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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)):
Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 7 of Tuesday, April 13, 2010. We have two groupings today.

The first grouping will go from 3:30 until 4:30. Before us we have three groups, representatives from the Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Legal Clinic, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, and the Canada Employment and Immigration Union.

Good afternoon to you all. Welcome to the committee.

We are studying immigration application process wait times. That is the topic. The process is that each group will have up to 10 minutes to speak, and then members of the committee will ask questions in seven-minute rounds. Probably that's all we'll have time for, the seven-minute round.

We will proceed with Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go.

You're on the air. Thank you for coming.

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go (Clinic Director, Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic): Thank you very much.

My name is Avvy Go. I'm the clinic director of the Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, which is a clinic providing free legal services to low-income immigrants and refugees from the Toronto area's Chinese and Southeast Asian communities.

I had the honour of presenting previously on a number of occasions in front of this committee, and I would like to thank you for again providing me the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. In my 10-minute presentation I will focus on family class sponsorship applications and the related agency applications.

I will begin with some general observations, followed by some comments about the delays we have seen as a clinic. Then I'll talk about what we think some of the causes are for the delays and our recommendations for change.

For more than a decade, family class immigrants have taken a back seat to other classes of immigration as the Canadian government took in more and more independent and business class immigrants to Canada.

With an ever-increasing number of people accepted under the temporary foreign workers program over the last two years, family

class immigrants have to compete for processing resources with an even greater number of potential applicants. At the same time, restrictive legislative changes and arbitrary decision-making by immigration officers have made family reunification ever more difficult, if not impossible. Interestingly, while the minister of immigration is concerned enough about speeding up the refugee process to introduce legislative reform to the refugee determination system, the government does not appear to have the same sense of urgency around the unacceptably slow processing time for family class immigrants.

Delays in family class processing occur in both overseas and inland applications. With respect to overseas applications, the delays are particularly severe for Canadians who want to sponsor their parents and non-dependent children, whose cases can often take multiple years, sometimes as long as ten years, to process.

Even though the processing time of overseas spousal sponsorships is faster, delays can still happen, especially if the applications have initially been denied and have to be appealed to the Immigration Appeal Division, which could take years to complete. Also, there is no time limit imposed once the file is sent back to the visa office for reconsideration after a successful appeal.

With respect to inland spousal sponsorship applications, the application time after it has been transferred to the local office is, in our experience, about two and a half to three years. Within that period, the sponsored spouse is often not able to work and does not have any access to public health care, which could cause a huge financial burden on the family.

Then there are those applications that are submitted on H and C grounds by individuals who have close family ties in Canada and who are deemed ineligible to be sponsored. Assuming that their H and C cases are approved, it could take three to four years for the cases to be finalized.

To reduce wait time for family class and related H and C applications, we recommend the following.

First, resources in visa offices should be reallocated from processing temporary foreign workers and independent class immigrants to family class immigration applications, including those filed under H and C grounds.

Second, there should be increased resources for local CIC offices to process inland spousal sponsorship cases and agency cases.

Turning now to causes for delays, I'll focus on three particular areas.

First, we are extremely concerned about the proposed changes to the bad faith provision under the immigration and refugee protection regulations. Under the new proposal, section 4 of the regulations will be amended such that the mere fact that one of the purposes of the marriage was to acquire status under the act is sufficient to support a finding of bad faith. Parallel changes are also proposed for sponsorships of adopted children.

Even under the current system, it appears that many visa officers often deny family class and genuine family sponsorship cases because the officers see their role more as screening out undesirable immigrants than as facilitating family reunification.

● (1535)

There appears to be an unwritten presumption that all spousal sponsorship applications, particularly those from the global south, are bad faith unless proven otherwise. If the proposed regulation goes through, more genuine applications will be denied. With more refusals at the first instance, more cases will have to be appealed, which will then result in longer processing time for those who are in genuine relationships. So in our recommendation, we urge the government not to amend the bad faith clause of the regulations and to maintain the current two-pronged test.

Secondly, the financial requirement for sponsorship is also a factor causing delays. Because of this requirement, many low-income Canadians are barred from being reunited with their loved ones. While the sponsor can appeal the refusal on equitable grounds, the reunification will not take place until years after the application is first submitted, assuming the appeal is successful. We therefore recommend that the minimum income requirement, including the ban on sponsorship due to being a social assistance recipient, be removed.

Another barrier to family reunification is paragraph 117(9)(d) of the regulations, which bars Canadians from sponsoring non-declared family members. At our clinic we have seen many parents barred from bringing their children to Canada because of this provision. Dependent children are sometimes not declared in the original applications for various reasons. In the case of China, we have seen that many parents do not declare their children for fear of being penalized by the Chinese government for having violated the one-child policy. A number of paragraph 117(9)(d) cases came about simply because of bad advice given by immigration consultants, even though the inclusion of the dependent child would in fact not have affected the initial eligibility of the sponsor to become a landed immigrant.

Not only does the non-declaration result in the subsequent exclusion of the child from entering Canada, but it may actually lead to the removal of the sponsor based on grounds of misrepresentation. In our respectful view, the initial errors made by the sponsors simply do not justify the extremely harsh consequences that are being visited upon them while little is being done to penalize the consultants whose wrong advice was the cause of the non-

declaration in the first place. We would therefore recommend that paragraph 117(9)(d) of the regs be repealed. Alternatively, we recommend that the Immigration Appeal Division be given the power to allow appeals on equitable grounds.

In conclusion, family reunification still is a core principle of Canadian immigration legislation. Reducing family class application wait times must become a priority for the Canadian government. This can only be achieved by investing adequate resources to process family class applications and introducing legislative amendments to remove all unreasonable and restrictive barriers to family class sponsorship.

Finally, I would like to end, since I have the floor here, by urging the committee to hold a public hearing into Bill C-11, because this is an issue that potentially will have an implication for the wait times for eventual family class members who are members of the refugee class as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Go. You obviously know your material. Thank you very much for coming and giving us your comments and recommendations. I'm sure later members of the committee will have questions for you.

Ms.... Here's a guy of Irish descent trying to pronounce people's names. I'll try yours: Ms. Casipullai.

● (1540)

Ms. Amy Casipullai (Coordinator, Policy and Public Education, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCA-SI)): That's wonderful. I'm impressed.

The Chair: Really? You have up to 10 minutes. Thank you for coming.

Ms. Amy Casipullai: Thank you.

First I'd like to thank the committee for inviting OCASI to present before you. OCASI is the umbrella organization for immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies in Ontario. As such, we don't work directly with immigrants and refugees, so what I'm bringing you today is based on the experience of our member agencies across the province, of which there are more than 200.

OCASI supports the recommendations made to you today by Avvy, by the Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic. We've worked very closely on a number of these concerns for many years.

Family reunification, or family class sponsorship, has been and continues to be one of the biggest priorities for our member agencies and for the communities they serve. I am sure the committee members would have noticed the shift in trends from family reunification more than 10 years ago, from around 60% of applications to, I would say, less than 30% now. That's something that has deeply troubled OCASI members across the province. As a country, we seem to have moved away from a commitment to permanent immigration to growing a vulnerable population of temporary migrant workers instead.

When the federal government introduced Bill C-50, the new selection mechanism, and increased funds to speed up processing these applications, OCASI was concerned at that time that it would be done at the cost of family class applications. We're not really sure how the department allocates resources internally, but we've actually seen a drop in the number of family class applications processed and an increase in the processing times.

The number of applications has not declined. In fact, as Canada's foreign-born population increases, we are likely going to see an increase in family sponsorship applications. This is taking up a lot of time for front-line settlement workers, for our member agencies. They have told us that their caseload is really heavy in two big areas: one is immigration applications; and the second is finding a job, and finding a job pretty much for the purposes of establishing enough income so that they are able to sponsor family members.

OCASI manages the settlement.org and etablissement.org websites—the premier resource for immigrants and refugees, as well as many other people who work with them. I looked at the statistics on the website last week. I looked at the discussion group, just to see what was happening. The highest activity is in the area of immigration. That was not surprising, but what was really troubling is that sponsoring family members as a broad category had one of the highest numbers of posts, topics, and questions. There were 8,053 topics or questions in just sponsorship alone, and 10,665 posts under that topic. I'm not sure what the traffic was like on the French side, which is only a few years old.

The next highest was employment, but employment had only 4,359 posts, less than half of what we get for sponsorship. We think this shows the amount of interest, the amount of concern we're seeing from people who use our website.

We are deeply troubled that we're seeing this shift in de-prioritizing family class applications at the same time we're seeing an increasing number of immigrants from countries with predominantly racialized populations, countries such as China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and so on. We're also deeply concerned that the applications in the family refugee categories appear to be low priorities for the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

So we are pleased that Minister Kenney talked recently about increasing the number of privately sponsored refugees and speeding up the refugee process in Canada, but it's regrettable that there isn't the same sense of urgency around the appallingly slow process for those trying to sponsor family members. Instead, what we have heard is a proposal to amend the IRPA regulations as they apply to spousal sponsorship, and one that might cause further problems and delays.

In that context, we are really pleased that this committee has taken up this topic for study.

The workers at our member agencies are finding that immigrants and refugees are increasingly seeking their help to navigate the delays in family class sponsorship. They have to wait three to four years or more, in many cases, to sponsor dependent children and parents.

The processing times for spousal sponsorship appear to be relatively fast when things go well. When things don't go well and the sponsorship is refused, it appears to take years to reunite with a spouse.

What front-line workers are seeing is the impact of that. The process is incredibly expensive for most applicants. They have to pay the processing fee and the right-of-landing fee, and then they have to find additional money to pay for DNA tests and to repeat the medical tests, because when the file is delayed, the tests expire and they have to redo them. For many, there's the additional cost and the burden of time to travel to the testing site and to the city where the Canadian visa post is located. In countries with limited travel infrastructure and restrictions on freedom of movement, family members face difficulties that cannot be solved by time or money. So in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, front-line workers increasingly see that their clients are having difficulties having the files processed.

● (1545)

In many cases, the sponsor simply gives up. Others have lived through the terrible experience of having a family member pass away while their file is still stuck in the system. Many have said that the wait and the uncertainty of not knowing when, if ever, they will see their loved ones makes it very difficult to cope. The uncertainty affects their mental and emotional health, and it has a significant economic impact.

Many applicants have found that while the processing time for sponsoring a spouse is relatively fast, sometimes the spouse is deemed inadmissible by the visa office for a variety of reasons, and appealing a rejected application takes several years. In the interim, the sponsor in Canada as well as the sponsored spouse have to deal with the mental, emotional, and social implications of having their relationship doubted and questioned by a Canadian visa office. They also have to invest a significant amount of time and resources in pursuing the sponsorship until they are reunited, which could happen several years later.

Community workers have noted that the delays create and exacerbate tensions between the spouses and family members. Many of the immigrants experiencing delays are from racialized communities, particularly those that are overrepresented among the working poor. They incur major debts to pay legal costs, to pay for telephone calls, and to travel overseas and back to see the separated family member. Community workers have also found that once the family is eventually reunited, they struggle with the estrangement between spouses and particularly between children and their parents.

We strongly recommend that the department increase resources allocated to processing these applications at both inland and overseas visa posts. We recommend that CIC also increase resources to process H and C applications to reduce the wait times and burden on these applicants.

I'd like to take a bit of time to refer to three other barriers that Avvy has already referred to. I'm going to kind of zip through them.

One of the things that community workers are noticing is that income is a huge barrier. According to IRPA, applicants have to meet the minimum income requirement. That's a burden for many of their clients who are overrepresented among the poor, including the working poor. They're the ones who are most often not able to sponsor family members. The majority of them are from racialized communities, and that's deeply troubling for OCASI. Many first sponsor a spouse and wait several years until their combined incomes are sufficient to sponsor a child or parents. It also presumes that they are able to leave their children or parents with another adult they can trust, and that's not always a possibility. The arrangement is fraught with difficulty and tension and it causes untold worry on both sides.

We recommend that the minimum income requirements, including the ban on sponsorship due to receipt of social assistance, should be removed from IRPA and its regulations.

We are also deeply concerned about the proposed changes to section 4 of the IRPA regulations on bad faith, again something the clinic already referred to. The change proposed would affect both sponsored spouses and adopted children. It could increase the forced separation of many families, increase processing times, and create delay.

As stated earlier, many genuine spousal sponsorship applications and sponsorship of adopted children are already being rejected by overseas visa offices. In many instances, there is a seeming bias against applicants for a variety of reasons on the part of the visa office.

The Chair: You have less than one minute, Ms. Casipullai.

Ms. Amy Casipullai: Thank you.

The proposed change could result in more genuine applications being rejected.

In conclusion, we strongly encourage you to consider holding public hearings on Bill C-11 because of the impact it can have. We believe it will only serve to increase more delays in the family class area.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your presentation.

We now have, from the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, Jeannette Meunier-McKay, the national president, and Wilfrid MacKinnon, all the way from Cape Breton, I'll bet you.

• (1550)

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon (Local President, Citizenship and Immigration (Sydney), Canada Employment and Immigration Union): All the way, sir.

The Chair: Good show.

We also have Alan Lennon, who is the coordinator.

You have up to 10 minutes for the three of you to speak, or just one.

Ms. McKay.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay (National President, Canada Employment and Immigration Union): Thank you.

Good afternoon. My name is Jeannette Meunier-McKay, and I am the national president of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Amongst our 20,000 members are the workers at the Sydney, Nova Scotia, case processing centre of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. With me, as Mr. Tilson said, I have Wilf MacKinnon, the president of our Sydney local and a worker in the case processing centre, and Alan Lennon, our staff coordinator.

The presentation I will make will be our view of the effects of the loss of jobs in Sydney on the Canadian public, and we'll be happy to answer questions after.

The Sydney CPC has two permanent lines of business: permanent resident cards and citizenship. There is also a pilot project called the foreign skilled worker centralized intake office. It is important to keep in mind that within the Sydney operation, many positions are filled by individuals who are acting in positions other than their substantive positions. So when, for example, people are let go from a mailroom, it may appear that they are being replaced, but they are being replaced by workers returning to their substantive positions and vacating higher-level positions. Therefore, it is critical to keep in mind the overall level of staffing in each of the Sydney lines of business and not be misled by a shell game of moving workers around in order to appear to have addressed critical staff shortages.

Within Citizenship, the centre processes applications for citizenship and applications for proof of citizenship. All applications for citizenship go first to the Sydney centre. The mail is received by clerical workers, who open, sort, and stream the mail to appropriate lines of production. Applications are checked by agents for completeness, signature, dates, documentation, residency requirements, and so on. Sometimes clients are contacted directly to ensure the completeness of the file.

Once Sydney is satisfied with the file, it is sent to a local CIC office, where testing is administered and citizenship oaths are administered and a new citizen receives their card. The above process can't occur until Citizenship in Sydney has done the work. Only then is the file returned to Sydney for archiving. The Citizenship mailroom staff is being reduced from 45 to seven, although it may be the case that individuals who are acting in other positions will be returning to the mailroom.

In any case, the reduction of staff at this initial stage will slow down the flow of applications for citizenship into production. In addition, 13 positions are being reduced in the unit that actually produces the citizenship cards. The result will be that permanent residents will have to wait longer to get their citizenship documents and therefore will have to wait longer to begin to reunite their families and to become full participants in Canada. Given that at present it takes 18 months to two years to process a citizenship application, it should be unacceptable to increase, and not decrease, the processing time.

For those who are granted permanent residency in Canada, they require a permanent resident card, which is the only acceptable proof of permanent resident status in Canada. Applications for such cards arrive in Sydney from various ports of entry as immigrants land in Canada and take up residency. They are initially processed through the PRC mailroom, where they are opened, sorted, and streamed. Electronic requests for cards are created and sent to Canada Bank Note, which produces the cards.

Permanent resident cards are typically valid for five years. Renewal applications go through the PRC mailroom and then to the agents, who review the application and residency requirements and, if all right, make the request for a new card. Without this card, permanent residents do not, for practical reasons, have status within Canada. Without it, they cannot apply for or renew social insurance number cards, provincial health services, and so on.

● (1555)

[Translation]

On average, 3,500 applications are received a week and, after several years of overtime and extra shifts, the inventory available at any given time in the centre is 25,000 to 30,000 applications for processing.

The cutbacks in the mailroom for the line of business from 15 to five are mirrored by a cut in the agent community from 36 to 20 or some other combination of cutbacks in the mailroom and in the agent community. The cutting of the staff complement means that any re-juggling of staff will not get around the obvious conclusion—lower production levels and longer waits for individuals needing this vital piece of identification.

The foreign skilled workers pilot project deals with applications within the economic class of immigrants. It is a program that was set up to allow prospective permanent residents access to faster processing if they can prove they have training and experience in any of the 38 targeted, high-demand occupations. According to the Toronto Star of March 29, 2010, there are 600,000 applicants in the system with waiting times of seven to eight years. To facilitate processing, an agent in Sydney reviews the application, and provides the applicant with either a negative assessment, effectively stopping

the process, or a positive assessment, which allows the applicant the opportunity to make their case to an officer at a visa post overseas.

There are plans to let go 22 workers from this project. In addition, a significant number of the workers in this project are permanent employees of the other business lines in Sydney and are 'on loan' to this project. Obviously, if there are lay-offs in the other business lines, then there will be reason to return these individuals to their substantive positions compounding the effect of lay-offs to the foreign skilled workers section. If for some reason such staff are not returned, then the negative impact on the other business lines will be even more significant.

[English]

It is also worth noting that Sydney and Cape Breton have serious economic problems, and the jobs at the case processing centre contribute significantly to the economic lifeblood of the community. While we would not advocate job loss in any community in Canada, it seems unnecessary to focus the loss of jobs on the CIC in Sydney, given the area's economic history and situation. Clearly, the federal public service is in trouble across the country. The proposed freeze on departmental budgets means that costs, including staff, will have to be cut back to incorporate rising costs for departments. This will affect the level of public service available for Canadians. There is simply no way around that fact given the parameters laid out in the budget. However, increasing wait times for immigrants and permanent residents should not be a viable public policy initiative, even in times of belt tightening and federal deficits.

It is our belief that Sydney CPC should be staffed at a level appropriate to the immigration and citizenship workload it is expected to process. The present practice of understaffing and then relying on special allocations of money to hire contract workers to nibble at the backlogs, which nonetheless continue for years at unacceptably high levels, is simply inexcusable.

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Ms. McKay.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: People immigrating to Canada, new Canadian citizens, and Canadian citizens in general should be entitled to prompt service from their government in providing the much needed permanent resident cards or citizenship cards or proofs of citizenship. They should not have to pay through cost-recovery fees for a service that is unacceptably and unnecessarily delayed. This is not the way to introduce new Canadians to our country.

There is no escape from what everyone knows: if you want to get the job done, you must provide the required resources. These cuts will ensure that the Sydney centre will not be able to get the job done.

Thank you.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you for coming and making your presentation to us.

Now each of the caucuses will have seven minutes to ask you questions and for you to give answers.

Mr. Eyking, welcome to the committee. You and Mr. Karygiannis are sharing seven minutes.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): No, Mr. Coderre.

The Chair: Oh, Mr. Coderre, of course. Sorry for that.

We've started.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the committee for having these witnesses here today.

I thank Ms. McKay for giving us this summary of how the cards are being processed, the time it takes, and the dire situation that's going to happen with these layoffs. I have two questions, and my first question is going to be to Mr. MacKinnon, because he came all the way down here from Cape Breton and he's here as a witness today.

In my last 10 years as an MP for the area, time and again I've seen ministers come to Cape Breton and recognize and appreciate the work that's being done down there in processing these cards. Mr. MacKinnon, can you give this committee a snapshot of how and why you're so successful in processing the cards?

My second question will be, back to Ms. McKay, with these valued employees in Cape Breton as a business model, wouldn't it be a benefit for the government to keep them on full-time, especially when there's not going to be any decrease in immigrants coming to this country?

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: Mr. Eyking and the rest of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

As far as your question goes, CPC Sydney is proud to represent the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and we're proud to do the job we do. Year after year, by hook or by crook, through magic by our management team, we get the job done. We look after the potential citizens of this country and we look after the naturalized citizens of this country.

We did such a good job that when the permanent resident card centre was to be opened in 2002, Sydney was picked to be that pilot project because of the hard-work ethic of the people in Sydney and the job well done. The pilot project turned into a permanent line of business, and we're proud to be dealing with that segment of society as well.

Then when the department decided to take the foreign skilled workers initiative from our overseas offices and bring it to Canada, again because of the hard work and the commitment to a job well done by the employees of CPC Sydney, we were lucky enough to receive that pilot project.

Mr. Coderre was once our minister and came down to Sydney and took a tour of the facility. We showed that we do a very hard job. We do a very good job and we're proud of the job we do.

In some years we produce 400,000 cards to bring into the system, to try to nibble at the backlog, as Ms. McKay has alluded to. However, when you take our staff down to two people producing cards, that doesn't equate to 400,000 a year. We can't do it with two

people producing the cards. We can't do it with 15 people trying to process 250,000 applications a year to bring to the production line.

We've proved time and time again that we are committed to the job, that we're proud to be members of Citizenship and Immigration, and we're proud to serve the people of Canada and the new citizens-to-be of Canada, and it's been proved by the two new lines of business that have been brought to Cape Breton, sir.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: We've always maintained that the good business model is to have dependable staff, which creates continuity within the organization. When you bring in people on different projects where they're only in part-time or as a term, you lose that expertise when these people are gone. So we've always maintained that a good business model is more full-time indeterminate staff.

We just have to look at what's happening with the archives, for instance. I mentioned in my notes that once they come back to CPC, they go to archives in Sydney. There's no more staff in archives now, so they're just sitting there. If you lose your card today, they have to review the first application you made. They have to dig it out of the archives. There's nobody there managing the archives.

We've maintained that CPC Sydney has been grossly understaffed for many years, and we think it's time that stopped if we're serious about introducing immigrants to our country.

• (1605)

The Chair: Monsieur Coderre, you have less than two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, as a former minister of immigration, I believe the services in Sydney are essential. Having been in a position to see the extraordinary work done by these men and women, I don't understand why the department wants to cut back on staff.

[*English*]

So I truly believe that we should take note of your wonderful job there.

It's a non-partisan issue. I think if we have some living proof that you are doing an amazing job, instead of cutting back on resources, we should make sure to maintain them. You have our full support.

Now, why is there such a difference? When we talk to the department, they say they are temporary; you're saying they are not. I think for the benefit of the committee we should explain why there's such a difference between what the department and the union are saying on that issue.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: We go by the list of the membership we have. We can count them, and 83 terms were being let go. Then there are casual workers. Casual workers within the federal government are supposed to be there for only a certain number of days—I think now it's gone up to 90 days—so once they're done, they're done.

It's quite true that the department will argue that their term is over and that after the 90 days for casuals they can't rehire them, but we know that in various government departments they've used that casual term policy quite liberally: they hire them just before the end of the fiscal year for 90 days, and then they let them go for a week, and then they bring them back in the new fiscal year. That's been a known fact, and we know that is happening.

But where is the continuity in the processing? When you're in a constant mode of training, that again creates delays. These 83 terms who have been there for a while know the job. They could continue to do the job more effectively because they are fully trained, and you wouldn't be trying to bring somebody off the street. I'm not saying that bringing people off the street is not a good thing.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Ms. Meunier-McKay, what interests me isn't complicated.

First, this is an essential service and, second, there is a political priority. We have to issue permanent resident cards. There is a citizenship reality and there's also a skilled worker issue.

Do you think this is a disguised funding cut on the part of the minister or department? These people met with you and talked to you. If you are an essential service, complete all the evaluation cards and are doing a good job, what could they do to you? What do you think it is: a cut, a strategy?

[English]

The Chair: Give a very quick answer, please, Ms. Meunier-McKay.

[Translation]

Mrs. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: It's a cut. It appears in the federal budget that has just been presented. We can't get away from it. Additional funding was granted so we could try to eliminate the backlog. As a result of this cut, here's where we stand.

[English]

Hon. Denis Coderre: *Merci.*

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here today.

Ms. Casipullai, in your presentation, you asked that the sufficient financial resources requirement be removed in the case of sponsorship applications. You're asking that welfare recipients be able to file a sponsorship application. Is that correct?

•(1610)

Ms. Amy Casipullai: Yes.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Don't you think that goes somewhat against the spirit of sponsorship? A sponsor supports an applicant while he or she is in the country. In this case, we're talking about people whose incomes are very low. In extreme cases, they are welfare recipients, who are unable to support themselves?

Don't you think they would be even less in a position to support the individuals they intend to sponsor?

[English]

Ms. Amy Casipullai: I thank you for the question. It gives me a chance to explain—I had run out of time earlier—that there are actually two areas there.

One is the ban in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act on sponsorship by anyone who has ever been on social assistance, even if that person is not currently on welfare. If the person had been on welfare ten years ago but they are now working and are able to sponsor, they are still not allowed to sponsor.

That concerns us—for obvious reasons—and I hope you will agree that it really doesn't make sense.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I understand that, currently, under the act, if someone has previously been on welfare, there's no chance. That person may not file a sponsorship application. That is the provision you want to get to.

[English]

Ms. Amy Casipullai: That's right.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: However, you agree that, at the time the individual files the sponsorship application, that person must be able to show that he or she can support the person sponsored. On the other hand, I understand why you do not agree on the levels currently set.

[English]

Ms. Amy Casipullai: Yes, I completely agree. The guidelines that are followed are the Statistics Canada guidelines on what constitutes low-income, and yes, it is incredibly difficult to be low-income and to be able to support another family member.

The thing is that families are very complex. The arrangements that we see are very different, very unique in each circumstance. When we have a regulation like this, one that applies to all cases no matter what, it's really difficult to understand what the impact will be for families.

The example I use is that of one spouse sponsoring another spouse, and then waiting for many years until their income comes up so that they can sponsor the children. But in fact the family actually is spending a lot of money for the care of their children; they're just not with them currently in the country. They are working. They are producing. At the same time, they are spending to look after family members who are not here. In any case, that cost is being borne by them.

The costs we cannot count are the economic costs and the long-term costs for that family.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: When a person has to prove sufficient income, that person includes the income he or she earns and spend outside Canada. That income is therefore already included in the calculation of income to show that that person is able to do so.

Is it excluded?

[English]

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: It's only the sponsor's income. Let's say the sponsor is in Canada and wants to sponsor their spouse overseas. Only the sponsor's income in Canada will be included.

I have seen cases where, for instance, a sponsor actually tried to sponsor his spouse; the child dependant was a Canadian citizen by birth since the sponsor was a citizen; and because the mother was not a citizen, she needed to be sponsored. The father brought the child back to Canada and tried to bring his wife, but because he could not bring his wife, he became a single parent. He had to go on social assistance. He had no choice. He had to look after his six-year-old child. Meanwhile, he was not able to sponsor his wife: he was on social assistance.

I understand that there is a sponsorship requirement. Nobody is asking for the sponsorship requirement piece to be lifted. You can still sign an undertaking to sponsor. You are still responsible for that person during the sponsorship period. What we are saying is that in deciding who can be the sponsor, income often is not the best indicator. You can have someone who makes a lot of money and who is still not meeting the requirement to sponsor the family. But you may have someone low-income who will in fact, having the extra family here, have more than one person making a living and all that kind of stuff.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: So these people should therefore be able to provide evidence of these outside contributions from a spouse back in the home country, for example. You're seeking more flexibility in determining ability to support.

•(1615)

[English]

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I have a more general question, which might concern everyone. I moreover spoke with departmental representatives about it at a meeting.

I have been the Bloc québécois citizenship and immigration critic for more than two years. Over time, I have become convinced that waiting times are used as an immigration management tool, unlike in other systems, such as the health system, where waiting times—

[English]

The Chair: Your time is almost up, Monsieur St-Cyr. I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Then I'll ask you a brief question.

Do you sometimes get the impression the government simply uses waiting times to better control its inventory and the influx of people into the country?

[English]

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Yes, and I think if you're using it as a management tool then it's always easier to just deny and reject applications than to approve them, because it would take more time to actually go through the applications and make sure they met the

requirements, or whatever. It's so much faster to just reject every single application in order to meet the quota, or whatever it is the government has set up.

So I think it's very important not to look at the issue of delay and tie it to the number of cases being rejected, approved, or processed by an officer. Rather than looking at wait times as a resource issue, try to put in as much resources as possible to make sure that all of the applications are dealt with fairly and comprehensively.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Go.

Ms. Leslie, welcome to the committee. You have up to seven minutes.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To the folks in Sydney, you probably don't realize this, but some of your strongest allies are actually staffers of MPs, because as soon as the news broke about the lay-offs, I got an earful from my staff about how this was going to be extremely problematic, that it was going to make things much worse, because as it is, our staff are getting an earful when they hear back from constituents who say, "What do you mean, 'eight months'? What do you mean, 'a year'? This is unacceptable".

I just want to share with you the following example, though it isn't a specific case but a pretty standard and formulaic example. A constituent sends in their information to the Sydney CIC office in, say, November. They get a response in January saying there are two pieces of information missing. They supply that information, and by February there's been no feedback on the application's status. Then they send a letter in March to ask for an update on the status.

That's what it looks like for them, but can you describe for us what the series of delays looks like from the perspective of the workers? What happens once you receive that initial application? What would the delays look like?

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: As someone who has processed applications as well as worked in the mailroom, when I get your application and am working on it, say, on January 15, that application would have been received in our mailroom in maybe May of the year before.

Ms. Megan Leslie: That long?

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: So it's taking that long for it to get from the mailroom to my desk to process. With the cuts to more staff, that wait will just get longer.

I'll just share a couple of anecdotes with you. When you have an application from a young person who is 16 or 17 years old and has the opportunity to represent Canada at an athletic event and needs to get a passport, but first needs to become a Canadian citizen, and you get their application after the event, it's pretty heartbreaking. When you get an application from someone who wants to represent Canada in the Canadian Forces—and I know the war in Afghanistan is not a popular thing—but can't become a member of the Forces because they're not Canadian and are waiting over a year for us to let them know if they have sent us all the information required, that's pretty heartbreaking as well.

Ms. Megan Leslie: So, Mr. MacKinnon, can you actually bring us through the steps in the delay? In the first example you received the application in May but it didn't get through the mailroom to you until quite a bit later.

Where else are the delay points? What do they look like?

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: If the application isn't complete, we have to send it back to the applicant to include what is needed. Then it comes back into the mail system again. Now, not only has the application been delayed, but the extra information we needed on the applicant has also been delayed. So we're then adding more months to the processing of that application. Sometimes it takes up to two years on what we call our BF shelf, for whatever reason, before we can produce the citizenship card and send it to the local office.

• (1620)

Ms. Megan Leslie: Okay. Thank you.

You brought up the issue of the young athlete. I can tell you that in my office there are a lot of people who say, "Look, my job offer is going to be rescinded if I don't get this in time."

So I have a question either for Ms. Go or Ms. Casipullai. Could you describe to us some of the hardship that you see because of the delays? What actually comes through your office door?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: In terms of family class sponsorship or citizenship—

Ms. Megan Leslie: What about delays with the PR card?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: I guess the PR card is not as big an issue for us, because the person is still a permanent resident whether or not he has that card in his hand. But citizenship can be quite a big challenge, because, as was mentioned, it's 18 to 24 months; that's two years. That means someone has to wait an extra two years before he would be eligible for certain positions, before he would be eligible to vote.

Although it may or may not impact on the sponsorship issue, because you can still sponsor families from overseas, some people don't want to leave Canada until they become a citizen, because it's better that they go back as a Canadian citizen to the country they're returning to. So those kinds of issues can be a problem.

For us, the delay usually happens with the other things I talked about—sponsorship, H and C—and those are horrendous, because a lot of times, while you're in the process, if you're inland...the person waiting for the status may not be eligible to work. He or she is not eligible for health benefits, so it's a huge burden for the entire family just to wait around doing nothing, basically.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

If I have a bit of time left, Ms. Meunier-McKay, can you describe, across Canada, the staffing levels in the last five or six years? Have they gone up, down, or is it just this shell game that you were describing?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: I think in the last five or six years it has spiralled up and down. There's a lot of use of terms and maybe casuals, so that does create a problem, because it's not just the issue of being understaffed. The workload continues to come in. The workload doesn't stop, so there's always an increase in the workload,

and with all the changes in immigration, where they're allowing more immigrants to come in, it's not going to get any better.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Can I just jump in on that one? No? I thought you could split the time.

The Chair: She has a minute, Ms. Chow, but that's about it.

A point of order, Mr. Young.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): I understand this committee has been reconstituted, or—

The Chair: We can have guests come here, and Ms. Leslie has signed in for Ms. Chow, so technically Ms. Chow is a guest. And you may speak for...

Ms. Olivia Chow: One minute.

The Chair: Maybe not quite that, but talk fast.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I just want to follow up and see whether there is a 10-year trend, because I know that in the mid-nineties there was a dramatic cutback on all the resources. As a result, there was a lot of backlog. There were fairly dramatic cutbacks. Is the staffing level that dipped during the late nineties now levelling up? In terms of the last 15 or 20 years overall, what has it looked like?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: If you look at the last 10 years, the staffing overall in the immigration department has gone down quite a lot. Even in the early nineties, when there were some cuts—federal departments all had to face cuts and there was a cut in the overall public service—Immigration was one of the departments that lost staff, and we're still losing staff. Now we have a budget freeze and we're losing staff again.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dykstra has up to seven minutes.

• (1625)

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to pound through these rather quickly. I've got seven minutes and I've got a lot of questions.

Jeannette, I'm having a bit of a hard time following all of what you said, so I want to get some clarification on a couple of things.

You said that the ministry has cut staff over the last 10 years. Could you specifically say in which years those were cut?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: It's not in front of me, but I can certainly tell you that we know, just within our membership lists—it's been around since 1996—that staffing levels have gone down. If we have to go back and get it for every year, we can go back to our membership lists and do that.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Are you speaking specifically about full-time or are you including temporary in what you're commenting on?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: There's full-time involved, where they're not replaced when they retire.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Is it just full-time, or is it temporary and full-time?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: There are both.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Okay, so we need to separate this. Even though individuals are notified when they come on board that they are going to be working on a temporary basis, you're now saying that you're including those in the massive reductions the ministry has made over the last 10 years.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: Correct. How can you not?

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Okay.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: They're hired to do a workload and process citizenship and permanent residency cards. Citizenship cards and permanent residency cards still exist and they still come in, whether they're done by a full-time person or a term person.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Well, I know, but you've actually said that temporary people are not nearly as good or as qualified as the full-time people and that we shouldn't actually use the temporary system because it in fact delays the process. They all have to be trained, and at the same time they aren't able to do more than, as you've just said, nibble at the backlogs.

This is the difficulty. You have ministry officials who are paying attention to what you are saying today. If the temporary program doesn't work and you don't like it, just say you don't and I'm sure the ministry, even though they would like to try to get these reductions down and even though they would like to try to use a little bit of extra end-year money that they find to try to reduce the backlog... you have come here and said it's worthless or it shouldn't happen.

I appreciate the fact that Mr. Eyking is here, but who is he supposed to defend, as the MP? Is he supposed to defend the fact that temporary individuals are actually given an opportunity to earn additional income, to earn the opportunity to prove themselves in the ministry, or to earn the opportunity to potentially be hired full-time? Or should we just do away with the program?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: I'll respond to that. And please don't misquote me again, because I never said our term employees were not qualified employees. What I said is that when our terms are let go and you have to rehire off the street, you're back into a training mode. I respect our term employees, our casual employees, and our part-time employees to the fullest for the work they do. But what's happening is that once they're trained and they're told their term is over, all of a sudden there is a backlog and we have to rehire people. So we have never been against hiring term employees.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Jeannette, do these people know or not know that they're going to be hired on a temporary basis?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: Yes, they do.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Does the ministry ever mislead anyone to believe that those temporary positions will become full-time at the end of the temporary program?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: In some cases I think there is some of that assumption, that they will be kept because of the workload that's there and the number of applications that come in on

a daily basis. So there is an assumption that even though they might have signed a letter that—

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Jeannette, who makes the assumption that all of those temporary people, even though they signed a temporary contract, are going to be getting full-time work?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: You just have to look at the workload. Let's go back to the workload, because this is what we're here for. The work is coming in—3,500 applications a day—and there are so many bodies—

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. McKay. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

We have a point of order from Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Chair, I do thank you for the point of order. As you have called Ms. McKay by her last name, I'd like Mr. Dykstra to show the same respect for the witness and address her by her last name.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Do you have a problem if I call you by your first name? Mr. Karygiannis wants me to call you by your last name. I feel it's a little more comfortable that—

The Chair: Let's move on here.

I'm sorry I interrupted you. I don't know whether you remember where I interrupted you. Proceed.

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: I'll go back to the point we're trying to make here, which is the workload. The workload is there, it keeps coming in, and we want enough staff to meet the needs of that workload.

I'll make it very clear. We are not against hiring term people. It doesn't matter if they're on contract. When they're hired and it says they're ending at the end of March or at the end of June, there is an assumption there, when the workload keeps coming in, the applications keep coming in, that there will be an extension.

• (1630)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I totally agree with you. You and I are totally on the same page. There would be nothing better than to get rid of the entire backlog. I don't question that for one minute.

Part of what we're trying to do here is work through how we address the wait times and how we get the backlogs down. One of the ways the ministry has determined this is not in the manner that you may like, in terms of spending a lot more money and hiring a lot of additional people on a full-time basis, but in a way that at least shows we're trying to work at it. If it's an unacceptable manner of doing it, I respect the fact that you may agree with that, but if there is not a want to have a temporary program that we can actually implement from time to time across the country, I suppose you're well within your right to make that... But I hope you'll understand that as much as we possibly can and wherever we can, within the fiscal constraints that we face as a government—and certainly the provinces face the same issue—we have to take those things into account.

If we are going to continue with programs like this—and the ministry is going to be up next, so we'll get a chance to ask them—I hope we have your full support to continue this program when and wherever possible we can implement it. We did it in 2006 in Sydney. We did it in 2009. Perhaps in the next couple of years we may be able to do it again. Do we have your support for that program?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: Well, you know what—

Mr. Rick Dykstra: It's easy for the opposition to say do it today and they'd give you a lot more, because they're not trying to run the government right now. They're just doing what's politically comfortable for them to do.

I'm asking whether you want to run the program.

The Chair: Stop the clock, please.

On a point of order, Mr. Coderre.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chairman, a committee's role, whether you're in opposition or government, is to ensure the sound management of public funds. When we have opposite us employees who are unable to do their job because your government has imposed cuts, it is our job to say what to do. Don't come and tell us we don't run the government. We manage public funds by helping you too.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

That's not a point of order. I'm sorry.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you. I realized almost right away that it wasn't.

If you don't mind, I would just like to hear from you guys. Do the three of you recommend that if we get the opportunity to run the temporary program again, we should?

Ms. Jeannette Meunier-McKay: I'm here to ensure that the same thing doesn't happen year after year, as this government has been doing. It is allowing backlogs and not allowing the claims of immigrants to enter in a timely manner. That's what we're here for. It is to fight for the new immigrants who are coming into this country. The only way to do that is to have enough staff to meet the workload, because that workload is there every day. That is not happening, and that's what we're here for.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Agreed. That's why I wanted to ask if you support the temporary program. That's all I wanted to get from you. The three of you were brought in here. You have the opportunity. Do you or do you not support the program?

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: Sir, I support the program, but I would like to move on, if I could, and address your concern.

Yes, we do, because we want to do a good job for the Canadian citizenry. However, sir, temporary people fill the same chairs with different faces year after year after year. Those same chairs are filled with temporary people every year. Does that not bring to you a sense that we should look at something more permanent? Because when the people are laid off, sir—

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Sir, it's my understanding that we've run the program—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: It's my time.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: The parliamentary secretary should give the witness the courtesy of letting him finish.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: He did, and now I want him to clarify.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: He didn't. You kept cutting into it.

The Chair: I have news for all of you. We're out of time.

Mr. MacKinnon, we'll let you say a few concluding words, and I'm afraid that's it.

Mr. Terence Young: Nobody has—

The Chair: Could we have some order? Mr. MacKinnon is about to speak.

Mr. Terence Young: We've talked to more people than—

The Chair: Mr. Young, Mr. MacKinnon is going to speak.

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: All I'm saying, sir, is that for years Sydney has been staffed with temporary employees. Yes, they sign a contract. I sign a contract for a six-month term and it turns into a 12-month term that turns into an 18-month term that turns into a 24-month term. Then when the government doesn't want to hire me indeterminately, they lay me off. Then the backlog starts to grow again, sir. Then the government throws emergency money at us again and we start the same cycle. It's time to stop the cycle, sir. It's time to stop looking at the symptoms and look at the problem, and the problem is understaffing.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Dykstra, but we're well over.

Mr. MacKinnon, thank you very much for coming all the way from Cape Breton to tell us about what's happening.

Mr. Wilfrid MacKinnon: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: I thank all of you for coming and giving us your comments.

We will suspend for a couple of minutes.

Thanks again, ladies and gentlemen.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Chairman, I have a question before we start.

The Chair: Yes, you may.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: When we talked about doing the wait-time study and the process of it, we sectioned off these meetings in hour-long blocks. That works out, I guess, to a disadvantage for the government, because we all basically get just one round, especially when there are three or four people here. I'm asking, I guess, through you to the clerk, why we would not be considering this a continuation of the meeting. What we would do is go to five-minute rounds and then just continue to follow through with our process in terms of questioning.

The Chair: Well, this topic has been raised before; Mr. Young has actually raised it before. We have our standing orders or rules, whatever they're called. In fact, at the last election—I don't know how many elections this committee has had—I asked members of the committee whether they wished the rules to be changed, and there was silence.

I'm going to try to be fair, but I have to be fair on the rules, and there was no change to the rules.

Quite frankly—if I could just finish—the process has always been, for any committee that I've chaired or any committee of which I've been a member.... It's like an inning of baseball. For the second inning we start all over again, and this is the second inning.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Well, let me use your analogy then, because I think it's a very appropriate one. The first three batters in the first inning who come to the plate—

• (1640)

The Chair: Well, no, unless it's a point of order.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: It's a point of order.

I don't think this is an appropriate time for this discussion. Certainly we can take this discussion up in the subcommittee, not when we're televised and we have people here from the department. I'm sure this discussion can be brought forward at another time.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: It's not a point of order, but I appreciate that you'll—

The Chair: Perhaps you could finish. I'm going to allow him to continue.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Very quickly. If the first three batters, if you will, come to the plate in the first inning, then in the second inning the first three batters don't come to the plate again. Numbers four, five, and six do.

I suppose what we could do—or perhaps what we do in the future—is when we have a two-hour meeting, we call it a two-hour meeting and just have all the witnesses give their presentations at the beginning of the meeting and then just continue to go around the table for that period of time.

I'm just suggesting.... And I'll take Thierry's comments about bringing this up at subcommittee. But it certainly would seem to me that there are times—for example, when the minister is here for an hour and a half or ministry officials are here for two hours—we could just continue to go around the table according to the order that we've established.

The Chair: Well, I'll do whatever the committee wishes, but I think at this particular point in time we'll leave this issue for the next subcommittee meeting, whenever that is. You can raise it then and we'll debate it as to whether that process should be changed with the majority of the committee.

So we're back again, Madame Deschênes. I've lost track of the number of times you've been before us in the last period of time. I've even thought of recommending to the committee that you become an honorary member of the committee. Here you are.

As you know, when you're giving us your presentation, you have up to 10 minutes to speak to us on this subject. Thanks very much for coming again.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Claudette Deschênes and I am the assistant deputy minister of operations at CIC. I am accompanied today by Paul Armstrong, director general of the centralized processing region at CIC.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me back. I had to think about that.

[*Translation*]

On a number of occasions recently, I have appeared before members of the committee to share with them the steps CIC has taken to deliver efficient and effective service, delivery that is integrated across our global network, facilitated by technology and partnerships, and guided by thoughtful risk management and quality assurance.

As members of the committee know, we live in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, and the hallmark of any successful government department is to constantly seek innovative ways to improve service to the public without compromising security.

[*English*]

We are doing a lot here in Canada and overseas to meet the goal and to make our immigration system work more efficiently and effectively. To that end, we have set service standards in a number of areas.

Although this list is not exhaustive, in 80% of responses to employers on exemptions from labour market opinions, it is our goal to provide an opinion within five business days from the time a complete request is received.

In 80% of overseas applications, we expect to make a final decision within 12 months from the time the family class application—and this would mean spouses, common-law partners, conjugal partners, and dependent children overseas—is received at the Mississauga case processing centre.

For 80% of new permanent residents, we will send an initial permanent resident card within 40 business days from the time the confirmation of permanent resident form is completed at a port of entry or at a CIC inland office.

We will provide all eligible applicants with a funding decision on their application within 90 business days of confirming their eligibility for funding or we will inform the applicants within that timeframe of any additional processing time that may be required. This is on grants and contributions.

Expanding our online services and increasing the use of online applications are just some examples of how we are achieving our objectives.

[Translation]

Our service standards can now be measured against CIC's actual performance and the results will be used to support our goal of enhancing service delivery.

We are committed to transparency, management accountability and citizen-centered service. Our service commitment is now outlined to the public on our website.

Thank you. My colleague and I will now be happy to respond to your questions.

•(1645)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you, Chair.

I think maybe we should take up that offer to make Ms. Deschênes an honourable member of the committee. She keeps coming back to us time and time again.

I would like to go back in history, Ms. Deschênes, and tell you that in 2006, when the government was changed, 80% of applications at all points of service—this is for spouses and partners—used to be nine months. Today it's 12 months. That's an overall increase of 33%. For dependent children, in 2006 it was 11 months for 80%. Today, in 2009, it's 13 months, an increase of 18%.

For spousal, in 2006 and 2009, Africa posts were nine months; today it's 14 months. For Asia and the Pacific it was seven months; today it's nine months. For Europe, it was eight months; now it is 10 months. If you look at those increases, specifically in Africa, a 55% increase; Asia and the Pacific, a 29% increase; Europe, a 25% increase—this is for spousal.

For dependent children in Africa in 2006, it was 11 months; today it's 24 months, an increase of 218%. For Asia and the Pacific, it was seven months; today it's 10 months, an increase of 42%. For the Americas it used to be 10 months; today it's 11 months, an increase of 11%.

I'd like to share with you some horror stories, and this is for spousal sponsorships. For Colombo, in 2006, it was seven months; today it's 14 months, an increase of 200%. For New Delhi, it went from five to six months, an increase of 12%. For Islamabad, it went from eight months to 14 months, a 75% increase. For Kingston, Jamaica—and this is a real horror story—it went up from five months for processing 80% of the spousal cases to 15 months today, an increase of 300%. For Cairo, it went up from seven months to 11 months, a 57% increase. For Nairobi, it went up from 13 months to 26 months, a 200% increase.

Dependent children in Nairobi, from 19 months to 37 months—these are our children out there, and from that part of the world it's doubled, a 194% increase. For Pretoria, it went up from seven months to 21 months, a 300% increase; New Delhi, from 10 months to 13 months, a 30% increase; Islamabad, from 12 months to 18 months, a 50% increase. Guatemala went up from 14 months to 23 months, a 64% increase. São Paulo, Brazil, went up from 10 months to 19 months, a 90% increase. Kingston, Jamaica, went up from six months to nine months, a total increase of 50%.

Those are some of the horror stories. When you're talking about spouses and children, that's got to be a priority, not only for today's government but for any government. It's got to be a priority with the department when we're dealing with uniting our families. When you have some cases where it's taken up to 37 months, over three years, for a parent to see his child, I think that is totally unacceptable.

I understand that in some cases we have officers serving in extraordinary circumstances, but if an officer does not want to fill that position, I am sure if you were to make a call, there would be a lineup of people who do want to go to those posts and serve.

Those examples—and this is why the study was brought in—need to be addressed. I don't care who the minister or the government is. The onus is on all of us, and especially on officials, so that when we look at this, we either somehow have to get more resources or, if the resources are not forthcoming from the minister, you're going to have to come to this committee and say the resources are not there.

This can be an impartial.... This is not Liberals or Conservatives or NDP or Bloc. These are our children, our spouses. These are husbands and wives whom we are trying to unite. If that doesn't take priority, then we, as Canadians, people in this room who are asking you to fulfill the mandate of the government regardless of what they....

Certainly, there's been an example under this government that increases have happened. The obligations we have to unite families are obligations that go above and beyond the call of duty—to unite families and bring them together.

•(1650)

My simple question is, what plans does the department have? What are the department's plans? What direction has the minister given you to address the horror stories, the overall increases of 33% all over the posts, 18% for children, and especially increases in some cases like Africa, where dependent children went from 11 months to 24 months, a 218% increase? Please enlighten us and tell us what there is.

If you don't have the resources, how can we impartially, no matter which government it is, help you get those resources? If that means we ask the minister to go to the cabinet table to ask for more money, so be it.

I cannot hear these horror stories every single day. They keep getting worse and worse. I'm sure you've seen it yourself over the years, as an immigration official who has been there for a long time.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: In fairness, the department is doing what it can to modernize and make things faster. Our priority is to reunite families, and we take that seriously.

Having said that, we may not be comparing apples to apples. We used to issue a document, the immigration visa, and it was put in the mail and sent to the applicant. After September 11 we made a decision, from a program integrity perspective, to require all the passports to be sent to the mission and a counterfoil given.

I'm just saying that when we compare the processing times, we may have added one or two months just regularly in terms of the process—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Ms. Deschênes, I don't mean to interrupt you, but I'm telling you about the year 2004, and that was three years after 9/11. The processes in 2004 and today are similar.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Don't forget that the processing time talks about the applications that are finalized in that year. Although we started talking about it, I don't think we put it in place in 2001, for example. That's one thing.

The other thing—and we've talked about it before—is that global case management will permit us to more flexibly move the workload to where people are, as opposed to moving people to the workload. Global case management, as we roll it out this coming year, will also permit us to have a lot more information in the electronic format as opposed to a paper file. That will permit us to do a certain amount of risk-taking as far as how much information we have on which to make decisions.

I'm not arguing about the missions you've chosen, but I will remind you that 80% of family class spouses and dependent children globally are completed in 12 months. One can talk about whether 12 months is the right amount of time or too much time. The last time I was here, Mr. Dryden asked what baseline we were looking at. We're going to do a study to look at that, because I think it would help us.

I also want to say that 82% of the applications globally are accepted under that.

The Chair: We're way over. Can you be quick?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Basically it's about—

A voice: She'll come back.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: No.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I wasn't suggesting that you come back another day. I'm just going to move on to Monsieur St-Cyr and Madame Thi Lac.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Chair, can I just ask two questions and she can respond to the committee?

The Chair: No, I'm sorry. You're well over.

I'm sorry, Madam Deschênes, but I have to follow the rules here.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Karygiannis mentioned a whole series of countries that are experiencing problems with waiting times. Once again I would like to get a little feedback on Haiti because, in our constituency offices and in the media, there are always stories that come back to us from the field. We already have contacts in Haiti. We constantly have cases where people obtained their CSQ—their certificat de sélection du Québec—a long time ago. In some cases, medical exams have expired and they have to start the process over.

Is processing being speeded up and, if so, what is the magnitude of that acceleration?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: If you go to the departmental website, you will have recently seen that we have set objectives. We aim to complete the processing of files that we had before the earthquake by the end of April. So we will decide who can come, who will be entitled to permanent residence. For some cases that we can't finalize, we will issue permits if there is an urgent reason to bring them in. If the application is denied, we will give them a final answer. We'll have them take an interview.

If we can do that, how will it be possible? They say it takes time for things to move, but in fact we need places to conduct interviews, for example. So we've set up tables outdoors to do everything that's necessary. We're trying to process the urgent cases, go at it on a case-by-case basis and make decisions. You must also recall that all the applications filed before the earthquake will be processed.

For later on, we've adopted a tight schedule for all new cases. We'll try to finalize the Haiti cases affected by the earthquake in six months at most. It normally takes much longer.

• (1655)

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You said the end of April. I imagine that means the decisions will be made at an exponential rate and that, at the very end, a number of them will arrive at the same time. If we continue at the present rate, we'll never get there.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That's true, but, as we told you the last time we talked about Haiti, a certain turnover has to be established, and that turnover is starting.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: In cases where waiting times have already been very long and medical examinations have expired, for example, do you have some flexibility, for example, to exempt people from another medical examination? Do they have to follow the same process today?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: People don't have the choice not to undergo the examination. According to our new measures, we'll merely request an X-ray, but not all the other analyses. We could also decide to do nothing and they can come to Canada with a permit and redo their medical examination here. We obviously prefer that they arrive here with permanent residency.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: We previously talked about sponsorship, requirements regarding financial resources and the fact that a lot of people had trouble securing those kinds of amounts. We had a discussion. I wanted to know whether you had enough flexibility under the directives to consider specific situations that have been presented to us, when people can obtain income from sponsored parents or family members, etc. Do you have some flexibility in administering the act?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: First, I would like to correct something that was said. We checked and, if someone has received income security benefits, that person cannot sponsor anyone until that person has repaid his or her debt to the income security program. This is not a permanent ban; the person must pay in order to be able to sponsor someone.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You say paying. Do you mean repaying?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: With regard to flexibility, the Mississauga office normally cannot deny a sponsorship. If the sponsorship is not possible as a result of the low income threshold, that case must be referred to an overseas office for review of all the facts pertaining to the case. The question is not to have a sponsorship approved by referring to others because our sponsorship regulations are clear with regard to who can sign a sponsorship application.

The Mississauga office will say whether applicants do not meet requirements and will request that the case be reviewed outside Canada. In that instance, we'll consider the situation as a whole before making a decision. Will that person be allowed in as an independent because he or she cannot meet sponsorship requirements? We'll look at that on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: So you're saying there's not really any flexibility in Mississauga. Financial standards are set, but, on the spot, there couldn't be any more flexibility and potential income from the other spouse who has stayed home for the children cannot be taken into account, for example.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That's correct.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Consequently, if cases are presented to us in our constituencies, we can tell people that. We can tell them that the case will be referred to the country of origin. They can talk to officials there because they know it's an official policy.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That's correct.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I have perhaps a final question. How much time do I have left?

[English]

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: In that case, never mind, because my question is too long.

• (1700)

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Thank you.

Could you give me a ballpark figure for how many full-time staff you have, including both regional staff and staff who are working abroad?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I suppose I should know that, but I really don't.

Ms. Olivia Chow: We are talking about staffing levels.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I thought we were talking about—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Staffing levels.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: —processing times. Sorry, I may not have—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Are we not talking about staffing levels? I think we are.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Well, we can talk about Sydney in terms of staffing levels, but I don't have it in total—

Ms. Olivia Chow: You don't have the total.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I think that—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Am I not correct? I just did a—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I hope you have it.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I do, actually.

If you compare the full-time staffing numbers for 1997 for regional staff and staff abroad with the numbers for 2009, there seems to be a drop. Now, I could be wrong; I don't know. We'll research this later on, but my impression is that there hasn't been a total recovery from the cuts that were inflicted in the mid-1990s, and that's one of the reasons there is a lot of backlog.

If we can't get into that area, then we can just focus on the number of staff in Sydney. When they started doing the initial assessment of federal skilled workers, was the number of people increased in that area, or was it just an add-on?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: No, we added resources to do that.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay. How many were there, as a ballpark figure? You can provide that number later if you don't have it.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Okay.

Ms. Olivia Chow: As well, a 10- or 15-year tracking of the staffing levels to see whether they have gone up or down or stayed flat would be helpful. It's hard to talk about wait times, whether it's in Sydney, whether it's PR cards or citizenship or landed immigrant sponsorship....

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Again, it's difficult for us. It's a bit like comparing apples and oranges. You'll remember that during that period the Canada Border Services Agency was also created, so a number of staff were moved over there.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I totally understand that. Yes, and there was also Foreign Affairs.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Still, we should be able to compare it collectively because staff is staff, whether it's at Foreign Affairs, CBSA, or CIC, right?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right, so we'll do a bit of work and try to bring out the picture—

Ms. Olivia Chow: It's hard to talk about increasing resources and whether resources have already been increased in the last few years or not.

On another area there is a question, though. Because of the delay in getting the PR card, you cannot get your social insurance number and therefore you can't work. I'm correct in that assumption. As a result, wouldn't there be any lost earnings? The PR card takes five or six months. We're not getting the tax dollars if they can't work, or that's a wash. Getting a PR card takes, what, six months or so, or is it a lot faster?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: At this moment, the processing time is 88 days.

Ms. Olivia Chow: It's 88 days, so there's really not.... If it's faster, wouldn't it actually allow people to work and get their social insurance card immediately?

Mr. Paul Armstrong (Director General, Centralized Processing Region, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I don't believe people need the permanent resident card. The permanent resident card is your card—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay, so it's not the problem.

Mr. Paul Armstrong: —for travel, if you intend to travel.

Ms. Olivia Chow: It's only for travel. You don't need to worry about your SIN. It's separate.

Mr. Paul Armstrong: No, they don't, because they should have a confirmation of permanent residence.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: You need to be a permanent resident to get the SIN.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Of course.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: You can be temporarily.... I don't think they're connected. We can double-check that.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay. Thank you for clearing that up.

Again, when sponsoring a spouse in the mid-1980s, you didn't really have to have an income level. Am I correct on that? I remember a period when CIC did not require it, because of humanitarian grounds. If you sponsored a spouse, you did not need—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I believe that's still true.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Then in terms of sponsoring a spouse, because I heard that conversation earlier on, that is still the case. If I am trying to sponsor a husband or a wife, there isn't an income level, but it is the case for children.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I think that's it, but I'm really not absolutely sure, so I would prefer to check before I tell you that.

• (1705)

Ms. Olivia Chow: In the question and answer earlier on, the witnesses ahead of you said that some people are split apart because the spouse couldn't afford babysitting, they can't go and work, they have to take care of the kids, the wife is overseas, and they can't bring their wife over. That tells me there is an income level you need. That was sort of my understanding. Am I not correct in that?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I'm not sure that all the facts were there, so I'd have to go back and check. We did check about being on welfare, and we confirmed that it's not a bar forever. You have to repay the welfare before you can sponsor, so if you have been on welfare—

Ms. Olivia Chow: For a spouse or for a father and mother?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Generally, to be able to sponsor. I think parents—

Ms. Olivia Chow: I thought for a father and mother it was different than for spouses—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes, and I do, too—

Ms. Olivia Chow: I'm talking about spouses.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: —but I didn't double-check that part, so I don't want to say the information we were given at the first was incorrect.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Okay. I have a last question.

Because it takes so long to sponsor your father and mother especially, there had been a pilot project where you allowed grandparents and parents to come in, to do a multiple-entry visa, so they could visit Canada while the sponsorship is happening, and in the meantime maybe they could take care of the grandkids so that the father and mother could both work, which is a win-win for everybody.

Is that something that we should encourage more? Is that an area that you would like to encourage? What do you think of this program?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It's certainly an area that we are encouraging. The last time I was here I took a note to sort of say I wanted to follow up to really see how often it was being used. If it was being used in some missions more than others, we would want to make sure that there was some consistency of looking at that, because we think it's the right way to do it.

Ms. Olivia Chow: It's the right way, okay. Great. Because what I've seen is that there are parents—

The Chair: Very quickly, please, Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: —who try to come to Canada and they can't get a visitor visa because they are not allowed to visit while their application is going on.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Ms. Wong is going to be taking this round.

Mrs. Alice Wong (Richmond, CPC): Thank you. Thank you for coming back to us again.

My questions are generated because of the previous panels. One of the panellists revealed the fact that the delay for some was because some information was incorrect, and the incorrect information was given because of advice from bad consultants.

Do you think this might be one of the reasons? If the information is incorrect, you have to send it back, and then if they get additional information and it is not actually certified, they will be back in the loop again.

So am I right to say that the assistance of bad or ghost consultants actually delays all of the processes?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Anybody helping who's not giving good advice will delay the process, so certainly we are doing a significant amount of work to make sure that the consultants and the lawyers who support these applications have the training and the knowledge.

From another perspective, we're also encouraging people so that if you don't need a lawyer or consultant...we're trying to get as much good information out there so that when applicants do apply, they provide us with all the information so we can process more quickly.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Another challenge brought to my attention is fraud. I visited Hong Kong. I visited Beijing on my own time and with my own resources, and the colleagues there actually showed me proof that there has been a lot of fraud for certificates, even for wedding pictures. For your due diligence, you have to make sure that people don't marry for convenience. Has that also been a challenge to you?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Certainly in terms of processing times, there are some places where there is additional fraud or documents are harder to come by. In terms of countries that don't have the same types of documents, for example, that we have in Canada, it's more complex to process the case.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Another question is about wait times again. Now, very often, when you say about wait times, it is always how many people are waiting, and then the processing time is the time when you first submit your application to the time you finally get a visa.

Am I right to assume that the more people who are applying, the more challenging it will be for your department to process all these applications?

• (1710)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Well, certainly from an immigration perspective, we talked before about how the number of applications we process each year is dependent on the levels exercise. If we get a lot more applications than the number we said we would take every year, then those people wait in line until we get to actively process them. If they wait six months, that six months is added to the normal processing time. So yes, it would mean that next year it's a lot longer.

Mrs. Alice Wong: The problem is not that you are not doing a good job; it's that we are too popular, in a sense, that Canada has become such a popular country for people to come to.

Going back to human resources in your department, in the previous panel there was a lot of discussion about temporary people coming in and being asked to work because we wanted to speed up some of the processes. How do you make strategic use of temporary additional human resources in our Canada-based processing centres? How are decisions made to allocate extra funding?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: The basic funding we have is based on permanent money we have. The number of employees we have is based on the amount of money we have, and we have to balance our budget. Every year when we get, let's say, four or five months into the year, we may be able to identify additional money, in which case we'll think about what our highest priority is in terms of trying to clear a line of business or get things processed a little faster. Then we will say we can hire so many people temporarily, either on a casual basis or on term.

Certainly on the citizenship business line we'd like to keep it as short as possible, so that's what we've done. Sometimes we're able to go to a central agency, Treasury Board or Finance, and get some money for a year or two, in which case we will apply it to some work.

In the longer term, we have to find ways to modernize so that we can do more work with the same resources. We could maybe apply risk in a different way or we could move resources, because there are

resources sitting somewhere that could do some of that work. That's the work we're doing right now.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have a whole minute.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Okay. Rick or Terence, do you have a question?

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you.

One of the people who were here before testifying before the committee talked about how people who come from China may not declare that they have dependent children because they're concerned about being punished because of the one-child policy. How often have you seen that happen? What do you hear from the front lines? What have you come across? How likely is that to happen? What should the government do about it?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I can't say how often I've seen it for China. We have seen it. Certainly we recognize that sometimes for a multitude of reasons people will tell us they don't have a dependant or they have only one dependant.

We have a case management branch at Citizenship and Immigration, which is working very closely on this, to understand the real reason they have done this, because most of the cases we're concerned about are refugees. Normally, if you indicate that you have dependants, they have to pass the medicals and security and so on before you yourself can be landed.

We have a mechanism in place to look at individual cases in which someone might not have declared an individual as their dependant. Although the act and regulations say these people can no longer be sponsored, we are dealing with them case by case and making assessments.

Mr. Terence Young: So you can't quantify that.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I can't, but we probably could look at what we have.

Mr. Terence Young: I would like to get an answer to that for the long term, because it's a very important and difficult situation. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think that's an undertaking.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It is. We're still working on the other undertakings.

The Chair: I know, and I've written them all down.

Madame Deschênes, that concludes the seven-minute round. Before we start the five-minute round, I just want to get instructions from the committee. I'm sorry, we'll pause for a minute.

The next meeting is this Thursday, April 15, at 3:30 p.m. We're going to be meeting over at that new committee room on Queen Street. There is one witness. His name is Jim Williams, and he's the minister/counsellor for immigration from the Australian embassy. He's in Washington. He's responsible for immigration from North America and the Caribbean to Australia.

We put down two hours. I think the notices have already gone out for two hours. I'm asking the committee if we can end at 5 p.m. or earlier and allow the subcommittee to meet after 5 o'clock to discuss a couple of things.

There are no objections to that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Monsieur Coderre, you have up to five minutes.

• (1715)

Hon. Denis Coderre: Is that a short five minutes or a long five minutes?

The Chair: For you, it's the long five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you.

Ms. Deschênes, I want to go back to the Haiti file raised by my colleague Mr. St-Cyr.

There's currently one situation in the field. An outstanding job has been done on adoption: that worked very well. However, when it comes to reuniting families and bringing children from there to here, there is a major problem. What is happening at your end? This makes no sense! It was said that 160 permanent visas were issued. We're not talking about pathetic cases; this is being done on a case-by-case basis. In Montreal, they all come to see us; they go to one MP's office, then to another's.

So I'm asking that we be sensitive to the urgent nature of the situation because this makes no sense. The rainy season is starting and I've just received a report on the situation: it's major; it's total confusion. There will be other deaths. And then we'll have a situation on our hands. They haven't even finished moving the temporary camps.

What's the situation right now? I'm not talking about Quebec's agreement relative to the rest; I'm talking strictly from the viewpoint of mothers and fathers who want to get their children back. You've already taken measures concerning DNA, medical tests and so on, and that's fine. Now give some hope to those who are watching us—we're on television—because there is a situation right now in the field. We don't know what to tell them. In fact, we tell them we're working hard, but, in fact, we're not moving forward and things aren't working. Why?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We have a lot of resources that are entirely dedicated to this matter. We have made a commitment that, by the end of April, all cases that were part of the process will be finalized. If you have any new individual cases that you think will not be settled quickly enough, you can present them to our case management branch, which has organized a section to process those cases.

I want to clearly explain a specific problem. We knew that some children who were ready for adoption had no parents or relatives. However, there were a number of cases of children eligible for sponsorship who may possibly have a parent in Canada and whose other parent was perhaps still in Haiti at one point. We don't want to make a quick decision either. We can bring them to Canada, but we

want to ensure we don't cause another problem by taking a child away from a parent.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Ms. Deschênes, I know there are agreements, that there are divorce cases, that there is the situation of one parent who lives in one place and the other elsewhere, and that we don't want the child to become a victim in all that.

That said, there are a lot of cases in which the child needs to be saved. This isn't a situation where we must say to ourselves... We can simply say it's easier to send an adopted child to Canada than to reunite a family with Haitian children who are in a bad situation there.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That's not what I meant.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I'm not saying that's what you said. I'm not putting words in your mouth; let's understand each other on that.

In fact, people come to see us and tell us that their daughter or son is over there. What can I do? I understand that we can use your resources by asking you to speed up a particular case. It's like the matter of the ministerial permit: a ministerial permit can always be issued, but when too many are issued, that may be because the policy isn't working. So what can we do? What are you doing? What is the situation on the ground right now with regard to reunification for children in Canada?

• (1720)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: If these are pre-existing cases, we will finalize them in the next two weeks. We will do our best as soon as possible. If they are new cases, the sponsor can make sure to complete the application. Normally we ask that this be done in Haiti. We want the person in Canada to do it and send it to us with as many documents as that person possesses. We reject no documents. We will review what we have and we'll start processing cases. We're going to negotiate with the sponsor or parent here to get as much information as possible.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Thi Lac.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): You're indeed a committee regular. We can virtually give you a free pass.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Ms. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: You said that by the end of April, all cases filed before the earthquake would be reviewed. So we are talking about approximately 3,000 applications.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We're talking about all the cases in the family reunification class. Here we're talking about children, spouses and parents. We want to make sure we finalize the cases that were already entered in the system.

We're also advancing the new cases entered in the system as fast as we can. We've also set very tight standards on the time necessary to process those cases so that we've made a final decision within three months at most, even for the new cases that arise.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: It was said that you were going to speed up the processing of cases from Haiti. However, there has not been an increase in immigration volumes generally permitted here in Quebec and northeastern Canada. Perhaps we'll try to avoid increasing the number of applications that have to be processed during the year.

There are approximately 5,000 applications pending for Haiti: 3,000 are in the system and more than 2,000 were recently filed, I believe. Most of those 5,000 applications come from people who are in the family reunification class and who have filed an application from Haiti.

Knowing what you said, that it won't be first come, first served, and given that there are quotas that have to be met, or a maximum number of people who can enter the country, how can we make sure there won't be any systematic rejections in order to meet those quotas?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: For cases from Haiti, we made the decision that we would not stop at any level. We're going to do everything we can as quickly as we can.

Once again, this concerns cases that fall into the family category. Some cases that I call "independent", which are taken over by Quebec, are pending; these aren't the first cases that we process. We take all the cases of families, parents and grandparents and we want to transfer them all from Mississauga to our office in northern Port-au-Prince. Their priorities in Port-au-Prince are interviews, DNA tests and things like that.

We won't stop processing the applications at some point, saying that we have done enough.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: All right.

I have one final question. We know that the appeal process for the rejected cases is very long. For the applications from Haiti, will there be a special process so that appeals are handled within shorter time frames, or will those people have to go through the same door as the one used for all appeal cases in the system?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: For the moment, we have a second approach, as it were, to settling cases, one that we would not normally take.

Right now, we have not established a faster process for appeals. It's more the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada that handles claims cases in Canada so that a decision is taken more quickly, so that we can also process the applications of members of their families who would like to come to Canada.

• (1725)

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Calandra has the final word.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

And thank you for appearing yet again.

My question is regarding two things that have never changed or have not changed in a long time: people's desire to come to this country and the fact that computers are not new to Canada. What is

taking so long for us to get a global case management system, and has that not had an impact, especially after 9/11?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Certainly, I think if anybody had told us it was going to take that long to get the global case management system overseas, we would have been a little disappointed. I think it's accurate to say that we're now focused on it coming and that we'll be able to do it.

As for why it took that long, the scope of that project was very, very big. During that time we also had a new Immigration Act, so things changed there. We also had the creation of the Canada Border Services Agency, so again, things changed there. I certainly don't want to make an excuse that is what caused it, but I think what we want to be focused on is that we now have it and we're going to be able to do so many things, providing us more flexibility in how we deliver—

Mr. Paul Calandra: That will obviously have an impact with respect to wait times and customer service. It will have an impact on staffing, but as I said, it's not a new problem. Did we not start computerizing? Did we not start looking into different case management systems in the 1990s or the 1980s? I had my first Commodore 64 in 1984. I started putting things on it. I had an Apple Macintosh. Why did we not move to computerizing much sooner?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We have computerized. We have systems in place. It's just that when the system overseas was initially developed, the foreign service officers reported to Foreign Affairs. So again, it's a matter of as we move forward we are integrating things in a better way.

Mr. Paul Calandra: What I'm getting from all this is that it seems what we have is a system that is a much more integrated system. Especially following 9/11, we have a system that is moving toward a computerized program that works better for people who want to come to this country and to make sure that we have a safer process.

We have no lack of individuals who want to come to this country. I would suggest to you that the success of the economic action plan in the midst of a global economic downturn and the fact that so many people are still excited about coming to Canada is a positive that we should be looking at.

The success of the Haiti mission and what your department has done in Haiti, responding to that, is something that should be an example used for all other future incidents or future devastating circumstances.

It strikes me that the department has had a heck of a lot to deal with in a very short period of time. There was a new act and a huge backlog that was left to us by a previous government. It strikes me that you have done an absolutely spectacular job in making sure that the interests of Canadians have always been put first and foremost.

Despite what you've heard and despite everything else, I want to congratulate the department on what I think has been truly remarkable.... Especially in the year and a half that I have been here, I have been nothing but impressed by what the department has done.

I can tell you in my office.... I have the largest riding in Canada, in terms of population, and I have one of the most diverse ridings in the country. My constituency staff has nothing but good things to say about the department. Sure, we'd like things speeded up and sometimes done a bit better, but I can tell you that we could do better responding to our constituents.

I just want to leave one comment because I know we are out of time. I just want to thank the department again for what I think is an extraordinary amount of work done, always putting Canadians first.

I'll leave you with that comment. If you want to comment, by all means do.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Thank you.

The Chair: I don't think you can top that.

Madame Deschênes, I want to thank you for coming I don't know how many times to brief us on this topic. We do appreciate that, so thank you and Mr. Armstrong for appearing today.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I've said, our next meeting is Thursday, April 15, at 3:30.

This meeting is adjourned.

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