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# **Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**

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## Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

• (0905)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.)):** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I call the meeting to order pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, November 28, 2007. We are studying Bill C-362, An Act to amend the Old Age Security Act (residency requirement). We will be hearing from Colleen Beaumier, who has introduced that bill, from 9 to 10, and then from 10 to 11 we have a number of people who have taken time to come and provide testimony on this piece of legislation. We thank them, and we'll introduce them at 10 o'clock.

First of all, committee, I would ask you to have a look at the first piece of business, which is the operational budget request for this study. I think all members have that in front of them. Do all members have that? I don't think there's much discussion on that, but I'll hear some if there is any. If not, I would ask for somebody to move that it be passed.

Madam Sgro.

**Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.):** I so move.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Are there any questions on the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** That was carried with great vigour. Thank you very much.

We are studying Bill C-362, and we have Madam Beaumier with us. Congratulations on steering this bill successfully to this point. We look forward to your testimony. I think you have ten minutes to speak, and then we'll have some questions.

Colleen Beaumier.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.):** Thank you.

To begin, I'd like to thank the chair and other members of the committee for inviting me to speak today, and for providing me the opportunity to answer questions concerning Bill C-362, An Act to amend the Old Age Security Act.

This bill was introduced in the House, by me, on October 25, 2006. Its aim is as simple as it is important. It amends the Old Age Security Act to reduce from ten years to three years the residency requirement for entitlement to old age security. Lowering the residency requirement in this way will remedy a grave oversight in

Canada's social security system, which is presently causing great stress to seniors across Canada and to the families and communities to which they belong.

All Canadians believe the elimination of poverty, especially amongst those most vulnerable in society, should be the top concern of the Government of Canada. This bill will go a long way to alleviating the hardship experienced by some of Canada's most vulnerable.

Let me take a moment to explain how it will do this. The federal old age security program came into existence in 1952 as a matter of social justice. It was motivated by a concern for the needs and welfare of Canada's senior citizens. Essentially, at that time Canadians recognized and decided that no Canadian senior should ever live in poverty.

Presently, the Old Age Security Act requires a person to reside in Canada for ten years before she or he is entitled to receive old age security. As a result, it is not at all uncommon for a Canadian senior citizen to go entirely without the benefits of old age security for many years, thus exposing them unnecessarily to the hardships of poverty.

However, I wish to emphasize that this is also about dignity and decency. Unlike the Canadian and Quebec pension plans, which are funded by contributions from each person over his or her working life, the OAS is presently funded from general tax revenues. This means OAS is funded from the taxes of every person living and working in Canada right now, not 10, 15, or 20 years ago. This is regardless of his or her country of birth. This also means that lowering the residency requirement does not affect or pose any sort of threat to the long-term viability of other pension schemes. Furthermore, OAS income is itself subject to tax, so ultimately, only those Canadian seniors most in need receive any OAS benefits.

From the perspective of social justice, a 10-year residency requirement is arbitrary and inappropriately discriminatory. Old age security, I want to emphasize, is not intended to reward seniors for services rendered. Rather, it is intended to ensure Canadian seniors will not live in poverty.

The needs of new Canadians are as genuine as the needs of those who have resided here for 10 years or more. Three years is the minimum residency requirement to become a Canadian citizen. If that's a sufficient residency requirement for citizenship, it's sufficient for old age security.

Of course, doing the right and decent thing costs money, and this bill is no exception. Based on statistical analysis undertaken by the Library of Parliament at my request, it can be estimated that if Bill C-362 comes into force for 2009, some 38,700 persons will become eligible for benefits related to old age security. That is, an estimated 32,900 will become eligible for old age security benefits, 28,100 will also qualify for guaranteed income supplement benefits, and an additional 5,800 will qualify for the spousal allowance.

When the changes are made, the total cost will be around \$410 million. Of that total, approximately \$40 million will be paid out in OAS benefits, \$310 million in GIS benefits, and about \$60 million in spousal allowances. It is estimated that the total cost per year will rise about \$15 million thereafter. I should note also that the actual cost to the government will be a little lower, because some of the benefits will be recouped through taxation.

• (0910)

The total cost associated with the changes proposed by Bill C-362 is not inconsequential. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the total cost per person is only about \$10,000 to \$12,000 per year. It should be further noted that these seniors do not all live in total isolation. By helping these seniors, we will also help families and the communities of which they are a part. Moreover, the cost to fix this glaring hole in our social security net is not insubstantial only because the needs of those affected are so great.

I believe Canadians all across the country want to address the residency requirement, which imposes a very real hardship on so many seniors, their families, and their communities. No person, and certainly no member of this committee, would ever want to face a choice between poverty and a life of absolute dependence on family and friends. By guaranteeing a certain basic level of support for all Canadian seniors, we guarantee a lifetime of dignity and self-respect for all Canadians.

On the whole, Canadians are a decent people. Without exception, whenever possible, we strive to do the right thing and to right wrongs whenever we encounter them. Even to the most casual observer, the hardships created by the 10-year residency requirement is a wrong that needs to be corrected. Why? Because it is the decent thing to do.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much, Madam Beaumier.

We're going to go to questions, starting with seven-minute rounds.

As well as our usual committee members, we have a few visitors today: Monsieur Pacetti for the Liberals, Monsieur Gravel for the Bloc, and Ms. Chris Charlton for the NDP, who is an intermittent member of this committee—welcome back.

We'll start off with Ms. Dhalla, for seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):** Thank you, Ms. Beaumier, for all your work in regard to this issue. You have the riding adjacent to mine. We all know it's a tremendous issue of concern to many seniors across the 905 belt, but also, I think, to all Canadians, all over Canada, out in British Columbia on the west coast, and on the east coast as well.

Could you just elaborate on the amount it would cost if this were implemented?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** The total cost, if this were to take effect in 2009—I think we're a little late for 2008-09—is estimated to be about \$410 million. The cost will rise about \$15 million each year. The changes in the OAS will be \$40 million of that; GIS, \$310 million; and the changes in spousal allowance, \$60 million.

I should also note that the actual cost to government will be lower because some of this will be taxed back. Many seniors have other investments and do pay taxes, and the additional income will be taxed back.

I have a chart here for 2009 to 2012, which I can distribute to the members' offices. The numbers I have were prepared by the Library of Parliament using Statistics Canada's social policy stimulation database. These estimates may be a little on the low side; however, I think they're pretty close. You can only really guesstimate from Statistics Canada.

• (0915)

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Do we know how many seniors are impacted with this differentiation in the residency requirement of three to 10 years?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes. I think for OAS it's 32,900 seniors; for GIS, out of that would be 28,100; and then for the spousal allowance benefits, it's 5,800.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Of those seniors—you can even speak from your own personal experience of having been a parliamentarian who's interacted on and advocated for this issue over a number of years—how many of those individuals would you think have hardship or have to rely on social assistance because they don't have access to these types of benefits?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I don't have those numbers. I know that the Province of Ontario claims the federal government owes them a few billion dollars to recoup some of the costs of this.

What has been an important issue for me, if you really want to look at the numbers and costs, is that many of these people come here and provide full-time day care for their grandchildren. And, Ms. Dhalla, considering that day care is your issue, you know what it costs to provide subsidized day care and day care facilities for people who would qualify. I think that offsets many of the costs that the government has never even had to address.

So if we look at these people as being an added burden to the government, I think we're wrong; I think they save the government a tremendous amount of money on day care.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Also, there are organizations like the Old Age Benefits Forum, comprised of seniors from all over the country, who advocate strongly for seniors who have been impacted—particularly seniors from those countries where they receive their benefits after a period of 10 years.

Perhaps, for the benefit of all committee members here, can you tell us a little bit about the Old Age Benefits Forum and some of the work they've done in advocating on this particular issue?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** We've had a tremendous amount of support from the Old Age Benefits Forum. Many of them are not immigrants; many of them are seniors who have lived in Canada all their lives and feel this is extremely discriminatory.

We talk about equality. Without equality there is no justice in our society. We have two classes of citizens currently: we have seniors who qualify for OAS and we have those who don't, based on their country of origin. We like to pound our chests and talk about what a just society we have and how there is equality and how everyone is treated the same. Well, we have two classes of citizens currently. I personally think—and there are many who share this view—that it is completely, completely unjust.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** I want to echo to my colleagues on the committee what Ms. Beaumier is saying, that this is an issue. I know that since I was elected in 2004 it has been of concern to many seniors. There is, I would say, a process of discrimination, where some seniors are receiving their benefits after three years and others are receiving them after 10 years. One only has to talk to some of these seniors to realize the challenges they face; without the benefits, they are put very close to the poverty line in this country.

As I said in the House of Commons last week, I don't think a senior should have to make a choice between filling up their gas tank or filling up their fridge or having to fill their prescriptions.

The passage of this bill brought forward by Ms. Beaumier, which I hope will be supported by all committee members, would help to ensure that we reverse this inequality, so that we will have a system that is fair and treats all citizens—seniors especially, regardless of which country they're from—with the utmost respect. So I hope we can count on the support of all of our colleagues around the table.

In closing, could I request that Ms. Beaumier forward to the clerk, who could distribute to us, the costing analysis that was done, along with the amount of people who are impacted by this particular inequality?

• (0920)

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I will do that.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Thank you.

**Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC):** Mr. Chair, on a quick point of order, the person at the table with Ms. Beaumier has not been identified.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I'm sorry, I should have identified him. He wrote my introductory remarks, you see, and he didn't include his name in it.

This is Sterling Lynch, from my office. He's done much of this research for me.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you.

Welcome, Mr. Lynch.

We will move along to *Monsieur Lessard, sept minutes.*

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. Beaumier, for introducing this bill and for being here this morning to explain it to us.

From the outset, I want to tell you that the Bloc will support this bill. However, a few questions are in order concerning the road map that may accompany it. Will your party support it?

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I know that our critic is supporting the bill, but it's a private member's bill and we don't whip votes. But most of my party is supporting this bill—perhaps all. Maybe not one or two, but generally, yes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** We agree on your analysis of the lot reserved for seniors, particularly as result of policies put in place in the past 15 years. That takes nothing away from your bill because, as I said earlier, we will be supporting it, and we'll see whether there is any reason to move amendments.

Does the bill require royal recommendation?

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes, it does require royal recommendation.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Will your leader seek royal recommendation?

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I haven't spoken to him about asking for....

You know, I'm running through this a little bit blind. This is the first time I've done a private member's bill dealing with finances.

If it's required that he does...I'm sure he will. Well, I think he will.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** I see from your remarks that you're a person who's very concerned about the lot of seniors. Do you agree with me that our concern for seniors should at least merit a comprehensive policy to combat poverty among seniors?

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes, I do. I think this was my way of getting the door open and sticking my foot into it before we come forward with an overall policy. It is not my critic's position or my portfolio to be dealing with seniors issues. That is for Carolyn Bennett, and I think she has an overall policy planned.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** All right. I want to understand. We parliamentarians work with political commitments to determine how to direct our efforts. Last November in Toronto, your leader announced that there would be a comprehensive policy to combat poverty. I remain skeptical about that, and that's why I'm questioning you. I'll question your colleagues as well when I have the opportunity.

Do you know what the Program for Older Worker Adjustment, POWA, is? Immigrants are also concerned by that. Every time a business closes, at least 20% of workers are over the age of 55. In 1998, your party cut that program. Cutting the program increased poverty among seniors.

With respect to the Guaranteed Income Supplement, you'll remember that your party—I don't want to attack your party, but I have to tell it like it is—refused to allow people to be automatically registered for the Guaranteed Income Supplement. As a result, today, \$3.3 billion is owed to seniors among the poorest citizens who did not receive it.

I would like to understand your actions and what it is possible to do in your party. We can do a lot amongst ourselves here, but, if there isn't a commitment by your party, we won't succeed and we'll continue to deceive immigrants who are having difficulty getting protection when they are elderly. We are working in that direction. However, it must be said that all seniors are victims of measures that affect their incomes and push them into poverty. I would like to know how you understand the support that we will get first from your party. On our side, we are completely invested.

● (0925)

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Mr. Lessard, I think the issues you are talking about are all-encompassing issues. We certainly have identified the problems within our party, but the solutions are being worked on. I don't think I'm in a position to even discuss the overall senior policy positions, because I'm not the critic and I'm not the one who will be releasing the policy on poverty.

The only thing I can speak to is my bill and my reasons for bringing it forward. As for the rest, I think we have to wait and see what comes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** You deserve a great deal of credit, and I respect you very much for introducing this bill.

In speaking to you this morning, I'm also sending a message to your colleagues. Barely two and a half years ago, you were in power and you denied us these kinds of measures. When I say you, I don't mean you personally, but rather your party. You have previously proposed these measures. I'm thinking of the one concerning the income supplement, the assistance program for older workers who lose their jobs and measures like those you're announcing this morning.

There are also questions of cost. I would like you to submit to us the table containing the figures you presented to us earlier. I believe I incorrectly noted down some of those that you submitted to us the second time.

If the Prime Minister intends to seek royal recommendation, we'll have to work together. I would like you to understand clearly, you who are introducing a private bill, that we won't get far if your party doesn't support it. We have to get through the royal recommendation stage.

I see that there are people here today representing people who have recently arrived in the country and immigrants of longer

standing. They have hope in this regard. I would like us to give them a fair idea of the contributions of each of the parties. I don't know what your commitment to this issue is. Work has been done in this area. I would like you to inform us about it and also to inform the interested groups here this morning.

Are you ready to do that?

[*English*]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, Mr. Lessard. That's seven minutes.

We do have conflicting information, so the information that you have, Madam Beaumier, you should make sure that the committee members have. We have had a cost from the department, and it's a little different from the Library of Parliament's. There may be reasons for that, but we can discuss that as we go. But we'd like to see your numbers.

Ms. Charlton, for seven minutes.

**Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Ms. Beaumier, I first of all want to commend you for bringing this bill forward. I think all of us who've been working on seniors issues know that income security is the single most important priority for all seniors in our country. I do agree with Mr. Lessard, there's lots of work to be done, and this is just a particular slice of the larger policy area.

Do you agree with him, though, that despite the fact that this is, as you say, a narrowly focused issue, we do know that right now in Canada there are 200,000 people who are eligible for the GIS already who aren't accessing it? And one of the reasons they're not accessing it, among many, is that there are linguistic and cultural challenges to filling out the applications. Therefore they're not even sure of their entitlement and don't apply, and they don't get the GIS.

I wonder if in proposing this bill, because it does deal specifically with the newcomer community, you've thought about how we'd ensure that when we provide this entitlement for the GIS, people who would now be eligible could actually access that benefit. Because entitlement without access doesn't do them any good.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** A simplistic way is to advertise in the ethnic newspapers—but no, I think we have to be a little more inventive in our ways of getting people to understand that these benefits are available. I do agree with you.

● (0930)

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Let me just ask a couple of other questions.

Do you have a comprehensive list of countries with which we don't have a reciprocal agreement, and therefore a list of countries whose emigrants this would affect?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, we don't have a list.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Is it possible for the committee to get that list?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** We haven't focused on the different countries affected, I guess because we didn't particularly think it mattered where they came from.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** It matters to me only in terms of—

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes, I understand that.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** —whether you would agree that we need to have particular kinds of outreach strategies to make sure everybody becomes aware of the entitlements. It does matter in which languages we might pursue that. It would be of interest.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** I'm informed that it would be easier to get a list of those countries with which we do have reciprocal arrangements, and we'll provide that to the committee as soon as possible.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Fair enough. Thank you very much.

You talked very eloquently about the fact that this isn't just a cost, that there's also a net benefit, not just to newcomers but to our whole community, in implementing this bill. It strikes me that one of the areas where there'd be substantial cost savings—although not on the federal government side—would be through social assistance savings, for example.

Have you costed that out at all? I know it will vary province by province.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, we haven't.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** It seems to me, following up on Mr. Lessard's comments, that when we're dealing with a private member's bill that in some parties will be subject to a free vote, putting as much evidence as you could before us to help us persuade colleagues on the other side of the House might be an element that would be persuasive to some.

In the same vein, this issue has certainly been around for a very long time—but I'm a rookie here, so correct me if I'm wrong—and people in my community and across the country have been lobbying for movement on this in a very tenacious way. They've hung in and been very patient with Parliament to get us to this point.

Since it's not the first time that it's before us, I wonder whether you can talk a little about what the obstacles were with past governments. What were the reasons why this was never brought forward? I know it was discussed, so there must have been reasons why it wasn't implemented. It couldn't have just been costs, I would assume.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I'm not really sure that it has been discussed at any great length. We've had different groups lobby us.

We're politicians, but we have our own personalities and things that are important to us. And I'll tell you how I got to this point.

The seniors in my area, mostly south Asians, began the lobbying. When they came to me and told me that it was against the charter and that it should be their right to have it, as a politician I was....

Even though they were right, you get a little tired of hearing people coming to you all the time saying, "I'm a Canadian, and I have rights, and...." You do.

At any rate, I told them that since I wasn't a lawyer, I didn't know what the implications were of the charter or how this would go through a court system, but I wasn't sure they'd win on a charter aspect. However, when I began going to the fields and watching....

I have a gentleman here, Sucha, who drives seniors who are over 70 to work in the fields so that they can have spending money. It's about dignity. When you go out and you see these people, they have so much pride and so much dignity; they don't want to go to their sons to ask them for money for coffee.

It's not as though you have to be very wealthy to have your parents come to this country. They come, they provide a service. There's dignity in being self-sufficient, and to see these men and women, in the hot days of summer, out working in the fields in order to preserve their dignity, made me very ashamed of myself and of our system.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** I agree with you absolutely. To me, this isn't a charter issue. As I understand it, the charter only applies to Canadian citizens. This is fundamentally an issue of treating seniors with the dignity and respect they deserve.

• (0935)

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** It's just decency.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** You talk about the services that people provide for their families. Even that doesn't matter to me. As a senior in your own right, whether you're looking after grandchildren or not, you deserve to retire in dignity and with respect.

Do I have time for one last question?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** You have about fifteen seconds.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** It will be a really quick question.

Now that we have changes to the immigration laws in front of us in the House, do you think this bill would be an additional disincentive for the minister, who now has greater discretionary power, to limit the number of family sponsorships and family reunions that become possible in our country?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Well, I think that's a question I really can't answer. My answer would be a little biased and a little political.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Go ahead.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** This is why I brought up the services they provide and the money they save the government by providing these babysitting services. I really think it's cost-neutral to the government. The services that are provided for and OAS—they are, at the least, cost-neutral, if not maybe a savings for the government, but a government that believes in proper day care.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you. That's your time, Ms. Charlton.

We're going to go to the government side. I believe we're going to start with Ms. Yelich, who may split her seven minutes with Mr. Brown, I understand.

**Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC):** Yes, I will.

Thank you very much. This gives us an opportunity to study more about why the old age security is set up as such, because I too was wondering. I have brought immigrants into the country, older people, and they had to wait 10 years. They've actually just succeeded in getting their first income this year from their social security program, so it was indeed welcomed.

However, I wondered as well...and I found out through studying this bill why it was done. I can now understand a little better that it appears the residency is not discriminatory against any country or nationality or origin. In some of the conversation, it almost sounds as though we're under the impression that it is. It certainly has nothing to do with any country of origin. What it has to do with is 10 years of residency. From what I understand, you can be born in Canada....

I actually just spoke with a student who said that if he had been born in Canada.... It's 10 years of residency after 18. So if he was born in Canada and then he went to work somewhere else and came back, he would still have to have 10 years of residency in order to apply for old age security when he got older. So even if you're born in Canada, you have to meet the residency requirement in order to receive old age security.

I would like to dispel any thinking that it has to do with.... Ms. Dhalla brought up the three-year and 10-year, but it's because we have agreements with other countries.

Am I correct in thinking that this would mean renegotiating a lot of agreements with other countries if we changed this? This bill is much broader than just old age security. It means renegotiating agreements with other countries. Have you even looked into what even the cost of that would be? There are a lot of countries with which we have negotiated these agreements. Have you looked into that? And can you provide this committee with the background or what you have found out about the international social security agreements?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** First of all, it is my understanding that if you were born in Canada and you worked in a country with which we had a reciprocal agreement, those years working there would count if you moved back to Canada to get a pension. I don't believe—

**Mrs. Lynne Yelich:** It would be pro-rated, though. You'd still be allowed to acquire your old age security, but there would be a pro-rating of sorts.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** But the years working in a country with whom we had a reciprocal agreement would count.

Now, most of the international social security agreements contain a provision that indicates that the agreement will continue to apply in the event that the Old Age Security Act changes unless either of the countries objects within three months. There are a couple of countries in which there are exceptions, and some programs will require signing a specific protocol, so it's difficult to even know if it will cost anything. It may be neutral.

● (0940)

**Mrs. Lynne Yelich:** Well, these are negotiations with other countries, which I'm sure would take...you know, some renewal in negotiating.

I will allow Mr. Brown to take over, but I want to make one comment—since you brought it up—about child care. One reason we find that our universal child care payment is seen to be quite welcome in immigrant families is that they don't have to worry about finding a day care. They do have that money for their choice in child care, and if it be a parent, an immigrant parent or a parent who wants to help with child care—

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes, if their parents aren't on the waiting list.

**Mrs. Lynne Yelich:** —that does help them quite a bit.

Mr. Brown.

**Mr. Gord Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to welcome Madam Beaumier to the committee.

I would never question her sincerity or her motivation in bringing this forward, but I'm a little puzzled, because of course she was part of the government that was in power for 13 years, from 1993 to 2006. That government fought against the attempt to have this law ruled unconstitutional. They fought it in court twice to uphold it.

Madam Beaumier, as you said during the debate on second reading, the seniors groups, needless to say, ran out of money. I'm a little puzzled about what your thoughts are on that, and why the government you were part of fought so hard to keep the current rules in place.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** As I said during my presentation earlier, I'm no lawyer—

**Mr. Gord Brown:** No, no, I'm not asking you to speak as a lawyer, I'm asking—

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** —but there may have been some point of law that warranted fighting the challenge that doesn't pertain to whether or not we should lower the residency requirement as a matter of decency. I don't know what the point of law was that the government fought the charter on.

Why didn't we do it when we were in power? I don't know if you recall or not, but we came into a massive deficit. Canadians suffered—we all suffered—getting out of that mess. We had to set priorities, and the residency requirement was something that would be better handled once the deficit was under control.

I mean, there's a list of things that you have to do. I acknowledge we didn't do it. Perhaps we should have, but you can only get so much done.

**Mr. Gord Brown:** No, I understand that. As I said, I'm not questioning your sincerity or motivation, but you've brought this bill forward to Parliament, so I would think you would probably have understood why your government was fighting against it.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Let Ms. Beaumier answer if she wishes.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** We keep talking about “government”. I notice this in every committee. When you say “your government”, I don't even begin to take that personally, as you shouldn't when we talk about government. We're talking about a bureaucracy that gives advice, and perhaps the advice was not the kind of advice I would have taken.

We can keep asking why we didn't do that then, but this is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow. I'm giving you an opportunity to do it and be the heroes.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, Mr. Brown.

We have about 15 minutes left. We have Liberals, Conservatives, and Bloc for five minutes, and then we'll have to decide if there's time for any more. We do have a number of witnesses yet, who've made a great effort to be here, and we want to hear them at 10 o'clock.

Ms. Sgro.

**Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.):** I'll keep my comments as brief as possible.

Ms. Beaumier, I appreciate your being here. I know this is an important issue to all of us. You're aware that we are currently undertaking a poverty study. Hence, this whole issue you are raising of course becomes part of the overall strategy we are looking at—how we deal with poverty in Canada, such as whether or not everybody who lives in this country should be able to receive some sort of guaranteed income to ensure they have a few cents in their pocket, and dignity.

You referenced the south Asian community in particular. And you can tell by the people who are in attendance today that they're clearly watching this issue very carefully. Many of them come over as family members, we all know that, and they end up providing the child care that many of the parents can't find otherwise. The \$100 they may receive as a child care benefit isn't going to the senior anyway, because the reality is that it's going in to help them maintain their living standards.

Are you doing or have you done any work on the whole issue of the reciprocal agreement with some of the other countries that don't have it, India being one? Have you had an opportunity to do any up-to-date investigations to see just where we are with those kinds of discussions? And is the government currently in discussions on that?

• (0945)

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, and basically the majority of newcomer seniors, whom this bill affects, come to Canada from countries where there is no social safety net. So a reciprocal agreement would be very difficult to get with a country that doesn't offer old age security.

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** Thank you.

My colleague has a question she wanted to get in.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Just with regard to some information that I believe Ms. Yelich has been speaking about, I had a chance to meet with the department on this particular issue just last month. They informed me in their particular presentation that there are 50 agreements that have been signed with other countries. They were in negotiations with three other countries—two of them being Romania and Poland—and six other countries for partial agreements. But as Ms. Beaumier mentioned, many of the people who are advocates of the old age benefits from those particular countries don't have an agreement at this moment. Neither do they have an agreement under way for possible negotiation.

That is why I think it's important that we do take a look at Bill C-362 to ensure that we substitute that residency requirement from ten years to three years without those particular agreements. And as was mentioned by Ms. Beaumier, many of those countries, including

countries like India and China and Saudi Arabia and a number of others, don't have a social safety net resource to provide their particular citizens. But when they do come here, just on the basis of equality and fundamental human rights, I think what is happening is extremely unjust and is something that is discriminatory.

I know I had a chance to be in my colleague Mike Lake's riding last week and was speaking to the seniors at the Edmonton Mill Woods Seniors Centre. There are a number of seniors across this country who are passionate advocates, and I think we see a number of them around this room.

We need to ensure that we put partisan politics behind us, regardless of which political party we're from. We have to do the right thing on behalf of these seniors in our country and ensure that we reverse this discrimination and really correct it, to ensure that there is true equality.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Thank you.

I'd also like to make a comment. We talked about whether this a partisan issue. It shouldn't be, and I think the people on the government side have to recognize that it really doesn't matter whether it's a private member, who the private member is, or what party the private member belongs to. The government that actually gets this through gets the credit.

So if it were purely a political issue, I'd be waiting until we formed the government instead of giving you the opportunity to do it, because the political "coups" go to the party in power.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Ms. Dhalla, you have finished? Thank you.

Mr. Lake, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** I'd like to start by just talking a little bit about research. I think you said \$410 million, but the department is saying \$700 million, which is a pretty significant difference.

Did you talk to the department as part of your research?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** We did ours through the Library of Parliament. I think, based on statistical numbers, as I said earlier, ours may be a little low, but I think yours are high.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** Okay.

Have you done any research on how your bill would impact social security agreements that we have with the 50 other countries?

• (0950)

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Yes, we have. I'll read it again for you: most of the international social security agreements contain a provision that indicates that the agreement will continue to apply in the event that the OA Security Act changes, unless either of the countries object within three months.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** Don't you see some form of court challenge coming up there if, let's say, Barbados is covering the cost for its seniors but India isn't, and the Canadian government is covering the cost for theirs? And there are 50 of these countries, some of which have supplied a significant number of immigrants to Canada. I would think there would be the potential for a significant increase in the costs based on that.

Actually, I want to move on, if I could. I've heard words like "extremely discriminatory" and "ashamed", as in you're ashamed of what we've done and everything else.

Do you believe we're hurting seniors by allowing them the opportunity to come to Canada under sponsorship agreements?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, I don't believe we're hurting seniors by allowing them to come to Canada under sponsorship agreements. You're obviously too young to be a grandparent, but I would think seniors would walk over broken glass and hot coals to be able to be reunited with their children and grandchildren. I think to keep them away from their children and grandchildren would be an extremely—extremely—cruel and brutal thing to do. However, just because we've given them the privilege of walking over hot coals to be with their grandchildren does not mean we should not feel some responsibility to make their lives a little easier when they're here.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** So you would rate the opportunity for seniors to come to Canada to reunite with their families as being equivalent to walking over hot coals?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, I wouldn't. I said if you were a grandparent, you would recognize the fact that people would walk over hot coals to be reunited with their grandchildren.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** I understand. My riding recently had the benefit of having Ruby Dhalla visit; I'm sure it was a great honour. But I'm sure what she heard and what she witnessed is the same thing I witness every day in my riding, and that is just a phenomenal family environment, with seniors who are so thankful for the opportunity to come to Canada under the rules we have right now. As most people would say, it's the most generous immigration system in the world, here in Canada.

But I hear you kind of questioning and feeling ashamed about the system we have, and it concerns me.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** No, I'm not. No. I think what you're saying is totally ridiculous. What I said was that grandparents are prepared to make any sacrifice to be with their grandchildren. They would rather live without pensions if they thought for one minute that it was an either/or situation.

I don't see why we're even talking about either/or.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** From your research, do you have any idea why, in 1977, the Liberal government of the day introduced the 10-year residency requirement in the first place?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** I don't.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** Now, they fought it to the wall. Your government fought it to the wall, in 1999 and 2003, in the courts. There were a couple of different cases.

What was it that was so important that they had to take it to the highest-level courts and run the parties who were challenging the law...basically until they ran out of money? What was it that was so important?

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** In 1999 a charter challenge against the residency requirement was rejected because the detrimental effects of the 10-year residency requirement did not "comprise a category analogous to those described" in section 15 of the charter; section 15 of the charter identifies a specific set of discriminatory criteria that warrants the court's specific attention, but it does not mean that

discrimination or hardship doesn't exist because it isn't included on this list.

**Mr. Mike Lake:** But why did the Liberal government of the day challenge that? I'm not asking what the reason for the court challenge was. Why did the Liberal government of the day—

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** As I said to you before, I'm no lawyer, but there may have been some point of law that warranted fighting the challenge that doesn't pertain to whether or not we should lower the residency requirements as a matter of decency.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much, Mr. Lake. That was five minutes.

*Monsieur Gravel, cinq minutes.*

•(0955)

[Translation]

**Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Perhaps I'm a bit naive. I'm not yet used to parliamentary practices. I was only elected a year and a half ago. Ms. Beaumier, thank you for your bill. I can't believe that these kinds of discussions can be held. Mr. Lake objects to the \$300 million intended for seniors, but the government has just allocated \$30 billion for the armed forces, which doesn't seem to cause a problem. I find that a bit sad. If the goal is to improve the lot of our seniors and of seniors who come from elsewhere, but who have integrated into Canada and Quebec, it seems to me we could stop going back and criticizing those who were in power for not taking certain measures. Instead we should consider the present situation. I believe we must build the future and stop looking back on the past.

I often hear the Conservatives—and this is part of their method—criticizing the Liberals for not doing one thing or another when they were in power. Perhaps I'm naive, but I think we have to improve the lot of our seniors. Bill C-362 will help seniors who come from elsewhere but live in Canada and Quebec. But there's something else.

When the issue of seniors arises in the House, I often hear Ms. Yelich compare Canada to countries that mistreat their seniors. Why instead wouldn't we compare ourselves to the best countries in the world in this area? I believe we should always have that kind of objective in view. I'm a priest, and I've always been told that, as a Christian, I should draw inspiration from Mother Teresa and try to imitate her rather than those who do not act fully on their Christian faith. The point is always to try to imitate the best. That's what I try to do. I don't yet come up to Mother Theresa's ankle, but I'm trying. I figure it should be the same thing for a country. There are seniors in Quebec and Canada. Could we become the best country in the world in the treatment of our seniors? If that's the case, we should stop comparing ourselves to countries that mistreat their seniors.

I'm here in the committee today because I'm concerned about the lot of seniors. This is my file. I read your bill, and, in my opinion, anyone who votes against it does not deserve to be an MP. I don't know how members who vote against this kind of bill can be elected. My colleague Mr. Lessard asked earlier whether the Liberals had a real desire to change things. That's what concerns me. The Bloc Québécois introduced Bill C-490, which is at the second reading stage. I heard a speech by a Liberal who is very positive. However, I'm afraid we'll get to third reading and then vote against the bill. That's the kind of thing that disappoints me. It's as though we wanted to have a clear conscience with constituents or citizens who elected us. If that's really the case, I think that's dishonest.

We have to work for people. We are at the service of the public, not our own. We're not here just so that we can stay elected, but really to help the public. A bill for seniors must serve to help them and not to get us elected. I hope that's also what you believe, Ms. Beaumier, and that your party will support that kind of position. I would like to hear your comments on that subject.

[English]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Well, I think that was a nice little.... I don't mean to be pejorative here, but that was a nice pep talk. I will send your comments around to every single member of my party in hopes that those who are wavering....

I haven't had any criticism, except perhaps from one member. I've had no criticism on this bill, and people are generally supportive of it within the Liberal Party. I can't begin to speak for the entire party. When we have private member's business, we don't vote in a block. It's a free vote. But as I say, there's only been one member who has indicated to me that he's not supportive of this, and we may be able to tie his arms behind his back and chain him to his desk so he can't vote against it.

And Mr. Gravel, don't worry; you've only been here a year and a half. I've been here 15 years. I'm still naive, and I'm still not used to being a member of Parliament. I know that everything works very slowly.

•(1000)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** You have 10 more seconds, if you like.

[Translation]

**Mr. Raymond Gravel:** Of course, Bill C-362 doesn't resolve everything. Are you also in favour of Bill C-490, which we introduced?

[English]

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** You know what? Confession, confession: you show it to me, okay, and maybe.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thanks for your answer. There's no more time to go into all the discussions on Bill C-490. Some other committee, or perhaps this one, will have the benefit of that.

Madam Beaumier, I want to thank you very much for bringing this. Again, congratulations on getting it to this point.

**Ms. Colleen Beaumier:** Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** We have a number of people who have been waiting patiently. I'm going to suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes while we seat our witnesses.

• \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• **The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** We're going to resume our study of Bill C-362.

To our witnesses, we are delighted and honoured to have you with us today. The hearings will be in English and French.

We do understand that coming before a parliamentary committee takes a bit of getting used to. Please be assured that we're all very friendly and very pleased to have you with us. Again, we're honoured by your presence here today.

Resuming on Bill C-362, we have with us a number of people. From the Old Age Benefits Forum of Canada, we have Balkar Bajwa and Kuldip Sahi. We thank you for coming. From the Old Age Benefits Forum of Vancouver, we have Balwinder Singh Chahal. From the Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network, we have Samuel Olarewaju and Kifleyesus Woldemichael. And as an individual, we have Raymond Micah.

Each group will have five minutes to present. We understand that at one point in time, when we had less witnesses, you may have been told ten minutes. We do have questions we want to get to. All the members are very anxious to discuss this bill with you.

We will start with the Old Age Benefits Forum of Canada.

Mr. Bajwa and Mr. Sahi, you have five minutes.

•(1010)

**Mr. Balkar Bajwa (Principal, Old Age Benefits Forum of Canada):** Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

Because of the time constraints, I would like to reduce the presentation I submitted to you earlier. I would like to concentrate on the points where this issue is opposed in general.

I have already appeared at some other forums on Bill C-362, and I presented certain views that might be in common with what I say today, but they are relevant here more than before.

The persons who oppose this amendment base their arguments on two main planks—permanency of connection of the beneficiaries with Canada, and their contribution. I feel privileged to take this opportunity to give my opinion on these two points here before this august body.

First, with respect to permanency of connection, most of the seniors have reconnected with their families after a considerable wait, and it is a cherished desire of every grandparent to spend the fag-end of their life with their children and grandchildren. Politicians must appreciate that they can never think of leaving them at this stage.

These people have left their previous country far behind. Canada, the most beloved country of their families, has also become their own country. It's not now a foreign country; it is their own country.

Most of the seniors have become citizens of Canada. They have taken a solemn oath by holding the Canadian flag that they will ever remain loyal and faithful to this country.

Respected members, are these facts not sufficient to justify their permanency of connection with Canada?

Second, the question of contribution regarding the seniors is clear and evident. Seniors bring along their rich academic and professional experiences, and they become a living source of academic and professional help to the family at all times. Particularly, they become an effective asset for the grandchildren in their school homework and further studies. They are the best source of transmitting their cultural heritage, which is full of enviable social and moral values. See them escorting small kids to the school or the school bus in the chilly, snowy weather. Is this not a contribution?

We can never ignore the long and rich background experience of elders. It becomes an asset for the younger generations who have yet to have these experiences. At certain crucial junctures of life or in vital decision-making situations, seniors render highly valuable opinions and advice. Most important, they remain available to their children at home. The house becomes a home that throbs with life all the time.

Income from disposed-of property in the native land and their current incomes and returns are all brought over here and judiciously invested in properties in Canada. Seniors make their families completely carefree from household errands and concerns, and thus the family members become more effective as Canadian workers and citizens. Seniors are the ones who brought up their sons and daughters, who are now contributing to the Canadian economy as professionals, skilled workers, and businessmen. Some of them are now serving as representatives in Parliament or in provincial parliaments.

I just heard some of the arguments here, and I think this issue has become a ball between political parties. I can quote certain occasions when Conservatives too sported this idea and decided it was discriminatory. I can adduce from the record that Mr. Gurmant Grewal, one of the Conservatives, moved a motion regarding this very issue. Another time it was when the Liberals were in power. I think we should not be made the victims of this political game.

Let us, sir, look at this respectable but useful section of our Canadian society a bit more compassionately. They should be honoured by having their economic and social security ensured. The amendment of this act will go a long way towards ensuring rights of equality for landed immigrants. Currently this fundamental right is being infringed, which leads to unfairness and injustice to them.

•(1015)

A parliament that can impose a condition has all the power and authority to remove it through an amendment. From this platform, I implore Parliament to make this amendment. It is a common and just cause for all seniors, yours and ours. At present, three years' residency is a sufficient condition to enable them to get OAS benefits. It will surely go a long way toward eliminating two classes of Canadians in matters of OAS benefits. There should be no classes, no bifurcation of seniors.

Hence, I extend wholehearted support to Bill C-362 and appeal to all of you to consider it compassionately and favourably, and to recommend it to Parliament for third reading.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, Mr. Bajwa.

To all the witnesses, to assist you with your time, when we get to four minutes and you have one minute left, I'll hold up a finger indicating one minute.

Mr. Bajwa, you weren't too far over. We appreciate that.

Mr. Balwinder Singh Chahal, sir, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Mr. Balwinder Singh Chahal (Secretary, Old Age Benefits Forum - Vancouver):** Honourable Chair, members, it's a privilege to be before the committee.

This weekend the federal Secretary of State for Multiculturalism was in Vancouver. He said that an official apology is coming. He also announced \$2.5 million compensation, or a memorial, for the *Komagata Maru* incident, which happened 94 years ago in Canadian history.

You are probably wondering why I'm raising this issue, as I'm here to talk about old age security. I'll come back to it later, but you will kindly keep note of the situation I just mentioned.

My name is Balwinder Chahal. I am the secretary of the Old Age Benefits Forum. We have been pursuing this cause for the last ten years.

To summarize everything in five minutes is a challenging task, but I will try to do it. Then I'll let it for you to ask questions later, if you have any.

What we are asking here is this. First, for any senior to have to stay in Canada for ten years is just not justified; it's unduly harsh; it has an unjustified impact on seniors and their living conditions, their families, even their ties. Ten years is not the right thing to do.

By itself, the ten years is a harsh thing. There is another dimension to the whole thing. We have two classes of seniors in the country, one class who access it when they are 65, without waiting for ten years. There are others who are 65 who have to wait ten years.

Whatever the rules or the regulations, whatever agreements we have put in, can those agreements in any way touch the charter? The charter gives us equality. This is a matter of equality.

I will ask honourable members to consider the necessity of all those social agreements we are talking about. Do we have agreements for MSPs? Do we have agreements for EI benefits? Do we have agreements for CPP? No. So where is the need for an agreement at all? I'll show the fallacy: that agreements were used simply as a tool to deny benefits to a group.

When the Old Age Benefits Forum undertook this issue, at a time when another party may have been in power, they looked into it and saw that something was wrong. They brought out the papers, which I have in front of me. This is on access to the public...immigrant seniors, and it is part of the government regulations.

What they have done here is a change. From now on, seniors from agreement countries will be paid on a different schedule. If agreements haven't changed, how can the government change the pattern of payment? That shows that agreements didn't carry any force earlier and agreements don't have force today. But they're being used as a tool to deny benefits.

Secondly, on financial service fees, my honourable representatives were talking about.... Finance is an important matter, I won't say it's not, and it should be looked into. But looking at a greater angle, if the figures are right that have been quoted in Parliament, there are 4.3 million seniors over the age of 65 at the moment, of which number 4.078 million are being paid old age security. This leaves us with 4% to 5% of seniors who are not getting it.

The point is not about millions. Certainly it is a millions thing, but the point and issue here is that we are already spending billions on 95%. How justified is it to say we don't have the money for the 5%? That's the whole thing. Yes, it will be millions, but if we are already spending billions, why don't we do it? That's another thing to talk about.

Another thing is about the law challenge. Yes, it went to the courts of law, that's right, but the courts do not make the law; they interpret the law. They say this doesn't fall under discrimination as emphasized in the charter. Yes, that is so. But I say, before this august body, you have all the rights. If there is a difficulty....

Now I will come back to what I was saying earlier: 94 years after the *Komagata Maru* incident, today we are offering a national apology and money. It was legal to deny that ship—it was legal—but it was unjustified.

• (1020)

Similarly, this provision might remain legal, but it's unjustified. It's unequal and it's unfair.

That's what we are imploring you on. Is it talking about legality? Certainly not. It is talking about the basic system of justice and fairness. It has to.

Is it a good policy to give security to my friend and deny it to me? We are both Canadians.

Let me pull out my citizenship card. What does it say on the back of it? I'll read this and then I'll close my statement. I hope everybody will kindly take their copy, which says:

This...is a Canadian citizen under the provisions of the Citizenship Act and, as such, is entitled to all the rights and privileges and is subject to all the duties and responsibilities of a Canadian citizen.

It doesn't have any subject. It doesn't say anything about the fact that if I'm coming from this country, my citizenship is subject to that.

With that, certainly the current bill does not go 100% the way we would see it, but it is reaching a compromise where fair, reasonable provisions of residency are taken care of. Financial security is part of that, as is getting seniors their fair and due share so they can live with respect and dignity.

That's my respectful submission. Thank you very much.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much, sir.

We'll move to Mr. Raymond Micah, who's appearing as an individual.

Mr. Micah, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Raymond Micah (Principal, Raymond Micah & Associates, As an Individual):** Thank you.

Honourable Chairman and members of the committee, it is truly a privilege and an honour to be part of this particular discussion.

I came to this issue in 2003 when there was a caucus group that came to Toronto, and I was asked, in my capacity as executive director of the African Canadian Social Development Council, to come to speak about issues affecting seniors in our community. Of course, not being a senior, I had very little knowledge about what those issues might be. Therefore, because the council was a membership-based organization that has many groups that deal with the different populations that make up the continental African-Canadian community, I consulted individuals to give me some information. I didn't feel that it was sufficient information for the presentation, so I started to do further research, and lo and behold, that was the first time I became aware of this problem that impacted our seniors.

Our seniors were saying, "The problem we have is that we have no income." That was something I didn't know about, and that was the impetus upon which I began to try to get others also to look into the issue vis-à-vis their own communities.

I belong to a group called the Alternative Planning Group, which has a membership that involves the councils of Chinese, south Asian, and Hispanic communities. So we did research and held focus groups, and all the seniors were saying, "Indeed this is a problem." So we said, "Ah, this is something that we really, as a matter of decency, need to try to raise attention around."

I say this because I do not come here to blame anyone for having come to the issue without necessarily having known of the problem previously. I come to you to say that there is in fact a reason, I guess, that all of us have a lacuna, a blind spot, about this issue.

One of the reasons is that, as we all know, previously, in the 1950s and 1960s, in the 1970s, in fact, and even up to the 1980s, the source countries, where people came from, were quite different. As Madam Beaumier rightly mentioned, they came from countries that were much more developed—in some instances, with social security systems even comparable to Canada's. Potentially, at least, individuals coming from those countries who had lived most of their lives there could have recourse if those systems were there to support them. So there was a comfort that was available.

There were also these agreements that Canada was able to establish, mostly with those kinds of countries, at least, in the beginning. So if Canada denied entitlement to its social security system for these individuals, there was something that potentially could be drawn upon. That changed in the 1980s with a change of countries, but for all that time, there was at least a basis for having some sort of comfort that everybody somehow would be catered to.

That has changed, and when it changed, unfortunately we didn't all immediately wake up to that reality. Now people are coming from countries where there are no such systems at all, where people will work all their lives not because they wanted to....

One minute, Mr. Chair? Okay.

Essentially, there are a number of questions that my paper—which I worked on overnight, literally, to put together—looks at, and I think you will get access to it when it's translated. What is the nature, source, and magnitude of the problem? How did it escape our notice? I've explained that. And what would it cost to fix it?

I actually did some estimates based on statistics from Canada Immigration and from Statistics Canada. Essentially my estimates—which I worked on overnight, so I haven't had a chance to share them with all my colleagues—are as follows.

• (1025)

It will essentially cost \$470.5 million per year, because there are 56,263 individuals over the past 10 years who have immigrated as permanent immigrants under family class. If we assume that in the first five years of their stay here, they will be given the same benefits that are given under the OAS, which is one-fortieth of the maximum—which is \$502.30—times five, that would be actually \$62.80.

If you take the average GIS that is given currently, which is \$634.02, you have a total entitlement for this individual, under this bill, of \$696.82. This means \$8,361 per person, per year.

Multiply this by these 56,000 people over a 10-year period, which is the period upon which people are denied entitlement, and you get \$470 million per year.

In the context of good governance, in the context of doing that which is decent, in the context of a budget of \$30 billion to look after seniors as a whole, in the context of an understanding within current practice that the support for seniors is actually divided—not only by the seniors themselves, not only by their families, but by government—I think it is possible that we can all rise to the opportunity that this bill provides to do good.

On the bill itself, we fully support it and we congratulate Madam Beaumier. There is a slight challenge that I think needs to be addressed, which is the sponsorship component. That also needs to be looked at.

On the sponsorship component, essentially, if left alone, one might have a pyrrhic victory. We do not do all this to achieve that. We want to have both a change in the act, under the OAS, that brings it down to seven years, and then a change in the immigration rules—it's in here, and you can read it—that also reduces the sponsorship obligation to three years, so that the purposes that such a change seeks under the act, under the OAS, will actually be achieved, effectively in practice.

Thank you very much.

• (1030)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, Mr. Micah.

We're going to move to the Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network.

We have Mr. Olarewaju and Mr. Woldemichael, for about five minutes.

The floor is yours, gentlemen.

**Mr. Samuel Olarewaju (Secretary, Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network):**

Honourable Chairman, committee members, and guests, I want to thank you individually and collectively for giving us, particularly the African Seniors Advocacy Network members, this opportunity to bring this issue forward to you today.

We are very pleased to see support across the party lines for this particular bill, Bill C-362, which was brought forward by Colleen Beaumier. We're equally happy that the intention of bringing this forward is to improve the livelihood of senior people in the community.

This issue is a long-standing one. It has gone on for many years. When we look at the G-8 nations of the world, statistics are being compiled all the time to be able to measure how each nation is doing. Various parameters are being used to judge each nation.

On the basis of that alone, I think it would be in the interest of Canada, of which I am a part today—and I'm grateful to the government for giving me that opportunity—to do whatever it can for seniors in order to ensure that the social life seniors are leading is commendable when other people around the world, in other G-8 nations, see it.

I want to thank you for the support that was given by other parties. We know those parties that are against it; we know those parties that are not against it. But we are not after which parties are in favour and which parties are not. The benefit is for every party. Whether there was a party in the past that ought to have done it and hadn't done it, and a new party comes in now and does it, the benefit is for everybody who is a Canadian, whether young or old. What somebody has not done in the past is the past. That is gone. We don't need to talk about or waste our time on the past.

What we want to talk about is what is happening now and what we can do to improve a situation that ought to have been corrected years ago but was not. That's what we're here for. So I want to thank you in that regard.

However, we strongly recommend that this act be reduced from ten years to three years. In a similar way, we also want the sponsorship obligation to be affected by reducing it from ten years to three years.

There's no point doing the old age pension alone, without taking into account the sponsorship obligation. There have been many situations in various communities in which those sponsoring their parents were having problems, not of their own making but because of what was happening, generally, in society.

The intention of children to sponsor their parents is a genuine one. But genuine as it may be, you can never foresee what problems you will run into. When problems come, as far as children are concerned, they have to take care of themselves. And they say, "Well, you're going to take care of yourself." How can an old man take care of himself?

So there has been a series of problems among seniors with their children. That's the area we felt the sponsorship obligation needed to be addressed, as well as the old age. In fact, according to the rules, the obligation cannot end prematurely, even if the sponsored individual becomes a Canadian citizen. That's why they flagged that on my Canadian citizenship.

My daughter who sponsored me is still responsible for whatever happens to me before the 10-year period is over. Thank God, she has a job. She's working. So maybe I don't have that problem.

But there are other seniors who have that problem. And I don't tell myself that because I don't have the problem, I don't care about others. We're all seniors.

•(1035)

So we wanted that and the obligation stands, even if the sponsor's financial situation becomes difficult due to major predicaments they face, such as loss of job or illness.

In short, we echo the following recommendation from the Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network. Number one, that amendments shall be made to all relevant existing acts and policies such that the entitlement of both the old and new immigrant seniors in federal, provincial and municipal income support groups, such as the social assistance program, is not compromised by the existence of an immigration sponsorship agreement between the sponsor and the newcomer senior and the Government of Canada.

Number two is that amendments be made to existing acts and policies to ensure that in all situations of genuine sponsorship breakdown—because we are looking at a genuine sponsorship breakdown and there are many—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Mr. Olarewaju, how many recommendations do you have, because we are running out of time.

**Mr. Samuel Olarewaju:** Only two. I have two in my paper, which I believe you will get shortly.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Perhaps you could sum up reasonably quickly, sir.

**Mr. Samuel Olarewaju:** Yes.

Of course, by simply reducing both the residency period and the sponsorship obligation period to three years, all key matters relating to provincial social assistance programs and the challenging task of determining what situation of hardship involving a senior meets the test of genuine sponsorship breakdown, and which do not, are immediately addressed.

There is one other thing I wanted to mention. People have been using the word "discrimination" here, about when the Supreme Court looked at this matter many years ago. I think it's a misuse of words. It is not discrimination we're talking about. Nobody

discriminated against me, nobody discriminates against us. What we are saying is that the law that was set up for this old age pension was set up in 1952. If we agree that the country is dynamic, the people in it are dynamic, the law too should be dynamic. In other words, the law too should change as the future changes.

It's not an issue of discrimination, but the law was made in 1952. We are now in the year 2008. How can we continue to use a law that was set up in 1952 to apply to our current situation in the year 2008? I wanted to mention that point.

I want to thank you very much. You will all get a copy of my paper.

•(1040)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much.

I want to thank you all, gentlemen, for taking the time today, for your passion on this issue, and, all things considered, your reasonable brevity.

We'll only have time for one round of questions, members, and it will have to be a five-minute round, so I ask you all to be precise in your language and precise in who you ask the question to, because there is a committee following us here at 11 o'clock.

I'll start off with Ms. Dhalla, five minutes.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Thank you to all of our witnesses for coming from all over Canada to present before us at committee. I think your presentations have been insightful. As my colleague Mr. Savage has said, they've been very passionate. We do appreciate all of the work you have done on this particular issue.

I have a couple of questions first for Mr. Chahal. Thank you for your passionate delivery. In terms of the Old Age Benefits Forum, both out in British Columbia and with Mr. Bajwa in Ontario, along with Mr. Sahi and some of the other people who are here, Mr. Chahal, can you please describe to the committee some of the initiatives that the forum has done in the past ten years in advocating for this particular issue? That's number one.

Secondly, what is the frustration out in the community, what type of comments do you hear from seniors? Could you please give us a firsthand perspective? I think that would be really beneficial.

**Mr. Balwinder Singh Chahal:** Thank you very much.

I'll come to the second question first: what kind of frustration do we see? I can cite a living example, whom, in the interests of secrecy, I would not like to name. There is a gentleman who migrated from India. He retired as a school headmaster, which we call a principal in our country here. He emigrated to this country in 1959, and went to work on farms. He was paying all of his Revenue Canada taxes right up until 1964.

In 1964 he was hurt at work, so disability payments kicked in. He received those payments for one year. At 65 years of age, they were cut off. The retired headmaster was looking after his family and giving educational advice to the young children, the grandchildren, and the neighbourhood children. At age 65, he had not been 10 years in the country and couldn't get anything—though he had already been working here. He was hard-pressed.

I saw that gentleman with real tears in his eyes, saying, “I have given my life to mankind.” He was not talking only of Canada or India. He said, “I have been teaching students, 1,500 to 2,000 people, and I worked with my hands when I came to this country, but now I am left alone.”

These are the circumstances that are happening. I would not like to experience that.

Now, the Old Age Benefits Forum was founded in 1994. Now it's been 14 years, which is a long enough period. We have knocked on every door possible. All the parliamentarians have files and files from us after we talked with them. We presented this to the Honourable Paul Martin at the time, when he was the finance minister. He agreed with us, but nothing happened.

A Supreme Court challenge was launched. But we are a voluntary body with no finances—nothing. We didn't have the finances to go there. And I will again say, it is not whether it is legal or not. You can say it's legal, but is it just? Is it fair? That's what I am asking.

If there are 10 people sitting in the room and we have money for 9, and we tell the person left, “Gentleman, you don't deserve it”, what kind of message are we sending? Is it a message of dignity and respect for the gentlemen? We are appealing for that. That is what a country like Canada....

And that's why I brought up the *Komagata Maru* issue. Let's not apologize after 94 years. This is an issue where I can say, with all due respect, that if parliamentarians don't do anything, you will see coming generations apologize one day that it was not the correct thing to do. We did that with the Chinese head tax, and let's not do it with this.

Thank you.

•(1045)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you.

Very briefly, Ms. Dhalla.

**Ms. Ruby Dhalla:** Because it's our last round, I just want to say thank you so much for your passion. I know you've been an inspiration to so many seniors across the country. And as someone who has put forward a private member's bill requesting that this government apologize for the *Komagata Maru*, I say that what's happening here with our seniors is an injustice, and I hope that all of us can put aside partisan politics.

You know, when the Liberals were in power, there were certain things that were promised when the Conservatives were in opposition, and now they are in government. Their deputy leader at that time stated that discrimination existed. We need to put partisanship aside, do the right thing, and correct this inequality to ensure that all seniors, regardless of where they come from, are treated with equality and fairness in this country.

Thank you so much.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, Ms. Dhalla.

There is an issue here. Mr. Woldemichael had expected to speak. Ms. Dhalla had four minutes, and I'm going down to four-minute rounds, but I'm going to give Mr. Woldemichael two minutes to speak, since he did make the effort to come here.

**Mr. Kifleyesus Woldemichael (Member, Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I was ready to speak a little more, but am only allowed to speak for two minutes. I want to give some enlightenment on three issues that were raised here before.

First is the issue of the Supreme Court's decision. I was a judge on the supreme court of my country, Ethiopia, for 30 years. I know the division of power between the court and the legislative bodies. The court said that while the law was not discriminatory, it must be amended or discussed by Parliament. They did not close it completely.

Second, this was the right decision, because the law or issue was on the wrong track. They said, no, the right track would be for the law to be amended by Parliament, by the government. That is why we came here: this law must be amended. We are asking for an amendment of the law. So there is no issue to challenge this bill raising the decision of the Supreme Court.

Third, I heard of a similar case that was rejected by a party in power before. We don't care about what has been done before. When it happened, we were in a great poverty, and we asked for a solution to our suffering. The decision that was made before by one party when it was in power does not bar our issue; it does not have a complete connection with it.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Be very quick, please, because we are going to lose this room.

**Mr. Kifleyesus Woldemichael:** Yes, I'll be very quick.

To the question to Ms. Beaumier on whether there is evidence to support this bill, this case is based on the poverty matters of immigrant seniors. Their poverty matters can be certified by us. What kind of evidence shall she produce for this Parliament? She said that this poverty, which is apparent to the immigrant seniors, must be solved. That is the right thing.

•(1050)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Sir, I have to cut you off there. I appreciate that.

Monsieur Lessard, for three minutes and twenty seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I want to thank you for being here with us. I'll try to be brief. I very much enjoyed each of your speeches, particularly the last, which is really revealing. Poverty can be seen among seniors. It's obvious; we see it. Even if we say we set partisanship aside, you have to recognize one thing. Mr. Woldemichael mentioned this: there is a division of powers, and we stand before political power. This may not be a partisan operation, but the decision that we must make is not based on technical elements. Do we have the political will to act, yes or no?

It's on that subject that I would like to hear what you have to say. The Bloc Québécois agrees. Ms. Beaumier was very honest with us. She said that part of her caucus was in agreement. She cannot answer for her caucus as a whole. We know that the Conservatives are opposed to this measure. Even though they tell us there are technical matters and they may not be able to support it, it's a matter of political will. Do we want it or not?

Earlier my colleague Mr. Gravel recalled that yesterday they allocated \$30 billion for defence. They weren't concerned as to whether there were any technical problems; they announced their political will.

What are your arguments to convince our colleagues who still aren't convinced that Bill C-362 is right? Those arguments should be brief.

[English]

**Mr. Balwinder Singh Chahal:** I will try to approach it.

My comments are, first, particularly directed towards honourable members of the ruling branch. You're asking the Liberals today why they didn't do it in their own time. Will the future not ask you that question also? Be mindful of that. That's simply asking. They didn't do it. I think the honourable Colleen Beaumier accepted it. I'm open to saying that the Liberals promised us that they would look into it right up to, I'll say, the prime ministerial level. But they didn't do it. Probably they did not have the political will at the time to do it.

Now show that will. We implore you to look at the changed times. It is the social and political thought of the Canadian system that has grown. We are looking into that. Let's not compartmentalize and narrow the events of where we were.

I have the exact words that our earlier Prime Minister said at a university in China. Whenever we go on the stage as politicians, from the Prime Minister to members of Parliament, we talk about equality. Equality is the first word. We talk about respect and dignity.

This is what we have come to let you know to make your job easier. We have not come to ask for anything from you. I will say that honourable members of Parliament should be thankful to us for bringing this issue to you and for giving you an opportunity to further refine the culture and laws of the country. We are trying to help you, to assist you. We are not here to ask for anything.

That's my submission to you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you, sir.

Thank you, Monsieur Lessard.

We'll go to Ms. Charlton.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to all of you for your presentations. It's a shame that we're running out of time.

I don't know if you're aware, but two years ago I had the privilege of introducing what we called the "Seniors Charter" on behalf of the NDP. One of the items we enumerated in that charter was the right to income security, and we didn't say income security for some seniors; we said the right to income security. That charter passed in this House and was unanimously supported by all the Conservative

members in the House, as well as the Liberal members. I think this really is a test of what we meant when we voted that way. I really appreciate these presentations in that context.

I think it's important for us to be clear on what we're doing here. This bill is not going to make any senior rich. In fact, if seniors are eligible for the guaranteed income supplement, then by definition they're the neediest seniors in our community, so what we're really talking about here is alleviating poverty among some of the neediest seniors in our community.

I really appreciated the comments made by all of you in one way or another about the important contribution of seniors. You know, often we characterize seniors as feeble and fragile and don't appreciate the intergenerational learning, the contributions to stable family life, and the very vibrant contribution that seniors still make in our communities. I think it's in that context that we have to look at this bill.

Right now in Canada we've got a quarter of a million seniors living in poverty. Other than saying that I agree with you all and that I am proud to support this bill, my only question is to Mr. Chahal. I just want to give you an opportunity to clarify, because when you held up your citizenship card, I think you may have left the impression with some members of this committee that this bill would only apply to newcomers who are now citizens, and that's not my understanding of the bill; I think this bill applies to anyone who has landed immigrant status or who would otherwise be eligible for the OAS. If I'm right, I think it would be helpful if you would clarify that point for us.

• (1055)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** I'll give you one minute for an answer.

Go ahead, Mr. Chahal.

**Mr. Balwinder Singh Chahal:** Thank you.

As you rightly pointed out, the present OAS act does not draw any distinction between an immigrant and a citizen. My only thought at that time was that even if I am a citizen, from an immigrant I have become a citizen, and that differential treatment—I will not use the word "discriminatory"—still continues in the face of it. That's what needs to be rectified.

One thing I would like to read in 30 seconds is the motion from the City of Vancouver. Their council adopted this motion after the presentation. They clearly say—they are writing to the Prime Minister of the country—the following:

That Vancouver City Council request the Federal Government to ensure pension equality for all Canadian senior citizens, regardless of their country of origin and whether or not that country has a social services contract with Canada; further that this motion be forwarded to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for support.

That is the consideration going beyond the party line. We again beseech, implore, the ruling party to come up, because this bill will not proceed further unless it has royal assent, because it's a money matter. We know that. This is the opportunity for you to grab. If you want to make some amendments to it, bring them to her; Colleen will be open to hearing them. We'll be open to hearing them, but try to embrace it.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much.

Our last speaker is Monsieur Gourde—which is good, because he can talk fast.

Go ahead, Monsieur Gourde.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Out of respect for Mr. Woldemichael, who didn't have a chance to speak long enough, I would like to give him the last word, if he wants to add something, of course.

[*English*]

**Mr. Kifleyesus Woldemichael:** Thank you very much.

Bill C-362, identified by the House, is the most important document to cure the chronic poverty problem of the immigrant senior. This bill we consider as a cure for our chronic problems of poverty because we are living in the poverty conditions of the 1952 act, which requires 10 years' residence to be entitled to income benefits. This falls on us, and we fall into poverty conditions.

What is poverty? It is hunger, and hunger is the source of illness and disease. Physicians say this begins from the hunger of your stomach. Why? If you are hungry every disease caused by stress will come.

This law was enacted in 1952. From 1952 up to now, a lot of rapid changes have happened. When this rapid change happens, the law must be amended. It must not wait until we submit application to the government. In our opinion, the minister responsible for this act must himself consider it and amend it.

• (1100)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Michael Savage):** Thank you very much, Mr. Woldemichael.

We're slowly being taken over by the transport committee, and while I'm sure I can handle the chair, I'm not sure the rest of you can handle the other members.

I do have a couple of announcements.

Minister Solberg has agreed to meet with us on May 27 for an hour to talk about our EI study. On Thursday we recommence at 9 o'clock to go clause-by-clause.

Madam Beaumier, I really want to thank you. I know sometimes it's frustrating to come to Ottawa to present your case and then have the time constraints as they are, but these rooms are tightly scheduled. We do appreciate your passion and your conviction on this issue. We thank you for being with us today.

Members, we'll see you at 9 o'clock on Thursday morning.

The meeting is adjourned.

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