



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 005 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, November 29, 2007

—
Chair

Mr. Norman Doyle

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• (1555)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC)): We'll go to Mr. Komarnicki to make a brief statement.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to make a brief statement.

Certainly with respect to the report itself, we did not request to make a dissenting report, even though we did have some reservations in some areas. I highlighted some of them, which were with respect to the recommendation that made citizenship retroactive without regard to the January 1, 1947, date, which is inconsistent with the recent Federal Court of Appeal Taylor decision, as well as a recommendation that certificates issued in error should only be able to be recalled within a set period of time, as it relates to a program integrity measure.

That said, there's no doubt that the government, if it wants to have an official position, can do that in its response, and it can take such a position on those issues as they want to, but it's a type of recommendation that we would, of course, like them to consider very seriously, as it comes from the committee after hearing a lot of evidence. Resolving matters from a date in 1947 forward certainly would be a laudable goal, but there was some feeling that we should go beyond that to resolve all the issues we could.

So it's with that statement that we decided not to do a dissenting report, but rather have the report go forward unanimously.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Telegdi.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I think I'll make a statement as well.

We have come a long way in terms of the two ministers we had initially saying there would be no amendments to the Citizenship Act and that it was not a priority. I'm pleased to see that position has changed.

I draw attention to the fact that Minister Finley said to the committee when she was in front of us that if the committee comes up with unanimous recommendations, she will bring them into legislation to make amendments to the Citizenship Act to address the whole issue of lost Canadians.

While the report doesn't go quite as far as I believe it should—and others can speak for themselves—those who listened to the evidence will also agree that we do not like to see discriminatory practices. Having people born out of wedlock because they had a church wedding and not a civil wedding being a cause for denial of citizenship, and quite frankly, having birth out of wedlock as a criterion in this day and age, certainly are not the rules that apply now, nor are those morals reflective of our time.

That said, I'm pleased with the progress we have made in terms of this report. I look forward to its speedy passage, because I think you will find support in all sections of the House for it.

By speedy passage, I mean that we're going to have to move very quickly to make that happen. I'm hoping the minister and officials already have it in the draft they've been working on for amendments and were anticipating what our response or our report was going to be.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Telegdi.

Madame Faillie.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faillie (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Actually, I would like to...

[English]

The Chair: Did you have your hand up, Mr. Bevilacqua?

Madame Faillie.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faillie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to stress the interest we have in the question of citizenship and the seriousness with which committee members have approached it.

I would particularly like to thank the people at CBC/Radio Canada, who have done a monumental job in getting out the information on this injustice, and who have managed to draw attention to it all across Canada in spite of the pressure brought to bear on them by people who did not believe the stories.

I am glad that the committee was able to shed light on the identity of the people whose citizenship was lost. I really hope that the department will take the recommendations seriously. But there are still situations that the government is aware of that are not covered in this report. I really hope that the bill to be tabled shortly will also deal with the situations that Mr. Telegdi has mentioned.

Well done, everyone.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Chair, I want to thank my predecessor, Mr. Bill Siksay, who did a lot of work together with other members of this committee. Certainly, there are stories of people who lost their Canadian citizenship through no fault of their own, whether they were war brides or people born to a Canadian parent before the act came into place in February 1977, or between January 1947 to February 1997 because they themselves or their parents became citizens of another country, or those who were born outside Canada after the act came into place in February 1977.

So I'm glad we have this report in front of us, which we are supporting unanimously. I certainly hope the minister has all her documents ready and that when it's introduced in the House, hopefully by February at the latest, we would give it speedy passage, so all the historic wrongs we have seen in the past can be quickly amended and finally all those sad stories can be corrected as quickly as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chow.

I want to thank all committee members for your very hard work and diligence in putting together this report, and the analysts and former members of the committee who have moved to new committees, who worked very hard on the report as well.

Am I moving a bit too quickly, Mr. Bevilacqua? Did you want to say something?

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua (Vaughan, Lib.): I was wondering, with these reports, sometimes when you say that it would be a first report of the....

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Chaplin): It's likely that if the committee decides to report the estimates, that will be the first. So we could say that—

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: The point I'm making is that sometimes when we say it's the first report from the Standing Committee on Immigration, most viewers will say—

The Chair: Oh, yes.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: I think a title kind of captures it a bit for people, a lot more than.... So I may I propose one?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: I have here “Reclaiming Canada for Canadians: a Report on the Loss of Canadian Citizenship”.

The Chair: Okay, that sounds pretty good.

We've heard Mr. Bevilacqua's proposal that there would be a title attached to the report, “Reclaiming Canada for Canadians: a Report on the Loss of Canadian Citizenship”.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'm not sure about that. It should be “A Report on Lost Canadians”. I'm not sure about the other editorializing as to what it does for Canada. I think we should just call it “A Report With Respect to Lost Canadians”, because that's how we referred to it throughout.

The Chair: Madame Faillie.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faillie: I do not know how that will turn out in French, but I would prefer it to reflect the subject directly.

[English]

So it would be “Reclaiming citizenship to those who have lost citizenship”.

• (1605)

The Chair: What was that again?

Ms. Meili Faillie: “Reclaiming citizenship to those who lost citizenship”, or “Reclaiming citizenship to the lost citizens”, those lost Canadian citizens....

The Chair: I don't believe it can be too long.

Ms. Meili Faillie: “Reclaiming lost Canadians”.

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): “Reclaiming lost Canadians”.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: It's a report on the loss of Canadian citizenship. Just imagine the title, and that would be the subtitle, right? So the thing would be “Reclaiming Citizenship for Canadians: a Report on the Loss of Canadian Citizenship”. It will work well in French as well.

The Chair: Yes, “Reclaiming Citizenship for Canadians”—

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: No. It would be “Reclaiming Citizenship for Canadians: a Report on the Loss of Canadian Citizenship”

The Chair: That sounds very reasonable, in my view.

Okay? I see no dissenters, so we'll go forward with that, and we'll be going forward with a unanimous report, so I want to thank committee members for that.

Maybe we will go back in camera.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faillie: Had we not said that we would do a press release too?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I think the clerk was working on a press release, or the analysts. Do we have a press release prepared?

Ms. Penny Becklumb (Committee Researcher): We've started work on one; certainly it will reflect today's comments.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: When are we tabling it in the House?

The Chair: It will be tabled in the House on Wednesday, possibly, when the clerk said it would be ready. Is that accurate? If not Wednesday, definitely Thursday. Would that be okay?

Okay. I guess it needs proofreading and concordance, whatever that means.

The Clerk: It's the process of ensuring that the two texts reflect each other accurately, both technically and in tone, and all the other aspects of the languages.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: Take your time and get it right.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're suspending for a few minutes until the minister gets here.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: I thought we'd have the minister here already.

The Chair: Yes. I asked a little bit earlier if she could get here a bit faster because we might be finishing early on this report.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Would it make sense, because we have extra time now and the minister can't make it here until 4:30, to spend a few minutes talking about the supplementary estimates anyway, among ourselves, to look at some questions we may have collectively?

The Chair: Okay. Can we move in camera first?

[Proceedings continue in camera]

- _____ (Pause) _____
-

[Public proceedings resume]

- (1630)

The Chair: The meeting will now come to order.

On behalf of committee members, I want to welcome the Hon. Diane Finley, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. Thank you, Minister, for coming along this evening in consideration of the supplementary estimates, votes 1a, 2a, and 10a.

I want to welcome as well, Mr. Richard Fadden, deputy minister, and Mr. Wayne Ganim, chief financial officer and director general of the finance branch, and Claudette Deschenes is from the department as well. Welcome to all of you.

The minister has an hour, after which she has to catch a flight.

Minister, you're very much aware of the routine. You've been here often enough. I don't have to tell you anything about it. You make your opening statement. I believe it's been distributed to members, so I'll pass it over to you, Madam Minister.

Hon. Diane Finley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, honourable members, for allowing me the opportunity to be back here before you.

As you know, you have before you my department's supplementary estimates (A) for the current fiscal year for your consideration and approval. I'm looking forward to your feedback, and I'd be happy to respond to any questions you have after I make my opening statement.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, most of the items in the estimates are routine in nature. I would, however, like to draw your attention to two items in the estimates, which reflect fundamental changes we are making to our immigration program in order to make it more responsive to the needs of the Canadian labour market.

First, I wish to note spending of almost \$4.6 million for our Temporary Foreign Worker program, an increase of 10%. As you

know, the program allows employers to hire temporary foreign workers when there are no Canadian citizens or permanent residents available for the positions needed.

And as you are also no doubt aware, Canada is facing a crucial need for more skilled workers in different regions of the country.

[English]

We continue to respond to that need. Last year we took in over 112,000 temporary foreign workers; two years ago that number was just over 99,000. This reflects substantial growth in this program.

As we bring in more temporary foreign workers, we also need to ensure they are protected in the same way all Canadian workers are. We must ensure employers comply with the terms of the contracts they enter into with workers from abroad, honour these contracts, and treat temporary foreign workers fairly, the same way all other Canadian workers are treated. Additionally, we must work with the provinces to ensure labour standards are met.

While a number of facilitative measures have been taken by Human Resources and Social Development and CIC, additional work does remain. This includes the introduction of more robust monitoring and compliance provisions to ensure the temporary foreign worker program continues to help meet the needs of the economy while taking measures to prevent abuse and exploitation of immigrants to Canada.

To better ensure worker protection, Budget 2007 allocated \$51 million for improvements to the program. My colleague, the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, and I will be bringing forward regulatory proposals in 2008 to enable implementation of these proposals.

Mr. Chair, the other item to which I would draw your attention is the \$2.3 million allocated to support our foreign credentials referrals office, or FCRO, that I launched in May this year.

- (1635)

[Translation]

Let me be very clear: our government wants newcomers and their families to succeed in Canada. And newcomers want to contribute to our country by working in the fields for which they have been trained. We want to help them do that. But as all of us know, it is all too common for individuals to come to Canada and find either that their professional credentials from other countries are not recognized here or that the process to have them assessed is slow and complicated.

While provinces have jurisdiction over regulating professions, the federal government has a responsibility to give newcomers the information and references they need to find how their professional credentials could be assessed and recognized, what upgrades they might need to meet Canadian standards, and what jobs might be available in various fields. We know that there is a real need to provide this information to newcomers. And in many cases, if we provide information to prospective immigrants abroad, they can take steps to get accredited before they come to Canada so that when they arrive, they can contribute more quickly by working in their chosen field.

[English]

As I said, I launched the program in May with six Service Canada centres offering foreign credential referral services in person. By the end of this month, there will be over 300 Service Canada centres across the country offering this service in person, as well as via telephone and on the Internet. Since its launch, the credentials.gc.ca website has had over 120,000 hits, two-thirds of which were from outside the country. The dedicated phone line has received over 900 calls, of which half were for information and half for referrals to assessment bodies. In addition, overseas sections have served more than 1,200 prospective immigrants already.

In addition to providing these services, the FCRO is also working with federal partners, provincial and territorial governments, employers, and other stakeholders to work together on this important issue.

As well as reaching prospective immigrants through our website, FCRO is also working overseas through pilot programs in China, India, and the Philippines to help skilled workers in these countries prepare to work in Canada while they're still overseas.

[Translation]

In fact, I traveled to India just a couple of weeks ago, where I had a chance to visit these pilot orientation sessions, delivered through a contribution agreement to the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. I also met key people in the business and education communities and told them about our programs so that they might encourage talented people to come to Canada. This chance to see our programs gave me a valuable personal insight, both into the programs we support and the dedication of our people overseas.

• (1640)

[English]

Mr. Chair, there are two items in the estimates that highlight efforts to make our programs more responsive to the labour market. This was a goal we articulated in *Advantage Canada*, the government's economic plan.

Toward it, one of the significant initiatives that we launched this year is the Canadian experience class. First announced in the last federal budget, this new immigration stream will allow certain temporary foreign workers and students graduating from Canadian universities to apply for permanent resident status without having to leave the country. Previously, students and temporary workers had to go back to their home country to apply.

This, we believe, will help us tap into a pool of talented people who've already demonstrated that they can succeed in our economy and in our society. It will also help us retain those students already studying here; it will help temporary foreign workers benefit from the Canadian work experience they are busy building and enable employers to recruit talented newcomers.

The good news is it's a two-way street. We believe the prospect of eventual Canadian citizenship gives us a marketing advantage as our schools and our employers look to recruit the best and the brightest from around the world.

[Translation]

This program will let us keep good people, not just in our major urban centres, where many newcomers head, but in rural areas as well.

If they have studied in a rural area or worked there temporarily, they may be more likely to remain there. We want to ensure that the entire country benefits from immigration. We want to get the right people in the right place at the right time. The Canada Experience Class will help us do that.

At the same time, we will ensure the smooth operation of the Provincial Nominee Program, which has grown substantially. The program allows the provinces to identify the people they need, and we help to get them here quickly.

[English]

Manitoba has been a leading participant in this area, welcoming close to 5,000 people last year—almost double the number of a year earlier—and other provinces are catching on as well. For example, we recently signed new framework agreements with Alberta and Nova Scotia that include provincial nominee annexes, while the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador has just renewed a prior agreement.

Mr. Chair, we are also putting substantial effort into helping people succeed once they arrive here. The government's commitment of \$1.3 billion for settlement funding across the country represents a significant increase in this important area. Working closely with the provinces and service providers, we are helping newcomers find jobs and integrate into communities and schools.

Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, I just don't have time to go over all the recent and upcoming initiatives in my department, but I trust that members have reviewed the annual report tabled in Parliament on October 31. This demonstrates that we will continue to play an important humanitarian role in accepting refugees and in reuniting families.

[*Translation*]

Committee members are aware of our specific commitments to resettle several thousand Karen, Bhutanese and Iraqi refugees. For Canadians looking to sponsor a relative from Iraq, we are processing those applications on a priority basis.

Beyond this, I have also initiated measures to assist the population of ethnic Vietnamese in the Philippines to apply for admission on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. This group, which has been a focus of attention for this committee, has welcomed the initiative.

[*English*]

Before concluding, Mr. Chair, I'd like to touch on a couple of pieces of legislation that I look forward to working on with this committee in the months ahead.

Bill C-17 addresses an important gap that currently exists in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. The proposed amendments in this bill would give me, as the minister, the authority to instruct immigration officers to deny work permits to individuals who might be at risk of exploitation or abuse should they enter Canada. Without this authority, our immigration officers are not able to deny a work permit to someone meeting all the requirements to enter the country even if they believe there is a strong possibility of that individual's exploitation or abuse.

As the honourable members know, temporary foreign workers—some with weak language skills, with no family or friends in Canada, and often with very little money—sometimes need more protection than Canadian workers. Some of these individuals could be at risk of degrading treatment, such as sexual exploitation.

The amendments we are proposing would make Canada a safer place by helping us stop human trafficking at our borders. I therefore urge all honourable members to stand with key stakeholder groups such as the Salvation Army, the Stop the Trafficking Coalition, and The Future Group and support this important legislation.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

The other piece of legislation on which I look forward to working with you concerns citizenship. The issue of "Lost Canadians" preoccupied this committee, and me, in the last session. I promised to bring forward legislation to address it. In the interim, I have used my discretionary powers to grant citizenship to some of those affected in this manner. We will clarify the rules governing the loss of citizenship and work to make them fairer. And we will do so in a way that protects the value of Canadian citizenship.

I look forward to tabling this draft legislation in the near future.

[*English*]

We have celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Citizenship Act over the past year, and I've had the tremendous opportunity to attend many citizenship ceremonies. I have to tell you, seeing citizenship through the eyes of newcomers who have just become Canadians certainly underscores the enormous privilege it is to be a Canadian citizen.

To conclude, the values we cherish as Canadians—freedom, peace, and respect—help make up the foundation of Canadian citizenship and immigration. I welcome the opportunity to work with the members of this committee to put these values into practice and to highlight Canada as a country that welcomes newcomers from wherever they come.

As the Prime Minister noted of the welcoming nature of Canadians:

East and West, North and South, French and English, immigrant and Native-born, we are all proud champions of these founding values—of the Canadian way.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your time. I am now prepared to take questions.

[*English*]

Thank you for your time. I will now be prepared to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

The time is moving along pretty quickly, so I will go directly to you, Mr. Telegdi, first of all, for a seven-minute round.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome. Let me say, you have come a long way from not wanting to look at the Citizenship Act to actually, hopefully, us doing something very meaningful around it.

You're right, it's the 60th anniversary of the 1947 act. It's also the 30th anniversary of the 1977 act, and this is the 25th anniversary year of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Minister, you threw a challenge to us when you appeared on this issue a number of months back. The challenge was that if the committee came up with recommendations that were unanimous, we would see it in legislation. So I look forward to it. I would have felt a little better if I had seen a little more money in the supplementary estimates, particularly directed at the Citizenship Act, but I trust you have enough funds to do it.

The other issue that's of major concern for me and Canadians and this committee relates to the critical shortage of workers from coast to coast to coast. It doesn't matter if one goes to the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, or British Columbia, there is a critical shortage of workers, and unfortunately, the shortage is for workers who are tradespeople and people with lower skills who cannot get here as immigrants.

I know you have the temporary foreign worker program. We know we have undocumented workers in this country—approximately, depending on the numbers, with their families, a range of 200,000 to 500,000. It seems to me that it would be more than useful to have these people able to apply under the temporary foreign worker program. This call has been made by unions and by companies. I know the home builders—it doesn't matter which part of the country we're in—are calling for it. I think that would be a very good way of dealing with the undocumented worker problem, which basically exists because the folks who are undocumented workers are working, contributing to the economy; they fit in. So there has to be a way of plugging them in.

Minister, I really hope you will look at that, because it just doesn't make any sense to spend a great deal of money getting these folks out of the country and then trying to bring in some other people who might not work out.

This can be done through regularization. I know your department has a plan on this. The previous Liberal minister was working on the regularization, and I hope you will take a look at allowing undocumented workers a chance to apply to be temporary foreign workers and further regularization.

Those are the questions I want to put to you, and I look forward to your response.

• (1650)

Hon. Diane Finley: Thank you.

First of all, I would like to thank the committee for all the work it has done on the lost Canadians issue. We have been following your deliberations very closely, and we are factoring that into the legislation we'll be proposing. I'm hoping we'll be able to move that through pretty quickly. Obviously, I'm interested because Bill C-17 is already coming before this committee, and having that one go through, we can get that protection to people who don't have it now even sooner.

In terms of the worker shortages across the country, you're absolutely right on that one. I hear it wherever I go. We have an aging population, a dwindling birth rate, people who are retiring earlier and expecting to retire even earlier, and it's creating worker shortages right from the PhD level. We're short of PhDs in research. We're short of almost every position, right down to dishwashers. It's a challenge to meet our labour market needs, no question. That's why we've done so many things to try to expand the temporary foreign worker program. We've worked with the provinces as well to expand the provincial nominee programs, because each region has unique needs and we didn't want to impose national program criteria on them.

We've been working with them so they can individually reflect their own needs, and we're really pleased to see the progress many of them have made in advancing the PNP. As I mentioned, Manitoba has been a real leader in this field. Nova Scotia is jumping on board. Alberta is going full-steam ahead, and of course we've opened new TFW offices in B.C. and Alberta to help them meet their temporary foreign worker needs.

One of the challenges with granting some sort of recognition program to those workers who are in the country right now who are

undocumented...it's twofold. I'm very sympathetic to the uncertainty they face. But one of my great concerns, of course, is that if we recognize these individuals and grant them permission to stay here right out of the chute, then it's a question of fairness to people who have been waiting for a very long time to come here through legal channels. My concern is if we were to put forward that position, we would be encouraging more and more illegal entrants. That's not something we want to do. That would not help preserve the integrity of our immigration system.

I would point out, too, that a previous Liberal immigration minister took much the same position as I'm taking. I have a quote:

...the granting of a blanket amnesty to undocumented foreign workers would send the message that there is a reward for those who remain in Canada without the proper authorization.

This is something I'm very concerned about, protecting the integrity of our immigration system.

• (1655)

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: I'm concerned about that as well. But the fact of the matter is that these people are here because our immigration system wasn't responsive to the needs of the economy and that's why these folks are working. If they all left tomorrow, we'd have a really serious problem. But it also affords us the opportunity to see those who are here. If they perform well, fit in, pay their taxes, and don't have a criminal record, it just makes sense to allow them to apply and to keep them.

You're right, Minister, some previous ministers said exactly the same thing you just said and some were Liberal ministers. That was written for them by the bureaucracy, which has always maintained the same position. The only thing I'm saying is Minister Volpe was in the process of regularization, and the bureaucracy didn't particularly like it, just like the bureaucracy didn't like to change the Citizenship Act.

You know, Minister, you just have to deal with that, because we can't afford to get rid of all these folks who are part of the economy. They're contributing to the economy. They have adapted to this country. It should have absolutely nothing to do with how many more people are waiting in line, because we can get those folks in. We've got a shortage of people, and this would help address that.

The Chair: A brief response, Minister, if you will, because we've gone way over time. But because Mr. Telegdi is vice-chair, I generally give him an extra minute or so.

Hon. Diane Finley: I would suggest my officials have been very supportive of the changes to the Citizenship Act we've been proposing. And in terms of the position on the undocumented workers and how this would be recognizing those who are already here, it would most definitely send a very strong signal around the world that if you want to get into Canada, do it illegally. As a member of a government that has been very aggressive in our crackdown on law and order, I think that kind of move would be viewed as contradictory to our overall value system.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Faillie, please, and then Madam Chow.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faillie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have some questions about the \$8.4 million that have been transferred to Foreign Affairs. It says that this money is supposed to be to support department staff working in overseas offices.

Could you give some more details about the kind of work that will be done overseas. Is this in order to reduce the backlog in applications? Perhaps you could tell the committee if the backlog, applications that have not been dealt with, has increased since the last time you appeared.

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: The vast majority of our applicants make their applications overseas at one of our missions, at one of our visa application centres right around the world. We have some 90-odd offices around the world. And we operate those as a tenant of the Department of Foreign Affairs. So we're on their premises. The money we are providing, that we are transferring to them, is for our operations overseas, and 85% of our applications, both temporary and permanent, come from overseas. We actually do processing there. This money is to pay DFAIT to pay our people and to pay our rent and our operations there.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille: Could you provide us with the detailed list, office by office, the breakdown of the \$8.4 million, that is?

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: We could get that from Foreign Affairs.

[Translation]

Ms. Meili Faille: Does that also include more resources in offices like Nairobi, for example?

Hon. Diane Finley: That is something quite different.

Ms. Meili Faille: Does that include possible additional resources, to answer calls to these offices, among other things?

• (1700)

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: These are capital funds.

[Translation]

I am sorry, it is both.

Ms. Meili Faille: Has processing time in these offices improved since the last time you appeared before this committee?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): We have done some things, like moving officers from one place to another or reclassifying some positions so that they can make decisions. For example, we got another position in Manila and placed two Canadian officers in Delhi. I cannot tell you in detail if processing time has improved. But I can tell you that, with more temporary workers, we have been able to keep the backlog from increasing.

Ms. Meili Faille: Each time we examine the supplementary estimates, I always ask for a table of waiting times for processing, the number of Canadian staff overseas, and the costs of each mission. That kind of information would help us to understand in detail what is going on in the missions.

There is a report that provides the details of processing delays in each of the missions. We are told that waiting times are getting

longer, and that in some offices, like Nairobi, service is nowhere near adequate. We have an office in Haiti too; when we call, they just hang up on us. We are told that each time we call to ask for information on behalf of Canadians, it holds up their work by three months.

We can sense the frustration that these overseas employees have with their workload. I want to know how the department is dealing with it. If you have some kind of answer for us, please go ahead. Afterwards, I may well have other questions.

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: The time it takes to process people does vary from location to location. In some locations there may be a sudden increase in the number of people who are applying to come to Canada. Under IRPA, we are obliged to process anyone who presents themselves, so we have no control over the incoming volume whatsoever.

That said, I think it's important to place the backlog in context. Just a few years ago, as many of the committee members will remember, there were 50,000 people who were in the line, who had made application to come to Canada, and we were accepting around 200,000 people a year in the permanent class.

When we took over as a government less than two years ago, that number had ballooned to 800,000. While we're now accepting records of around 250,000 per year, that's still a three-and-a-half-year backlog, and resources have been capped during that time. So the challenge is getting at the backlog and getting to these people who have made application.

We have taken a number of steps to expedite the process to streamline operations. One of the key things is the emphasis on temporary foreign workers. That number has grown very significantly over the last few years as we tried to meet the labour market needs. We still have the same finite amount of resources to apply, so we're having to work smarter.

The result of that is that, in total, of all permanent residents, in terms of the number of months to process, in 80% of the cases it has actually declined. In 2005, it was 52 months. We now have it down to 45 months. So that's considerable progress with the same limited resources. I'm very pleased that we've been able to do that.

That's not to say we're satisfied, because we're not. We look forward to making this even better.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Faille. We'll have to catch you on the next round.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Madam Minister, this is along the same line, about the \$8.3 million transfer to DFAIT.

In 2002, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, according to public accounts in Canada, collected about \$353.6 million in user fees from immigrants, including, I see here, \$89 million from temporary resident visas, \$45 million from ordinary Canadians trying to sponsor and bring their parents and spouses into Canada under the family class, about \$77.8 million in landing fees, and \$99 million from skilled workers. So, in total, it's a lot of money: \$353.6 million.

Why won't you put all these funds into the supplementary estimates under the immigration program—for example, to clear the 800,000 potential immigrants who are now backlogged and to hire more staff to support the missions overseas through DFAIT?

We remember that in the 1990s those departments were cut by something like 45% by the previous government, so there are dramatically fewer visa offices, whether offices or staff. It's a desperate situation. Why wouldn't you take that money and transfer it so there are lower wait times?

• (1705)

Hon. Diane Finley: That would be a nice solution if we could do it.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Why can't you?

Hon. Diane Finley: The finances of the Government of Canada in that regard don't operate like private business, nor do departments. Under parliamentary rules, all the fees we take in for processing and for applications go into the general revenue fund. Then we have to make our submissions, such as through this process of supplementary estimates and the budgets, to get what we feel we need to operate. We're competing with all the other departments for those same funds that are in general revenue. We don't get to raise money on our own and apply it to our own programs.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I thought in the passport division that all the money we get from passports we then spend on getting people their passports faster.

I learned of an act that was passed on March 31, 2004, called the User Fees Act, that basically said, in the spirit of accountability and transparency, there would be performance standards published and the act would be followed. So you would either lower the fees or drop the fees or take the fees to make sure the services are delivered as quickly, as efficiently, and as streamlined as possible.

I would think that's common sense. So why wouldn't the department do that kind of work or voluntarily follow that User Fees Act?

Hon. Diane Finley: Coming from business, that has been a frustration of mine personally, because that's my approach—set up a new product line and make it self-financing.

The deputy can explain the technical reasons behind this, but it is government policy that these things go into general revenue.

Mr. Richard Fadden (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): You're quite right that Passport Canada is allowed to retain fees. Parliament set it up as a special operating agency. For any department or agency to have that happen requires legislation, which by and large, I should say, the central agencies do not favour because it would reduce the amount available for distribution as general revenue. But you're right, Passport Canada has a special rule.

In respect of the User Fees Act, it only comes into play in a department like CIC if the department moves to increase fees. We are now before the courts on a number of cases relating to whether or not we're charging too much for our fees, so until the courts take a position on this, it's difficult for us to say a great deal about it and it's difficult for us to change the fees.

Hon. Diane Finley: I might mention one of the challenges that occurs when we set fees, let's say for an application. CIC incurs certain expenses, obviously, but we work on many things in partnership with other departments—CBSA, for example, and the RCMP in doing security checks and fingerprint checks and those sorts of things, and the Department of Foreign Affairs for our rent, which is a general overhead. The fees are applied to a broad range. We're not self-sufficient in the provision of those services.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I would think that if there are more fees, more funds can then go to the RCMP and CSIS; then the security check would be a lot faster. Right now it's backlogged. You wait for the security clearance, and then your medical clearance has expired. Then you have to do it again, back and forth. It wastes your department's time and the poor immigrant's time, and it just goes into a vicious cycle.

Can that fee be used for immigrant settlement services, whether it's foreign credentials—

• (1710)

Hon. Diane Finley: No.

Ms. Olivia Chow: —or settlement services or ISAP? It's none whatsoever?

Hon. Diane Finley: No.

Ms. Olivia Chow: That is frustrating. Are you saying that if we do set up a stand-alone special operation, it actually hurts the department, because you would get less money from the general...or would you be able to get more money? I wouldn't want the immigration department to have less money. By doing so, would you then have more money coming into the department or less?

Hon. Diane Finley: The risk exists that it could be less, because if they say we are now a stand-alone department and then we have to raise all our revenues and pay them out to the other departments, we are all of a sudden starting to become a revenue generator, which changes our mandate significantly; instead of providing services, we're now a business unit, with all the risks and rewards that that entails.

If we don't get sufficient revenue, then we provide even less service, but if we go to that kind of standard, it's very conceivable that the general revenue would provide zero funding, saying that we should be a stand-alone.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I see. Thank you.

The Chair: Very good. Time's up. Thank you, Ms. Chow.

Mr. Komarnicki is next.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for commenting on the various activities of the committee here.

I know Mr. Telegdi raised the issue of the shortage of skilled workers and temporary foreign workers. Almost every part of our economy in Canada is robust, and there is a significant need in that area. Of course, he's talked about the undocumented workers and how they may fit into the program, but it seems to me we are providing a somewhat legitimate avenue or stream for people to come into our country to meet the needs of that robust economy. I know you've mentioned the provincial nominee program, but we also have other programs, and I'm particularly interested in the Canadian experience class.

I might add that we have had a fairly robust budget. There is \$51 million with respect to the temporary foreign worker program, \$34 million in selecting the immigrants whose skills and experience Canada needs, and of course a \$1.3 billion budget over five years for the integration programs for newcomers.

Having said that, I'm particularly interested in the Canadian experience class because it certainly allows for foreign students to come into our country. It allows for temporary foreign workers to make a leap into something that's more permanent. I've had the opportunity to make an announcement of your extension of the off-campus work permits for private institutions, and that went over very well in both Edmonton and in Winnipeg. In fact, Diane McGifford, the Manitoba Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy said with respect to that one portion of the program:

There are almost 3,000 international students attending post-secondary schools in Manitoba, many of them at private institutions. The expansion of the Off-campus Work Permit program will mean more international students will bring their skills, knowledge, and their own distinctive perspectives to our workplaces.

In terms of legitimizing ways for people to come into our country and meet the needs, particularly with respect to the Canada experience class, could you comment on what's being done?

Hon. Diane Finley: They are all very good programs; we're rather excited about them because they are innovative and they do contribute to the economy in both the short term and the long term, we believe.

The off-campus work program has been very well received. Last year we had over 11,000 post-secondary students take advantage of it. It's a great program. It helps the students earn some money to help pay their way, but more importantly it provides two things. One is that it gives them Canadian work experience. It lets them learn about Canadian work ethics and how to find a job in Canada, because it's often different in the countries they come from. It gives them references. It lets them learn how to adapt to Canada.

That's really good for them; it's good for us as well, because in the long term, when they go to graduate—and I know this from some work I did a few years ago with the evaluation of the post-secondary system in Ontario—80% of university and college students want to stay in the town where they graduated. So if we can encourage these students to stay through the Canadian experience class, we're getting

people who have already become familiar with and created ties to that community but who have also learned how to work in Canada. They have the experience. They're much more likely to get a job there. Then we get the benefit of these newcomers, which we need. It's a terrific program.

I'm glad to see that the pilot projects are going along well in terms of extending it to private institutions. I'll be interested to see the results of those programs. Over the long term, as we fully launch the Canadian experience class, we're going to see the country and employers and newcomers benefit from temporary foreign workers being allowed, for the first time, to apply for permanent residence from within this country. We're not going to give them all that experience, get them trained and get them used to living here, and then send them back home to wait for three to five years; we're going to keep them here with the skills.

The employers are investing in them now, people get to stay, and it's good for everybody.

• (1715)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: To follow up on that, one more point is that if we're looking at how people can legitimately come into the country, the provinces have the provincial nominee program. They can get people directly suited to the occupations or whatever they require. Then we have the off-campus work permit and the temporary foreign work permit, which I understand has been extended now from one year to two years. Something has also happened with the live-in caregiver program, and then there is the ability to apply within Canada to go forward. Would you agree with me that all of those speak to legitimate avenues, as opposed to trying to come in some other way?

Hon. Diane Finley: They are legitimate avenues....

The Chair: I have one minute left. I want to make sure we're not a long time here because I have such a line-up of speakers. You have one minute.

Hon. Diane Finley: They are legitimate avenues, and we are putting resources into processing them in a timely manner to respond to the needs of business, to keep business going, quite frankly.

Having got them here, having got them trained up...in some jobs it does take two years before you really get your feet underneath you. It would be a shame to lose those people, we believe, for all the wrong reasons. This is why we were introducing the Canadian experience class, so we can take advantage of those investments.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That completes our seven-minute round. We'll go to the five-minute round with Mr. Bevilacqua.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much, Minister, for your presentation.

I'm noting a statistic here: 70% of Canada's labour force growth comes from immigration. Between 2011 and 2015, 100% of our net labour force and population growth will come from immigration. Needless to say, I think you would ideally be the minister of perhaps one of the most powerful ministries in government. And what I hear from you is that you are having a bit of a challenge to get the resources you need.

That's of concern to me. It is of concern to me because above and beyond looking at supplementary estimates, which I guess we do at committee, I'm concerned about the fact that here we are, as Canadians, with an aging society, having to compete for skill shortages, not just domestically but I'm talking broadly, in the global village, and the global competition is stiffening as developing countries like India and China and others have an expanded middle class.

You have a phenomenal job ahead of you to attract people to Canada. On top of that, here you are—I can just imagine how you feel in cabinet—with these real challenges, and you have 800,000 unprocessed immigration applications. In other words, they're a barrier to entry more than anything else. Then, within your own domestic market, you have tensions between yourself and the Province of Ontario and a \$100 million shortfall.

I don't know if you could even tell me how many foreign credentials have actually been accredited as a result of your foreign credentials referral office.

I feel for you, because I think your heart is in the right place, but if you are around the cabinet table and the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance are not recognizing the importance of immigration in Canada.... I mean, you said you require more resources, and I believe you. I think you do require more resources because you have some major challenges.

I'm simply wondering what kind of confidence we can have in a government that does not recognize the importance of immigration by not allocating the types of resources it requires.

• (1720)

Hon. Diane Finley: If I may, I'd like to take issue with some of those points. Some I will acknowledge. Yes, we do have challenges, no question. The single biggest challenge at the moment is the backlog we inherited from the previous government. It was allowed to balloon. We're looking at ways to address it in the longer term.

In the meantime, we're being successful at finding ways to continue to meet the labour market needs. We've invested extra money in the temporary foreign worker program. We're working with the provinces to meet their regional needs, which is extremely important. We've invested \$1.3 billion in settlement funding, because there is no point in bringing all these people here if we don't help them adapt to this new environment.

The previous government kept those levels frozen for 10 years. Think about anything else where a price or an individual's salary has been frozen for 10 years. I call that a starving of resources, and that's one of the reasons the backlog was allowed to grow so high, because the resources weren't put to it.

Our government has been investing—in the FCRO to help people get to work, in temporary foreign workers. In terms of the foreign credentials referral office, its role is not and has never been to get people accredited. It's to help people find out how and where to get accredited. The accreditation process is part of the provincially licensed regulatory bodies.

I believe that our leadership role is to help people, particularly before they even get here, navigate through the labyrinth that exists in finding where and how to get their credentials assessed, so that having got them assessed before they even come here, they can use that time to upgrade their skills to close the gap between their skills and Canadian standards.

The Chair: You have half a minute.

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua: I have half a minute; I won't take longer than that.

I also want the minister to tell Canadians that not only did you inherit certain things, you also inherited a surplus. When I see how that surplus is being invested, I really, honestly, cannot see that immigration is a priority for this government, and I think statistics will prove me correct.

You can't have billions and billions of surpluses, a backlog as big as yours, and the competition that exists for global workers, and you and your government not invest more money. I'm not the one who said it needed more money; you said that, so I think you're in agreement with me.

I think this file, the immigration file, in the Conservative government needs to be pushed forward, because it's a very important issue facing Canadians. I think you, as minister, will have to fight a lot harder to get the type of funding and resources required so that immigration is taken seriously in this country.

The Chair: I'm sorry, I have to cut it off right there.

I have to go to Mr. Carrier, who has five minutes. I think that's pretty well going to do it for us.

Mr. Carrier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Finley, gentlemen and ladies.

I am a new member of the Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. It is a committee that has great significance for us as MPs.

You said that you were working very hard to help temporary workers become involved and adapt to the country as much as possible. You also have programs that assess the credentials of other categories of workers. But you have not talked about the problems of family reunification and refugees.

Our constituency offices often have to deal with problems like that. They see heart-wrenching cases: people who have been accepted as refugees, but whose children, for some peculiar reason, are still in their home country. We have all the difficulty in the world getting cooperation from your department on problems like that.

Let me tell you about one particular case. An Algerian lady was accepted as a resident in Canada, but her children were still in Algeria. So she wants to get them here. The embassy that deals with their file is in Paris. You can see the problem. The children's passports have to get to the embassy in Paris.

How can the children physically and financially handle all these immigration requirements? The requirements are important, but there are no resources to help people meet them. I was even ready, as an MP, to pay FedEx to take the passports to the embassy to get the process underway. Your department absolutely refused, saying that FedEx had no business shipping passports. Short of going to do the department's job ourselves, since it is not there on-site for cases like that, there are no resources.

I would like to hear what you have to say about that. Is it your intention to improve the services that we have to provide to people whom we have accepted as refugees here and are good citizens. It is important for them to be reunited with their families. If our own children were left in another country, on another continent, how would we handle it?

• (1725)

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: There's no question we want to help refugees. I believe all Canadians want to help legitimate refugees.

We've been working very closely with the UNHCR to do that and to make it as easy as possible on refugees, who are designated convention refugees, to come here. Canada is known around the world for the fairness of its refugee system.

Obviously, not knowing the details of individual cases, it would be difficult for me to make comments, but if you have some details we'd be happy to look at those. The deputy has a bit of background on that as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Fadden: Usually, Mr. Chair, people living in a country where immigration services are not provided should be able to leave their documents at the Canadian embassy in their country; from there, they would be sent to the immigration section that could look after the matter.

As the minister requested, could you let us have the details? We can look into the specific circumstances of your case.

Mr. Robert Carrier: I just point out that we do not have an embassy in each country.

[English]

The Chair: Time is up, but we do have two minutes, so I can allow one minute, Mr. Batters. It's your turn for one minute—and a one-minute response.

Mr. Dave Batters: I'll try to do my best in one minute, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for your appearance before us, Minister, with your officials.

As a member of Parliament, I know one of the main areas we deal with is immigration-related concerns. I can say that from the time I took office in 2004, this was one of the main departments where problems existed and where, clearly, fixes needed to be undertaken. I

commend you, Minister, and Minister Solberg before you, for all the initiatives you have undertaken to fight at the cabinet table to make these important fixes.

Since I only have one minute, I want to ask you this quickly. You recently went to India regarding a trip on foreign credentials. Can you tell me a bit about why you visited India, the places you visited, and what you learned over there? What was the importance of your trip to India, Minister?

The Chair: You have one minute, Minister.

Hon. Diane Finley: You want all that in one minute?

Well, my trip to India had three goals, and I'm pleased to say they were all achieved.

Number one was to launch a new office in Delhi where we provide, in partnership with the Canadian Association of Community Colleges through a grant arrangement, a two-day orientation and education course for Indians who are planning to come to Canada. This is to help them learn—so they know what to expect when they get here—everything from how to get their credentials assessed to how to buy a house, how to work the transit system.

The second goal was to see firsthand our operations on the ground. I'd heard all kinds of stories and I wanted to see for myself. That was an enlightening experience.

The third goal I had was to meet with senior business, education, and government people to make sure that India knew that Canada was open for business, that we have a lot of ways for Indians to get here and to get to work quickly in their trained field. So it was a recruiting trip, in many ways, and a sales trip.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. It's unfortunate we don't have more time. We could use another hour, but we'll get you at another time, I'm sure.

I want to thank Mr. Fadden, Mr. Ganim, and Madame Deschenes for your presence here today. Thank you very much.

Now it's necessary to go to our votes.

Shall I call the votes?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Department

Vote 1a—Operating expenditures and the payment to each member of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada who is a Minister without Portfolio or a Minister of State who does not preside over a Ministry of State of a salary not to exceed the salary paid to Ministers of State who preside over Ministries of State under the *Salaries Act*, as adjusted pursuant to the *Parliament of Canada Act* and pro rata for any period of less than a year – To authorize the transfer of \$222,500 from Canadian Heritage Vote 5, \$85,000 from Human Resources and Skills Development Vote 1, and \$85,000 from Health Vote 35, *Appropriation Act No. 2, 2007-2008* for the purposes of this Vote and to provide a further amount of.....\$414,702,262

Vote 2a—Pursuant to section 25(2) of the *Financial Administration Act*, to write-off from the Accounts of Canada 2,813 debts due to Her Majesty in Right of Canada amounting to \$1,620,031 related to immigration loans issued pursuant to section 88 of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* – To authorize the transfer of \$4,158 from *Citizenship and Immigration Vote 1, Appropriation Act No. 2, 2007-2008* for the purposes of this Vote and to provide a further amount of.....\$1,615,873

Vote 10a—Expenditures.....\$136,000

(Votes 1a, 2a, and 10a agreed to)

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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