who was pregnant with my youngest brother, flew with four children to England, and my father and I and three brothers and sisters sailed for England on board the RMS *Saxonia*.

I was twelve years old at the time, and England was a complete shock to the system. Everything was different. The country was still recovering from the effects of the war. Although we moved from a very depressed area in Canada, we were a lot worse off.

My father could not find work, and there were no houses to be had, so the family was split up, farmed out to various aunts and uncles and friends of the family in the village. I ended up with an uncle in Eastleigh, a small town outside Southampton, over two hours away by bus. School in England was a nightmare, and I struggled until I left at the age of fourteen, a little better off than the grade eight I left in Canada. Unable to do anything better than farm work, by the age of fifteen and a half I joined the army as a boy soldier.

I was a bit of an oddity, being a Canadian in the British army. This changed, however, when I was asked if I had a passport and I replied that I had not, but as a Canadian maybe it would be difficult for me to get one. Of course, when they looked at my birth certificate they told me I was British. I certainly didn't feel British, nor did I want to be British. I was a Canadian.

Catch-22 is a world away from describing my life from then on, including my attempts to re-establish my identity as a Canadian. I spent the next 25 years in the British army. I signed on as a boy of fifteen for nine years with the regular army and three years with the reserve, and by the time I was old enough to understand what I had done, it was too late. By the time I had done my nine years I figured another three would be okay, and by the time I had served twelve it seemed foolish to leave without a pension, so I just stayed on.

I've seen active service in South Yemen, in four tours of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, and in the Falklands war. I left the army in 1986 and went to work at the local hospital as the voice communications technician, where I fell into a bit of a rut. I've always wanted to come back home to Canada, so I wrote to Immigration in 1993 to inquire about my status and was told that I had lost my citizenship. There was no leave to appeal, no grey area; the law had changed, and that was it—period.

They did say, however, that I could come to Canada—see the letter I have submitted with my testimony—live here for a year, and then claim my citizenship back in the normal fashion.

●(0910)

The important thing here that escaped my attention was legal entry. This means “landed”, and if you're not an immigration expert or a citizenship expert these little words have meanings that are not at all obvious to the ordinary person. So I came over on a holiday, just to see what the old place looked like and take a look around, and met up with an old friend of mine who had just gone through a divorce. During the holiday we decided that I should come back to live.

Armed with this same letter, I went to London to the Canadian embassy, where I had been several times before with my mother. After spending over four hours in the rain queuing just to get in, I eventually arrived at a wicket. I explained to the man behind the glass that I intended to go to Canada, get work, get a work permit—I had a job already lined up with the commissionaires—and qualify to regain my citizenship. He smiled and wished me good luck.

So I sold my house and car, put my personal effects in a part container, and flew to Halifax, where I was issued with a visitor's visa on arrival. The first thing I did was apply for a work permit, and so filled in the forms and sent them down to Buffalo for processing. Buffalo sent them back, saying I would have to get the job at the commissionaires validated. I didn't know at the time, but HRDC will not deal with an individual when it comes to job validation. This is done by the employer.

It very soon became obvious that there was a history between HRDC and the commissionaires, and that this job would not be validated. The rules are quite clear: if the job can be done by a Canadian, HRDC will not validate it.

This was obviously something I did not know, and now unable to work I was left in something of a quandary. I went to see Joan Faulkner, who was MP Geoff Regan's aide at Bedford. She had a lot of knowledge about immigration and advised me to apply for landing under the common-law category, which would be the quickest way for me to get landed. There being apparently no other avenues open to me, I waited for 12 months to qualify as a common-law applicant and then applied for a permanent resident's card. This application took another 12 months to complete.

My attempt to come home has cost me two years of my life and about \$100,000, when you take into consideration two years of lost wages and two years of living expenses—all this because my citizenship was taken away from me without my knowledge. My father never took British citizenship, and as I had travelled on his passport I was certainly Canadian when we arrived in England. The rest of my family are all Canadians and would not have had the same problems coming home as I had. Even issuing a temporary work permit would have alleviated some of my problems. I could have at least supported myself during my two years of waiting. It seems to me to be a shame that my father fought for his country to maintain freedoms and liberties that were stripped from his eldest son at the stroke of a pen.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to go on to Marjorie Stone.

Ms. Marjorie Stone (Co-Director, Atlantic Metropolis Centre): Thank you, and thanks to the committee for making a space for representatives of the Atlantic Metropolis Centre.

My name is Marjorie Stone. I'm one of the three co-directors of the Atlantic Metropolis Centre. With me today are Dr. Ather Akbari, a professor of economics at St. Mary's University, and Dr. Swarna Weerasinghe, who is a professor in community health and epidemiology at Dalhousie University.

The Atlantic Metropolis Centre.... Some will be perhaps familiar with the Metropolis Centres; you may have had presentations from other Metropolis Centres in your travels across the country. We're a consortium of academic researchers, government representatives, and non-governmental organizations dedicated to pursuing policy-relevant research related to immigration, population migrations, and cultural diversity. We brought for the committee's perusal both a brochure, which outlines the centre and its structure, and a two-page summary of our activities in the first year of our operation.

There are four other Metropolis Centres in Canada established eight years ago. We're the newest centre. We draw on researchers at ten Atlantic universities and on government and NGO partners across four Atlantic provinces, giving particular focus to research agendas distinctive to the Atlantic region.

The views we're presenting today are not the official views of the centre; they're the views of this particular group representing the centre. We'd like to speak under the categories circulated with the information publicizing the committee's travels across Canada. I'll address first the new citizenship act, and then Dr. Akbari and Dr. Weerasinghe will address issues of credentialing and family unification.

As you're probably hearing from other representatives in Atlantic Canada, there is a huge push now in Atlantic Canada to attract more immigrants. This is now widely recognized as being vital to the future of the region, to its economic and social wellbeing, because of population decline. All four Atlantic provinces have introduced population or immigration strategies within the last few years to address the problems associated with the fact that 76% or thereabouts of new immigrants coming to Canada settle in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. You've probably heard this referred to as the MTV phenomenon. It's what we're up against in the Atlantic provinces.

We want to attract higher numbers of immigrants to Atlantic Canada, and we want to retain more of the immigrants who initially come here, through creating welcoming communities in which multiculturalism is valued, tolerance is promoted, and barriers created by systemic racism are addressed. We think the discussions around a new citizenship act create an ideal opportunity to take a proactive approach to addressing regional disparities in the attraction of new immigrants and fostering welcoming communities. I lay emphasis on that phrase because it doesn't actually come up in the literature surrounding the new citizenship act.

First of all, we would like to emphasize, as you're probably hearing across the country, that the new act has to reduce the barriers, the logjams, and the inequities that currently impede the immigration process—the almost Byzantine structures. We've just

heard a very eloquent account of how these structures have affected the life of one individual whose father served Canada, and who served Canada himself in various ways through fighting for Britain.

It's particularly important to realize that we can no longer be complacent about attracting new immigrants to Canada. The research shows that in some of the sending countries we've traditionally received a lot of immigrants from—for example, China—there are now measures being taken to stop the brain drain, as they see it, of engineers and professionals from their country to Canada. They're changing their rules around citizenship. Also, in developing countries there's increasing concern about the fact that Canada is going in and, as it were, raiding these countries, engaged in its own form of brain robbery, as it were.

We need to be sensitive to these issues in developing a new citizenship act. Just to bring this point home, I'm sure as you're travelling across the country you talk to taxicab drivers; I've talked to many in the last few years. Often they're professionals or engineers. I'd mention my discussion with a Turkish engineer taxicab driver in Edmonton most recently, who was very bitter about the way in which Canada had been misrepresented, the fact that he was attracted to Canada as a skilled immigrant, yet that when he arrived here there were many barriers to his working in the profession he thought Canada wanted. He was very active about this. He was telling people in Turkey, trained professionals, not to consider applying to Canada, to be wary of misrepresentations of Canada as a country. We need to keep this in mind.

●(0915)

We are leaving a submission with the committee. I'll just highlight a few other key points under the first section, citizenship, and turn this over to my colleagues. There needs to be more access placed on the expanding of the family class of immigrants. Dr. Akbari will speak to this in more detail.

The new act also needs to take an inclusive approach that considers the potential contributions to Canadian society of a wide spectrum of new immigrants—not perhaps just people who can bring a lot of money, for example, to Canada's entrepreneurs. Many of our most productive citizens historically arrived as people with almost no money, or sometimes as refugees. We should keep that in mind.

Discussions around the new act we hope will be used to address some of the myths that still linger about immigrants and how they're burdens on the economy, etc. There's a very succinct summary of these myths in *Nova Scotia's Immigration Strategy*, on page one. We've given the address for that in our document to the committee. We also would like to emphasize that the act needs to commit itself to Canadian values of fairness, democracy, and justice. There seems to be a creeping movement to what some legal experts associated with the centre describe as a hierarchy of rights, whereby members of Canadian society who may not yet have full citizenship are not being given the same kinds of legal rights as others. And as we saw with the Maher Arar case, in some cases Canadian citizens are stripped of their rights.

We have a large Arabic and Middle Eastern community in Halifax, and there's strong concern about that case in particular and with racial profiling associated with it. When Maher Arar's wife came to speak here in March at a lecture series at Dalhousie University, 250 members of the community turned out and gave her a standing ovation at the end.

Finally, I'll just emphasize that in the act I think great care needs to be taken to define the term "responsibility", which is coming up a lot. Responsibility is a very fuzzy word. It needs to be defined carefully, and attention needs to be given to addressing the responsibilities of government as well as the responsibilities of Canadian citizens. That would include responsibilities, on the government side, for promoting multiculturalism, gender equality, and linguistic duality.

I'll emphasize linguistic duality. Our colleagues from the Moncton office of the centre cannot be here today, but they are in engaged in several projects that address the particular kinds of challenges francophone communities in minority situations outside Quebec face in terms of attracting immigrants in the face of declining populations.

• (0920)

The Chair: Thank you very much. What we're going to do, because the other two speakers are speaking on topics that we have panels set up for, is have them speak at those panels. That way, we're not going to mix apples and oranges.

I want to thank you very much for that presentation, and you as well, Mr. Martin.

I'm going to start off the back-and-forth with Alexa asking you questions and you responding.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Mr. Chairman, just before we proceed, I wonder if I could seek clarification.

I'm wondering, in terms of the presenters, whether it puts you at an inconvenience if you're asked to stay on and speak at subsequent sections of this—just out of respect for your time.

It seems to me we're in a position probably to be more flexible on this point than the witnesses are, since we're such a small delegation this morning. I wish not to create a logjam here or anything, but I just wonder if that isn't something we should be prepared to take into consideration.

The Chair: The problem we have is we only have an hour scheduled for this. The other time for speaking is going to have an hour and a half. If we're going to be able to deal with the citizenship issues on which we are supposedly producing recommendations to the government just on the new citizenship act, it would be better not to short-change that.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I'm sorry if it might create a logistical nightmare. What about our current witnesses, then, appearing first in the next segment and starting earlier, which has the same effect?

The Chair: Can any of you stay for the other sessions?

Mr. Ather Akbari (Domain Leader, Economic Consequences of Immigration, Atlantic Metropolis Centre): I have other commitments later on in the morning. If we gave two-minute presentations each—

• (0925)

Dr. Swarna Weerasinghe (Domain Leader, Health and Well-Being of Immigrants, Atlantic Metropolis Centre): If we gave two minutes, or a maximum of three minutes—

The Chair: Okay, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Ather Akbari: Thank you very much.

I will go through my presentation, which is on the recognition of international experience and credentials of immigrants.

Credentialing issues are widely recognized to be a serious obstacle to social and economic integration of new immigrants in Atlantic Canada. I think the issue of foreign credential recognition has not been well understood. The current practice has been that if an applicant applies for landed immigrant status, his or her documents are sent to a professional association for certification, and once that certification is obtained, the applicant's expectations have risen—that "I have been recognized in Canada and it would be easy for me to obtain a job." However, the reality is different from that, and we have to realize that the labour market does not operate that way.

Research indicates that there is often a gap between official recognition of credentials by professional organizations, such as engineering councils, and by employers. If structures and programs need to be developed for working through the demand side of the labour market, employers have to feel comfortable in hiring immigrant workers. Employers are also more in love with local experience than credentials.

Ways of dealing with this issue could include bridge and mentorship programs matching qualified immigrants with companies. There are models that have proven quite successful in various provinces in this regard. Of course, the cost of doing this could be determined, and who would bear the cost is something that could be discussed.

On the issue of citizenship, research suggests that a major factor that influences the area in which immigrants settle and whether or not they stay is the experience of family and community networks. Research also suggests that expanding the family class of immigrants may be one of the best means of attracting and retaining immigrants in regions outside major urban centres. Evidence suggests that this can have an even greater effect than employment opportunities. Creating more flexible and extended family classes of immigrants is therefore very important to the success of immigration strategies in Atlantic Canada.

Thank you very much for giving me this time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Swarna Weerasinghe: I will be speaking as a researcher and an educator, an immigrant, a visible minority woman, and also as the mother of two Canadian citizens, and also a wife of a husband who is a Canadian citizen and a landed immigrant.

I will concentrate in the area of health. That is where the research is that I have conducted. Marjorie talked about brain drain, and I'm going to talk about brain waste and the negative social and health effects.

Credentialling is a major issue in the area of health professionals and medical professionals. Quite often, there are doctors with high degrees who come knocking on my door, saying, "Professor, is there anything I can do for you?" I ask them, "What do you do?" "I deliver pizzas", or "I drive taxis". It is quite heartbreaking. If you looked at the Romanow report where Romanow talked about this brain waste, what he suggested was to look at where there is excess and try to bring in those people, rather than leaving holes in those countries, which have invested resources in educating those people.

These people who have foreign credentials can contribute to making the Canadian health care system culturally sensitive. Right now, the Canadian health care system is not culturally sensitive or appropriate. They can bring new knowledge about tropical diseases. In my research, I have found heartbreaking incidents where there are no qualified people to treat malaria, and they don't know what a rash looks like on black skin. They look for redness, and they have to look forever, until it is oozing and infected.

There should be short-term training programs offered in courses by properly trained experts in the field to train foreign medical and health graduates about the Canadian health care system, in prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. It is an investment; it is very much more cost-effective than training new graduates.

Consideration has to be given to the negative health effects that occur as a result of discrimination against visible minority immigrant men and women. I analyzed Canadian community health survey data, the new cycle, and what did I find? I found that visible minority immigrant women are the most educated people—they have the greatest percentage of post-secondary education—but when I looked at their income and the level of occupation in relation to their education, they are in the lowest category.

Then I looked at this inequity, at how it relates to their mental and physical health. What did I find? Visible minority immigrant women are 13% less likely to obtain the same level of occupation compared with Canadian women, and 30% less likely to obtain the same level

of income. As the inequity increases, health deteriorates, on average by 9% on a scale from zero to 74. Immigrants' physical, mental, and emotional health deteriorates in direct proportion to their length of stay, and especially to the waiting time. Affirmative action and equity policies should be in force to eradicate these inequities.

If you look at the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, if you look at the Canadian Health Act, if you look at the Canadian Citizenship Act, every right speaks of equity. Is this a reality? I don't know. Attention needs to be given to the ways in which gender impacts upon credentialling issues. Is it the same for women and men? Specially designated educational funding programs need to be considered to assist professional immigrants overcoming credentialling issues.

Universities and colleges have a great role to play. Universities and colleges should also be recognized as central players here, interfacing with the professional and trade associations that review their educational programs.

I will now continue with family reunification issues. "Family" is not the nuclear family for most people, especially people coming from Asian and African countries. Their family is the extended family. It involves a complex network of responsibility and support systems. For many immigrants from Asian and African countries, for example, the family circle includes not only parents and siblings, but also nieces and nephews, and often there is a strong sense of responsibility towards other family members.

● (0930)

When my father passed away, I applied for my mother to come here for just six months. I'm originally from Sri Lanka. Her visitor's visa was rejected. There were no grounds, and when I asked why, I was yelled at in front of everyone. I still don't know why.

It is considered a duty to take care of aging parents, which can produce positive effects in Canadian immigrant communities in that it results in reducing costs for seniors. Immigrants' health and emotional well-being are also seriously threatened without social relations, especially those who live in small cities in Atlantic Canada where there are fewer immigrants. I struggle to live here with no help for day care, and no support to take care of my children when I go to conferences internationally and nationally.

Reunification should take into consideration these cultural bonds with extended families, and the family class should include immediate and extended families such as siblings and their children.

I thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I might just point out to the panel, even though all our committee members aren't here, that half the committee members were born elsewhere. We have two refugees—I'm a refugee from Hungary and I experienced many of the situations you talked about, and we have another person who's a refugee from Uganda—and we are very keen about these kinds of issues.

Mr. Martin, your loss of citizenship, and as Alexa can tell you, the whole issue of citizenship, has been a great concern of mine. There's a wonderful book that was written by Barbara Roberts called *Whence they Came: Deportation from Canada*; it really deals with how flippancy we have been as a country in terms of the rights of people coming here, and it documents mass expulsions.

So I'll give the floor to Madam McDonough.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is regrettable that other members of the committee aren't here. One of the important reasons for travelling across the country is to begin to get a profile of the issues. This enables the committee to be responsive to the recommendations made to government. So your willingness to share your personal experiences as well as your policy recommendations is much appreciated.

Without having been a member of the committee, I can tell you that many of the problems you have identified are evident to members of Parliament. We see them at the constituency level. As the leader of my party for eight years, I had the opportunity to criss-cross the country. To the embarrassment and humiliation of Canadians, we have probably the most highly educated taxi drivers in the world. In Canada. It was interesting for me to hear the various constructions on this situation. I heard many times that people ended up feeling that it was almost by fraudulent means that they were attracted to Canada, having been led to believe that their credentials would be part of their gaining entry. They operated on the reasonable assumption that they would be given the opportunity to practise their respective vocations, trades, or professions.

As parliamentarians and legislators, we need to be figuring out the source of the problem, and the solutions that suggest themselves along the way. Personal experiences can help to illuminate the problem. Dr. Akbari and Dr. Weerasinghe, I am thinking of you in this context. In some ways Mr. Martin's experience is quite different from the one you described. Far from being empowering, credentials can erect barriers that prevent people from fulfilling their dreams and supporting themselves in a way that meets their expectations.

I wonder if you could recommend any changes that would help people to make more informed decisions before coming to Canada. What should Canada be doing differently, at the point of application, to take experience and education fully into account? Could you give us an idea of where the opportunities and the frustrations lie? Could you suggest a more pro-active process that would match skills and education with Canadian needs?

I'm wondering if there are other proposals that you feel need to be considered at the point of entry before we talk about what happens when you come into the country.

● (0935)

Mr. Ather Akbari: One issue there is that outside of Canada a very rosy picture is presented to the applicant. Especially that is done by the immigrant agencies that are working abroad facilitating the process of immigration.

The fact that a professional association has certified an immigrant's documents should not be portrayed as if it will make it very easy for him or her to obtain a job in Canada. The information should be provided to the candidate that this certification does not mean that private employers will view it in the same way.

Once a professional association certifies the document, the expectations are raised on the part of the applicant. So there has to be some information process there.

I don't know if anybody wants to add to that.

● (0940)

Dr. Swarna Weerasinghe: I just want to add a few things related to my experience.

Fortunately, I took my credentials in Canada, so it was very easy for me to get into the system. I think there is the perception here, when looking at the CV, to consider where the degree comes from—that's the perception. So first of all, we have to do something to change the perception and look more broadly at where these degrees come from and at what they learn. In fact, those who are coming do similar.... I'm in the Dalhousie medical school, and the medical curriculum is quite similar. In fact, they do more there, because some countries have the IB program, the International Baccalaureate program. They do more.

It is important to look at not only the certificate or the one line of the CV noting where it comes from, but to look at more details of the courses they have taken. That is one thing.

From going through the experience of dealing with foreign medical graduates who are residents, I know there are certain things we train people to do. The health care system in Canada is different. I will give you an example. Here they do first the diagnosis and then the treatment, but in some other countries—third world countries—they don't do the diagnosis because they don't have the facilities to do it. These doctors are trained to treat people by guessing. They see the symptom and they guess the disease and they do the treatment. Those things have to be changed.

My solution is to do very short-term, free training.

I don't know that I answered your question.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I wonder if I could ask Dr. Stone about the work the Atlantic Metropolis Centre is doing—I believe I'm correct—around the issue of credential recognition. The governments keep saying yes, we recognize there's a huge problem, and there seems to be a lot of talk, but it's not clear to me what's actually emerging that government needs to respond to and enact or implement.

Could you talk a little bit about what work is being done to deal with this problem of recognizing what the equivalency is of the credentials, the experience, or the training people bring in? And what are the processes whereby that kind of training can be done in such a way that it doesn't become an insurmountable barrier but becomes a way of facilitating using the skills that are needed and letting people get on with their lives?

Can you tell us about what is happening at the Atlantic Metropolis Centre in that regard?

Ms. Marjorie Stone: I should emphasize that we're a new centre. We've been up and running for one year, and we're trying to operate with \$300,000 across four Atlantic provinces with many researchers. I think we're at the stage where we're hooked in with the other centres, where more research has been done on credentialling issues as they affect those parts of Canada. Some of that will carry over into the Atlantic region.

We're still at the stage where we're trying to identify the problems and bring the players together to the table. We emphasized the role of universities and post-secondary institutions in our submission—because they didn't appear, in the quite brief description of this credentialling issue—as a complex problem.

I think one of the roles the centre will play is to push for research and studies and for the creation of structures that get the universities talking to each other more and working with the various professional associations that accredit various programs both at the provincial and the federal level to tackle some of these issues. Immigration is now on the agenda of the Atlantic university presidents. At a recent ACOA meeting, for example, there was a big presentation on immigration. I regularly bring it up in the Dalhousie senate.

I can see at Dalhousie, just taking it as an example as, I guess, the largest Atlantic university, that there's still room for a lot of work to be done on creating a kind of coordinating structure within the university that might look at how the credentialling problems, for example in medicine, might parallel credentialling problems in engineering or in computing science, and then look for resolutions that might cut across some of those areas.

It is a very vexing and complex issue. There are a number of initiatives underway that involve people in the NGO community working on the credentialling issue. I know there's an initiative in New Brunswick that's quite well advanced working on the credentialling issues.

● (0945)

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I don't know whether this is a shocking suggestion, but given how shattered people feel—I mean on an emotional level as well as shattered economically—to arrive and discover that the many years of training and education that they thought got them into the country in fact don't allow them to get on with their lives, because of these barriers and so on, is it at this point a problem that is serious enough that the government should be looking at dealing with the issue before people come into the country?

In other words, you make application, you then go through a process while you're remaining in your country of origin where your credentials are brought forward and fully vetted, and then some sort

of matching process takes place in respect to your particular vocation or profession. Is the problem serious enough that this is where the solution should begin to be implemented, so that people aren't living in a world of never-never land and economic devastation?

Secondly—and this is a very tough question to put to you—if you had been aware how severe the barriers were, would you think in your own instances personally, but also as you look at other colleagues and friends and new Canadians who are suffering similar problems, that had you known the difficulties before you came you would actually have chosen to come under those conditions?

Mr. Ather Akbari: I think one important point is, as I mentioned before, that it is important for us to provide enough information to a prospective immigrant that certification doesn't mean you have a guarantee of a job. That is one thing.

Another thing is that to solve this issue it is more important to work from the demand side, from the employer's side. What do employers want? Certification by the government doesn't mean a private employer is going to hire somebody. When they look at the curriculum vitae and see that this person doesn't have Canadian experience, they ask, how good is that person going to be for me?

One way probably is, as Swarna also suggested, that a short training could be provided to them. If a skilled immigrant enters Canada without a prior job offer, then there could be a short training program for that person, so that it appears on their CV. Then, when employers look at them—because employers want some Canadian orientation....

Of course, the issue then arises who will pay the cost of that, and that is something that could also be discussed. Maybe that cost could be added to the processing application fee of that immigrant.

But it helps to work from the demand side, I think.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Alexa, I'm going to take some time here to go through some questions.

Just on the whole issue of the brain waste, I've been using that term for a long time, and I had the personal experience with my father when we came here and we went to Vancouver. He was an architect and a town planner but he could only work as a draftsman, so we finally ended up moving to Toronto, where he got hired as a planner. People often ask why anybody would move from Vancouver, but that was one of the reasons. The brain waste is a much bigger problem than the brain drain.

In the last budget we put up portals that are going to be Internet-based, and those are going to, hopefully, enable people to better know what the requirements are and what the realities are in trying to find jobs in Canada. Also, we've gone into licensing consultants.

Now, the minister made an announcement yesterday on some of the issues relating to international credentials. I like to use the word "international" because "foreign" sounds foreign and it's not very inclusive, so I like to use that phraseology.

But we have to do much better.

With respect to Dr. Stone, I was very much impressed about the responsibility side and what the responsibility of government is. Just yesterday on the CBC they said a 52-year-old man who had lived in this country for 51 years got deported. He got deported because he got in trouble with the law. This is an issue the committee has identified and one we are going to address, hopefully.

But the real problem is, if you looked at the reverse situation, where all of a sudden we got somebody from Russia, speaking no English or French, ending up in Canada...and we started talking about something called de facto citizenship. This country has a really sad history in terms of deporting people. It seems to me, when we have a young person coming in from another country and they get into trouble with the law, they weren't criminals when they came here; they became criminals when they were here, and we should really be taking responsibility for that.

Whenever you look at anything like the whole issue of rehabilitation or what have you, it's very clear that you need a support structure. In some ways we go and get the best and the brightest, then the family comes over and makes a contribution to Canada, and all of a sudden, when somebody becomes a problem, we deport them if we can, and that's not right.

So I hope you address that issue, either in responses here or by sending further information to the committee. Could you?

● (0950)

Ms. Marjorie Stone: Could I speak to that? I was speaking last night to Dr. Constance MacIntosh in the Dalhousie Law School, who works on immigration issues, and she raised precisely this point around responsibility. I think Canada needs to not only look at its responsibility to members of Canadian society in the situations you've described, but think about its responsibilities in an international arena.

Even in a case where you do have someone who perhaps comes to Canada by fraudulent means and turns out to be someone who is engaging in criminal activities, if the solution is always just to deport that person, even in a case like that, and you're just deporting that person back to a country where there aren't the kinds of legal and policing structures that can check the damage that person will do, you're just deporting a problem back to a country that is not well equipped to deal with it. So in terms of international relations, it's not a very responsible way to move.

But I think the cases are very serious where, as you say, maybe a young person gets in trouble and the family has been contributing to Canadian society. Suddenly this family—and this is another problem Dr. MacIntosh flags—doesn't have the same rights as other Canadian families, even though it thought it had those rights. That's why in our submission we emphasize these Canadians values of justice and fairness and democratic due legal procedure.

The Chair: I will also invite you to examine the citizenship revocation process contained in Bill C-29.

In 1998 I became parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, and we were reviewing this and trying to come up with a new Citizenship Act. We went through a number of proposed bills, Bill C-63, Bill C-16, and Bill C-18.

The thing I found really problematic about the proposed acts was not only were they not going to correct the present injustice in that—because when you say somebody committed fraud, normally, if you're accused of fraud, you get to defend yourself against fraud—but in terms of the present process, you have one ruling from a Federal Court judge. He or she makes a decision on the balance of probabilities, which is not designed to deal with fraud, and the decision of the judge is not appealable to any other court. Then the minister and cabinet get to take citizenship away.

Bill C-63 was going to make it even more draconian. Quite frankly, I did not find it to be charter-compliant and I opposed that bill.

That's why your suggestion on responsibility is very important. Would you take a look at that and give feedback to the committee?

Mr. Martin, you're in a situation.... We had 45,000 war brides who came from Britain and 21,000 of their children. I'm just totally horrified by the process that has taken place. I see this letter from the bureaucracy you received in 1993.

This is something that became a new issue for the committee. We really weren't looking for it, as you can imagine, but we've ended up with people like Mr. Martin and war brides as we go across the country. A lot of them didn't realize they had to go and apply as immigrants, and therefore they have no citizenship. Then you have an even more horrific situation where if somebody who believes they're a citizen has a child outside the country, that child is stateless.

Unfortunately, this is a kind of extension of the bureaucratic mentality that has operated in the immigration department, and it was one of the reasons the committee members started thinking about splitting citizenship and immigration. Once you are a citizen, you are a citizen; there's a real differential.

I'm at a loss, quite frankly, Mr. Martin, as to how we can actually compensate you for the disadvantages you and people like you have gone through. All I know is that the committee is very concerned, and we're going to quickly do two reports. One is going to be on citizenship revocation, and we're going to do the other one on war brides. We're going to be celebrating the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and the very thought that this could have escaped the attention of government...

Let me tell you, this is pretty new to us as members of Parliament, but somehow we really have to rectify it.

Are you aware of how many people would be in your situation in the Halifax area?

● (0955)

Mr. Stuart Martin: Not in the Halifax area. I know that Don Chapman up in Vancouver has been dealing with various bits and pieces. I know of a couple, certainly.

But you're absolutely right in some respects. There were the applications I went through; I've written down here "the implacable wall of bureaucracy", and that's exactly what it is.

I've had the fortunate experience of working for the commissionaires. Before I could work, I was backwards and forwards to the Halifax office. After I got the job in the commissionaires, I found myself on the other side of the glass. It was rather bizarre for a couple of days, dealing with people coming into the office in Halifax. They can't help them. They literally cannot help these people. They couldn't help me. All they could tell me to do was to phone Vegreville; pick up the phone and phone the centre.

Now, have you ever tried using that phone? I defy anybody to get through to anybody anywhere. It's like throwing information into a black hole. It makes no difference how much you throw in; there's nothing coming back.

But yes, it is a problem. That was one of the things. I'm sure the CIC works very hard at what they do, but the way the thing is set up makes it very difficult for people out here trying to get anywhere with applications and/or information about anything at all.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. McDonough.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I have one brief question, Mr. Chair.

I think everybody is aware that Pier 21, with its long history, is now basically a museum of Canada's immigration history. It reflects, I think, what Canadians want to see us as being. There are many happy stories about the outcome of immigration to Canada, but there are also the kinds of realities that you're describing. Pier 21 has quite an elaborate program of inviting people who came through Pier 21 to document their history, to tell their stories, and to actually try to identify commonalities and so on.

I'm wondering if you have had occasion, through Pier 21, to make contact with others who have faced the very same problem you have. If not, I'm wondering whether that's something that would be worthwhile and perhaps would interest you to do for the collective understanding of the magnitude of the problem—the problem that others may still be facing. I mean, there was a happy outcome to your horrifying story, but I'm wondering how many other people find themselves in the same situation today.

• (1000)

Mr. Stuart Martin: Yes, I agree. I went down to Pier 21 with my mother's original landing document. At the time, she was 18 years old, and heavily pregnant with me. Immigration Halifax stamped the document on August 31, 1946, at Pier 21. I went up to the counter there and said, "Can I have this stamped, please?" They were delighted to see it. I was promptly sent upstairs, and they photocopied all the bits and pieces.

So I don't know if they keep any kind of record, but I think they do, because they took this—

Ms. Alexa McDonough: They are trying to expand their database all the time, and look at creative ways to connect the stories. I would really encourage you to pursue that further, through Pier 21, and see if there's a way to connect with others who've had similar stories, particularly those who are probably still trying to establish themselves as full citizens.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Our session is over.

We'd like to get a picture of all of you—with me, Alexa, the clerk, and our researcher—for our records. We'll be putting some photos up on the committee website.

We'll suspend for a few minutes.

• (1002)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1008)

The Chair: Order.

We'll start off this session on international credentials. You each have up to seven minutes to speak, and then we'll go to questions and answers.

We'll start with Mr. Deveaux.

Mr. Kevin Deveaux (Member, New Democratic Party Caucus, Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Kevin Deveaux, and I'm a member of the legislature for Cole Harbour—Eastern Passage, which is just outside of Dartmouth. I'm the House leader for the official opposition and also our critic on the Office of Immigration, which in this province was only created a matter of months ago.

I wanted to take a few minutes to talk. I don't have a written submission. I was going to do this verbally. I wanted to talk about a couple of issues surrounding international credentials, particularly in Nova Scotia, and the impact it needs to have in this province, because I think in Canada there are two solitudes. There are the places like Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto, and probably to a lesser extent Calgary or Edmonton, where you have a critical mass of immigrants who are coming to those places, and the services are in place. Nova Scotia is not one of those. Even though we've had a large number of people come through this province, immigrate here, and then emigrate out through Pier 21, we have not had in the past hundred years a very large immigrant population settling here, and I think it's begun to have an impact on the prosperity of this province.

My party and I believe that the prosperity of Nova Scotia comes through skilled workers coming to this province and setting up businesses or finding work. That in itself won't happen on its own, because as we all know, immigrants have a tendency to go where there's already a critical mass of people of a similar culture, similar ethnicity, where there is an ability to have services.

So with regard to Nova Scotia, I would make a couple of comments. One is that the federal government needs to recognize that Nova Scotia, like other provinces similar to it, doesn't have the infrastructure in place to provide those services, and it's as simple as someone who welcomes someone when they come to the airport, or within a short period of time. If an immigrant hypothetically comes from Turkey or from Uzbekistan and arrives in Halifax and they've maybe chosen Halifax, there needs to be some ability to connect with them, because it's not like there's a large Uzbeki or Turkish community here. So as a welcoming community we need to have some opportunity to provide that connection early on, because if those skilled workers in those first few days and weeks and months don't have a good impression of their ability to find work here, then obviously there's a tendency to move on. And as we know, the retention rate in this province is fairly low.

I would also suggest that one of the things the federal government has tried to do is to provide through the nominee programs an opportunity for the provinces that don't have as many immigrants to take more control of recruitment in an opportunity to try to bring more skilled workers into Nova Scotia. The federal government did sign a provincial nominee program memorandum of understanding back in 2002 with the Province of Nova Scotia, but I would suggest that the committee should look at one change, which I think is a very simple change. Unfortunately, in this province that program has been handed over to a private for-profit company. That in itself is not so much a problem, except I would suggest to you the principle of why we have memorandums of understanding with regard to nominee program is so that we have government-to-government agreements where provincial governments can get more involved in recruiting skilled workers into Nova Scotia.

Unfortunately, in this province that has been handed over to a company that is making a profit from the program. It does have its benefits—I won't deny that—but overall I have a concern with a program that does create a profit margin built into immigration. If there's a way in which the federal government in future memorandums of understanding can avoid, as part of those memorandums, the contracting out of those nominee programs to private companies, I would suggest that would be a good thing.

Finally, I would say that having done some work overseas, internationally, I've met a lot of people who are very interested in coming to Canada, and I think they would be just as interested in coming to Halifax as they would to Toronto or Vancouver or Whitehorse.

•(1010)

One thing we need to do before they come here, and I'm sure you've heard this before, so I won't dwell on the point, is whatever we can to let them have the ability to either develop their credentials or have their credentials approved. There's a tendency for them to pass the litmus test—get the 67 points—be accepted here, and then come here and be frustrated by the fact that even though the federal government has said they have met certain credentials, or that their language skills have met a certain level, that isn't necessarily what is happening on the ground.

Frankly, having spoken to people who have talked to me about wanting to come to Canada, if maybe in those circumstances we told them—and it was safe for them—to stay for another six months in their own countries with their families on the basis that then they would know that their credentials would be met when they arrived, I would suggest that wouldn't be a bad way of doing it in order to ensure that when they arrived on the ground they would have the opportunity to start working. I think that frustration is something that can cause only problems later on.

That's basically my submission. Thank you.

•(1015)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kutcher.

Ms. Jan Sheppard Kutcher (Employment Services Manager, Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association): Good morning, and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Jan Sheppard Kutcher. I'm the manager of employment services with the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association, or MISA.

I've worked for the past eight years with this organization, probably the most diverse organization in the province, doing front-line work with newcomers who are struggling to have their qualifications recognized and to enter the workforce here. I'm not a newcomer, so I'm speaking to you today as a settlement professional. All my comments and recommendations are from that perspective. I recognize that you will have probably heard a number of presentations at this point. I'm going to try to be brief and specific.

First, I think it's important to note that the recognition of qualifications includes not only the paper documents, the credentials, but also skills, knowledge, competencies, and experience. While the recognition of credentials is generally just the first step in the process, it is worth pointing out that there is still no international credentials assessment service anywhere in the Atlantic region. That said, I would not recommend a large-scale national service, as I believe newcomers to Nova Scotia would almost certainly be left behind with such an approach.

Newcomers who've chosen Nova Scotia as their new home need to be able to bring their original documents, which are precious, in person to a local assessment service for an accurate Canadian equivalency statement. As every province outside the Atlantic has mandated a particular international credential service, I would recommend that the federal government require that this be done in the Atlantic region.

Second, in self-regulating professions, national initiatives are often a precursor of provincial change. This has been notable, for example, in engineering, nursing, and medicine, where national initiatives have set the stage for change and have influenced provincial regulatory bodies to work toward developing fair and more streamlined processes for assessment and recognition of international qualifications. These national initiatives have helped to create an environment where our more local advocacy efforts can be more effective.

For example, we've partnered over the last couple of years with the nursing profession, and this has led to the development of a "Welcome to Nova Scotia" information package, and also working in partnership with that profession on the development of an orientation to the Canadian health care system and to professional practice in Nova Scotia, which is currently being piloted and is open to all health care professionals who are settling here in the province.

The federal government needs to continue, or I would recommend that they continue, to encourage and support national initiatives, but though they are necessary, I believe they are not sufficient. Even more significant progress can be and has been made when the stage is set for organizations like MISA and other settlement partners to do our advocacy work at the local level.

It has been noted in the preliminary documents that this entire issue is highly complex. In order to do local advocacy, it takes time. It takes time to develop the requisite partnerships and relationships, to present arguments and information, to create, push for, and participate in multi-stakeholder tables, and to nurture client-driven associations.

In the settlement sector, we know the players in the province and we have a certain understanding of the provincial dynamics, but we need support from the federal government to do this local advocacy work.

•(1020)

Third, the process of qualifying in many of the regulated professions is costly. There are fees for every professional examination, and the costs of competency assessments can easily be upwards of \$5,000.

For newcomers, these fees pose significant financial barriers, made more severe by the well-known difficulty that newcomers have in accessing credit. In some cases, even getting a credit card can be next to impossible.

I would strongly recommend a change that would allow newcomers, professionals and tradespersons, to access the federal student loan program in order to assist them in paying the required fees for examinations and competency assessments. These loans would be repayable once the recipients were licensed and working in their field. It would not be a high risk for the federal government, but it would make a significant difference and would send a clear message to newcomers as they make their way through these qualification hurdles.

Finally, to ensure that qualifications receive recognition, and that workforce integration occurs in a timely and effective manner, newcomers in every trade and profession, and particularly in a small province like Nova Scotia, need professional settlement assistance as soon as possible after arrival. They need to get clear information about licensure pathways. They need to be able to set their own career goals and make realistic plans of action.

At MISA we have developed an intensive, customized model for facilitating workforce integration in Nova Scotia. It involves active partnering with local employers, selecting from a menu of program options, and ongoing coaching. If we want immigration to work, access to this kind of strategic assistance is not just a service for the benefit of newcomers. It is an essential investment for all of us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Radulescu.

Ms. Carmen Radulescu (As an Individual): Thank you.

Good morning, honourable guests.

My name is Carmen Radulescu, and I'm here as an independent speaker. I'm an international engineer, with a graduate education, who was employed in Romania and accepted in 1996 into Canada through the point system.

The point system took into consideration the length of my experience, my English and French abilities, and most of all, my profession. Because of this, I was made to believe that I would be an asset to Canada. I was never informed about the existence of APENS and the difficulty I would encounter when trying to have my experience and educational credentials recognized here in Nova Scotia. At the interview with the Canadian consul, if I had truthful information about these issues, I would never have come to live in Canada. I had an excellent job in Romania, where I worked in my field as a published researcher, and I owned my own home. Here in Canada, my chances of owning one are slim to none. I also had a pension plan through my work in Romania, but here, as I do not belong to a professional association, I will end up living only on a Canada Pension Plan pension, which will probably not be enough for basic living expenses at the time of my retirement.

I did not plead to be allowed to come to Canada. I was not a refugee, but came as an independent, because I believed that Canada needed the expertise and experience of immigrants. I believed that it was a mutual need. I knew that it wouldn't be easy, but it was my intention to continue my life, not to begin again from scratch.

After my arrival, I have learned everything I needed to know about searching for a job, such as preparing résumés, interview skills, and personal presentations. I went to various engineering companies in Nova Scotia. I was told that I could work as an engineer, but under someone else's signature until I became affiliated with APENS. On this advice, I started to apply for jobs, but no matter how hard I tried, I was not successful. Most of my attempts finished with a polite letter from the employer wishing me good luck in my future endeavours.

One of the things I noticed was how people responded to my accent. In terms of my appearance, facial expressions, and gestures, everything was fine; however, when I spoke my first words, I would notice a change in the person's attitude. Immediately upon hearing a foreign accent, my experience and competence and abilities were undermined by their ignorance. I believe I did not have a very good chance of finding a job as an engineer without my professional engineering accreditation.

I was facing a paradox. In order for me to obtain the full accreditation, I needed two years of Canadian work experience. This has since been changed to one year. However, as I was unable to find work and acquire the experience, I was unable to gather enough experience to qualify for these affiliations. I was told that Romania did not have an agreement with the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers and that our universities were not considered to be assets by the Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board. Other countries do have agreements, where their engineers are required to write only one exam, the same one that Canadian students are writing. However, in my case, I had to pass a total of five exams. I also had a very short deadline for completing those exams, which, from my point of view, was unreasonable. The timeframe does not account for the everyday difficulties we face as immigrants in Canada to survive and provide for ourselves with basic necessities, such as shelter, heat, and food.

I'm unsure why Romania is not on the list of good countries. What I do know for certain is that I have compared all of the courses I took at my university, the former Polytechnic Institute of Romania in Bucharest, with those that DalTech offers its chemical engineering students. There is only one course that I should upgrade, engineering economics, the only one not offered in Romania, due to our different political system. I also compared the number of accumulated class hours, and there is a noticeable difference. For example, the heat transfer course offered at DalTech is a 60-hour class, including lectures and laboratories, whereas the heat transfer class I completed was for 159 hours.

Canada also applies a double standard when working abroad in our countries, the countries where we, as immigrants, are educated. Professional associations under CCPE's umbrella are cautious in granting membership to international engineers, because they are against lowering application standards or compromising public safety. On the other hand, the same standards do not apply to Romanian engineers working in cooperation with Atomic Energy of Canada, Ltd., at the Romanian nuclear plant in Cernavoda, Romania.

•(1025)

My cousin was employed at this plant in Cernavoda in 1988, upon graduating as an engineer, and he's still working there. He has never had to pass any new professional exams for the Canadian government, and he was not retrained by Canadians. Nobody questioned his professional knowledge. So it is hypocritical for them to apply such a double standard to the Romanian engineers here in Canada.

I was treated with apprehension and suspicion by the APENS director of registration nine years ago. She called and asked me to bring the degree awarded to me from my university stating that I'm an actual engineer. She said, and I quote, "We know what your degree should look like." I still remember those words. I felt belittled and disrespected by her accusatory remark. I realize the suspicions stem from the ignorance of the regulatory bodies that evaluate and critique our degrees, but this doesn't make me feel better. The system lacks humanity, consideration, and respect.

Whatever problems you have with our credentials, solve them before you accept us into the country, especially since our acceptance is based on the point system.

Ignorance goes beyond learning about an educational system. There is a lot of general information about our culture and societal background. For instance, in a communist society, cheating or using fraudulent documents is considered to be one of the worst crimes to commit and is punishable by imprisonment. Documents from my country are notarized by at least four official signatures, including that of the Minister of Justice, and are officially translated by an accredited lawyer.

I'll make some recommendations. I believe that the whole credential recognition system is discriminatory, since it places us in an unequal position with Canadians, lowers our self-esteem, and ruins our credibility as professionals. It should be eliminated, because it's just a barrier meant to force the international engineering graduates to stay out of the market.

The point system is misleading. It should reflect the needs of the country for specific trades, or the immigrants should be told it is just a tool used for the screening process.

Businesses should be encouraged to hire immigrants through government funding, tax cuts, or programs similar to the hire-a-student program, where employers are subsidized by government. Those positions should not be for low-income opportunities but for employment opportunities that are matched with each immigrant's qualifications as recognized in their country.

A special area of the employment insurance program should be created to help immigrants acquire on-the-job training and experience within their field of expertise. Parliament should allow immigrants to participate in these programs if they are working in low-income opportunities that are unrelated to their qualifications. They should also sponsor university education programs and courses that would help immigrants enter their fields.

Universities should work with regulatory bodies to create short, one-year programs that would be recognized by professional organizations and societies. These should include all the courses that an international engineering graduate needs for professional recognition, as with APENS. For instance, an IEG should be able to register and complete all the course evaluation and examinations through DalTech, as do other Canadian engineering students, and be able to follow this route for accreditation. In this way, the IEG would be able to take university courses, ensure technical terminology, and pass the examinations leading to becoming professional engineers. This would ensure consistency and equality for all applicants.

If Nova Scotia wants to retain immigrants who are active, contributing members of the economy and society, these issues need to be addressed and championed by provincial government working in partnership with regulatory bodies and businesses.

Thank you.

•(1030)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Edwards.

Ms. Megan Edwards (Nova Scotia Office of Immigration):
Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, Ms. McDonough, my name is Megan Edwards, and I am the policy analyst for the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration.

In recent years Nova Scotia has experienced a significant drop in our immigration levels, from 3,500 in the mid-1990s to approximately 1,700 in this past year. In comparison, our natural increase for the province, which has been in decline since the 1990s, is expected to turn negative in 2006. Our population growth will depend on immigration, internationally and interprovincially.

The Province of Nova Scotia is concerned that our current level of immigration will not help address the forecast demographic trends and that we will experience lost economic opportunities, competitive disadvantages, declining communities, and potential labour shortages. We recognize that we must rectify this situation, but to do that, we know that we need to satisfy certain conditions, conditions that will help encourage immigrants to choose to come to Nova Scotia and to stay here.

On January 26, the Nova Scotia immigration strategy was released, the Office of Immigration was created, and the Honourable Rodney MacDonald was sworn in as the Minister of Immigration for the province. Since then, we have developed an action plan for promoting this province to potential immigrants and addressing the needs of immigrants. Today, the first budget to fund our work will be introduced in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

We know that essential conditions need to be present in order to be successful in increasing our immigrant levels. Immigrants need to be supported by a welcoming community, have timely access to appropriate settlement services, and be gainfully employed in work that is related to their chosen career. A critical factor in our immigration strategy needs to be finding better ways to assist immigrants to access the labour market in a way that matches their qualifications and aspirations. We need to do more to recognize the credentials of immigrants to maximize the benefits of Nova Scotia's immigration program.

During the consultations on our immigration strategy, we heard from immigrants themselves that one of the most difficult issues they face when they come to Canada is accessing the labour market. Though they may have obtained their education and work experience from their home countries, employers and regulatory bodies may be hesitant to license or hire them in their profession. Immigrants don't understand why they were selected to come to Canada based on their education and work experience, because when they arrive, this doesn't seem to matter.

Many comments received from immigrants during the strategy consultations related to their difficulties in accessing regulated professions and obtaining a licence to practise from professional organizations in such areas as the medical profession, engineering, architecture, and apprenticeship trades. There is a gap between the knowledge that immigrants have a positive impact on the economy and the acceptance of their credentials by employers and professional organizations.

Yes, we must ensure that everyone meets Nova Scotia's standards, but we must also work with employers and professional associations so that newcomers can have their qualifications assessed without delay. In many cases, after an immigrant's credentials are assessed, they are advised to seek upgrading of existing credentials, or to start their education and training from the beginning. This is especially noteworthy in the legal profession in Nova Scotia. Again, this is a process that may be difficult for immigrants to understand, because they were selected to come here based on the skills and experience that they could bring to Canada.

Currently many federal and provincial government departments are trying to find ways to make this process easier and more transparent. However, government must involve employers and businesses—and the settlement agencies, who have been the trailblazers of this in Nova Scotia—along with the sector councils and regulatory bodies in the credential assessment and recognition process.

Another important issue raised in our consultations was the gender inequity experienced by immigrant women professionals. Many immigrant women ultimately give up their careers in order to maintain the home and provide support to their husbands as they begin the process of becoming licensed in their chosen profession. The process of credential recognition must recognize that there are differences here.

Yesterday's announcement of the internationally trained workers initiative is a positive move forward. It's also a timely one for Nova Scotia, as we are preparing to engage our professional associations and sector councils on this very issue. One element of that initiative is the web portal, which we hope will be used to encourage immigrants to begin addressing issues of credential assessment, credential recognition, and language training prior to arrival in Canada. And it's important for this web portal to be reflective of all regions of Canada, not just Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.

● (1035)

The Office of Immigration would like to work closely in partnership with the federal government to ensure that this issue is addressed quickly, fairly, and consistently throughout the country. It may be beneficial to recreate the former access to professions and trades working group with members of federal and provincial immigration and labour market departments, with some specific initiatives that can be implemented quickly in all provinces and territories.

We are making progress. The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Department of Health, and the Office of Immigration are working together to address the assessment needs for internationally educated health professionals. If we can apply this partnership model to other professions, our successes can only grow.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deveaux has to leave at 10:50, so initially, Alexa, perhaps you can deal with him, in case we have questions, and then we'll go on to the other folks.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I guess as parliamentarians we understand why a member of the legislature has to be at the House on the day that the budget is being introduced. I will, then, with your invitation, quickly pursue a couple of matters raised by Mr. Deveaux.

I want to say, I was utterly horrified when you actually brought out publicly the concerns about the manner in which, basically, Nova Scotia's immigrant attraction program had been privatized, had been put out on a contract basis to a venture capitalist firm. I'm still trying to make sense out of this. I know you referred to it seeming to fly in the face of our whole commitment in this public policy matter to have a profit margin sort of built in.

The more I looked at that.... And I appreciate that you drew my attention to this when we were discussing it. I went to the website to try to figure out, what is this?

What worries me about it is that it seems to build in not just profit margins for those who were doing this work, but really, one can only assume that those who become involved in that exercise are driven by the profit motive.

So people are being brought into the province based on what kind of bewitchment there can be for those who enter into these schemes in terms of direct investment in their companies. I wonder if you can elaborate a little bit further on this in terms of how it is working, what the experience is. Maybe a policy analyst for the provincial department could elaborate on this as well.

I think that program was actually established three years ago. What kinds of numbers are there? Is that in the public domain? Do we have information on the numbers of people who have actually been brought in through that program, and do we have documentation of what the actual experiences have been?

It just seems to be a huge leap from the stated humanitarian and public policy intentions with respect to immigration to Nova Scotia.

•(1040)

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: Thank you. I'll try to do this briefly, but with a certain amount of understanding.

The way it works is that when the provincial nominee program was created in 2002, within a few months the province signed a contract with a group called Cornwallis Financial, which was and still is a venture capital company. They have agents throughout the world who then seek out nominees. By nominees I mean skilled workers, entrepreneur class. I think they also deal with.... There are two nominees for each regional development agency in Nova Scotia. They're separate; they don't have to pay the fees, so I'll put those aside. If you're a nominee from another country, you go to the local agent and put down \$1,700 for your application. The number I got a month or two ago was about 450. It may be higher now. These are actual nominations, people who filed nomination applications.

From that—particularly for the entrepreneur class—if you are interested in setting up a business, you are then matched with a local company. That has to be approved by the provincial government. We don't know the number on the list; we've heard 15, we've heard 25, we've heard 30, but they haven't actually given us the specific number. The province approves the list of companies. The immigrant who is accepted for the nominee program then gets to pick from a buffet, a smorgasbord, of companies. They then invest; they put \$130,000 down. Of that, \$30,000—well, \$27,000 or \$28,000—goes to Cornwallis and its agents. There's a processing fee, and then \$100,000 goes to the company in Nova Scotia.

Now, that's not equity that you invest in the company. It's money that goes to the company in cash. Of that, \$80,000 stays with the company. In return, the new immigrant has a chance to work for six months at that company for \$20,000. To be fair, the theory is that instead of just having them.... In most other provinces you put \$150,000 down in equity in a company, so you're investing it and you own part of the company, but there's no guarantee as to how that will work out. The theory is that having them work there for six months after paying \$80,000 to the company and getting \$20,000 back themselves will build a relationship.

At the same time, how does that affect us on the ground? I can say that our understanding is we know of only between 15 and 30 actual immigrants who've come in under those programs. Nova Scotia, under the PNP, had 200 a year starting in 2003, so we could have had up to 600 come in, as of this year; we've had somewhere between 15 and 30 actual immigrants on the ground.

I hope that answers your question. It gives you a better sense of how this is working here at the moment. It's a problem, if we only have that number. I understand that things build up exponentially as time goes on, but I think a lot of us would have hoped those numbers would have been higher in this province, sooner.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Can I just seek clarification, and then maybe ask Ms. Edwards to elaborate further?

The number of potentially 600 coming in through that program, and appearing at the moment to be about 15—is that under the economic nominees program? In other words, is it the investment program in which they pay \$130,000, and so on? That's not taking into account the numbers coming in through the skilled worker program?

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: I believe the number of 15 that I talked about is skilled and economic. I believe the 200 number is the total for the whole province, each year, under the nominee program, so it would also include the ones allotted for the regional development agencies in the province as well. Ms. Edwards may be better able to clarify it, but that's my understanding.

Ms. Megan Edwards: The numbers we've received from Cornwallis show that at present over 200 have been approved through the provinces, through the interview process; 31 have received permanent residencies from the visa post; 75 families are living in Nova Scotia, 31 of which have permanent residency, with the rest on temporary work permits. So they are here and their children are in school.

The majority of people accepted were in the economic category. The economic category has the most uptake from immigrants. The skilled worker category is employer-driven, so many of the people accepted through this stream have been working in Nova Scotia as temporary workers, or have been sought out for special areas such as kilt makers or bagpipe makers. Most have been working here and are being rolled over from temporary work permits into the nominee program.

At present we have only one person in the province interviewing. Each nominee must be interviewed, and each one must come to Nova Scotia for a five-day exploratory visit. In some cases, this is difficult because the visa offices overseas are not issuing visitors visas. They're not honouring the dual intent of the legislation.

We want immigrants to come and see Nova Scotia because we want to make sure this is the province for them. We want them to be able to make attachments to Nova Scotia so they will come here and stay. Part of the point of the economic category is that they will get work experience. They will work with an existing Nova Scotia company. Many of them have said publicly that they feel this is an investment in their new country.

•(1045)

The Chair: Mr. Deveaux, could you tell me what percentage of the population of Nova Scotia was not born here?

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: About 5% or 6% of Nova Scotia is foreign-born.

The Chair: You are higher than Newfoundland.

I asked that because you have a challenge when the numbers are lower. My riding is over 20%, and much of southwest Ontario and Toronto is up to 50%. You need to establish a critical mass. In my community, we have a new-Canadian program that offers assistance on how to apply for work and helps to place immigrants with employers. The placement is underwritten by the government. I was at a recent graduation, and I found that immigrants are largely being hired by other immigrants.

You have a different attitude when you have more immigrants around. I was in P.E.I. One of the members of the committee is Lui Temelkovski, and we went out for lunch. Lui came from Macedonia about 40 years ago. We went into a restaurant and he gave the woman serving us a Canadian pin. She said, "Oh, I have lots of those. Give me one from your country." He said, "This is my country". I'm not mentioning that to say anything about the waitress, but that's the attitude. You have to accept accents. That's part of being Canadian. So maybe you need that critical mass.

We had people before us who talked about the extended family. They said not to look at the nuclear family but to consider the extended family. People from outside Canada are going to be more

comfortable if they have support. If you're the only person from a particular country, it becomes difficult to settle.

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: I've done a lot of work capacity-building in Kosovo, and it's interesting, because a lot of them came as refugees, so it almost was an instant critical mass for that community and you could see how that community has bonded here or in other places. But it isn't the same for others.

I want to focus on one particular point. It's a very good point. This came up when the province introduced its strategy back in January. One of the biggest hurdles to immigration to Atlantic Canada is the attitude of Atlantic Canadians. Your anecdote is a very apt one, because it talks about the fact that in a community people gauge whether or not you're new based on decades or based on generations, not based on years. People still see that. My wife is from Ontario, and I have friends from Ontario who are still "come-from-aways". That's the term that they use here, "come-from-away", and it's used for people from other parts of Canada, let alone immigrants.

I've been trying to talk about this issue. I'm not the only one. Others have as well. The province talks about enticing immigrants to come here and tells them how good a place it is. Absolutely, that's part of it, but the mirror component of that, the other side of it, is we need to be educating our own people on why immigration is important to them.

I mentioned that 5% are foreign-born. I would suggest that's skewed. In Halifax it's probably a fair bit higher. If you go out beyond the Halifax regional municipality the numbers are probably much lower.

So on the attitude of Nova Scotians, on the perception of why immigration is not a bad thing but a good thing, what they need to be doing is a wholesale change in the attitude of Atlantic Canadians, which is something very few politicians are prepared to talk about. Frankly, we're not going to prosper without more immigrants, so there needs to be that recognition of a need to change the attitude of Atlantic Canadians toward immigration.

•(1050)

The Chair: How many Kosovars did you have come here?

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: In fact, there was a base here. One of the two refugee centres was in Nova Scotia. Right now I believe the number is somewhere around 250 or 300 who remained. There are at least some, and they all live in the same general area in the metro area, so there is a certain base that's been built.

The Chair: I imagine there was a fair amount of volunteerism by the community.

Mr. Kevin Deveaux: Yes, that was part of it too. You saw that like it was with the Vietnamese boat people as well. You saw churches sponsoring. There was an outpouring in this way that you don't get when it's one or two coming across as refugees compared to a mass number coming in, as we had in the eighties with the Vietnamese boat people or in the nineties with the Kosovars.

The Chair: Do you have another question before we let him go?

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I was interested to leap from Mr. Deveaux's comments to Ms. Radulescu's. It almost seems that we have seen before the committee, this morning and again now, that in the aggregate everybody talks about how critically important immigration is to our community, to enrich it, to create the diversity, to create new wealth and so on, but when it comes to individual experiences, it can be extremely devastating. I think Mr. Telegdi himself has given an example that illustrates the point Ms. Radulescu was making, that if you have the credentials you can find yourself in a situation where all of a sudden just having an accent creates a certain barrier, a certain resistance.

Without putting you on the spot, I want to say I really admire your coming forward to share your story, because one of the things that's extremely difficult is that you find that you're here with your hopes and dreams and aspirations not being fulfilled and then sometimes are made to feel that you're some kind of an ingrate if you complain about the situation—Aren't you just lucky to be here? That of course misses the point that if it's not working for you, as a citizen, and your skills aren't being utilized fully, it's not working for the community either, and where are we?

I wonder if I could ask you at this point, because you've gone through this very frustrating process, what enables you to remain persistent and committed to trying to make this work, as opposed to what happens with a lot of people these days—and this is a terrible loss for them personally and for our communities—where people are saying to heck with Nova Scotia because there isn't the sensitivity to the critical mass, and they will go to Montreal, Toronto, or Vancouver, that MTV syndrome that's talked about? Those are the larger centres where people tend to relocate. What has enabled you to remain here, to keep trying to sensitize the system and make your way?

Second, I'd be interested in asking Ms. Kutcher from MISA what we are seeing in terms of the heartbreaking situations where people were actually saying they were going back to their countries because this is not at all what they wanted, what they were offered, and at least in their home countries they are treated as fully contributing individuals with value.

• (1055)

Ms. Carmen Radulescu: I wondered what made me stay here. I love Nova Scotia. It is very nice. I think the main reason I decided to stay and not move right away when I realized how hard it is here was that my daughter felt okay in school. She was happy, and I was happy. It's very hard when you come and you lose your family and friends, and you start to make a new home again. Your children have to start all over. I talked to her and she seemed okay.

You have good universities. This is another reason I stayed here. I said if I have to do some courses for university, I can go to Dalhousie. I was also thinking about it for my daughter. She can stay

here and she doesn't need to travel. Another reason is that I will improve my skills, become a better person, and somehow I'll still get through. I'm very persistent. Another reason is if you go to a bigger city, the competition is bigger, so you don't gain anyway. The system is wrong because it doesn't allow us to work easily. This needs to be changed. I started to complain to MISA and wherever I was able to. Things start, and they seem to move. Twenty years from now, maybe I'll be able to work as an engineer. Still, there's hope.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Nine years after coming, you still are not working as a practising engineer?

Ms. Carmen Radulescu: No.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: What is it you would need to do at this point in order to be able to get to that point?

Ms. Carmen Radulescu: I think I would need to have a chance of having a job. What I need now is for somebody to believe that I'm not stupid, I'm smart, I can do the job, and to give me that chance.

When we come as skilled immigrants, we have some skills. We are trained and we can manage very quickly, and we can learn very quickly. We can learn the language, we can learn how to behave, and how to speak with your colleagues. I have good feedback from the other work I have done, and all the work I've done here in Canada. I know I can contribute. The only thing I need is somebody to say, okay, maybe I will let her try. I will do fine.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: What kind of work are you now doing?

Ms. Carmen Radulescu: I work for the YMCA as a YMCA school support worker.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Thank you.

Ms. Jan Sheppard Kutcher: It's hard to know where to begin sometimes, because this is such a huge topic. On your comment about skilled professionals returning home, unfortunately we really do see that. In fact, very recently I had an e-mail from a periodontist—a woman—who was originally from Brazil and had come here with her husband, another periodontist. He had been working in an academic setting. Although she was highly skilled and had years of experience, and although we need periodontists here in Nova Scotia, through the three-year period they were here, she was never able to practise in her field, except to help out with some research work. On top of that, they were applying for citizenship, and it got bogged down. It was years and years that their application was in the system. As you probably know, it's impossible to get clear information about the status of an immigration application.

If someone's here as a temporary foreign worker and they apply from within the country to get landed status, there's a website, which is not very helpful, and there's a 1-888 number, which I've called recently. I just press random buttons, trying to find a person. I speak English—fine—and it's impossible. I tried on their behalf and found out it was still in process.

Anyway, the e-mail I got from her recently was following her return visit home. She went with her daughters and decided to stay. She said, "I feel welcome. I'm back in my field. I can practise. Please come and visit me here. I feel like I've woken up from a nightmare." I thought that was a really dramatic and very sad commentary.

That's probably one end of the spectrum. In the same week I had another e-mail from another person who said it was a miracle—they'd been able to get a residency position in medicine, and so on. We see the full range. We see really wonderful settlements, successes, people getting into their fields here, and we see the opposite—people returning home. It's an emotional tennis game, sometimes, in the work we do.

Can I just add one thing? There's so much to say. One thing that I think is very important is for skilled professionals and tradespeople to get into a work setting related to their occupation and profession as soon as possible, so they do not get diverted into the so-called survival jobs—driving the cab, doing the cleaning, being the room attendant—when that's not where their skills and experience are, because to then come back into their fields becomes a very difficult task. Sometimes it means not coming in at exactly the same level at which they were working previously—an engineer may work in a more technical position—but it is to get into a position related to their field of work.

In some fields that is possible. We use programs like the New Beginnings work placement to lever that type of opportunity. It can work very well. If the person is then hired on, they're working in their field, they're getting contacts, they're getting an introduction to their field, and they're able to then carry out the requirements to qualify while they're working in their field, rather than going off on a tangent.

The other thing, though, about getting into a workplace related to their occupation is that although it's good for the newcomer in terms of income, references, contacts, and getting an understanding of how the occupation is practised here, what may be more important is that it's an assessment of international qualifications in a workforce setting.

● (1100)

This relates to the hesitancy that exists here in Nova Scotia, but quite frankly, when it comes to employers, it's across Canada. From all the discussions I've had with settlement workers and with newcomers across the country, employers everywhere have this reluctance, this skepticism that you speak English with an accent. What that means is a person speaks another language as well. But gaining access to a work site means that the employer can see first-hand what the individual's qualifications are, what their experience is, and they can assess them in a work site in the professions, as well in the trades. I think it's probably even more important in the trades, which are very hands-on.

If someone came to work for me for a period of three weeks, I could tell whether they had the skills or the competency to be a good employment counsellor with newcomers. I don't see why a periodontist could not work with someone for a few months and be able to determine whether they have the competencies to meet the Canadian standards. I don't see why a skilled professional like that would have to start over again, or do, in the case of dentistry, an extremely expensive qualifying program.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Edwards, you mentioned that you were having trouble getting cooperation from someone from the visa office when you have somebody who wants to come and check out Nova Scotia. This is where you have to get the thinking changed in the visa offices. I'll give you an analogous situation where the ministry was so wrong. It was concerning the policy that when grandparents or parents applied to come to Canada to be with their family, as soon as they made that application they were cut off from a visa. Then they couldn't apply to have a visa. And sometimes, God knows if they were ever going to get here, given the backlog. Finally the government came to its senses, and you heard the announcement about how now we're increasing the number of parents and grandparents that are able to come into the country, and we are issuing them multiple-entry visas.

And just think how horrendous it must be for a parent who wants to go and see their family in Canada, but as soon as they apply to become a landed immigrant in Canada, they are cut off from being able to go to Canada until their application is processed, which might be never. It's a terrible dilemma. I'm glad to see that that mindset has changed there.

I would really like to know from you if you can send figures to the committee as to how many of these visas have been turned down, because actually the committee does, on occasion, call in the ministry officials. Sometimes they are not as happy to be there as others, but we still get them in. And we put those questions to them, because we really have to break the mentality of having a real sense of suspicion of anybody who wants to come into this country. It's just a mindset that really has to change. I'm glad to see it's changing for the parents and grandparents.

I very recently read an article in the *Toronto Star* about returning. It talked about all the people going back to China because they have much better opportunities. So we're not going to be the land of milk and honey as we have been in the past when China was an oppressed country. A lot of people come here, find that they're underemployed, and go back. So we have to be a lot more careful about it.

I've really thought about this a whole lot. When I look at immigration, even though it's been the lifeblood of the country, we have been good at it only when the national interest is being served. We needed a railway; we brought in the Chinese. The railway was built; we put an exclusion on Asians. We needed to settle the prairies; we brought in the Ukrainians. We needed to break the land, and so on. We needed somebody in the skilled trades.... We have huge numbers of people in Canada, especially in Ontario, in the skills trades that came from elsewhere because we haven't been producing them. I don't think we're very good at bringing in professionals, because a couple of years ago we changed the point system, and instead of bringing in trades that were needed here, we said let's bring in people who can score these points.

The split is 60-40: 60 economic, based on the point system, 40 for family reunification and refugees. My thought is that we could switch those numbers, because we're finding that somebody who is over here under the family class making \$20,000 a year—and we had this as evidence before us—is a lot happier than somebody who is in the economic class making \$30,000 a year. It seems it's really unfair to set people up for failure.

So the question I have for you is should the 60-40 be changed to 50-50, or to 40-60 the other way? And also, should we really get back into trades? We should do a much better job with the portals, hopefully, in terms of matching up opportunities for people before they get here, because it's got to be awful to come with a degree and then just end up having the brain waste that goes on.

•(1110)

Ms. Megan Edwards: In Nova Scotia and Canada alike, we have to be more creative about how we attract immigrants. In our strategy we support a balance between immigrants from the economic, family, and refugee classes. We don't want to attract only economic immigrants. We need to target communities that currently exist here. We have a large Lebanese community, and they are interested in working with us to increase the number of immigrants. In many cases, these will be family members. Our nominee program is looking at adding a stream to allow family businesses to nominate a family member to come here and work for them.

The days of immigrants coming here and creating a business that their families are going to take over are ending. Families are choosing different professions. They have the opportunity to do this when they come here. Whether it should be changed to a 50-50 or a 60-40 remains to be seen. It depends on how we target our attraction methods. We support increasing the numbers of private sponsorships of refugees. Refugees have been some of the most successful immigrants to Nova Scotia. We have to change the mindset of people who think that refugees were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. They bring skills and expertise to Canada and Nova Scotia. At our new office we will be working with communities—we want our attraction program to be community-driven.

The Chair: Make sure your new office stays in touch with the committee. If you're having troubles, you can come and tell the committee about it

Ms. Sheppard Kutcher.

Ms. Jan Sheppard Kutcher: I would like to comment on skills. In the current system, newcomers often have MAs and PhDs,

because that's how you get the points. I spoke recently in my office to two men running a couple of Chinese restaurants. They can't find anyone in the city who's skilled in Chinese cuisine. They know people in China who have these skills and want to come over. They would even invest, but they can't get through. There's a backlog. There's a huge shortage of truck drivers. Driving a truck is a skill. Heavy equipment mechanics are scarce in this province and across the country.

We need to broaden our notion of skills and reduce our emphasis on formal education. We are seeing lots of MA and PhD newcomers, and that's great. But I'd like to see a broadening of our interpretation of skills. We need to encourage the family class, because that's how you build communities. The social and cultural supports available through family connections and communities are really important.

Here in Nova Scotia, I don't think that ethnic communities can provide the strategic assistance newcomers need to access the workforce. In Toronto an engineer from Iran will come and find work right away, but it will be in a Subway franchise owned by an Iranian Canadian. That's not the kind of assistance they need. They need assistance that ethnic communities are not in a position to provide—help in understanding the workforce, connections with regulatory bodies, and special supports like sector-specific language programs or short-term training.

•(1115)

The Chair: On that point, I have some businesses in my riding where the person who started the business is from Southeast Asia. About 90% of his employees—and he has a couple of hundred of them—have very good positions, and it's a very good business. They are tool and die makers, engineers, and what have you, and they are all from Southeast Asia. So having the critical mass helps in that regard.

Ms. Jan Sheppard Kutcher: I don't think we're there, in Nova Scotia. I don't think that's the reality of our context right now. Beyond that, I think that more integrated workforces can be stronger. Although I understand your point, I think the strongest organization is the diverse organization. I don't think it's an organization that's made up of everyone who's been living in Nova Scotia, is white, has the same background, and so on. I don't necessarily think a strong organization is one that's made up entirely of Southeast Asian Canadians, either.

I think there's strength in diversity. I think there's more innovation. I think, generally, it would be a healthier society and there would be healthier workplaces if we had more diversity there.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I have any number of questions I would like to pursue. I know time is short.

It's also clear that there is an artificiality, in a way, to the three different categories we're looking at because of how much obvious crossover there is. One of the witnesses in the previous group, while she was speaking about this aspect of citizenship, was also talking about the inability to bring her widowed mother in after her father died, and she'd absolutely given up any hope of being able to do that. At the same time, she was not able to get access to the kind of child care that she required. There's a totally absurd lack of recognition of that problem and how it's going to be solved.

I'm interested in pursuing two things quickly. One is that I've been extremely impressed by what I understand Manitoba is doing, a province like Nova Scotia in many ways—you could exaggerate that—at least in terms of population size, in terms of being a have-not province, and so on. I know MISA has been involved, as has the provincial department, in looking at the Manitoba experience. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about what it is they're doing so successfully and the application of that here. To what extent is the Manitoba model under the new immigration program being pursued?

Second is the whole business of determining real skills and competencies. As everybody has said, it's not just what it says on a piece of paper; it's determining their knowledge, their actual competencies, and so on.

I've become more and more impressed with the work of the Prior Learning Assessment Centre here. In fact, as we speak here this morning, practically the entire staff of the Prior Learning Assessment Centre is a major host of a conference that's taking place just across the harbour about continuous adult learning.

I'm wondering whether part of the answer for dealing with credentialism and for assessing what it is people bring to the situation—the piece of paper isn't going to tell you one way or the other.... Is that a process MISA is turning to at all, or the provincial immigration program is turning to, to try to determine the equivalencies of skills and how we can remove that as a barrier and instead find a process that will actually help to create access, rather than the opposite?

Ms. Megan Edwards: We have had a lot of discussions with Manitoba. They really have been the trailblazer for the smaller provinces in this area, and I think they have been able to have the successes they've had because the process was driven by business. Business came to the government and said we need workers and we need people to come here to fill these skills gaps, and the province and the city of Winnipeg really took strides forward to invest money in an immigration program for the province.

Right now, I see a better comparison between Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, which has an office of immigration that's been operating for about three years now. Their levels of immigrants are about the same as ours, and they have a rural-based population and a resource-based economy. So we're going to be working with Saskatchewan and looking at some of the things they have looked at in their fledgling days in attracting immigrants, because right now they are a better match for our current situation.

Manitoba, of course, has great best practices with their nominee program. They've got numerous streams, they have priority processing, and they've been able to increase the number of their immigrants, but not quite double them yet, which is what they've

been hoping to do. Nova Scotia is hoping to more than double our immigrant intake in the next four years, so we're going to have to learn from those two provinces.

With prior learning assessment and the assessment service, we've heard that once we get that piece in place that's the easy part; it's the recognition that's difficult. If people can get a piece of paper saying that their credentials are comparable to Canadian ones.... But the issue is how do we get that message to the business people? How do we change the mindset or “come-from-away” attitude, as Mr. Deveaux was saying? I'm a southern Ontario refugee to Nova Scotia, and I see that attitude every day, not only with myself, but also with the newcomers who come into our office and feel frustrated.

So I think it's the recognition piece that will take the bulk of our energy.

I don't know if Jan wants to....

• (1120)

Ms. Jan Sheppard Kutcher: I've been in touch with the PLA Centre here for about ten years, and the prior learning assessment process is a part of some qualifications recognition—the process related to some professions. The only example that springs to mind at the moment is medical lab technology, and that's done at a national level. Locally I just haven't seen it used or promoted as a tool for being part of qualifications assessment or recognition, and I'm disappointed in that. It has the potential to be used as a tool in that way, but it's not currently.

The PLA Centre here is very good at what it does, which is assisting in the development of portfolios. But to be quite honest—and I'm going to sound critical here—it's kind of one size fits all. It has an excellent portfolio development program that takes approximately three months to complete—for language intensive. I've spoken to them on many occasions about adapting it to fit the more urgent needs of newcomers. It's been difficult to use as a tool, quite honestly. I think it has great potential, because it conceptually makes sense. What have you done in the past? What have you learned from it? How can you articulate it and document it? Getting it recognized, as Megan has said, is an issue.

Over the entire time I've been working in this field, and especially the last five years, I've looked to Manitoba and across Canada to see what are the best practices, what are the models for assisting with workforce integration. We've visited Edmonton. Last November I even went to Toronto to see about a care program for nurses, and the internship program that Skills for Change has put in place.

We've been looking at and trying to learn from what's being done in other provinces. In Manitoba they've taken the lead primarily because of a different mindset, a different attitude toward immigration. Throughout history Manitoba has been almost inherently more progressive. Being an immigrant is seen as something admirable, it's not a big deal, whereas Nova Scotia has the mentality of people leaving. I'm another "come-from-away," and when I came it was, "Well, why did you come here?" That's starting to change, but when I first arrived and raised the issue of immigration, even in the context of looking at the pool of immigrants as a way of meeting skills shortages, I encountered the response in political circles that it was not politically palatable. "We can't say that kind of thing. We have unemployment in Nova Scotia." That has begun to change.

The business community is starting to drive change here, but initially, politically it just didn't work. You couldn't raise it. That has started to change, but that's the big difference here. The local government is now taking a lead in promoting and trying to attract and put efforts toward the retention of newcomers in Nova Scotia. There's been a huge shift in the mindset here in this province. As settlement workers, we're trying to take advantage of that shift to try to work really hard to help put some changes in place.

We're in a transition period. We need to work to help get fair processes in place. Then we can back off, because hopefully those will then be integrated into the system. Unfortunately, I don't think it's realistic to think that there won't be... We could have more mutual recognition agreements, and that would be a step forward. There's also a certain missing element of common sense sometimes with situations when you think, "What? That doesn't make any sense from anyone's point of view." But regulated occupations, self-regulated occupations, are always going to have some kind of process.

• (1125)

We need to encourage them to make it as fair and streamlined as possible. We need to look at what kinds of supports can help people make their way through that process as quickly as possible, while accessing work related to their fields.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's an appropriate point to end this session on.

I want to thank you for appearing before the committee. We will send you copies of our report.

As you saw before, we'll take a picture so we have it on the record. People can look at it when they want to know who the input was from. Thank you.

We'll suspend for a few minutes while the other group gets set up.

• (1128)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1136)

The Chair: I want to welcome you to this session. We're doing cross-country consultations. We were here exactly a week ago and could have had the session. We had six members of Parliament, but we weren't sure previous to that if we had to be back in Ottawa for a vote. This is the second-last stop before we complete the

consultation. Tomorrow we will go to Quebec, and then we'll have covered all the provinces.

We're going to start with five-minute presentations, and then we'll get into questions and answers.

We'll start with you, Ms. Edwards.

Ms. Megan Edwards: Mr. Chairman, Ms. McDonough, thank you again for allowing us to speak to you today about these very important issues.

As noted in my earlier presentation, the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration was established in January of this year. Since the provincial immigration office opened its doors, many of the inquiries received in our office have been related to the processing of federal immigration applications. People who have applied to come to Nova Scotia through Citizenship and Immigration Canada are increasingly frustrated with the existing call centre website service model they must navigate to access information on the status of their immigration application or to renew work or study permits.

This was also a concern we heard during the consultations on the development of our immigration strategy. Very often our conversations were derailed from the focus on our provincial issues to become a forum for discussion about the processing of applications by the federal government and the treatment immigrants have received from staff at visa offices abroad.

At the provincial immigration office, we are unable to provide any information on the status of immigration applications. However, directing people to the CIC website or the call centre is frustrating for the public, as they have been finding little or no assistance from these sources.

Many of the people contacting our office are people who have applied through the family class category and who are attempting to reunite with their spouses and children or other family members. Immigrants have told us of the importance of having family support in order to feel secure and happy in their new home.

Nova Scotia's immigration strategy values the importance of a balanced immigration approach, including humanitarian and compassionate categories such as the reunification of families and the sponsorship of refugee families. The federal government has responded, when it comes to family reunification, with their recent announcements to expedite in-Canada spousal applications and to increase the number of parents and grandparents who will be granted permanent residency in 2005 and 2006.

Though these immigrants may be older, they can still make a productive contribution to our economy by working with their children in an established business in Canada or by providing child care assistance to allow women to pursue their employment aspirations. It's important to remember, and I alluded to this in my credential presentation, that immigrant women often are forced into the position where they give up their occupations in order to maintain the home and to look after their children. There has been a gender inequity that needs to be addressed.

In support of families, Nova Scotia's immigration strategy has proposed the development of a new category under our nominee program, called the family business stream. This category was suggested to us during our consultation process as a way of ensuring that businesses are able to continue operating, as immigrant families are finding that their children may wish to pursue other careers instead of taking over a family business. A plan for the implementation of this new stream is being developed in order to ensure that proper labour standards would be applied and that the businesses are viable in the long term.

In closing, immigrants who are selected under the family class category may meet many of the guiding principles outlined in our strategy document, and we would support expedited processing for applicants under this category. The Nova Scotia government recognizes that it would be irresponsible for us to encourage people to immigrate here who aren't likely to succeed, and family members have built-in supports to assist with integration.

Are the principles community-based? Family members will be joining an established community already in existence in Nova Scotia.

Our final principle is being fair and inclusive: that we must ensure that all people living in Nova Scotia are given the opportunity to achieve success. By building our diverse culture, we will also be building welcoming communities.

If we can create the right conditions and opportunities for immigrants, they will come and they will stay, and we will all benefit. Without improvements in these critical areas—credential assessment and recognition, and improved services to immigrants, including those in the family class—substantial progress will be difficult.

Thank you.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Anjana KC.

Ms. Anjana KC (As an Individual): I'm Anjana KC, I'm a permanent resident, and I'm from Nepal. I'm here to talk about an issue involving my brother and his wife, who is not able to obtain a permanent immigrant visa.

We applied for a permanent immigrant visa in 2000, and we received it in February 2003. We landed in Ontario on April 13, 2003. In January 2003 my brother got married, but when we landed he forgot to mention that he got married. Because when we applied he wasn't married yet, and nobody asked. We didn't read the documents properly, so it's partly our fault. Since then he's been trying to sponsor her, and got rejected. We sent marriage certificates to the case processing centre. The case went to the Canadian High Commission in Delhi and they rejected the application in December 2003. We then appealed in March 2004 with the help of a lawyer, which yet again was unsuccessful.

We presented a number of pieces of evidence, including wedding photos, invitation cards, and marriage certificates. Along with the evidence there have been many people who have written letters to the Ministry of Citizenship, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Toronto

Immigration Appeal Division, and also many other people who my father knows from Ontario who were at the wedding, or who were invited to the wedding. I and my family take full responsibility for making an honest mistake, for not reading the documents properly. But it's a very honest mistake because we were all travelling from different parts of the world when we landed here. Due to the travelling hassles we really didn't....

I understand that the government has every right to ask not to let in my brother's wife, but I also believe that we've done most of what we can do. We provided all the evidence we could, yet my brother's wife is still not able to come here. They've always planned to come here and study. They're medical doctors. They want to study more and start working here. Because my brother's wife is not getting the visa, my brother and his wife have been separated. Right after they got married my brother came here and she was back home. So they haven't seen each other for two years. We're a very close-knit family, and to see my brother and his wife go without seeing each other for more than a year after their marriage has been heartrending. I hope me being here today shows just how badly we want my sister-in-law to be able to receive immigration visas for my brother and herself so they can both pursue their dreams, which they have long awaited.

Thank you.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Moncayo.

Ms. Marianela Fuertes (As an Individual): Thank you.

Good morning. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak before this committee. We are Marianela Fuertes and Carmen Moncayo, two new Canadians born in Colombia.

We are here to present to you a complaint on a very recurrent and pervasive procedure that takes place in the Canadian embassy in Colombia against Colombian refugees living in Canada and their families residing in Colombia.

This may be the case for many other refugees coming from different parts of the world; however, by using the first-hand experience of Colombians, you could see the impact of this horrendous practice that separates totally refugees from their families, adding a new burden to their challenges and hardships.

By using two personal examples we want to demonstrate to you the conditions under which the refugees are treated according to the Canadian guidelines for immigrants.

Before going any further, I would like to say that for my husband, Cesar Rincon, our young child, and for me, the opportunity to live in this beautiful country was like an opportunity for rebirth. We are very thankful for the opportunity that the Canadian government has given to us. It saved our lives and has allowed us to raise our son in peace and in a secure environment. We are a young professional couple, both of us lawyers. My husband was a prosecuting attorney, and I myself was an assistant judge in the Colombian constitutional court system. We were both professors at the university, and for security reasons we had to leave the country.

We had to make the decision to leave Colombia in only two weeks. I am mentioning the conditions of the departure because I would like for you to try to imagine the rupture of our family unit and the circumstances under which we had to leave. We have lost our careers, our worldly goods, and our families.

I am aware of the great opportunities that Canada has to offer and that all immigrants have suffered losses. However, when someone has decided of their own free will to emigrate and to start a new life in another country, they are the masters of their own destiny. No one has forced them to do anything, and this is an important distinction.

After two and a half years our main efforts have been trying to be part of this society and overcome the changes we have faced since we left our country. Having our mother would be a very strong support in this process, for which reason my mother has tried to come three times. The Canadian embassy in Colombia has denied her visit, although she has shown savings and every piece of information they requested. Nothing has been considered enough. The only reason my mother wants to visit Canada is to be reassured that our decision was the correct one and to see her grandchild, Gabriel, who is seven years old.

Ms. Carmen Celina Moncayo (As an Individual): In July 2003 I invited my friend, Patricia Molina, to visit me in Halifax. On three occasions, and for different reasons, her visitor visa was denied. After my MP, Wendy Lill, requested an explanation of this situation, the Canadian embassy in Colombia responded:

... specifically, Ms. Molina's brother, Sergio Molina, currently living in London, Ontario, is a former refugee claimant. Due to this reason, the officer in charge was not satisfied that she was a potential visitor, therefore, the application was refused.

I need to know why my friend was not informed from the first that her brother being a former refugee seeker was an obstacle to coming to Canada independent of her personal situation. A Colombian pays \$150 for every visa application. Marianela, her family, and any other refugee who comes under the government assisted refugee category are not informed of this policy.

Those are not isolated cases, but are some of many where Colombian-born Canadians have invited their families and friends to visit them and the Canadian embassy in Colombia has rejected them. I have information about a particular case where a woman with a very difficult pregnancy requested her mother's visit and was denied for very weak reasons. Once again, they were a family coming to Canada under the government assisted refugee program.

Canada has an international reputation of being a leader country in humanitarian cases based on the grounds of its response to refugee crises around the world. But their international commitment as a resettlement partner with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees does not end with bringing them to a safe place. Canada has acquired the full commitment of ensuring that refugees have government support to overcome the negative consequences emerging from their conditions as victims of war, persecution, displacement, and many other human rights violations. As you must know, all of these conditions produce one of the biggest sorrows, which is the breakdown of family ties and the support and protection that brings its closeness. By denying family visits to refugees, the Canadian government is maintaining the existence of these perverse consequences.

One of the most important goals during the resettlement process is the refugee's integration into Canadian society. This is basically a process of developing a sense of belonging and being respected in this new society as a member with equal rights and responsibilities as their Canadian-born fellow persons.

How can a refugee feel accepted and feel that he or she is a full member of society when for the most outrageous and unbelievable reasons their families are rejected over and over by a system that is based on a subjective criterion? How can this criterion work when it implies that everybody who is related to a refugee wants to come to stay in Canada? Is this a system that is promoting first-class and second-class citizens?

We request to be informed if there are any protocols, guidelines, procedures, or criteria developed by Immigration and Citizenship Canada that prevent refugees from having their families visit them in Canada. We'd like to know those guidelines and we ask to have them made public.

All refugees and asylum-seekers must be informed by immigration officers that by accepting the protection of the Canadian government they accept that their families will never be able to come and visit them in Canada. They must make all the necessary arrangements to meet them in a third country in case they are never able to go back to visit their families in their native countries.

We also request that the situation be analyzed and considered under the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms regarding equality before and under the law.

Thank you.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The visa process is probably one of the most frustrating things that members of Parliament get to do, particularly if they have large immigrant bases, because it's pretty subjective, which I think you put well, and it's difficult to know what we can do to overcome it.

Just as a bit of a background, in 1997-98 we turned down 70,000 people who applied for visas, representing about 10% of the applicants; in 2004, we turned down over 151,000, representing 18%-plus.

In its frustration, the committee has been trying to look at different methods. One of the methods we're now discussing... Because once you get turned down, it becomes very difficult to get in, though you can reapply. So one of the things we were looking at for the people who had been turned down in the initial go-around was to have some kind of bond system, where the person doing the sponsoring from Canada would give some kind of guarantee or post a bond, somewhat similar to what is done in the court system, when they make decisions about keeping people in custody or letting them out. That seems to work fairly well. This would only apply to the people who got turned down. It would afford us an opportunity to do some kind of quality assurance, because if you have a visa officer who keeps turning people down, you never know if those people would go back. There's no quality check on that, whereas if they come here under this other process and then they go back, then obviously something is wrong.

It's a terrible dilemma from that personal perspective, but also from an economic perspective, because when people come to visit Canada, they're tourists and spend money, and they turn you into a tourist as well, because you go and show off your province and your community.

Anyway, after that introduction, I'll call on Alexa.

• (1155)

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Welcome to the parliamentary committee.

I'm not the regular New Democratic Party member on this committee. My colleague, Bill Siksay, who is from the west coast, was not able to be here, and I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to be here today.

I will say that consistently my colleague, Bill Siksay, has reported back in informal discussions as well as formal discussions around the problems that you've outlined and others have outlined, and I'm increasingly horrified by what seem to be two recurring problems. One is a mixed message, worse than a mixed message, a kind of perverse, hypocritical message that says we really want new Canadians who came either as refugees or as applicants for residency. We really want them to come. We want them to succeed. We want them to flourish, but we're going to refuse to create the conditions that allow them to get on with their lives. Second, there is a feeling of frustration that there are simple inequalities here in terms of how the rights of Canadians apply to new Canadians, and in particular to refugees in many cases.

Every member of the committee, almost regardless of political stripe, ends up feeling utterly frustrated and actually humiliated and apologetic on behalf of Canada, as much as we ever can express that in a way that is anything but superficial.

There is a basis for saying that this committee is trying to get to the bottom of what it is that needs to change, that needs to be reflected both in attitude changes and also in practices, in terms of how people are dealt with at the level of the Canadian embassy, the level of where application is made, as well as on this end in dealing with people's requests for information, for updates, for insights into why decisions are being made as they're being made.

I'm interested in pursuing a little bit further your sense about what that denial of what seems to be totally reasonable requests for family members to be able to visit or family members to be reunited with other family members is really all about. Is it, from your point of view, as you experience it and as others experience it and have recounted their stories, a kind of net of suspicion that is cast over yourselves or your family members? Do you end up feeling that the officials seem to take the view that really no one is to be trusted, that they just want to come to visit families because what they really want to do is get into the country and then stay illegally? Or in the case of Ms. KC, is it a case of your feeling that no matter how many ways you acknowledge a mistake on the part of your family, provide the evidence that makes it absolutely clear that this is your sister-in-law, your brother's wife, who needs and wants to reunite with her family, that actually you're left being made to feel that you've wilfully misrepresented the facts and nothing you can ever do will wipe that clean so that reunification can take place?

Is that where this comes from, in your experience, as you try to make sense out of it? Or does it appear to be just a kind of brutish abuse of power on the part of people in jobs to which they seem ill-suited to actually carry out what are supposed to be Canada's humanitarian, compassionate policies?

• (1200)

I think we're trying to get at what's going on here, what's behind this, both in terms of how it leaves you feeling and in terms of what we as members of Parliament must do to try to change the situation. I wonder if you can just elaborate on that a little bit.

I realize you're putting yourselves very much on the hot seat here. I and all members of Parliament, I think, appreciate that you're willing to do that. That's not an easy thing to do when you feel vulnerable and frustrated.

Ms. Anjana KC: I think there are some people who lie about it to get something out of it, but then there are people like us who don't. We don't get anything out of it at all. We just want my brother and my sister-in-law to be reunited, and we've tried almost everything. They've asked us for almost everything, and it's been two years that we've been trying and trying and still getting all rejections.

I just want to say there is no benefit for us at all in lying about their marriage, nothing. Instead of doubting so much, they should also think about those people who are really there because they want to be together and not because they get some benefits.

Ms. Carmen Celina Moncayo: I think there are several factors there. One is a discriminatory attitude against refugees. It's believing that refugees are people who are bringing problems to this country, that refugees must be related to some kind of issues and we need to prevent them from getting in. There is discrimination in terms of what countries we want to get people from. All refugees come from countries where there are problems, and the fear is that all their families want to stay and to live in Canada, so for that reason we don't want them to come and visit here. They want to flee in an irregular way; because they are not people we can trust, they will follow the normal procedures.

There is a general rejection attitude against asylum seekers, and I wonder why, if we have the status of asylum seeker, we punish people who do that. It is the last door for people who can't go through the long procedure of being relocated under the UN system or under Canadian embassy selection. We should preserve asylum as a very important port of entry to save people, but we penalize people for getting in that way.

There are a lot of needs. For example, Colombian people come and land here, and they get asylum-seeker status. Most of them come through the United States, so they get that visa before getting a Canadian visa. There are also needs in our particular case, and the stereotypes about Colombian people....

I think there's a huge misunderstanding of what a conflict is. How, for example, can my mother live in Colombia and enjoy her life there and not want to live here in spite of the difficult situation there? Because people don't understand the realities of the country, they put everybody in the same box. I think it's ignorance, also, of how people are affected and how people live in different situations in their countries.

Those are my impressions.

I don't know if Marianela wants to add anything.

• (1205)

Ms. Marianela Fuertes: The point is why—in my case, for example, we had to leave Colombia and now we can return—can we visit our family but our family can't visit us? Why not? Because we are refugees in Canada. This is a double punishment. We can return to our country but our family can't visit us. We have a letter in which the ambassador in Colombia says this is the reason, because this person claimed asylum and used a tourist visa and after claimed and....

I say, look, anybody who goes to Canada as a refugee can receive visits from his family. This is a general assumption...and that is terrible.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I don't want to encourage you to talk about anything that would put your family at further risk back in Colombia. I'm trying to understand the situation in which you find yourself now, and how you can get from where you are now to where you can actually exercise your rights as a new Canadian, which surely should include being able to have family come to visit.

Did you come to Canada through the United States, or did you come directly to Canada?

Ms. Marianela Fuertes: Directly to Canada from Bogotá, Colombia. We got my permanent residence in the embassy in Colombia, not here. We didn't claim here after coming. In Colombia, in Bogotá, we claimed for refugee status, and they gave it to us in Colombia. We came with our papers in correct order.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: So your assumption, which seemed quite reasonable, would be that family members who might want to visit you would have the same right to do so as anyone else, or family members who might want to be reunited and come to Canada would have the opportunity to do so as well.

Were those questions that were in your mind at the time, that you had an opportunity to discuss? Or were you in a situation where you

were literally fleeing for your own safety, so those weren't questions that you had an opportunity to seek answers to or discuss in a way that was looking forward to the future?

Ms. Marianela Fuertes: The condition was very difficult, because like I said in my letter, it was in two weeks. Only my husband had a meeting with the person in the embassy, and they asked specific questions about our situation. But they never said anything about our family. We claimed only for the people who were in a dangerous situation—that is me, my husband, and my little boy. We didn't involve other people, because they were not in the problem. My mother was very close in the process, but she was not in a dangerous situation. They tried to visit us because she's my mother, and my boy is her only grandson. That is the reason. She doesn't want to stay here. She doesn't want to live in Canada. She lives in Bogotá. She has her house. She receives a pension because of her job. She doesn't need to leave Colombia. She wants to stay in Colombia.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to go back to that question that we were talking about and examining in committee, where, in the case of your mother, if she was turned down you could post some kind of bond or surety in Canada. That would mean if she came and stayed and made a refugee claim, then you'd forfeit the money you put up.

I just want to know how that would meet your situation. What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Marianela Fuertes: In my particular case, I don't have a problem with that. We'd try, because we want her to come and visit. But in general, I don't think it's a good idea. Why should refugee people have to pay for our rights? Because it's a right. The unification of the family and the visit of family are rights. This is like you asking me if I want to pay for...I don't know, travel around Canada. If everybody can travel around Canada, why should the refugee have to pay for that?

That is the only consideration I have on this question.

But in my particular case, I think in my own interest I'd say okay, I don't have a problem with that, because I want my mother to come visit us. But I think it's a dangerous policy, because it's like you're saying refugees have to pay for the right to visit their family.

Ms. Carmen Celina Moncayo: There is another point here. There is an issue of rights, and are we creating first-class and second-class citizens?

The Chair: Actually, just on that, it doesn't matter if you're born in Canada or you aren't born in Canada. If you want somebody to visit from a country where Canada gets lots of refugee claims and people come to Canada and apply for refugee status, it would apply whether you were born here or not.

The reason I say that is because the present situation that we have is so unsatisfactory, because if you get turned down for a visa overseas, you're turned down. You can apply again, or you can go to Federal Court, or you can get a minister's permit, which are really difficult, when you look at the numbers. It wouldn't be discriminating on the basis of whether you're a refugee, or Canadian-born, or whatever; it would just discriminate on the basis of where people who are coming to visit are coming from. That's what this would help deal with. So I'm asking for your advice. The committee is deliberating it because we are so frustrated with the status quo.

In your situation, your mother came and she left, and then the surety, or whatever, is removed, but it would facilitate her coming here.

Ms. Marianela Fuertes: Yes. I lived before in Winnipeg, and I wrote a letter to my MP and asked this question, whether this was possible. For example, in our case, my father, in Bogota, could pay a fee, and if my mother didn't return, the embassy could keep the money paid. But I didn't receive an answer.

• (1215)

The Chair: I have this letter that your brother received, and I'm disturbed by the wording of the letter.

I'm going to get you a copy of this, Alexa. It's quite amazing. It says the law is that you have to lay out all your dependants and relatives, and so on, and if you fail.... Then they go on to say that the fact that this person wasn't declared resulted in a determination being made by the Mississauga office not to remove your brother for misrepresentation.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: The presumption of guilt is truly astounding.

The Chair: That's right. It's exactly what you're saying. It's the presumption of guilt versus the presumption of innocence. I guess that's the mindset.

What occurs to me is that immigration is the lifeblood of this country. It has been in the past, and it's going to be in the future. Somehow we have to change the mindset of the interpretation of regulations to maybe sometimes give the benefit of the doubt and try to act in good faith. If this were a business, they surely would have no repeat customers, with that kind of attitude.

Did your brother apply for humanitarian and compassionate consideration?

Ms. Anjana KC: No, but he applied to the the case processing centre in Mississauga.

The Chair: Anyway, I appreciate all your presentations. It's not particularly easy, but let me tell you that you have much more company across the country that we would wish you to have. Somehow we're going to try to come up with some recommendations to make this better.

Alexa referred to Mr. Bill Siksay, who was with us for most of the hearings. He is an excellent member of the committee, knowledgeable, diligent, hard-working, and very compassionate. In one of his speeches in the House of Commons he said that he, as an MP, had Kleenex boxes in his office because the stories were so moving.

That is the case with every member of this committee. We have dealt with these issues in our ridings. We have a particular interest in citizenship and immigration issues, and are determined to find some accommodation for them, because there are too many negatives for us to maintain the status quo. Hopefully, we can get regulations in place where the officials can, once again, do what I think many of them wish they could do, and do best, by giving them discretion on the positive side of things.

I have no more questions.

Alexa.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I'm reading this letter, and I can't even imagine how devastating it must be, on the one hand, to have a letter that more or less says to your brother, you're lucky we're not kicking you out of the country for your misrepresentation, but we're not going to do that. In other words, you're permanently in a situation of indebtedness and insecurity—but we're certainly not letting your wife in.

This probably won't make you feel any better, but it's what Canadians need to understand about what's going on, because Canadians should not be prepared to allow the government to condone or sponsor these practices.

My colleague, Bill Siksay, the regular representative on the committee for the New Democratic Party, said this morning that if at least one example is brought forward, Mr. Telegdi could indicate if there were others where somebody's family member was not listed because they had been presumed to be dead. The family had given up on finding that person and had come to Canada, but when that person was found to be alive, the latter was still not permitted to come in. So there is something utterly, horrifyingly abusive about the exercise of power that won't recognize the perversity and inhumanity of a practice like that.

I don't think that's who Canadians want us to be. I don't think that's who Canadians like to think we are in the world, but it's not an exaggeration to say that we have heard story after story in the foreign affairs committee over the last couple of years that we aren't who we think we are in the face of the world. Canada's reputation for being a humanitarian, compassionate nation is severely—take your pick, as these words were used again and again—deteriorating, dwindling, falling apart, declining, or withering.

We would all like to thank you very much for being here today to try to send a clear signal that this is not acceptable to you. We need to help carry forward the message that it is not acceptable to Canadians. As parliamentarians, we feel this is not acceptable to Canadians, and your telling your stories and taking the risk of doing so helps us to achieve what I think we understand you are looking for and that we share.

So thank you very much for being here. The very best of luck to all of you. I know it's more than luck, but it's real change that needs to happen to have the doors and hearts of Canada open.

Thank you.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

The committee is adjourned.

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