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Chair

Mr. Norman Doyle

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● (1730)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC)): I want to welcome a delegation from the Finnish Parliament, which includes six members and the clerk.

I know you have a number of meetings here in Ottawa. You're meeting with the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

As most of us are aware, Finland is currently in the process of finalizing a new migration policy, so we welcome the opportunity to have you share your experiences with us. If we can be of any help as a committee, we would be only too pleased to do so.

We're going to try to be as informal as possible, so please feel comfortable. I'll pass it over to you. You can make your presentation or do whatever you want.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari (Chairperson, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): Thank you very much for receiving us.

The Chair: You're very welcome.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: You said we could share our experiences as far as immigration policy is concerned. We don't have any experience, in comparison to your tradition and history and what is happening right now. We are willing to learn from you, because we are aware that Europe is lacking in immigrants.

It has been said that Europe is the old-age home of the world because our population is aging. We urgently need immigrants. Actually, the worst thing is what is happening in Finland. In Finland, the population is aging the fastest of all the EU countries right now.

Delegates from our Ministry of Labour recently visited your country, and they had an excellent opportunity to hear your views.

We are members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. My name is Liisa Jaakonsaari, and I'm chairing this committee. As far as my political background, I'm a Social Democrat.

Mr. Jari Vilén (Member, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): I just have a few words.

I'm Jari Vilén, a member of the Conservative Party in Finland. I'm the chairman of the Grand Committee, which is the Finnish Parliament's European affairs committee.

Mr. Johannes Koskinen (Member, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): My name is Johannes Koskinen. I'm also from the Social Democratic Party. I was the Minister of Justice from 1999 until last September, but now I'm back in the Parliament.

● (1735)

Ms. Maija Perho (Member, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): My name is Maija Perho. I am from the National Coalition Party. I am also the vice-chairperson of my parliamentary group. In the previous government, I was the Minister of Social Affairs and Health.

Mr. Aulis Ranta-Muotio (Member, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): My name is Aulis Ranta-Muotio. I'm a member of Parliament for the Centre Party. The Centre Party is more or less the Prime Minister's party in Finland.

Mr. Antero Kekkonen (Member, Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament): I am Antero Kekkonen, Social Democrat, and a member of Parliament.

The Chair: There are more Social Democrats than Conservatives here today.

Mr. Jari Vilén: In Lapland we say it's not the quantity, it's the quality that counts.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: Our ambassador and counsel to the committee....

As you just heard, Mr. Vilén is from Lapland, where Santa Claus lives. If you have any wishes, you can tell him.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: On my background, I was Minister of Labour. I'm the mother of the first immigration law in Finland.

Now it would be interesting to hear how your committee works. You said that you are finalizing some core points of your immigration law.

The Chair: We just had the Auditor General in to talk about and review some of the reports she's given us since 2003.

We have a target of roughly 250,000 to 300,000 immigrants per year. We've benefited a great deal from immigration. We have a multicultural country, and most people would agree that immigrants make a great contribution to our country. Immigrants have a history of creating jobs here and bringing new ideas to the country. They're very productive and integrate well into our society. Canada really is a country of immigrants. The little province from which I come, Newfoundland and Labrador, has English and Irish people, and most parts of Canada have a lot of immigrants.

Right now we're looking at examining a number of issues from the immigration targets for 2006-07. We have a backlog of applications generally for the country, so we're going to be looking at that. We're looking at temporary foreign workers, embassy closures, problems in obtaining temporary resident visas, foreign credential recognition, general issues dealing with the refugee appeal division, and quite a number of other issues as well.

Maybe I'll go around the table and some of our committee members can ask some questions or make some observations, if you will.

Mr. Blair Wilson (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to Canada and welcome to the committee. I have just a couple of comments to pass on to you. I know your economy has been doing incredibly well lately. We've had 10 years of prosperity here in Canada, which has taken us to the point now where we're balancing our budget, interest rates are low, and unemployment is at a 30-year low. I'm from western Canada, Vancouver, and the economy in British Columbia is booming, as is Alberta's.

One of the interesting things you said in your opening comments was that your need for immigrants is urgent and your population is aging rapidly. That is one of the things that as a committee we've also discussed. I think it's a global problem with developed countries. We've got an aging population that will be retiring soon, between about 2012 and 2015.

One of the things Canada has is a great competitive advantage, vis-à-vis your country and other countries in the world, in accepting immigrants and assimilating them peacefully into our society. I don't think Canadians really appreciate the fact that we're world leaders in opening our doors to people, and we have such great success stories of people who have come here, even recently. In the next five or ten years, I think Canada is going to realize how great a competitive advantage we have.

I think we have that advantage because it's been our history. Canada is a young country compared to a lot of the countries of Europe, and we were forged out of the fact that we had English- and French-speaking people coming together, and we had a large first nations aboriginal population to begin with. So the way Canada started to grow was due to three distinct societies having to get along with each other. I think the level of mutual respect and tolerance is part of being Canadian. We've been able to take that and evolve that forward, and now I believe we celebrate the differences between ethnic groups and members of society.

I know that in Vancouver, where I come from, you can walk down the streets, and every ethnicity in the world is prevalent there and growing. We also have the luxury of having lots of real estate. We have lots of areas to take in people and grow, so we're not like smaller countries, where you really have to figure out how to maximize the efficiency of your area.

Those are just some of the comments I wanted to pass on to you to show how our society is structured. I think that's what benefits us on the immigration front.

● (1740)

The Chair: Good. Thank you, Blair.

Madam Faille.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): First, I want to welcome you. Johanne and I are from the Bloc québécois. So we represent Quebeckers, and we are in the majority in Quebec.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll just take a moment to allow people to get their earphones in and get technically fixed.

Mr. Jari Vilén: Which channel is the Finnish one?

The Chair: The next time you come we'll have a Finnish translator.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: In Quebec, unlike the other provinces, we have our own immigration agreement. So there is a division of responsibilities. The main difference between your system and ours may reside in the fact that we have a department dedicated to the development of immigration policies, whereas, in your case, the Department of the Interior does that, so it's much more focused on security, sovereignty protection, and so on. That's one major difference between the Canadian system and yours.

Our immigration model differs depending on the province you're in. In Quebec, the model is necessarily different as regards permanent residents and selection. Quebec has full power over immigrant selection. You can understand why: French is important for us, since more than 80% of the Quebec population speaks French. So we have different integration concerns.

On the other hand, what remains under federal jurisdiction are family reunification and refugee issues.

As regards investors, Quebec has a different model. The federal model is offered, but, if you go to Quebec, the preferred way of managing the investor category is different there.

I could give you a document prepared by the Quebec government which very clearly explains the differences between the federal immigration system and the one in Quebec.

● (1745)

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I come from Quebec as well. My riding is called Laurentides—Labelle. The immigrants we take in there are more business people who come to settle in our region, Hautes-Laurentides. So we take in a lot of foreign investors. I invite you to come to Quebec and visit the Laurentides region.

I have a question for you on the document you submitted to us. In it, you say that you've been dealing with a major increase in immigration in Finland in the past 10 years or so.

I'd like to know what has caused this increase in immigration there. Is it a labour shortage? Why are you facing higher immigration demand?

[*English*]

Mr. Jari Vilén: I'm glad to respond to it, if you'll allow me very briefly to say just a few words.

As you can see, we are from different political affiliations here, but speaking overall, most of the parties in Finland feel the same, that for the first time in our history we need immigration to Finland.

So far, we have been giving the population to Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, and especially Sweden. One hundred and fifty thousand to 200,000 Finns, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, immigrated to Sweden. For the first time in our history we have to start actively recruiting people to Finland. So we're in an absolutely new situation, which means we don't have any traditions. We are concerned about the mistakes we might make. And we're especially concerned about the mistakes that have been made in some other European Union countries. We want to prevent the kinds of escalations and troubles we have in Belgium or France, for example.

We've just started the debate. For example, should immigration be work-based or social-based? Should we be selfish enough to try to redirect people to our society needs today, which is more or less in the service sector, especially in the social sector and the health care sector. These are the people we need to have. And how do we especially prevent the situation in immigration for people who come to work in places where Finns don't want to work in any more? This has the potential for social challenges and for political problems.

At the same time—we have an election next March—there are always parties willing to exploit the situation, saying that foreigners are taking Finnish jobs. We still have unemployment of roughly 8% in our nation, due to the fact that we had one of the worse recessions in the early 1990s, which profoundly changed Finnish society. People who were unemployed at that time are at the moment in a situation where we can't find jobs for them because the structural changes in society and working life have been so profound. They mainly come from the countryside, from areas where there are the more hand-based skills of lumber and agriculture, where we can't really find jobs today.

So we are in a profoundly new situation. Therefore, we're interested in finding out why you have been so successful—or have you been so successful? What we all have in our minds now are the events of last weekend. Maybe, Mr. Chairman, your colleagues would comment to us: Will last weekend's events and the first arrest of Canadian citizens suspected of being active in terrorism profoundly change your immigration policy? Will it have political consequences, or what political consequences might it have for your society and your country? I think this is the question we all have in our minds at the moment.

Let me say that the information we have—

The Chair: Will immigration policy tighten up as a result of the homegrown....?

● (1750)

Mr. Jari Vilén: This is the situation we have.

The question you put forward.... I think the challenge in Finland is the climate and language. Who would come to work in Finland? It's a very functional society, a very efficient society, very transparent, of which we are proud, but the language is very difficult, so we don't really have a genuine place for people who come. We have mostly Estonians, but Estonia is a very small country that needs its own working population.

These are more or less the questions we have on our agenda at the moment.

The Chair: What is the population of Finland?

Mr. Jari Vilén: Five million.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: It's 5.3 million, and we have calculated that a little bit more than one million Finns reside abroad. We know that in Canada—

A voice: In 100 years.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: In 100 years, of course.

But Canada has quite a big Finnish population. Some of our relatives are in Canada.

The Chair: Do you have a younger population or an aging population?

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: Learning about this issue is one—as Jari mentioned, in nearly all ratings, as far as competitiveness is concerned, standards of schools, we are number one in the world. But we receive very, very little foreign investment. One researcher said it's due to an aging population, due to demography. Foreign investors think this nation has no big future, has no prospects because of demographics. That's one reason we want to have more immigrants.

The Chair: Madam Deschamps, were you finished?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Yes.

The Chair: Bill, go ahead, please.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome—although I have to start by saying that we also claim Santa Claus, so we may have to work on where Santa Claus really lives.

I'm a member of the New Democratic Party, which is the social democratic/ democratic socialist party in Canada. I represent a riding in a suburb of Vancouver in British Columbia. My riding has about a 50% immigrant and refugee population, which is pretty typical of many of the ridings in the Vancouver area.

In my area, the largest immigrant population group is Chinese, either from the People's Republic, from Hong Kong or from Taiwan. So about 30% of the folks in my riding speak Chinese, either Cantonese or Mandarin. The next largest group is Korean, and then there are some European and Central American groups after that. There is a significant newcomer population in the area, which presents certain challenges.

It means that as an elected representative I have to have a communications strategy that incorporates some communications in other languages outside of the official languages of Canada. My office staff speak a total of seven other languages including Cantonese, Mandarin, Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, and Hindi, because there is a South Asian community associated there as well. Having that kind of language capacity is also important so they can assist people who don't have English or French language skills yet, largely in dealing with immigration difficulties.

Settlement issues are a huge problem: how you integrate someone into Canadian society and the resources that are available to do that.

Right now there are large inconsistencies across Canada with regard to that. There is some dispute about what the numbers are, but it looks like Quebec gets about $4,000 per immigrant to do settlement work and language training; Ontario gets about $3,800, or will get that soon under the terms of a new agreement it has with the federal government; and British Columbia gets probably around $1,000 per immigrant. So there is a wide variation in what the federal government transfers to the provinces, because the provinces make these decisions.

Those things have a dramatic effect on people's ability to be part of Canadian society and the attachment they feel to Canadian society. I think your question about the events of last weekend may be one of the issues we need to deal with in that context.

We know that the people who have the greatest difficulty settling are often adults who have come without English or French language skills, and teenagers who come. Younger children adapt very easily through the school system and learn very quickly, but those groups present particular challenges in all of that.

It's interesting to hear you describe the issues that Finland is facing, because they are exactly the same issues Canada is facing. Our population is aging. By the middle of the next decade we expect that all job growth will come solely from immigration. By the mid-2020s we expect all of our population growth to come solely from immigration. That is the point at which it becomes a question of our social programs and how we pay for them. We need that immigrant group to help us maintain the kinds of social programs that have meant so much to us in Canada. I think that's a real issue for us.

We are starting now to talk about a Canadian diaspora. For the first time there are Canadians living in other parts of the world in large numbers, particularly in Hong Kong and China. We're talking about folks who came and either had an experience that wasn't as positive as they expected, but became Canadian citizens and then went home to their country of origin, or, because economic conditions improved, returned to work in their homeland and may come back to Canada at some point. Planning for how that will work becomes an issue, but it is just not on our agenda yet.

We may get a bunch of retirees in 20 or 30 years, people who decide to retire back in Canada. How do we accommodate that movement back?

You asked about whether immigration should be work-based or have a social base to it. That is something we have struggled with in this committee. Right now our economic immigrants get here on a point system that tries to get the best and the brightest. That was the intent. So we give people points in our application process to get here, recognizing their work experience and their education, but then they get here and find out they can't work using that experience or that education. That's causing lots of anger and frustration in our system.

● (1755)

We have settlement workers now who have to have security because people are so angry about their experience of coming to Canada. So there's a disconnect between our application process and the reality of working in Canada, which is causing some significant problems. The recognition of international credentials is a piece of that.

Touring across the country last year, the committee discovered that often the happiest immigrants are people who come through family reunification, who came because they had families here. They don't have the same work or income expectations. They'll take a job that may not be the greatest job in the world, but because they're with family, they're happy and they have their social network in place. Their adaptation is often much better because of this.

It's interesting that Canada has talked about an official multiculturalism policy. We have determinedly not wanted to be the melting pot that the United States talks about being, in which you become part of a more homogenous culture. There's still some struggle around that in Canada.

In my constituency, it's more likely that you'll have a big Chinese new year's celebration than you will the calendar new year. That's a real change. I did more celebration of the Chinese new year this year than I did of the calendar new year, but that's very typical of the atmosphere now in my riding. There are some people who welcome that and there are other people who resist it, seeing it as an unwelcome change. So there are some social tensions around that policy, but overall it is working right now.

You wouldn't visit my area and come away with an impression that there was overt racism, dramatic incidents of racism, or real institutionalized discrimination in significant ways. That's working its way through. There's lots of intermarriage happening, so the nature of our community is changing through these means as well.

That's probably more than five minutes' worth of rambling, but anyway....

The Chair: We're not on any big time limits here today.

Barry, did you have a comment you want to make?

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Yes, two or three things.

First of all, I want to welcome you here to Canada today and welcome you to our committee. Only two weeks ago I was in Taiwan as part of a Canadian delegation, and I had the opportunity to meet with legislators in Taiwan and to share experiences. I think it's very valuable, so I appreciate seeing you here today.

In terms of the specific point that Jari raised about what happened this weekend, my sense is that it will not change public policy in Canada. I think we will discuss security issues and processes and how we deal with immigrants, but I don't foresee any change; we are committed to this course of action. As Bill and others have said, we are a nation of immigrants. There are hiccups along the way, but I don't think it will cause a serious reassessment of immigration in Canada. We debate whether there will be 250,000 or 300,000 immigrants in a year; I think that's what we are committed to.

I appreciate that it is quite a challenge for you starting something new, or a new program essentially. On the other hand, sometimes having a clean sheet of paper to work with is an opportunity to see what other countries have done and to try to steal some of their good ideas, and maybe avoid some of the problems.

I would make two or three observations. Unlike Bill's or Blair's ridings, I come from a rural area, with a largely anglophone background and smaller numbers of immigrants. I think one of the challenges we have in Canada today is that a large percentage of immigrants do go to our large cities. We actually have parts of rural Canada that want immigrants, including where I live in central Ontario, but even more so in northern Ontario. These mining and forestry communities were populated only 30 or 50 years ago by many Finnish, Italian, and Polish people, who settled there in the 1940s and 1950s.

So we have rural parts of Canada that are trying to figure out how to attract immigrants to their communities. Weather is also an issue here, as most people come from a warmer place than Canada, so trying to attract them into northern Canada, where the climate is harsher, is also a challenge.

In our large cities we are dealing with the immigrant flow coming in, which is welcome, but it brings in some issues with it, and in rural areas we're actually trying to figure out how to get more immigrants to come to these places.

I have a couple more comments. On the issue of whether it's essentially an economic or a social enterprise, I think it's both; I think there are two sides to the same coin. However you start, you very quickly will be into the other, because you're dealing with people. And even if you implement a strategy or a program that's largely economic-based, I think social issues are part and parcel of it, so you may as well deal with them up front.

These are not suggestions, but just some ideas. You could ask questions about what countries in the world have large numbers of people who might be interested in coming to Finland and how well suited they are. Climate is an obvious issue, but as you say, language is another one. Possibly, rather than trying to draw your immigrants from 100 countries in some proportional way, maybe you should look at or target a handful of countries that you have the resources to actually establish a strong relationship with. It would also allow you to build fairly quickly a population of new immigrants, a critical mass of people, who would quickly create their own social institutions, whether it's family or churches or community groups. In a small place, you may find that actually focusing on a few countries initially, and trying to establish links, might work better than a system where you essentially set up criteria and five billion people around the world are eligible to apply to come to Finland.

● (1800)

I don't know. These are just ideas. As I said, that's not the way we do it in Canada, but it might be something interesting for you to consider.

I understand that Finnish is part of a Hungarian family of languages that is spread around, but I'm not sure....

A witness: [*Inaudible—Editor]*

Mr. Barry Devolin: Maybe there is no opportunity there, but I guess I would say that you should choose to view your situation as an opportunity and be realistic.

The last point I would like to make is that I would encourage you to be proactive, decide what you want to do and then push forward to make it happen. As I said, one of the comments I hear in Canada—and I'm relatively new to this file—is that I'm not sure we're as proactive as we could be, theoretically. But our program is so large and under way, I think we're doing what we need to do, which is dealing with people who show up at our door saying, we'd like to come to Canada. But you don't have that situation right now, so you might be able to channel that a little bit better.

Anyway, those are some of my views.

● (1805)

The Chair: Good. Thank you.

Is there anyone else?

Madame Folco.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles): I'd like to welcome you as well. Like my two colleagues who spoke French before me, I represent a riding in the province of Quebec. However, unlike my two colleagues, I'm a member of the Liberal Party; I'm therefore not a member of a separatist party.

However, I've done a lot of work in immigration for a very long time and I have a few comments to make.

[*English*]

First of all, let me disagree totally with my colleague, Barry Devolin.

We had an immigration policy in the 19th century by which we chose the countries from which we accepted immigrants. These were, by and large, the British Isles. Then we expanded that and went into northern Europe. Then we expanded and went into southern Europe, after the Second World War, and so on and so forth.

We are now at the point where we have a point system based on how old the candidates are—I am sure other people have explained this to you—how many young children the candidates have, their level of education, and so on.

What we have tried to do—whether we've achieved it or not, I don't know—is make our immigration policy as free of racial or religious prejudice as possible.

If I may be so bold as to say this, Mr. Devolin, the danger in choosing a country is that you might choose a country you think is very much like yours in terms of culture, economics, and so on, and then you're going to be absolutely criticized because you're not choosing from another country. That is the first comment I would like to make.

The second comment is about the importance of settlement programs. When I was with immigration in the Quebec government, one of the things we worked very hard on was the welcoming society, what we call in French *la societé d'accueil*, the people who receive the immigrants, that is, the homegrown families, and what we ought to be doing and what information we should give them so they see immigration as a plus, not just a plus for the country but a plus for them personally, so they know how far they should go to meet the immigrants halfway. We are always saying that the immigrant must modify his ways in order to fit into our society. That is true to some extent, of course, but society—and I think it was my colleague Bill Siksay who said this—also has to change. It can be a very dangerous thing for some families who are more traditional. That is a big problem.

In my riding, I have a lot of immigrants from the Near East and the Middle East. This would mean the Maghrib, Algeria mostly, and then Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and so on. That brings in another problem, and that is the problem of religion and its role in society and its role in schools and in Canada. I think it is the same in your country. We tended, until fairly recently, to have lay institutions that were free of any slant toward one religion or another. But there have been demands from various religious groups—not only from the Muslims, but it does include Muslims—to be able to keep a certain number of their customs within these non-religious institutions.

That is a big question. It is a question that France has had to deal with, and Britain as well. And we are dealing with it.

I think that contrary to what France, Belgium, and Britain are living through, one of the pluses your country has is that it is not a former colonial country. France and particularly Britain, and Belgium, with the Congo, had to live through that period, and are still living through it, in which the people who live there feel that France or Britain or whatever owes them something because of the wealth that was taken out of the colonies for centuries.

You don't have to worry about that. This is one thing that we Canadians don't have to worry about. That is one reason why we do well in our relationships with countries in the developing world, because we don't have that history with them.

I could talk forever about immigration. It is my favourite subject.

As far as the consequences of the terrorist arrests last weekend, I agree with my colleagues. I don't think it is going to change anything very much. But where it is going to really hurt us is in our relationship with the United States, because the Government of the United States has always been convinced, ever since September 11, that all the terrorists came through Canada and it was our fault.

● (1810)

I've heard Mrs. Clinton say time and time again that people were going through our border like it was a sieve. Now it's going to hurt us even more in our relationship with the United States. What we're trying to do is to keep our border with the United States as open as we possibly can. It's obvious that this is going to be an element that is going to close the border much more than we would like to.

Those are the comments I would make for now.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Folco.

Nina, and Ed, and anyone else who wishes to raise a hand....

Okay, Bill.

Nina, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all.

My name is Nina Grewal. I'm a member of Parliament from the beautiful province of British Columbia, and I am a member of the Conservative Party. My riding has mostly immigrants.

I would like to know how your immigration policy works. Could you please give us an update on that? How many immigrate to Finland every year? Is there a family class? How much time does it take for family unification cases? Does family immigration take more time than business immigration? How many categories do you have in immigration? Do you have a parliamentary channel?

These are so many questions.

The Chair: I would imagine that you're still in the process of developing your immigration policy. You wouldn't have a specific immigration policy that you could share with us at this point in time, would you?

Mr. Jari Vilén: I could easily answer your question about the foreign population in Finland. The foreign population in Finland is 90,000 out of 5 million people. Out of the 90,000, half are mostly from Russia or ex-Soviet Union countries. They are more or less coming for love; they come to marry. Usually, it's Russian ladies and Finnish men—that's the combination.

But we don't yet have a policy about how to actively recruit. We don't have traditions. We are looking to the neighbouring countries at the moment, which means the Russians, the Estonians, the Baltic States. Those have the most potential. We have an economic gap between the possibilities and prosperity of Finland and the potentials and challenges they have in those countries.

Estonia is a marvellous example. Their language and culture are the closest to ours. Their economy is thriving, and there are only one million citizens. We can expect to have tens of thousands of people coming from there. But even if they came, they wouldn't stay. They might come to work for five days and go home every weekend. It takes 18 minutes to fly from Helsinki to Tallinn by helicopter.

We actually don't have countries that are close to us. Therefore, we have to look in every single other country in the world. The only country in the European Union at the moment that has a surplus population is Poland. Every other country is losing population. Italy and Finland are losing population the fastest because of the aging population. In Poland, they don't have educated and trained people. Because of the previous systems and the legacy of communism, they have surplus population in the countryside. They're a very Catholic population, and this actually saved the country. But their surplus population is not trained and educated for the challenges of the future.

So we go to Asia, like everybody else. I'll give you an example. Germany tried to recruit about 6,000 engineers for their companies. They couldn't get more than 2,000 to come to Germany, which is a very attractive country—language, culture, well-based. They got only 2,000. Finland, which as I said is in a very remote corner of the European Union, is a very nice, functioning, safe society, but it doesn't have a similar kind of network that would assist them in coming here.

I'm saying there are political consequences, because we do not have a tradition. There are always parties and politicians who are saying.... For instance, I come from the northern-most constituency of Finland, which has an unemployment rate of 18%. If I say that I need to have 1,000 foreign workers come from Asia to Lapland, it's over for me.

● (1815)

The Chair: I see your point.

Ms. Maija Perho: May I say a few words?

One problem in practice in Finland now is that we have immigrants who are very skilled and highly educated, and they are unemployed or doing jobs that don't demand any education. The first thing we need to do is try to train these people to get better jobs.

The most crucial question is on elementary language education or training. This is one thing I want to know about. How do you organize language education? I've heard that it depends on the province. For us, it's not very well organized. We must change the way we organize this education.

As a member of the EU, we didn't open our borders to new EU members when they became members at the beginning of 2004. I think that was a mistake. It was a political decision that we made in Parliament, but it was very much debated. When we evaluated it afterwards, it was a mistake. We have now lifted it. All parties agreed, if I remember correctly.

I really want to know about integration in the sense of education. How do you re-educate people who already have professions?

The Chair: I think Madam Folco could make a very significant contribution to that question.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I come from a province where we have a fantastic program. As everybody knows, we get a large amount of money from the federal government. With this money, we divide the population into adults on the one hand and children on the other.

For children, we have what we call welcoming classes. These are special classes in which all the immigrant children who have just arrived are put together and taught one or two subjects—if it's in Quebec, in French, and if it's in the rest of Canada, in English. These welcoming classes are set up in regular schools. The children stay there for 10 months, more or less, and when it is deemed that they have enough language skills to move on to a regular class, they move on, at which time they may get a little extra help outside of the regular class.

For the adults, there are any number of programs. Some of the programs are administered directly by the province's ministry of education, and adults go to school all day. In Quebec, they are paid to do this. It's not a huge amount of money, but a stipend. They're paid to stay in these classes in which there is nothing but immigrants all day long. They stay about ten months as well, until it is deemed they have learned enough English to be able to go on.

There are many other groups that cooperate. I've told you about the administration through what we call school boards—that is, school administrations—but there are all sorts of NGOs, non-governmental agencies, that also receive money from various levels of government, whether provincial or federal, and they help out in teaching the language.

What we teach—and I'm speaking specifically about Quebec here, because Quebec has had a longstanding agreement with the federal government, and the other provinces came in later—is not just language; it's also culture. There's an emphasis not just on learning the words but on learning about Quebec's history, problems, and so on. The cultural part is integral, both for the children and the adults.

When I said earlier that the linguistic and cultural integration of immigrants is very important, as far as I'm concerned, that is really where the money should go. Once you've decided how you're going to divide the money between getting the people in the country and what happens there, the whole problem of how to get people to integrate is absolutely major.

If I could say one more word, we're running into a big problem with professionals who come—doctors, pharmacists, dentists, lawyers, and so on. When they arrive in the country, they are not allowed to practice. We've run into problems with the professional corporations, and this is something that has to be looked into. I would strongly suggest that you look into this question even before you start receiving, because once they get there.... We ended up having doctorates driving taxis, which is horrible.

I'm sorry I took so much time.

● (1820)

The Chair: Good contribution.

We have two people who haven't had a chance to have a word—Blair and Ed.

Bill, I think I'll have to divide the time between Blair and Ed.

Oh, you spoke once already.

Okay, Ed.

If we have a couple of minutes left over, Bill or Blair can have a go.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I won't ask too many questions.

Further to what Madam Folco was saying, of course, the federal government does provide integration and settlement funds to the provinces, which work in the area of integration and language training, as do third parties and school boards. It's kind of a cooperative thing therein. We've proposed as a government a credential recognition committee to help out with those who come in with credentials that we might recognize in our country.

The area I wanted to speak about is.... You were looking at promoting work-based immigration, and of course you'll probably have the social side of it as well. But the work-based portion, where you'll be looking to bring in more skilled workers and temporary foreign workers, is something we're doing now. I'm hoping we don't get into a competition in that area, but it seems, for the same reasons, because of an aging population in a fairly strong economy, we're facing similar problems to what you are.

We've had a program called the provincial nominee program. It works differently from province to province. Some provinces have capitalized on it—Manitoba, for instance, Saskatchewan to some degree, Ontario not quite yet. What they've done is they've matched employers needing a particular skilled person with employees, and they actively recruit the people who are trying to meet the expectation with someone who's looking for that particular skill or trade. Immigration facilitates that provincial application and tries to get it processed more quickly than the normal stream of immigration.

It seems to be working reasonably well where it is working. The problems are still timing and how long it takes to do the matching. Many would like to see a far shorter time; nonetheless, it's a lot quicker than going through the regular stream in immigration. Some provinces have been able to do that relatively successfully.

We also have a situation that's developed in some of the more major centres where perhaps because it's difficult to get through the system in the regular way, people have filled particular jobs and opportunities without coming through the system, perhaps in a measure because the system has not been properly geared for what's happening in the economy and in the trades. The provinces are slowly trying to address that. We have a good group of people who are working but have not been regularized.

I think the system could be improved, and when you're looking at this issue of skills and trades and working, you have to be sure you develop a system that will meet the needs, so to speak, as opposed to blocking those who might be legitimate entrants. You'll find that those who want to come in on the skilled areas or trade areas generally come from places that have some connection to family. In other words, if there's a housing contractor and his community is involved in that business, they will be attracted to that trade.

So somehow if you can combine the need for the workers with the objectives of the communities there, it might be helpful.

● (1825)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any last comments?

Did you feel a need to ask your question?

Mr. Blair Wilson: Just quickly, I wanted to say that one other aspect is the refugee class. If you're looking to get people who are motivated and want to take an active role in your society, that's an area that should seriously be looked at. We have areas in Africa, a few from Iraq and Afghanistan, where people are looking for homes. At the same time, with the aging population we're talking about, there are going to be jobs that don't require a lot of skill that need to be done in society.

If you get people like that who are coming to your country, they'll develop their language and greater skills, but at the same time they'll take up jobs that society needs to have done. At the same time you're providing them with a new, safe home.

The Chair: Bill, this is your last comment.

Mr. Bill Siksay: I just wanted to touch briefly on the whole issue of temporary workers, because that's a serious problem. I think temporary workers in Canada tend to be the most exploited workers in our society. Agricultural workers often work in difficult working conditions with no enforcement of labour or health standards and no access to our social programs. That's been a huge problem, and it continues to be a huge problem.

Another class of temporary workers in Canada is live-in caregivers, nannies, who have an extradited process towards citizenship but little ability to move between employers, and some real restrictions on their working life in Canada. There are serious considerations about their working conditions, having to live with their employer, that kind of thing, and they have no way around that. So there are some serious problems with the situation of temporary workers in Canada.

The other problem with temporary work is that an employer can go through a process to certify that there is a need for a certain skill set that isn't available in the Canadian workforce and bring in workers from another country on a temporary basis. I think in various places there are concerns now about what that really means and about that certification process. In my own home community, it seems, for instance, applications are being approved and decisions are being made on the basis that a foreign worker is available to work more cheaply than a Canadian is. That thinking flies in the face of some of the criteria that have been established for the program, and it also flies in the face of our ability to maintain a Canadian standard of living and certain working conditions that are important. Many of our unions have difficulty with that kind of program, for instance.

You mentioned the higher unemployment in Lapland. That's an issue here as well when it comes to temporary foreign workers. Do we make it possible for a worker to move from another part of Canada to take that job rather than bringing someone in from outside the country? And finally, do our companies give the kind of internal training that makes it possible for them to fill these positions that they say can't be filled from within Canada? Canada has a terrible record on corporate job training. Employers don't do a lot of job training. Europe presents a much better example in that area. So it's another part of that mix.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I hope we've been helpful in some way. And now that you've been here, I think it's only fair if you'd issue an invitation for us to go to Finland and visit you at the nicest time of the year.

What time of the year is a good time of year to visit Finland? Any time.

● (1830)

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: Thank you very much. Perhaps we have given too pessimistic a picture of Finland. That's not what it's like, actually. It's a marvellous country, and we welcome all Canadians to come to Finland.

The Chair: To work or as a tourist?

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: To work and....

The Chair: What is a good time of year for tourists in Finland?

A witness: Right now.

A witness: In Lapland, April.

The Chair: Well, it's been great having you. Thank you.

Ms. Liisa Jaakonsaari: Thank you.

I have a small present from the Finnish Parliament. It's our national symbol. It's a lion. We have no lions, but it's a symbol.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Members, we'll be televising our committee meeting on Wednesday. The minister will be in for main estimates, so be on your worst or best behaviour, whichever is appropriate for you at that time.

Thank you very much to our Finnish friends.

The meeting is adjourned.

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