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Monday, November 29, 2010

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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 34, on Monday, November 29, 2010. The orders of the day are pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a study of the 2010 fall report of the Auditor General of Canada, chapter 3, “Service Delivery at the Department of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada”. The second hour will be pursuant to Standing Order 32(5), the annual report to Parliament on immigration, 2010, referred to the committee on Monday, November 1, 2010.

We have some guests with us today, some witnesses on the Auditor General's report. I understand the Auditor General is out of the country or at least unavailable. We have Sylvain Ricard, who is the assistant auditor general, and Glenn Wheeler, who is the principal. Welcome to you.

Also at the table are officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

My understanding, Monsieur Ricard, is that you will give a short presentation. Then we will open it up for questions, which could include officials from the department.

Oh, they're going to do one, too. Okay. Well, then I will continue introducing you.

We have Neil Yeates, the deputy minister, Claudette Deschênes, the assistant deputy minister of operations, and Les Linklater, the assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy.

So you're going to make a presentation, too. Well, that's good.

Monsieur Ricard, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Ricard (Assistant Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss chapter 3 of our 2010 fall report, service delivery. Joining me at the table is Glenn Wheeler, Principal, who was responsible for the audit.

All Canadians require the services of the federal government at one time or another, and research indicates that they expect high quality service. At the same time, the government must balance clients' needs with policy requirements and available resources.

Our audit looked at the practices used by three organizations — Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and the Canada Revenue Agency —to set

their service standards, monitor and report on their service performance, and act on this information to improve service quality.

• (1540)

[English]

We found that two organizations we examined, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency, have adequate practices in place to manage their service delivery, while a third, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, has yet to establish service standards for some of its major programs. We appreciate that the committee would like to focus today on the portion of the audit that examines Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

The department has been working to develop service standards since 2007. In April 2010 the department published a preliminary set of service standards and associated targets for four business signs. This set of standards is very limited, considering that the department provides more than 35 different services. There are no standards for some major services, for example, the citizenship program.

Without a complete set of standards, the department cannot comprehensively evaluate its service performance and may not be able to ensure a consistent level of service to its clients. In the absence of standards, the department was using operational data such as intake, output, processing time, and inventories to provide some indication of performance.

We recommend that the department ensure that all channels of communication provide consistent information on the time it takes to process applications for citizenship and requests for citizenship certificates, that it establish and communicate a comprehensive set of service standards for all key services it delivers, that it monitor and report on its service performance against these standards, and that it collect and analyze client feedback and complaints to identify systemic service issues.

[Translation]

The department has developed an action plan in response to our recommendation. In particular, we note that it plans to develop a comprehensive set of service standards and to begin reporting externally on them by spring 2013.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I know. I'm awake.

That's a record speech, sir. Thank you very much.

Mr. Yeates.

[Translation]

Mr. Neil Yeates (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Good morning, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Neil Yeates and I am Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

[English]

I'm accompanied by Claudette Deschênes and Les Linklater.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak today on the findings of chapter 3 in the Auditor General's report.

[English]

First, simply to make it clear, the department does agree with the Auditor General's recommendations related to adopting service standards and more generally improving service delivery. As the Auditor General observed in her report, the department has already taken some steps to improve our services to the public, both in Canada and overseas. But I'd also like to take this opportunity to point out to the committee that it is challenging for CIC to introduce timely service standards for business lines where we have no control over intake.

Our immigration plan sets limits on how many applications we will process in a year; however, in many immigration streams there is no limit on the number of people who can apply. We receive high volumes of applications, processing capacity is limited, and the levels plan determines, ultimately, how many people can be admitted each year. This can result in long delays while cases wait for active processing and it makes it difficult to set timely service standards.

I would also like to note that each case is processed on an individual basis in full accordance with the law. In order to ensure applications are processed accurately and fairly, this can take longer in some cases. Errors or incomplete information in forms, missing information, or other inconsistencies can cause further delays in processing a case. Despite these challenges, CIC remains committed to improving its services to applicants and our processing times. Indeed, we've made some recent progress.

This year, CIC piloted initiatives that have shortened processing times for business visitors and many students through the business express program and the student partners program. It also accelerated processing of sponsorship applications from Canadian citizens and permanent residents who had close family members who were significantly affected by the earthquake in Haiti. As well, the global case management system, GCMS, is currently being rolled out overseas, and it will be implemented in all overseas missions by the end of March 2011. This will improve CIC's processing efficiencies, since staff will have access to an applicant's information in one integrated system.

● (1545)

[Translation]

In addition to improving our processing times, we have expanded our online services and increased the use of online applications, in order to provide more accessible and efficient services.

Our goal is to make it easier for people to apply online, by helping applicants overcome the often confusing information overload that may lead some to seek the services of an immigration consultant.

[English]

Expanding our online services has significantly improved the application process by providing more accessible and efficient services, and CIC intends to make all types of applications available online in the future. The department is also developing video tutorials that provide step-by-step instructions on completing application forms. We expect these videos will help increase the efficiency in processing applications, since they will help reduce the number of errors on the forms.

Our online services are now also available on a mobile site. This enables applicants to access our services whenever they are on the move, wherever they are in the world, and whenever is most convenient for them. Indeed, we are committed to establishing an online relationship between applicants and CIC through the use of electronic accounts, application forms, and status updates. This means we would be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The department has also entered the foray of social media to further engage applicants and the broader public. Through Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, we've begun an ongoing dialogue with the public about our policies and programs. We are also publishing the most current processing times on the CIC website for applications in all immigration categories. This provides applicants with access to the most accurate and timely information available.

[Translation]

Despite making information more easily accessible for applicants, we understand that members of Parliament are often approached by their constituents for information on the status of their application. And CIC is looking to improve its immigration reference document intended specifically for senators and MPs.

By engaging applicants in an online relationship, CIC is empowering applicants and we are also improving our online services in other ways. For example, we are developing an interactive online tool that matches individuals with the immigration option that best suits them.

[English]

Based on the recommendations from the OAG's report, CIC also began work this year to improve our collection and analysis of feedback and complaints from applicants, and through our website we've begun online consultations on our current service standards to understand applicants' perceptions of these and the CIC's service declaration. We will also launch a survey of applicants by the end of this fiscal year, and the results should be available next year.

The results will inform future work on improving our service standards and setting new ones. We plan to report on these results publicly.

This year we introduced service declaration and service standards for four services, and we will implement a second phase of service standards on April 1, 2011. The second phase will incorporate the lessons learned so far, together with feedback from applicants from the implementation of phase 1 on April 1, 2010.

These are some of the ways we are working to improve service and address the Auditor General's recommendations. Ultimately, we aim to improve service standards for all of our key business lines.

I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yeates.

Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

In my riding, I get approached, as many MPs do, by an awful lot of people who are unable to find out where their application is and how it's being processed. I explain to them that the reason they haven't heard back from CIC, or from the embassy, is that nothing has changed in their file. I usually add that if CIC had someone there to answer all the letters and requests for information that are sent in, there would be fewer people working on their files.

That sort of reflection leads me to wonder, and hopefully the people from the Auditor General's office can inform me, if not the others.... I like the idea of service standards. Who wouldn't want to make sure that Canadians and people interacting with the Government of Canada are getting the best quality of service possible? But given that there isn't any significant extra funding for improving service standards, where is the line between...? Are we actually going to improve service delivery? Will we be processing people's applications quicker by investing in service standards? That's what I'd like to hear from you all. Are we making things better for applicants? Will it be faster? Will it be more efficient for them once we have a better quality of engagement?

• (1550)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The direct answer is that standards don't directly improve the service itself. It's a means of measuring your service level against the target you're aiming to achieve. Far be it from me to signal a need for more funding or to say what should be the service level, but we believe it's important to reach a conclusion about funding. We believe it's important for an organization to decide on the level of service they want to deliver and then monitor the service to identify how things are going.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Much of the emphasis is on providing accurate information to people. Instead of thinking that they're going to have their spouse here within 12 months, they realize it's going to be 20 months, or whatever the number is. Even though the emphasis is on telling them that it's going to take them 20 months, so they actually have the right expectations, isn't there a sense that they might be pleased to know how long it's going to take, theoretically, except they'll be so disappointed that it's going to take closer to two years to have their spouse come over that knowing that it's actually 20 months isn't going to help? We can talk about great service performance, under these metrics, and yet not talk about actually delivering what is within people's expectations of how long it should take to sponsor a loved one to come over.

Maybe CIC could respond to that.

[Translation]

Please go first, Mr. Wheeler.

[English]

Mr. Glenn Wheeler (Principal, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Mr. Chair, I'll start, and then we'll turn it over to CIC.

As Mr. Ricard mentioned, the act of establishing service standards has several benefits, including increased accountability and transparency. We note this in several places in our chapter. It gives all stakeholders—the department, Canadians, new Canadians, members of Parliament—a better sense of what processing times are. Measuring performance can give the department a sense of where it is and where improvements can be made. So this information is of paramount importance to the department in managing its program.

Perhaps the department would like to respond as well.

Mr. Neil Yeates: I think that question hits the dilemma right on the head. We've been publishing processing times for many years. I think for most of the clients we deal with, that probably is the key metric as far as they're concerned. It's not the only one. We have qualitative dimensions of service standards in terms of how quickly we might respond to somebody, say in a call centre, in terms of answering the phone, or the nature of the interactions with our staff and whether they are professional, courteous, respectful, and those kinds of things. Those are all important, but I think at the end of the day, most of the public are most concerned about how long it's going to take their application to be processed. I think it's quite correct to have a standard per se, which for us is mostly going to deal with our processing times.

I would just say to the committee, Chair, that as we embark on this process of developing service standards for all of our business lines, a lot of that's going to be about translating our processing times into a service standard, because we are bound by the levels plan and other things.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: It's an important thing, and I absolutely agree with the metrics and with having service standards and measurables so we can see how a department is doing and how effectively it's delivering its services. But it concerns me that—I assume there haven't been significant amounts of new funding to the department in order to implement these new service performance standards. Is that true?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, if I may, we haven't received new funding for service standards per se, but we do have additional resources that are being used for federal skilled workers under the action plan for faster immigration. It has had that effect actually. Resources were put in to reduce the backlog of applications we had. We've seen a pretty dramatic improvement, actually, a big reduction in the backlog for federal skilled workers. It peaked at about 640,000 cases, and it's about 340,000 now, so it's gone down quite dramatically. For the new cases that are coming in, we're able to respond within that six- to twelve- month period, which we think is a reasonable time in which to do it. That has come about essentially through applying controls on the front end of the application process. It gives us a more manageable group of applications to deal with.

● (1555)

Mr. Justin Trudeau: You've done that by returning a whole bunch of applications that didn't qualify, rather than processing them. I think that's a question I will actually have in the second hour.

The Chair: I'm afraid it's Monsieur St-Cyr now. Your time is up.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: I mean in the second half of this.

The Chair: I know, but your time is up now.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

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

Thank you to all of you for being here today.

In your report, as far as the audit is concerned, you raised the issue of consistency of service and the information which is provided, whether that information is provided online, on the phone, or by letter. I could not find any detailed information on whether you examined the consistency of services provided abroad. You talked about the various service points throughout the world.

As members of Parliament, we have several concerns, including this one: depending on the embassy we deal with in a given country, the information we are given will be more or less transparent, and the ease, speed and quality might vary, as well as the quality of the service we receive.

Is this simply a false perception on the part of members of Parliament? In other words, it seems that the service we receive varies greatly from one CIC office to the next, depending on where it is located. Perhaps you have also looked at this issue and concluded that the services provided throughout the world are uneven.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No. I will clarify the paragraph you are referring to. What we were simply trying to say in this paragraph is that, at a certain point, given the means of communication the department had, the information provided on a same subject was not consistent. It's not that we assessed or measured these things; it was

simply a fact. If people sent information by letter or online, they were not afforded the same response time. This technical problem was solved, I believe, or it is in the process of being solved.

What I mean to say by this is that the purpose of our audit was simply to see whether there was a mechanism to establish service targets. After that, the department would measure its service performance. But, in our case, we did not attempt to assess a service performance.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You do not conduct the assessment, but you see whether the department is doing so.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Exactly.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: In that case, I will ask my question again.

To your knowledge, has the department assessed the quality and consistency of the services it provides elsewhere throughout the world?

[English]

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: As Mr. Ricard mentioned, our audit didn't specifically look at that particular thing. We looked at the extent to which the department identified service standards for its major programs and services at the corporate level.

The one program we looked at in a bit more detail was the citizenship—

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: And that is done completely in Canada, of course. I understand. In that case, I will take the opportunity to put the question to the officials from CIC.

Do you assess the consistency of the services you provide in various countries throughout the world? The perception the people who work in MPs' offices have is that the quality of services varies greatly from one embassy to the next. Is that justified?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that we face challenges once in a while, including problems with certain embassies in certain missions. These challenges vary all the time.

[English]

On how we monitor that, we look at processing times across missions and lines of business. One of our dilemmas is to what extent we can expect processing times or a service standard to be the same in each mission around the world. It is a big challenge in the business we do, given the circumstances we face, the number of countries a particular mission may be serving, and the different logistical and other issues that may exist in that region of the world.

● (1600)

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Is there any possibility that we increase the amount of processing done in Canada? Does everything which is currently done abroad have to be done over there, at the risk of having inconsistency in service standards throughout our missions? Could we not just do most of the processing in Canada, which would guarantee a certain stability in the services we provide?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: That's a very good question, and it is actually what we're looking at right now.

In our processing centre in Sydney, Nova Scotia, we do the initial intake for the federal skilled worker program. They do the front-end processing of all the cases to determine the initial eligibility.

We're now looking at whether we should be taking a certain type of those cases to final approval here in Canada in Sydney, rather than sending them back to the mission. If we do a bit of a triage by risk, that would allow us to sort cases in that way.

That's a very germane question, as we try to sort our way through our business in how we might reorganize the processing in our network around the world.

As committee members probably know, we are rolling out our new case management system, GCMS. It allows us to share the workload electronically and seamlessly around the world. Up to now, we've had to ship paper files around the world, which, as members can imagine, is very time consuming, expensive, and slow.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Our constituents have concerns about the fact that cases are not processed individually. Applicants are always the ones to provide information. Every time, they have to repeat their story. Of course, they have to wait, they have to call back, and then they have to start the whole process all over again. They never deal with the same agent twice. I know that the same thing happens within other large government organizations. Some of these organizations have tried to change their approach and give each agent a certain number of files to deal with.

Have you thought of adopting this type of approach, or do you feel that this is just simply not possible within a department?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Ms. Deschênes can probably answer that question.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): If I understand correctly, you are referring to situations where you are calling with regard to a file, and then you have to call back three weeks later. You are finding that—

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Whether it is someone from my office, a citizen or me—

[English]

The Chair: We have to hurry because we're way over time here.
[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Every time I try to move a file forward, I have to leave a phone message or I send an email. Then I'm told that they will get back to me five days later. But if I have another question, I have to start the process all over again and tell my story again from the beginning. Isn't there a way of streamlining this system?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We are currently looking at the way we manage information, both on the member of Parliament side, as well as on the client side. One of the first things we want to do is to make things more systematic. One idea might be to send updates of files more regularly. In cases where the status of a file has not changed, this would still allow people to remain informed. It would reduce the number of cases.

We are also thinking of assigning certain specific groups of clients to certain units. This way, people would not have to tell their story over and over again.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

The question I have is, why are members of Parliament even involved in all this? Why do we and our staff have to become experts in immigration?

Mr. Trudeau just said that our job is to interface with our constituents. But more and more we're getting involved in files. Personally, I think that's a problem.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: The department feels we would like to do something where you would not need to do as much. We'll need to start with baby steps and see where we go.

The Chair: "Baby steps"—it's a good movie.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): To the Auditor General's Office, are there any other departments, in your experience—I know you only surveyed three—where 90% of the government services delivered had no service standards? Do you recall?

• (1605)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Honestly, I don't know. As was just mentioned, we audited those three entities. Auditors without facts don't like to....

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: Mr. Chair, I would just add to Mr. Ricard's statement. In our audit, we did of course scope two other departments.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I saw that. What about other departments? In your experience, are there any other departments that don't have these kinds of service standards?

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: No. To echo what Mr. Ricard said, it was outside the scope of our work.

Ms. Olivia Chow: In the history of CIC, do they have service standards—not now, but say 20 years ago?

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: I can only respond to that by saying that, as we note in the chapter, the department historically has been using input data processing times and output data as a way to manage performance in the absence of service standards. As we stated in the chapter, to this point they've identified only four.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Traditionally, a service standard is not what's been established, right? So you're starting with four and you would do more next year.

How many files, on average, have been lost in CIC in the last year or two years? I asked this question under Standing Order 42 and got a response back that they don't know how many files are lost, because they're lost, or there isn't a loss. But my office had people saying they lost their files; they found them eventually.

Do you keep track of that? Do you have that number, and would you be able to provide it?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I don't have that number with me, no.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Would you be able to provide it to me in the future? Do you track it?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We don't track the number of files lost. Sometimes they're lost temporarily. From a perspective of global case management and an e-application future, that's where we want to go, so it would be in the system, and not a paper file, which—

Ms. Olivia Chow: Right. It's a problem.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: As you visit some missions, it's a problem.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Let me just talk specifically about citizenship. The wait time seems to have grown fairly dramatically in the last few years. If the department thinks you've been away for more than the allotted period of time—you're supposed to be away within the three years out of five—they give you a questionnaire. Then if the questionnaire doesn't quite work, you go into this whole year and a half of discussion and appeal, whereas if applicants just waited for another three months to submit their citizenship files, they would have completely, 100%, qualified.

Common sense practice would say that if someone gave you a file for someone who is not quite qualified, give it another two months and they will qualify, instead of going through this long, involved process, wasting your time and their time. They then have to wait for a year and a half before this questionnaire is done. This means that by the time they put in the application for citizenship, and then by the time they get it, you're talking about three years. I've seen cases even longer. Do you have practices in place like that, just to smooth some of the process, so the customer service is delivered in a way that is efficient and effective?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, that is exactly what we're trying to do, as has probably been referenced. What we refer to as a perfected application is in some ways the bane of our existence. As is being suggested, incomplete applications cause an enormous amount of work in the department, a ping-ponging back and forth that's not very helpful for anyone.

In terms of some of the quality control and advice to clients, some of that happens through the call centre, and so on. No doubt we could be doing more, but that's specifically on citizenship proofs, PR cards.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We'd like to move to an application where people don't apply unless they meet all the requirements—

Ms. Olivia Chow: The full requirements.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That's right, because we spend a lot of time resourcing—

Ms. Olivia Chow: When would you be able to do that? I've seen the back and forth. You don't need to describe it; it would take an hour.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We're hoping to be able to move on that process fairly quickly. We've had an analysis of where we want to go, which involves the testing and so on, and even trying to move that a little bit further ahead in the process.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Six months? A year? You don't know. Okay, I see you're reluctant to give me a timeline.

A few months ago our committee looked at the layoff of workers who process the citizenship files. At that time, we said there was

going to be a big backlog. I notice you've now hired back some of those workers.

Without the service standards and a timeline of what you would tolerate, how do you project when you need these workers, when you'll lay them off, and when you bring them back? At that time, your workers were telling you the backlog is going to get worse, the wait is going to get worse, and you need them. They got laid off anyway, and then a few months later they're back on. It doesn't quite make sense.

• (1610)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, the dilemma we've had has not been not being aware of the impact on processing times. It's really been whether we have the resources within the department to maintain the staff, and that has gone up and down. Over the past few years we've received some temporary funding to provide us some short-term help on the volumes in citizenship, which have grown over time to be quite a bit greater than our basic capacity to process them, so processing times have gone up.

Yes, it's quite true, over the past year we had some additional resources. They ended, and we had to wait until during this year to see if we would have sufficient funds within the department to reallocate them to this function, which we decided we could manage in July.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Now, we're—

The Chair: Sorry, Ms. Chow, I'm afraid that's it.

Mr. Young.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Mr. Yeates, does everyone who applies for a visa to come to Canada want to come here right away?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Not necessarily. On the temporary side, that tends to be fairly immediate. On the permanent side, we often get lags from one year to the next. So when we're doing visa issuance—as the members will know, we have many different immigration categories—we have to estimate what we call a wastage rate of visas that will not be taken up within that year. It's fairly low, maybe 2% to 3%.

Mr. Terence Young: I'm thinking of those that are not taken up and of those that are not taken up right away.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes.

Mr. Terence Young: For example, people who want to sell property, or finish a job, or finish school, or they change their mind temporarily.... How do you set a service standard for a wait time under those conditions?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I think in that particular circumstance the key service standard would likely be the issuance of the visa. How that translates into the management of the levels plan is a bit of a different set of circumstances for us, but the service standard for the individual likely would be how long it would take to review and issue a visa, make a visa decision for the individual.

Mr. Terence Young: Being that you have limited resources, do you ask people who apply for visas what time period they'd like to come to Canada?

Mr. Neil Yeates: On permanent immigration, people are applying knowing generally how long it's going to take for their application to be processed. I think the short answer to your question, generally, is no, because the processing time is often fairly lengthy.

Mr. Terence Young: Mr. Ricard, are you satisfied with the action plan the department has prepared in response to your audit?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: It looked reasonable to us. We've had discussions with—

Mr. Terence Young: How are you satisfied with it? What's good about that plan?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We believe it's a reasonable plan, given the challenge ahead.

Mr. Terence Young: The department seems to have very clear processing times. Why do you feel it's not sufficient processing times, as a way to tell Canadians what to expect?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We believe that an organization not only needs to know where it is in terms of the time it takes to process something, but it should establish what it's aiming for so it can be monitored to see if they are achieving their objective.

Mr. Terence Young: Yes. So Mr. Yeates, why do you do it the way you do?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Well, I think the dilemma the department has had is that when most people think of service standards, one of the key components is timeliness, in our case for processing an application. We've always had a dilemma that when you tell somebody it's going to take 32 months to process their application, they're not going to see that as a timely service standard, and we would fully understand that. So we have tended to stay in the world of processing times rather than putting that out as a service standard per se.

Mr. Terence Young: Right.

Mr. Ricard, in your department do you have any sympathy for the fact that, to a large degree, Citizenship and Immigration can't control when people take up their visas, or can't control the demand for skilled workers, or can't control a number of other things? They can open the door and sometimes people don't walk in. They can't control the demand for caregivers, etc. Did you take that into account in your audit?

• (1615)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes, we do realize the operational realities. For example, in one paragraph we refer to the fact that we've selected three entities, and we didn't compare the three entities for that reason. Every organization has a different legislative framework, different operation, different clients, different business.

So yes, we have to take that into consideration, and I would suppose, when the department sets their standards, they will take that into consideration. But in our opinion, they still have to come up with standards, and the department seems to agree with that.

Mr. Terence Young: Mr. Yeates, could you summarize for the committee what significant variables you don't have control over in the current situation?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Certainly.

Chair, probably the biggest single factor for us as a department on the permanent immigration side is that, by and large, we do not control intake in terms of the number of applications to our programs, whereas on the output side, our annual levels plan determines how many people we will actually admit.

With an open-ended application system, it means we may get wide variations in demand for different parts of our program. That may far exceed the number of applicants we are able to allow to come into the country in any given year. That's probably the single biggest factor.

However, there are others. There are issues in different parts of the world dealing with security clearances, for example, where that may be a very significant issue. Those cases go to the RCMP and to CSIS. Depending on their complexity, they may take quite some time to be reviewed before they would come back to us for further processing. We also deal with health issues. All immigrants require an immigrant medical exam, to be cleared medically before they can come here. Again, in different parts of the world that may take quite some time to actually be available.

Fourth, and this was referred to earlier, it is going to depend on the individuals and how quickly they respond. We may issue instructions to a client to go and get a medical. The client might not do it at all, or they may take six months to do it. We don't know. We might remind them after a period of time, and we might close their file after a period of time if they haven't followed up.

So all of those are the kinds of factors that affect how quickly we deal with processing.

Mr. Terence Young: I have studied your global case management system, and it occurs to me it's more than major; this is a very, very significant transformation. Would you please describe the scope of this transformation and what it means to Citizenship and Immigration?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Thank you.

Chair, the global case management system is replacing a number of what we would call legacy systems. As members probably know, historically we have been a very paper-based system, in terms of the way we deal with files, and if you visit some of the missions around the world, you will see this enormous amount of paper, once you get inside the working part of the embassy.

GCMS is basically going to dramatically reduce the amount of paper that we need to deal with. It will allow us to shift workload seamlessly around the world, what we call our global network in Canada—missions around the world—and it will allow us to do that with a great deal of confidence that stuff is entered into our system only once, and then it can be accessed by users from around the world. We think the potential for efficiency gains there are huge, but they will also be more accurate. GCMS also allows us to do searches and things that we were not able to do before. To give an example, Chair, we're able to search common addresses. This is where we've come across residence fraud in citizenship applications. We've had 300 people claiming the same address. It was very, very difficult to make that kind of connection under all of the disparate systems we had before.

It's a very powerful system, from an information management point of view, but also very powerful from an individual case processing point of view, as was referenced earlier.

One other thing—

The Chair: We have to move on.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Okay.

One part of the case can be done in one part of the world and another in another part of the world. It's a big step forward.

The Chair: He's talking like Mr. Kenney.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: *Merci, monsieur le président.*

Something struck me, Mr. Yeates, in your presentation. You mentioned using more of Twitter and Facebook. I'm a huge user of social media myself, but as such, I and many employers and institutions have realized what a tremendous time waster it can be. I'm assuming that the use of Twitter and Facebook would be folded into the recommendations that CIC is working on to improve collection and analysis of feedback and complaints, rather than actual service delivery through Twitter.

• (1620)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, that's the case, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Justin Trudeau: I just wanted to make sure.

I'd like to ask Mr. Ricard a question.

You said, in your case study on Haiti, that the department had indicated that thanks to special measures that were passed, Canada had taken in, as of April 1, 2010, over 2,100 Haitians, more than 200 of which were children. That means that between January 12, when disaster struck, and April 1, Canada had welcomed 2,100 Haitians.

Is that actually what you found? Are these applications Canada received and assessed pursuant to the special measures?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: That is what we noted in our management of the file. In this case we wanted to show one of the measures the department had taken to adapt to a specific situation so as to improve service.

[*English*]

Mr. Justin Trudeau: I would certainly like to turn it over to Mr. Yeates, then, because anecdotally, I have a very large Haitian community in my riding. The response has been one of unmitigated frustration at the fact that other than putting a big "Haiti" on an envelope and sending it in to a special location, they haven't seen a lot of action.

Could you perhaps break down for me what those 2,100 Haitians...who were brought in through these special measures, in the period between January, February, March, and April?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Certainly we can do that, Chair.

There were different categories we were dealing with. Some of the cases that were in our system were before the earthquake and then after the earthquake, and then there were the Quebec special measures on top of that. We can speak to those different categories.

Madame Deschênes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: These were children that were to be adopted.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: These children's files were practically settled, almost 90% settled, right?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: They were in the system and we were awaiting final authorization.

We really focused on cases that were already in the system. When those cases were dealt with, we then started working on others. In most of your ridings, people had not sent in applications. The first thing they had to do was therefore to obtain authorization from the Government of Quebec pursuant to the special program.

We only started receiving applications in the summer. Until October 29, we were receiving new applications. There are 1,137 people in the system including 167 for which documents were issued and 52 that settled in Canada.

Most of these applications only arrived in July, August and September. We are currently processing them, but the family class cases remain our priority. By definition, the cases from Quebec that were welcomed were not within the federal government's family class.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: I understand, but the figure you provided, in other words 2,100 Haitians since the disaster, dates back to April 1, 2010. These are not Haitians who applied because of the disaster, but rather Haitians who had applied well in advance of that. This figure of 2,100 is absolutely not as a result of the earthquake.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I disagree. We showed great flexibility in the way in which we processed these cases because of the earthquake. Indeed, these applications had been made before the earthquake, but the way in which they were processed and the risk profile attached to them were influenced by the earthquake.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I will continue along in the same vein because I am wondering about the same thing. Out of 2,100 Haitians welcomed as of April 1, how many of them would have come either way, regardless of the earthquake? If this had been a normal year, how many of them would have been taken in usually?

• (1625)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I cannot answer that. We were trying to process files within a 12-week period. In normal circumstances, the processing times would be far longer than 12 weeks. We process these cases very quickly. I would need a mathematical algorithm to provide you with a figure, but I know that these people would not be in Canada today had it not been for the effort we made.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: How many cases do you process within a typical year?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I don't know, but I will check.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Very well, you can send in the information. The idea is to see how many would have come to Canada during that three-month period, or quarter.

I would like to get back to the Quebec program. If I understand correctly, the explanation for the low number of arrivals is that applications came in to Ottawa relatively late in the process and that dealing with these applications is not one of the department's priorities.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Processing these applications is not the first priority. We are currently processing these applications as quickly as possible. Our priority has always been known to be the family class. These cases do not fit within that category.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: The family class includes people who would already have submitted an application for family reunification before the earthquake as well as those who applied later under the federal program.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Exactly, according to the definition of family class for Quebec and Canada.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: From what you are saying, it would have been strategically better for individuals wanting to be reunited with their family in Quebec over that period to have applied directly under the federal program rather than under the Quebec program.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Even if an application was under the Quebec program, it would have been processed immediately had it met the federal program standards.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I understand. The Quebec program was broader, more generous. But let us assume that someone was eligible under the federal program. If that person had opted for the Quebec program, it would have slowed down the application.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: No. Either way, the Government of Quebec had to meet with the individual. If the application met the standards defined under the federal program, it would have been processed expeditiously. One of the problems posed by these cases is that much time passed between the assessment done by Quebec and the moment when applications were sent in by families. These delays have not helped, but there was nothing we could have done without a formal application.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You are saying that applications under the federal family reunification program were processed as a higher priority than those under the special Quebec program.

Were these applications from outside Quebec, or were they Quebec-based applications made pursuant to the federal program? Did Mr. Linklater tell you anything about that?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: All applications that meet the criteria for sponsoring a relative, be they from Quebec or any other province, are processed urgently by the federal government.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Very well, that is the answer. Even though there is a special program for Quebec, you have two categories. You prioritize applications which meet your program standards, but surplus applications coming from Quebec end up lower down on the list.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes. Do not forget that the Ottawa office receives assistance from the offices in Port-au-Prince, Santo Domingo and our officers here. We currently still have far more resources processing Haiti-based applications.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Very well.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur St-Cyr.

You know, we started roughly at twenty minutes to. I'm going to give Dr. Wong five minutes.

Mrs. Alice Wong (Richmond, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you for being here, because then you answer some of the questions.

I visited Beijing, Hong Kong, and Manila. I had lengthy meetings with our CIC officials on site and listened to their challenges, because we're always asked why it takes so long for processing from those places.

Incomplete applications are definitely one of the challenges. Also some of the places are in far-off islands or vast areas. It's very difficult to have them even come back to the offices. There are also the challenges of documentation because of fraud. That has probably made it even more complicated.

There are also cases where the applicant overseas actually really doesn't want to come yet. For some, the husbands, whose wives are working here, don't seem to want to come that fast. That is another challenge, that they will take time; they don't even want to respond yet.

There is also the medical examination. That's why some of our officials, for student visas, actually advise the students to take the medical exam anyway during the process, so they don't have to wait too long to come back.

My question is, what other major initiatives are you working on where we can anticipate seeing client improvements over the next few years?

You did mention quite a bit about the global case management system, but you didn't quite finish on that. So I'll ask you, Mr. Yeates, to comment further on that. In one case, we caught 28 marriage applications from the same small village in China. That's probably one of the things.

• (1630)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Thank you, Chair.

I can elaborate a bit further on some of the other things we're doing.

We've noted that we did publish a service declaration this spring. We also published the first set of service standards on exemptions for labour market opinions, on family class sponsorships, new permanent resident cards, and grants and contributions. So those are in place now, and we're monitoring those and will be reporting on those shortly.

We've also put in place e-mail feedback forms in each of the missions and on our website. We have redone the website. We did receive feedback from clients indicating that it was difficult to find correct information on the website, so we have redone it and updated it, and we'll continue to do that on an ongoing basis.

We also continue, in some of our specialized business lines, to seek very direct feedback from the people we are working with.

So we've basically broadened the scope of how we interact and bring information in from clients. I mentioned the broader survey we'll be doing later on this year.

On GCMS, Chair, as has been noted, the capability of the system does allow us to identify common addresses, the common use of consultants, say in mailing addresses; there is the issue of ghost consultants, which is a big issue around the world. That can be triggered when we see the use of a common mailing address. When that starts to appear a lot, you know people are using a consultant, whether that's declared or not. So the new system does have a lot of that kind of capacity, and it's really improving our fraud detection and prevention.

As has been noted, in some countries around the world, relationships of convenience, marriages of convenience, as they're called, false documentation—all those kinds of things are kind of endemic to what goes on in some of those countries. The information system is very helpful in making that much more readily obvious.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Those are some of the—

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Dr. Wong.

Mrs. Alice Wong: So those are more in the short run, but what about the longer term, all these initiatives? Right now, we know there are loopholes and challenges, but what about a longer-term impact?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Over the longer term, as I noted earlier, GCMS will allow us to shift our workload around our network and sort out the most efficient way to do each step in the process and what is the local value added that we would have from a mission versus what might be done centrally here in Canada, in a very efficient way with very significant economies of scale.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's it. Our time has expired.

Monsieur Ricard, Mr. Wheeler, thank you for coming and giving your thoughts on the Auditor General's report. Pass on our best wishes, and we look forward to seeing her at another time.

Thank you very much.

This committee will suspend for a few moments.

• (1635)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: We're going to start again.

This is the annual report to Parliament on immigration. We have the same officials that were here with the Auditor General.

Mr. Yeates, do you have a few opening comments to make?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Neil Yeates: I do. Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen.

[*English*]

I'd like to thank you again for inviting us here on the annual report to Parliament for 2010. As committee members will know, Canada has one of the most ambitious immigration programs in the world. The 2011 levels plan is broadly consistent with the 2009 and 2010 plans. We're planning to welcome between 240,000 and 265,000 new immigrants, supporting both our long-term economic needs and the shorter needs in our period of economic recovery.

At the same time, we'll be maintaining our commitment to family reunification and refugees, and we have raised the admission ranges for spouses, children, and refugees.

[*Translation*]

Today I wish to speak to how the department has developed a more responsive and flexible economic immigration program, as well as to how we have improved the overall efficiency and responsiveness of our immigration and refugee programs.

[*English*]

We are committed to finding new ways to meeting our immediate and longer-term labour market needs by attracting and retaining the most qualified and skilled workers that employers require. One of the actions we have introduced is a new avenue of immigration called the Canadian experience class. It was introduced in the fall of 2008. The CEC provides a pathway to permanent residence for certain skilled temporary foreign workers and international students with Canadian degrees and work experience. Because students and temporary foreign workers are spread broadly across Canada, the Canadian experience class is expected to distribute immigration across Canada more evenly.

We've also expanded the provincial nominee programs, which allow provinces and territories to address regional labour market needs by nominating workers for permanent residence. The PNP is intended to share the benefits of immigration across Canada. Twenty-five percent of economic immigrants are now destined for outside Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, compared to only 11% in 1997. Admissions under this program have also more than tripled since 2005, and in 2009 alone, more than 30,000 provincial nominees and their families came to Canada. Currently, the number of provincial nominations is aligned with the request of all jurisdictions, and we anticipate slightly higher PNP admissions in 2011. Building on these achievements, amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act were introduced in November 2008 as part of the action plan for faster immigration. The action plan is a comprehensive series of improvements designed to speed up the processing of applications and make Canada's immigration system more closely aligned with and responsive to labour market needs. It included the first set of ministerial instructions for processing, on a priority basis, new federal skilled worker applicants who have the skills Canada needs.

• (1640)

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, these are just some of the ways we have made our economic immigration program more flexible and responsive to our labour market needs.

The action plan also entails a series of administrative measures to help draw down the backlog and decrease processing time of applications, and it has already reduced the backlog of federal skilled workers.

[English]

As of September 2010, the backlog of federal skilled worker applications has been reduced by 47%, and processing times have dramatically improved. I'm pleased to report to the committee that 80% of all final decisions on applications received since November 2008 are being made within 12 months or less. In June 2010, the minister introduced new instructions. As with the first set, the objectives for the new ministerial instructions are to allow CIC to keep the intake of applications in line with our processing capacity, to reduce application backlogs and processing times, and to respond to key national labour market needs.

The new ministerial instructions also introduced a cap on the number of new federal skilled worker applications that will be considered for processing. A cap is a key step towards making our immigration system more modern and responsive, since it allows CIC to better align application intake with our processing capacity and labour market demand. To improve and expedite the processing of applications in all categories, we are currently considering a number of options to move forward with the use of biometrics for immigration purposes. Given the growing prevalence and sophistication in identity theft and identity fraud, the use of biometrics is also necessary to reduce abuse and ensure the safety and security of Canadians.

This past year we also continued to uphold our long-standing and proud humanitarian tradition by offering protection in Canada to more than 22,000 refugees in 2009, including more than 12,000

refugees resettled from abroad. Working with the international community, we resettled close to 1,000 Bhutanese in 2009 as part of our multi-year commitment to bring to Canada up to 5,000 Bhutanese refugees who have been living in UN camps in Nepal. In response to ongoing appeals for additional resettlement support to the displaced Iraqi population, we resettled more than 4,000 Iraqi refugees last year. In addition, we pursued reforms to improve Canada's asylum system, culminating in the introduction in March 2010 and subsequent passage into law in June 2010 of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act. The act's implementation will mean faster protection for those who truly need it and quicker removal of those who do not.

[Translation]

I am also pleased to report that the Citizenship Study Guide, *Discover Canada*, has become one of the government of Canada's most in demand publications. Since it was launched in November 2009, almost 300,000 copies were requested from CIC and a special audio version of the guide, made available in April, has received more than 122,000 visits.

Finally, I am pleased that we will soon see the first results from the Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications. In December, processes will be in place to assess, within one year of application, credentials for 10 regulated occupations, including registered nurses, engineers and pharmacists.

[English]

Chair, those are some of the ways we've developed a more responsive and flexible economic immigration program. The department will continue to explore ways to improve the flexibility, responsiveness, and efficiency of our immigration and refugee systems.

Thank you. I'd be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

The Chair: Yes, we do, sir.

Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you, Chair.

My first question is around the 47% reduction in the backlog of federal skilled worker applications. Is my understanding correct that a large part of reducing the backlog was linked to this cap on new federal skilled worker applications? That is, a number of the applicants within the backlog were returned before being processed because they weren't going to be successful anyway, or something like that.

Can I get a little more explanation on that, sir?

• (1645)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, Chair. I can clarify that.

The backlog I'm referring to in terms of the significant reduction involved the cases we had on file prior to the implementation of the first set of ministerial instructions. It did not apply to the more restricted list of occupations, so they were processed. This is one of the characteristics of our system; we have to apply the rules that were in place at the time the applications were made.

That backlog basically was the old system—wide open, no occupational restrictions. That's the big backlog that has been reduced.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: How was it reduced?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Basically, by processing the cases. Obviously some were accepted and some were not, in terms of whether they met what was required under the points system.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: So the backlog went from 640,000 to 374,000 because all of that backlog was processed? Is that it?

Mr. Neil Yeates: That's right.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Okay, let me chew on that for a moment.

I'd also like to ask a question about the refugee board and the refugee acceptances. We got the refugee board back up to around 98%, I think. I'm interested in the interactions between the processing of refugee claims and the processing of immigration claims.

How does one stream influence the other?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, I would say very simply that the streams are actually independent. The size of the refugee class will depend on two key things. One is the number of refugees we settle, what we call government-assisted refugees, from overseas. They were the Nepalese and the Iraqis I referenced. The other key piece is the number of cases that are processed through the Immigration and Refugee Board and the number of people who are successfully granted status.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: That would be about the almost 7,000 individuals who successfully requested asylum and were processed through the refugee system, which you refer to on page 11.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. In the document—sorry, I'll just make sure I've got the same reference here—in terms of the 2010 plan—

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Sorry, that was 2009.

Mr. Neil Yeates: In 2009. With regard to the protected persons in Canada, the range of 7,000 to 9,000 is what is coming through the Immigration and Refugee Board.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Okay. And the processing of refugees is entirely independent of the processing of immigration applicants?

Mr. Neil Yeates: That's correct, yes.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Can you tell me about the queue process for refugees, then?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes.

I should say, Chair, that we don't speak for the Immigration and Refugee Board. We'll tell you what we know in a general way; you may want to ask them directly. But basically, they're processing cases largely on a chronological basis, by way of date of application.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Okay, so the date of arriving in Canada and applying—

Mr. Neil Yeates: Making a claim.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: —and making a claim.

Regarding the 7,000 individuals who succeeded in requesting asylum on or after their arrival in Canada, how did most of them get to Canada?

Mr. Neil Yeates: The majority of those would have made a claim when they arrived in Canada at the border. It could have been at an airport or it could have been at a land border. Depending on the country of origin, it tends to vary quite a bit. As an example, we've had historically a lot of claims from Mexico, and they have been from a combination of people who are already here in Canada, perhaps working, and others who simply showed up at the border, land or air.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: It also indicates about 4,000 of their dependants abroad. So for the 7,000 people who were accepted here in Canada, who were evaluated as being legitimate refugees, actual refugees, we then turned around and accepted 4,000 from their families because they were legitimate refugees.

Mr. Neil Yeates: That's correct.

• (1650)

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Regarding the 7,000 accepted, how many people would have applied to be refugees? Is it twice as many or three times as many who weren't assessed to have been legitimate refugees?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Historically the acceptance rate at the IRB has been around 42%.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you.

It interests me, though, that of 7,000 accepted and identified as refugees, we have more than half that number of family members brought over. That's obviously a very significant number, and a path where, in many cases, one person who comes to Canada is trying to bring over their family that is in a similar situation.

Thank you for clarifying that the immigration stream is entirely independent of the refugee stream. I think that's something that is important to have on record here.

I'll pass it for now. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

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

In your statement, you touched on accomplishments over the past few years and indicated what is coming in future. Among other things, you referred to the refugee issue. You mentioned that this Parliament had adopted the Balanced Refugee Reform Act in March 2010, a matter in which this committee was actively involved. There was, in fact, unanimous consensus on the issue.

I remember very well all the work that had been ongoing for a long time. I gathered that the department had been working on the issue for a very long time. You had informed us, during your various appearances before this committee, of the ideas that you intended to present. We were entitled to some rather detailed briefings. The department was really prepared and we could see where it was heading.

The House is currently examining Bill C-49. We have not seen anything about this bill and we have yet to have any briefings that are as detailed as those we were given previously. I know that you cannot discuss the political aspect. The minister will answer questions on that issue.

What prompted the department to say that, yes, Parliament needs to adopt this bill and provide for these special measures for people who arrive in groups?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Mr. Chair, I will start to answer the question, but perhaps Mr. Linklater could help me later on.

[English]

I think the key issue, Chair, has been whether the government, whether Parliament, is concerned about the way people might arrive in Canada to claim asylum, particularly with the involvement of human smugglers and traffickers. The information we have is that people are paying a lot of money to be trafficked to Canada, and I think the government is very concerned about that, and therefore that turned attention to how one might respond to that. There is a variety of ways of doing that, including the appointing of a special envoy; doing a lot of work with countries in the region; and working with UNHCR, the IOM—the International Organization for Migration—and the international community writ large. But one of the factors that has been raised is to what extent Canada's system is seen as what is called a “pull factor”, which makes it, if you like, vulnerable to these kinds of activities.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Is this type of activity a very recent problem?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: It's hard to say. Certainly marine arrivals have been unusual. They've happened before. There were the Chinese boat arrivals in 1999, I believe. It's not that common, but it has happened from time to time.

The worry is that you start to create an incentive for those things to happen and you get a real wave of those occurrences. That is what has happened in Australia; hundreds of boats have arrived on the coast of Australia.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Currently, with respect to the 7,204 in 2009... We do not yet have the figure for 2010, however—

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur St-Cyr, there's a certain generality when we're talking about this. Bill C-49 isn't in this report. It's being dealt with by a legislative committee. We've let you go on a little bit more, but I think it's inappropriate at this time.

●(1655)

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: If you had listened to my question, you would realize that I am speaking specifically to the information on page 13 of the Citizenship and Immigration Report, namely, the number of protected individuals who entered Canada in 2009. There were 7,204 of them.

What I would like to know is the percentage of people who arrived individually, either by car or by plane, at the border, and then made an application. What percentage of people arrived in a group, either by boat or bus, or by any other means? It would be good if the committee could see how the situation is developing and be informed about what changed in 2009 and 2010. What magnitude are we talking about?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Mr. Chair, it is very difficult to say.

[English]

We don't really know. Certainly we would know about something like a big ship arrival. We didn't have any of those occurrences in 2009. To what extent we were dealing with organized arrivals it's very difficult to tell, but we know they go on. We have had experiences where a significant number of people have claimed asylum status off a single flight. To what extent there was collusion amongst people on that flight, we really don't know.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Have you tried, in the past, to see if this was... Do you not know the answer because you never tried to find out, or is it simply because you haven't managed to show or find out what it was?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: It is a very difficult movement and set of issues to get a handle on. We work with the RCMP and CSIS on measures designed to combat trafficking and human smuggling, but this is a very difficult group to go after. We try to work through those agencies with other countries to get local law enforcement cooperation, and so on.

We've been dealing with some of those issues with respect to refugee claimants from Hungary. Members may have seen that there were some arrests in the Hamilton area. A trafficking ring was uncovered and charges have been laid. There has been good cooperation with the Government of Hungary in that case. So that kind of work continues to go on. It's very difficult to quantify, because it's hard to get your fingers on it.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: On the same page in the report, although this is repeated in several places... Protected persons in Canada are those who come here and apply for refugee status. As for dependents abroad, that would be the family of these individuals who comes here later on to join them.

We could consider that the total number of these individuals who arrive alone or who are accompanied by their family remains constant. For example, if a family of four arrives here by boat or a single person arrives by boat and then sends for the three members of his or her family, that works out to being the same thing. Would I be correct in saying that?

[English]

The Chair: You're over time, so I'll go to Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I see that under the family class the parents and grandparents are still stuck at the 13,000 level. That's a steep drop from 10 to 15 years ago, when the total number of family class applicants accounted for almost half of the people coming into Canada. Now it's about a quarter, so it's a much smaller number. In the meantime, there is a huge backlog. Maybe you can let me know what the backlog is for parents.

I just know that to sponsor a parent from Beijing, it takes five years; from New Delhi, it's six years; from Accra, it's eight years; and it's three years before your sponsorship application is even reviewed. So it's just huge. I can't see how, with the 13,000 to 17,000 range for parents and grandparents, you'll ever deal with that backlog. Wait times will never get smaller; they'll just grow.

Am I wrong?

Mr. Neil Yeates: That is one of the dilemmas we have in the immigration program. The number of applications for parents and grandparents is about 145,000. That's a large number.

• (1700)

Ms. Olivia Chow: That's per year, right?

Mr. Neil Yeates: That's what we have now, so we have about 10 years' worth in our current backlog of applications for parents and grandparents. I mentioned the federal skilled workers earlier, where we add 640,000. So that is our dilemma. We have large numbers of applications trying to get through a very small—if I can put it this way—levels plan tube.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Why not expand the little hole that you're letting people through? With that backlog, it's going to take forever. I can just see this going from five to eight years. Two years from now, we could be sitting here with a 10-year wait.

What would be the plan?

Mr. Neil Yeates: There are three options. First, there's the status quo: we just keep going. And you're quite right, processing times will probably continue to lengthen, given the demand.

Second, the government could look at a larger immigration target overall. We're at this range of 240,000 to 265,000. However, there are a lot of implications there—the number of people Canada can settle, the effect on our whole support system of health and social services, the effect on education, and so on. So that needs pretty careful consideration.

Third, there are trade-offs between the different components of our existing plans. You could rebalance the system and decide to do more of one and less of another. And that's what we've been doing a bit at the margin.

Ms. Olivia Chow: People from Beijing, Canadians, have been here for 10 years and they want their parents to come—they're

having a baby and they want a grandparent to babysit, or there are any number of reasons. Maybe they want to live with their parents; they have very traditional family values. They point to the fact that if you sponsor a father or a mother from Paris, you wait a year or two, but if it's someone from Beijing, it's five years plus. They say that's unfair. They say each visa office has a target, and the target number is not balanced, based on the number of applications.

Why one year in Paris and five years in Beijing? I can't answer their question. It's a basic violation of their human rights, they think. They see it that way.

How would one answer that question? How do you set these targets?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Fundamentally, we are wrestling with the number of applications at each mission. And missions are given specific targets in terms of their "share" of the overall target. So if there are a lot more applications in one mission, they're going to develop more of a queue.

This is where GCMS can help us. Historically, it's been very difficult. Our new global case management system allows us to do the casework in different parts of our network. It gives us the opportunity to equalize the processing time around the network.

Claudette, do you have anything further on the missions?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Basically, the global case management system will permit us to deal with some of that issue. But at the end of the day, it depends on the number of applications and the type of application.

Paris is probably not a great example. A lot of the Paris cases are destined for Quebec, and we have certain obligations toward the Quebec government. That's why they'd probably be processed a little faster.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Do you have an estimate of the number of non-status residents? They've been called undocumented workers or people with a precarious status, i.e., people who have gone underground. Do you have an estimate of how many there are? There have been estimates of 200,000. Some say there are 100,000. Who knows, because they are underground?

Are you concerned about this trend? Since 1957, every 15 years or so, there is an administrative review that allows some of them to get status in Canada, whether on humanitarian grounds or in some other way. We haven't done one for almost 20 years. With all these temporary foreign workers and failed refugee claimants out there, the number of people who have gone underground is probably growing. Is that a concern of the department?

● (1705)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, I think the short answer, as the member suggested, is that we actually don't know, in terms of numbers, because by definition, people are underground. However, we are well aware, as is the Immigration and Refugee Board, that there is a backlog of cases at the IRB, and we're working hard with them now to try to work our way through that backlog. We'll see how that goes. But in terms of the implementation of the new system next year, we would like to have gotten rid of as much of that backlog as possible.

Ms. Olivia Chow: But those are above ground; they're not underground.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, they're claimants.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chow.

Mrs. Grewal, it's your turn.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair. And thanks to the officials for their time.

Our government recognizes the challenges that Canada's refugee determination system faces, and we have brought in important legislation to ensure that it is fast and fair for everyone who comes to Canada.

Could you please update the committee on the implementation of the Balanced Refugee Reform Act?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Certainly, Chair. Maybe I will start, and then ADM Linklater can carry on.

As members know, the bill received royal assent in early July, so we've now been working hard with our partners at CSIS, the RCMP, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Public Safety to implement the new regime.

As you know, as members, it's a very complicated system. There's a whole series of things that we're working on: updated regulations, new rules at the Immigration and Refugee Board.... They're starting consultations on that, by the way. New staff are being hired. The IRB is moving from governor-in-council appointees, as you would know, to civil servant decision-makers. They're finalizing the job descriptions and the staffing strategies for those positions as they set up the RPD, the Refugee Protection Division. They're also setting up the Refugee Appeal Division, which is new. They will be GIC appointees, so they're working on the strategy for getting that up and running. We're working on the interoperability of all of our computer systems between the different agencies, because there are some improvements we need to make there.

In CIC, we are coordinating this effort between all of these partner departments. We're working on trying to reduce the backlog for our humanitarian and compassionate cases and for our pre-removal risk assessment cases as well.

Those are simply a few of the components that are in train for this very complex set of machinery that is the refugee determination system.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I see.

Mr. Chair, the rest of my time I'll pass to Mr. Dykstra.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to follow up a little bit on your commitment from 2009, in terms of offering protection to more than 22,000 refugees here, including more than 12,000 who've resettled from abroad. One of the things we did as a government, and it was supported in the House by all opposition parties, was pass Bill C-11, which committed to an additional 2,500 refugees on a yearly basis to our current obligations to the UN.

I do want to get an understanding of this because I think it needs to be clarified. Those refugees, whether they be Bhutanese or whether they be Iraqi, are in fact already approved and it's been indicated, from a UN perspective and from a worldwide perspective, that they are true refugees.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Obviously, it makes things much more difficult for us to be able to fulfill our international obligations with respect to accepting refugees here in Canada if, on an intermittent basis, we have a number, in some cases hundreds, literally, show up on the doorstep—or at the “waterstep”, if you want to use that language—and that does obviously hurt and hinder our ability to fulfill our international obligations.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, one of the challenges has always been focusing our efforts in working with the international community, with the UN, the UNHCR, when dealing with a lot of very protracted refugee situations around the world. I mentioned Nepal and the Bhutanese refugees. Yes, that requires a lot of effort, but we feel it's a really critical part of what we do in the refugee determination program, and that is our preferred route for resettling refugees from around the world.

● (1710)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: Three minutes.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Great. Thank you.

One of the things that I also want to touch base with you on is the whole issue around our “Discover Canada” guide, which was actually very successful in terms of being issued this year.

Could you speak a little bit to the success of the guide itself, and also speak to the fact that we have faced some challenges with respect to those who have applied for their citizenship, gone through the test, and now find it's not as easy to become a Canadian citizen and achieve the status that many in the world would love to have?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Thank you.

Chair, as members will know, we did do a very major revision of the citizenship guide called “Discover Canada”. It is I think a much more comprehensive document than the previous version, and we redeveloped the citizenship test to match the new guide. It remains a multiple-choice test, but it is more difficult than the previous test. However, if one studies the guide, we wouldn't expect people to have difficulty with it. We are monitoring it quite carefully. We've made some revisions as we go along. We track responses to individual questions, and if we find a question is not hitting the mark, then we go back and look at it, whether it's being adequately covered in the guide or not, whether the question is worded in a way perhaps that people are not understanding in the way we thought they might. We will continue to make those changes as we go along.

The guide itself has proven enormously popular. I referenced that we've sent out hundreds of thousands of copies. It's been downloaded on the web a couple of hundred thousand times. We have an audio guide as well that people can download. It has proven to be immensely popular as well.

We are encouraging its use among teachers and students. We've developed a corner of our website for teachers and students, and the citizenship material is there. As I say, we were surprised at what the public response and the take-up has been to that material.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you.

One of the other areas that you've obviously done a lot of work in is for those who are trying to apply to come here for permanent residency. The whole Canadian experience class program and the uptake of that, the success of it—perhaps you could speak very briefly to that.

It has become a very popular opportunity for those who have the skill sets and have been here long enough to be able to apply. It is a process that is actually moved through much more quickly than people had anticipated it would take in terms of wait times.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, we are very pleased with the Canadian experience class, Chair. The huge strength of the program is that it works off Canadian credentials and Canadian work experience.

As committee members will know, one of the key issues for immigrants to Canada is foreign credential recognition. It's been a challenge for many years. I think we are making some significant progress now with the national framework. However, the CEC program essentially bypasses that problem because it's basically picking up people who are already at Canadian colleges and universities, so we know, obviously, the credential is not going to be a problem in the Canadian marketplace. That's coupled with Canadian work experience at defined levels. These people who are well educated are in the workplace now and are already successful.

One of the other key issues is language—

The Chair: No, no, that's it.

Language.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Language.

The Chair: That's it.

Mr. Neil Yeates: *C'est tout. Merci.*

The Chair: We're going to move on to Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to pick up on some of my concerns around the cap, which I alluded to in an earlier question. But first I'd like to get a little clarification on something Mr. Dykstra referred to.

He referred to the UN convention refugees as “true refugees”—the fact that they have been identified and analyzed by the UN. In many cases, as you explained, it has been in protracted situations in horrible circumstances in large refugee camps around the world.

Could you tell me, by Canadian law, for a refugee who is a convention refugee or a refugee who shows up at an airport and declares they are seeking asylum...? Once they've been determined by our Canadian processes to be refugees, is there a difference between a convention refugee and a refugee arriving by boat, by air, by plane?

●(1715)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, essentially they end up in the same place, whether determined by the IRB here in Canada or by the UN and brought in as a government-assisted or a privately sponsored refugee.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: So basically, once someone has recognized that they are fleeing persecution, oppression, or however we frame the definition of refugees, once they're identified as a refugee in Canada, they are a refugee, regardless of whether it was the UN or any other factors around them. They are a person needing and deserving of our protection.

Mr. Neil Yeates: In essence, that's right.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Thank you very much. It is important to get that clear.

On my question about the cap, which I was referring to earlier, the backlog was reduced because...from the time the first directive was brought in narrowing the field of workers, that allowed you a little more leeway to get through the existing backlog without adding to it the same size of backlog. However, here is my concern about the cap. Are we refusing people who simply do not qualify because they're not in the right professional stream, or are we not processing their application because, for example, we've already reached some quota number of engineers from India, so we know we're not going to accept any more, and therefore we turn them away, without actually even looking at their application, even though their application, had it arrived earlier in the year, would have been processed and possibly accepted?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, unfortunately, there are elements of all of those in our system. We have the people we would call pre-C-50, so pre-ministerial instructions. That is the big backlog I referenced. There are no occupational restrictions on that. They were all processed according to the points system, and they still will be. We still have 340,000 to go. So that is that group.

“Ministerial instructions 1”, as we refer to them, were the first set of occupations that were identified, and it is true that the uptake for that took a little while to build up, but then it started coming in a flood. The nature of our business is that as soon as you define requirements, everybody races around to try to make their qualifications fit the new requirements we have developed. There was a bit of a lag, but then it started to build very quickly.

That then led us into “Ministerial instructions 2” at the end of June this year. We took another look at the occupation groups with provinces and territories and employers and narrowed it a little bit, but there were some changes up and down. Also, the decision was made to implement a cap on the number of applications at 20,000 a year and 1,000 for any one occupational group. So far we have hit one of those for the year, for people in business management. It's quite a broad occupational group. We find that the broader the group, the more quickly it gets filled.

We'll see how that goes. We'll continue to monitor it, but we still have a large cadre of that, if you like, open-ended group, the 340,000, to draw from. We have been encouraging provinces and others to draw from that group because there are lots of good candidates in that group.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: You also mentioned, on page 21, the importance of language training. How much was spent on language training in 2009? I didn't see any numbers in here.

Mr. Neil Yeates: We would have to get you that number, but we certainly can. You mean in terms of language training here in Canada?

Mr. Justin Trudeau: Yes, now—

The Chair: I'm going to cut you off at language again. We're out of time.

Mr. Justin Trudeau: It's always language, isn't it? *Les Anglais!*

The Chair: I know, *les Anglais*.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Mr. Yeates, earlier on you answered Ms. Chow's question on wait times throughout the world. You referred to a global quota. Later you said that each embassy has its own ratio of cases to process.

If I've understood you correctly, although you only indicate total numbers in the immigration plans you have, within the department you also have an immigration profile setting out the number of individuals that should come from each region, and you allocate resources based on that. Is that how things work?

• (1720)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Generally, yes. We need to take a number of categories into consideration.

[English]

We look at all of the categories we have—provincial nominees, Quebec selected, federally selected, skilled workers, family class, and so on—and we make an assessment both in terms of our historical experience in terms of countries around the world and then

in terms of what the levels plan is giving us with regard to the target ranges for each one of those categories.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: From what I gather, when we decide to take in 150,000 economic immigrants and establish what percentage will come from Europe, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa or anywhere else on the planet, that is a political or societal choice, there is a quota, a profile that needs to be established.

How is that done within the department? I have not seen the mechanism. How do you determine the distribution among various geographic regions?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: It's actually very complicated, how we do that, Chair, because we're trying to weigh all of these different factors. Madame Deschênes, in operations, basically works with all of the missions abroad to try to come up with a plan on how we're going to manage this each year.

Claudette.

[Translation]

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: With the Government of Quebec, for instance, we agree on what we will grant the province or what it wants to do. Quebec will tell us where it wants its immigrants from. So, we start by saying, for instance, send a given number of cases to Quebec. Then, we look at where investor applications come from. Then, we look at family class, parents and grandparents.

In the end, we always try to balance the number of applications and the number of cases we will be processing, knowing that our resources are somewhat stuck in time. It is not easy to increase resources. Some missions may at times ask for more time because we also look at rates of denial and acceptance.

We do not start by saying, for instance, that we want a given number of self-employed workers from Europe and Africa. That is not our starting point. We start by determining our plan, the inventories in these offices and what needs to be done.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I understand that you do not start from scratch each year. Ultimately, we decide whether our country will increase or decrease the proportion of immigrants coming from a given region based on the distribution of resources. If we want more, we allocate more. If we want fewer, we allocate less, and we transfer.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That is why the GCMS system is of great interest to us. It will allow us to no longer have to consider things based on the resources in a given place; rather, we can consider total resources and see how we want to expedite cases as quickly as possible.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: It will give you more flexibility to transfer resources from one place to another, even though, physically, they may not be moved from one country to another.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That is precisely it.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Very well.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It can happen that we are unable to process some cases in Africa, as it is difficult. In this case we will be in a much better position to do other things in Canada to expedite applications, for instance.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Ultimately, you are doing the best you can given the allocation of resources based on the targeted immigration profile. We have control over that despite the restrictions you are referring to. Obviously, there is more or less control as far as applications are concerned. You may get a series of applications from one given country because Canada is popular there.

The length of the line-up, in the end, represents the gap between the type of immigrants we are seeking and the number of immigrants from that given country who want to come to Canada. So, this line-up is not solely caused by reasons beyond your control. It is also a result of the immigration profile we are seeking, or that the department is seeking, for Canada.

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: Chair, I would say that the system doesn't work as eloquently as is described. Basically we're dealing with a lot of variables that we're trying to juggle. The denominator, really, for all of that is processing time. In an ideal world, arguably, we would have equitable processing times across all the missions, all categories, around the world. In some ways, that is our objective. There are so many things that happen during the year, so many local circumstances, but that's essentially what we plan from.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Uppal.

Mr. Tim Uppal (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's well understood that immigration plays a key role in supporting our economy, especially in this time of global economic instability. Can you please share recent changes made to the immigrant investor program, including the larger financial investments that these newcomers will make in our economy?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Certainly.

Just very recently—in fact I believe the changes come into force this week, on Wednesday, December 1—we have doubled the investment amounts and net asset worth amounts for the immigrant investor program. The investment amount is increasing from \$400,000 to \$800,000 and the asset amount from \$800,000 to \$1.6 million. It's roughly in the neighbourhood of what some of our comparator countries are seeking for immigrant investor programs—the U.K., Australia, the U.S.—roughly in that ballpark. We believe we will still be very competitive. We've had very strong demand for the immigrant investor program, particularly from China through Hong Kong, so we have lots of applications there to process.

We think it will strengthen the program by making those changes.

Mr. Tim Uppal: This government has increased its funding into settlement programs, and that would include language training. Do you know the percentage of immigrant uptake on this? My understanding is it's lower than we'd like. Are there any plans in getting more immigrants to take this up?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Mr. Chair, on language training itself the uptake is around 25%. That is somewhat lower than we would like. We do have a program right now where we are using vouchers. We've got a

couple of pilot projects going on at the moment where we've sent out vouchers to people directly, so they can choose the language school of instruction of their choice. We're measuring this over the first six months, when we send out the voucher, and we're finding so far that the take-up is more than double what it was.

So, historically, in the first six months—and I do emphasize that the time period is important here—it's been about 3%, and through the voucher program it's about 7%. We think that's a pretty significant change, so we'll continue to experiment with different ways of getting the message out and sort of encouraging people to take language programming. As we know from the research, it's a very key determinant of integration and economic success.

Mr. Tim Uppal: In your opening comments you mentioned the biometrics program. Can you expand on that? What are the benefits of it, and when will this program be implemented or when do you expect it to be?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Biometrics, which is essentially the collection of fingerprint data and digital photographs, often using facial recognition software, is a very powerful identifier of identity, and it's very difficult to fool a biometric system.

You may have seen some of the cases in the media from time to time, the most recent example being the fellow from China who used a silicone mask—very creative on his part. But it's very difficult to fool a biometric system because it's your fingerprints that are going to be registered. It's a very powerful technology. It's being used by a number of other countries. It's already been implemented by the U.S., the U.K., and Australia.

We are working on rolling out, in a phased approach, over the next several years, a regime of biometric collection. We already do it for refugees. We do share information on a pilot basis with our partners, particularly the U.S. We are finding a fairly significant match rate with the U.S. It's about 43% on claimants, so it's quite high. Where people are claiming different identities and so on, biometrics is able to sort them out. So it's a very powerful tool.

Mr. Tim Uppal: Thank you.

The Chair: I have one final question. You're not online processing, are you?

• (1730)

Mr. Neil Yeates: We are now for some streams. We're using it for students and temporary foreign workers here in Canada. Those applications are available online now. We're starting to process those applications now using scanned documents and the online application form. That is where we want to go, so we've started that.

The Chair: When will you finish the rest?

Mr. Neil Yeates: We have 35 lines of business, so that remains to be seen, but we will take on the ones that are going to have the biggest impact in terms of processing time.

The Chair: Our time has come to say goodbye. I want to thank Mr. Yeates, Ms. Deschênes, and Mr. Linklater for coming and chatting about this report with us this afternoon, and for the auditor's report as well. Thank you kindly.

This meeting is adjourned.

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