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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (1020)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): We would like to welcome everybody here, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), our study on employability in Canada. I would like to take this time to thank all the witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to be here today to talk to us about what we believe is a very crucial issue, not only now but affecting us in the future.

I have a couple of housekeeping items, and I always leave something out, so I'm sure all my colleagues will remind me as we go through.

The way it will work today is you will get seven minutes each, and I would like to keep you right to seven minutes because we have a number of witnesses. If you don't get to all of your recommendations, my suggestion is that we'll try to pick that up in the questions. Then we'll have seven minutes of questions and answers of all the members, followed by a round of five minutes.

To the MPs, you have some research documents. I just want to make sure the clerk gets them back, and then we can redistribute them to you at the next meeting. That's the original report on the study of employability in Canada. So if we could get that back, that would be great.

The third thing is, for those of you who presented briefs a little bit late, they cannot be distributed to the full committee until after they've been translated. We will make sure they get translated. You may reference them today, but if they're late coming in, as far as the submission goes, you can rest assured that the committee will get them at some point, after they've been translated.

I'm going to start with Mr. Kramer.

Thank you for being here, sir. You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ken Kramer (Chair, Muscular Dystrophy Canada):

Honourable chair and members, thank you for your invitation this morning. My name is Ken Kramer. I am the chair of the national board of directors of Muscular Dystrophy Canada. I'm also a lawyer and president of the law firm KMK Law Corporation in downtown Vancouver.

Since 1954, Muscular Dystrophy Canada has been committed to improving the quality of life for the tens of thousands of Canadians living with neuromuscular disorders. Our organization provides

funding for leading research for the discovery of therapies and cures for neuromuscular disorders. Beyond research, we also provide various services to Canadians with these disorders, including assisting in the purchase of wheelchairs.

I'm here today to make you aware of a lamentable situation with regard to the funding available for persons with disabilities and to offer solutions that I hope you will strongly consider. These are important ideas, as I believe firmly that they will encourage greater employment amongst this group.

There are currently major inconsistencies in the levels of services, funding, and accessibility offered between provinces when it comes to wheelchairs. The result of this lack of funding is that non-profit organizations such as MDC are obligated to use a significant portion of their limited funds to pay for people's wheelchairs, instead of allocating that money toward research that will find a cure for degenerative disorders.

While some provincial programs will cover all the costs associated with purchasing wheelchairs, others will only provide funding for children or for those who are on social assistance. While some provincial programs boast wait times of up to six to eight weeks, others take over six to eight months to provide this medically necessary equipment. Some provincial programs offer readily accessible information about their program requirements and processes, while others don't even have an official wheelchair program in place, making the necessary information very difficult to find.

Wheelchairs are a fundamental need for those who require them. Those with such needs should not have to deplete their savings before receiving funding from the government. If the government is willing to provide funding for someone to obtain a hip replacement so that he or she is able to walk, then it should also pay for a person's wheelchair if that is what he or she needs to get around. Both situations, as I will discuss later, encourage independence.

To that end, MDC, along with five other like-minded organizations, have recently launched a national wheelchair strategy, wherein we ask that the government implement the following three important pillars: one, national standards to ensure that the levels of service and funding provided to those in need of wheelchairs are consistent across provinces; two, federal transfer payments to enable all provinces to provide full funding for their residents' wheelchair needs; and three, the creation of a one-stop information venue, whereby information about the various provincial program requirements, processes, and contacts would be available through a national phone service and website.

But how does this affect employability issues in Canada? I believe there are two ways of looking at this: how this fits within governments' existing support networks and how not doing so discourages employment. In the first case, it is important to look at how government currently helps people work. Be it literacy, job skills, or health care, the efforts of government are designed to create as level a playing field as possible for all to compete. The system at present, where costs of a wheelchair are often downloaded to the individual, makes it difficult for the disabled to afford mobility.

•(1025)

Beyond this fix within the mandate of the government, it is important to look at how the status quo can actually make working unaffordable. Governments' job should also be to make sure there is always an incentive for all to work. Fewer people on social assistance means more revenues and fewer expenses for government, ignoring the dignity and financial independence. But while it may seem counterintuitive, some Canadians with disabilities will find it more affordable to rely on social assistance than to work, since being employed would mean that they would have to deplete their entire savings to obtain a wheelchair, a purchase that costs as much as or more than a new car. Clearly this doesn't make sense.

For example, the chair that you see me in now costs approximately \$25,000. Because I can be independent through the use of this highly sophisticated electric wheelchair, I am able to run my law firm in downtown Vancouver and employ three individuals. Without this chair, this simply would not be possible. Now, I am very fortunate to have this equipment, but not all persons with disabilities are so fortunate. Imagine how many extra people might be employed or be employers if access to mobility devices was not an issue.

If implemented, we strongly believe our recommended measures will have a direct impact on the job prospects for Canadians with disabilities. Beyond this, such a program would make Canada an example to other countries in terms of the importance and benefits of investing in its citizens. The time has come for wheelchairs to be a core part of our national health care strategy and, by extension, how Canada promotes employment among its citizens. We call on you,

esteemed members of the committee, to help make the national wheelchair strategy a reality. Every Canadian deserves to live with dignity and independence, and deserves to have the opportunity to contribute to his or her community. Without a prescribed mobility device, many Canadians cannot participate in making Canada's economy stronger and more productive.

Thank you for your attention. I invite you to review the national wheelchair strategy backgrounder, which I have provided to the committee in French and English. This document will illustrate some of the discrepancies that are in existence in regard to services, funding, and accessibility between provinces when it comes to wheelchairs.

•(1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kramer, and thank you for keeping that right on time as well. You're a good example for the rest of our witnesses who will come after you. And it's good seeing you again. I know we saw you in Ottawa—

Mr. Ken Kramer: It's good to see you too.

The Chair: —but this time it was our turn to come out to see you.

Ms. Blank, you have seven minutes, please. Thank you.

Ms. Bonnie Blank (President, Canadian Dental Hygienists Association): Thank you for affording us the opportunity to speak to you today. Dental hygienists are primary oral health care providers, focusing on oral disease prevention and oral health promotion. Oral health has a profound impact on the overall health of Canadians. Periodontal disease, historically considered a localized infection, is now considered a potential risk factor for a number of serious health problems such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, diabetes, and low birth weight babies.

The links between oral health and general health underscore the need for a health system that integrates the mouth with the rest of the body. Two human resource system changes can support this integration. Number one, dental hygienists must be able to work with other general health professionals and to work unsupervised to increase access to care. Adequate access must be provided to post-secondary and continuing education.

What does the federal government need to do to support the oral health human resources system? First, it must remove barriers to accessing dental hygiene preventive services. What is the largest roadblock? Dental hygienists are not paid directly for their services. In many provinces and territories, in order for dental hygienists to be paid for their services, they must work for a dentist. This creates a monopoly on oral health services that does not benefit the public in the end. The public service dental care plan and the Veterans Affairs Canada—VAC—dental services program perpetuate and support the monopoly by not paying dental hygienists for their services. Several international reports and letters call for payments directly to dental hygienists in private businesses. The spinoff from the direct payment will be increased competition and increased access to oral health services. A letter from the Canadian Competition Bureau overwhelmingly supports the ability of dental hygienists to initiate practice with no restrictions from dentists.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission published a report on competition in health services that documents how dentists' control over dental hygienists reduces competition in oral health services. In addition, the OECD recently published a report on competition that highlights the negative impact of dentists' attempts to prevent independent dental hygiene practices. The competition authority in Ireland also criticized the dentists' efforts to forestall independent dental hygiene practices.

Two government dental plans—the pensioners' dental services plan of the federal public service and the Ontario children in need of treatment, CINOT, dental program in Ontario—pay dental hygienists directly for their services. The federal government must follow the lead of these progressive programs. This will allow competition to flourish and improve access to oral health services.

Second, the federal government needs to strengthen human capital. Strengthening human capital through continuing education is of paramount importance to the dental hygiene profession, and it is a requirement for licensure in most provinces. Continuing education ensures health professionals keep abreast of constantly changing research, education, and technology. It ensures quality standards, programs, and services—quality that so many Canadians have come to depend on—and ensures excellence within the profession, accountability to the public, and increased productivity.

The federal government can encourage health professionals to participate in continuing education through income tax incentives. We call on the federal government to expand several definitions in the Income Tax Act to enable health professionals to obtain deductions for a broader range of continuing education activities, including conferences and online courses. The definitions in the Income Tax Act that require revision include the following: designated educational institution, certified educational institution, and qualifying education program. Definition revisions should allow individuals to claim expenses related to continuing education events.

Income tax deductions for an expanded number of continuing education activities would provide an additional incentive to Canadians to increase their knowledge and skills. It would result in investment in lifelong learning and it would increase productivity.

• (1035)

Human capital can also be strengthened by improving access to post-secondary education through improved student loans. Dental hygienists are educated during two- to four-year programs of study at a college or university. Many students are battling the high cost of this education, which can cost up to \$40,000. The elimination of grant programs in most provinces puts a further strain on students.

In conclusion, you can make critical changes to government policies to improve oral health human resources in Canada and the oral health of Canadians. Support the direct payment of dental hygienists, improve access to post-secondary education and continuing education through tax incentives, and improve financial assistance for post-secondary education.

Thank you. We will be pleased to answer any of your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blank.

We'll move to Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Perley Holmes (Business Manager, International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers - Local 97): Thank you.

I'm going to give you a brief introduction of what an ironworker is. We're part of the building trades. We're the people who place the rebar in concrete structures. We place the structural steel in your buildings and bridges. We're pretty well on every job that's not made out of wood.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): You like heights, right?

Mr. Perley Holmes: Well, yes, I have worked in high places.

But that's what the ironwork trade is.

With respect to that, I represent the local. We have about 1,800 members in this province, and there are about 15,000 of us in Canada. We have lots of issues, and they're in the newspapers, with mobility and skill shortages, and this is what I want to address.

I passed around a graph. I'm not sure if you have it, but it shows the apprentice completion numbers over a period of years. When you look at that, this is what happens when the government gets involved with apprenticeship. We ran our apprenticeship program up until there. Ever since 1986, the numbers pretty well tell the story. It was going pretty good when we were in charge of the apprenticeship program.

Anyway, I'm going to read a letter, as I'm going to run out of time. It's a letter I addressed to the last Minister of Human Resources, Belinda Stronach, in January. It pretty well sums up a lot of what I'm going to say, so I'll see if I can get through it in time.

To the Honourable Ms. Stronach:

I am writing to request your assistance in addressing an ongoing issue I feel is of grave concern, not only to members of my Union, but also to the public at large. The issue is the requested use of foreign workers to deal with an anticipated skilled trade shortage in British Columbia. I have previously written to your office regarding the skilled trade shortage issue and the impending "foreign worker" solution. This issue now requires your immediate attention.

In particular, I want to address the issue of workers who place reinforcing bar, or rebar, into concrete. The open-shop, non-union contractors in residential high-rise construction have been screaming for the past couple of years that Canada ought to open its borders to foreign rebar workers. They claim projects are in disarray, on hold, and others may be cancelled due to these contractors' inability to attract and retain rebar workers.

Yet, a recent study done by the Construction Sector Council entitled, *Labour Requirements for 2005 to 2013*, indicates a need for only approximately 300 additional ironworkers over the next three years in British Columbia, with another 100 or so required over the following 4 years, ending in 2013. It is our position, which I will sketch out in greater detail below, that we are more than capable of meeting this demand from within our own borders.

...it is interesting to note that the same group of contractors crying out for the right to bring in foreign workers to deal with an alleged skills shortage are the exact same contractors who have never bought into the need for full-fledged apprenticeships or formal training, and heaven forbid they would accept anything like a red-sealed tradesman. They are also largely responsible for the strong lobby group behind the provincial government's destruction of apprenticeship training in the province of British Columbia.

In contrast, Ironworkers Local 97 has a proud and enviable record of supporting apprenticeship training and our membership hold at least 98% of the Ironworker Red Seal certifications issued in this province. The first formal ironworker training curriculum and dedicated facility in North America was developed and initiated by Local 97 in 1956. This program was subsequently adopted by the International Association in Washington, DC, and is now used throughout North America. It is a proud legacy as my Local Union enters its 100th year in the business of building Canada.

A few years back it became alarmingly clear that we were not attracting enough apprentices into our trade. There are numerous reasons for this; namely a lack of work and diminishing wages due to the competitive bidding against the open-shop sector, a sector that never was a supporter of apprenticeship, and therefore unwilling to bear any of the cost burden associated with training apprentices. In addition, for a time we had the lowest wages in the rebar sector in Canada, the consequence of which was the inability to attract experienced Ironworkers from other parts of Canada to fill the void. Wages have now increased to the point that we currently have 30 rodmen...

—actually, we have a hundred rodmen from other provinces—

...almost all of who are from Quebec, working in British Columbia. We expect another 40 to arrive in the New Year.

It is interesting to note that the province of Quebec, since implementing the Decree and enacting significant labour law changes in the early 1970s, have developed the best training and apprenticeship programs in North America and quite possibly the world. As a result of this commitment to training, there is now an abundance of mobile, highly skilled tradesmen from Quebec available to travel to other parts of Canada, including British Columbia, when construction is slow in their home province.

Ironworkers are a mobile group of workers, and as a result of our fraternal brotherhood, we have the ability to tap into this valuable source of highly skilled Canadian tradesmen from Quebec. If the open-shop contractors signed an agreement with us, they too could gain access to this gold mine of opportunity. Instead they, in collusion with the provincial government, wish to bring in foreign workers rather than employing or training Canadians. I wish to note one of our contractors, Harris Rebar, is paying airfare and some subsistence allowance for these tradesmen, something the federal government has done in the past in parts of this country for unemployed Canadians.

● (1040)

Recognizing the dwindling apprentice to journeyman ratio a number of years ago (presently, 6% of our membership are apprentices)—

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Okay.

—I put together a proposal called the Ironworker Aboriginal Initiative. Subsequently, a meeting with former minister Jane Stewart led to a referral to the Construction Sector Council for consideration of my project outline. The CSC took on my project and obtained funding through HRSDC. At present, we are in the process of launching the pilot project for the ironworker Aboriginal Career Awareness Program in British Columbia, with the intent of taking the program national later this year. It is a wonderful marketing and recruiting program, geared to the segment of our population with the highest unemployment rate, that will easily be adapted for all the trades down the road.

I'll stop there, Again, I sent a package, and I apologize that it wasn't here. It addresses a lot of issues with regard to the skilled trade shortage.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Holmes. As I said before, we'll make sure that once it's translated it will be distributed, not just to the members here today but to all the members of the committee. We thank you very much for that submission.

Next we have Mr. Byrne.

Mr. Pat Byrne (Business Manager, District Council 38, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades): Thanks very much.

First of all, thanks to the committee for allowing me this time to speak, and thanks to the staff as well.

The issue I want to talk about is, to me, a very important one. It impacts heavily on the future of our economy and on our young people.

It's funny. I didn't realize that Perley was going to be here this morning, so some of the things I'm going to talk about will be quite similar to the issues that Perley touched on.

Perley is not the only guy who likes working on heights. I'm a glazier by trade, and that involves pretty much anything you see around the downtown core that has glass, aluminum, or mirror involved. That's us guys, and when you see the fellows hanging on the sides of buildings, I've been there myself.

Thirty years I've spent, actually, as a glazier. My old man was a glazier for thirty years before that, too, so it's quite a proud trade. I'm quite proud of my trade, and I come by it honestly, through my dad and also through my uncles.

Currently, I'm the assistant business manager with District Council 38. We represent more than 1,900 skilled workers in the construction industry in the province of British Columbia. Our industry represents a number of trades, including painting. We also represent all of the industrial and commercial painters in the province and residential painters.

As well as glazing, we also represent the wall and ceiling sector. We have drywall finishers, another apprenticeable trade.

We also represent workers who aren't recognized as TQ, but they work in hazardous materials removal and industrial cleaning.

Our membership is all over the province, but it's concentrated mainly in the lower mainland, Vancouver Island, and the Prince George area.

It will come as no surprise, I'm sure, to the members of the committee that the construction industry in British Columbia is booming right now. Low interest rates and high commodity prices have contributed to a boom in residential and commercial construction, and our members on the lower mainland, and in southern Vancouver Island in particular, are almost all working. I think we have maybe 5% unemployment at this time.

I'd like to speak to the committee today about three issues that you're examining: the skilled worker shortage, apprenticeship training, and the recognition of foreign credentials.

On the skilled worker shortage, it sometimes seems you can't pick up a newspaper without reading about a shortage of skilled workers in a number of sectors—teachers, nurses, and doctors. But lately, as preparations for the 2010 Olympics begin, there has been an increased degree of attention paid to the shortage of skilled tradespeople in the construction industry.

I both agree and disagree with that statement, that we have a shortage of skilled workers in the construction industry, and I would like to explain.

Here on the lower mainland and on southern Vancouver Island, yes, we have a shortage of skilled tradespeople in the construction industry, although the shortage varies from trade to trade. But in our experience, the same cannot be said for other regions of the province. In the Kootenays, for example, more than 50% of the unionized journeyman electricians are unemployed. In the interior in the north, more than 40% of the electricians are unemployed. Province-wide, 30% of the unionized journeyman boilermakers are unemployed, as well as 25% of journeyman plumbers.

We believe the skill shortage can best be addressed over the long term by returning to a much more robust and aggressive trades and apprenticeship training program. While this is a provincial responsibility, I urge you to recommend that the federal government take a much more active leadership role in this issue.

We put our money where our mouth is when it comes to training. At District Council 38, we currently own a 26,000-square-foot training facility that we operate in partnership with our contractors. We've been strong proponents for additional resources for the trades and for apprenticeship training for many years, and our record is excellent.

Currently, every single painting apprentice in this province goes through our training facility out in Surrey. There is nowhere else in the province you can receive that training. We're expanding our school at the current time, and as early as March of next year we expect to be delivering, in partnership with BCIT, glazier training.

Currently in British Columbia there is only one facility where you can receive your glazier training, and that's BCIT. So if you're working outside of this area, you have to come to the lower mainland. We're also working in partnership with our Glazing Contractors Association to see if we can expand that training to the interior, at Thompson Rivers University, and also over to Camosun College on Vancouver Island.

Right now, if you're a drywall finisher in the province of British Columbia, you can't get your technical training here anymore. With the changes to ITAC, the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission, what happened with the change in the apprenticeship system here...BCIT cancelled the drywall finishing program. We're looking to resurrect that at the training facility we're building at our facility right now.

Collectively, we can do much more to address the skills shortage, but we require government to resume the leadership role it once served.

With respect to the issue of foreign credentials, we see this as an issue more relevant to professionals like doctors, nurses, and teachers. That said, it becomes an issue in the construction industry when some companies use the skills shortage as a pretext to apply for permission to use foreign workers.

● (1045)

The bottom line in the construction industry, we find, is that a request for foreign workers is all too often a request for cheaper workers. Recent examples include the Bilfinger Berger building of the new Golden Ears Bridge, something I'm sure Perley can fill you in on a heck of a lot more than I can. It's the bridge that's going across the Fraser River between Langley and Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows. The company has applied for permission from the federal government to import 340 foreign workers, saying they can't find enough qualified workers in Canada. They say this despite the fact that the ironworkers union has hundreds of unemployed, qualified workers in eastern Canada. In fact, Perley was showing me some letters he has representing over 1,200 ironworkers in Canada who would be willing to come out and work on this particular project.

Again, we see this issue being framed, generally, about professionals, but when it's used as a pretext to bring in workers who are paid less than the Canadian workers they replace, we have to speak out.

At the end of the day, if a company truly does need to bring in workers from outside the country, if the need is genuine, the very least we can expect is that those workers will be paid not one penny less than a Canadian worker with the same skills. Let's keep Canadians employed and paying taxes and supporting their communities.

In conclusion, as I said at the beginning of the presentation, I primarily wanted to talk to you about a shortage of skilled workers, the need for an increased focus on apprenticeships, and the recognition of foreign credentials.

I have four recommendations.

Number one is that the federal tax credit for employers hiring apprentices be amended so that the credit is increased for each completed apprenticeship. Right now, there's no incentive for the employer to keep his or her apprentices moving through the system to completion, only to hire them. We believe a modest expansion of the tax credit would have a major positive impact on apprenticeship training completion.

We would like to see the federal government assume a leadership role with respect to trades and apprenticeship training. We recognize the work that has been done to date, but we believe that a reinvigoration of the red seal classification is crucial. We recommend that the government look at the work being done by the Government of Alberta and encourage the other provincial governments to adopt that provincial approach. The federal government should insist that companies seeking to import foreign workers be required to demonstrate that the skills needed are not possessed by available Canadian workers.

Also, we would like to see increased funding for the federal agency responsible for assuring that a genuine shortage of workers exists. We've had off-the-record conversations with individuals in this area who tell us that they're unable to adequately investigate the requests because of shortages in the department in funding and personnel.

So thank you again for your time this morning. Sorry I ran on a little bit there, but if I have any time, we'd be more than pleased to answer any questions you have. Thanks.

• (1050)

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Byrne. Thank you very much for that.

We're going to move to our last presenters or witnesses, Mr. Chan and Ms. Mitchell, for seven minutes.

Mr. Tung Chan (Chief Executive Officer, United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Tung Chan and I am the CEO for SUCCESS. I'd like to start by thanking you for giving me this opportunity to present to you.

SUCCESS has been a non-profit, not-for-profit organization since 1973. We have 12 offices in the lower mainland, we have 350 employees, and we have a total of 9,000 volunteers. Our budget is about \$17 million a year, and I'd like to thank the government for providing roughly about 80% of that to us. The other 20% we fundraise through the community's support as well as from our own resource recovery programs.

We have always provided a holistic, integrated approach to helping new Canadians settle. What do I mean by that? It means that we help them find accommodation, we help them get jobs, and we help them learn about their new neighbourhood. We also help them learn new languages. We truly believe that when new Canadians

arrive on our shores, we have to provide them not with a single approach but with a holistic and total approach.

We believe that when we look at the statistics in population growth—and I'm not going to bore you with statistics—the labour market is going to be reliant on new Canadians coming to our shores. I want to stress, along with my colleague here, that we're not looking for foreign workers; we're looking for new Canadians who are interested in moving here to adopt our country as their country.

Next, I want to look at the B.C. situation. If we look at the B.C. skilled workers' occupations, between 2000 and 2004, this province received up to 15,000 skilled immigrants. They possess skills, expertise, and technology in engineering, in finance, and in marketing. Typically, they are between the ages of 25 and 44 and have at least a bachelor's degree or several years of experience. As a country we are benefiting tremendously from those kinds of human resources.

When we talk about new Canadians coming here to settle, it has to be both ways. It's not only that new Canadians coming here need to adopt to this country, but we believe—with the 33 years of serving them that I have experienced—a host country also needs to move. It's a two-way street. They need to do that in an interactive way.

Let me talk about some of the challenges that are experienced by new Canadians coming here. The first one would be language, and when I mean language, it's not just learning English but more about learning the linguistics, learning the social language skills as well as skills in the workplace. It's important also that their foreign credentials need to be recognized. They also need to adapt to the local culture and to gain Canadian experience.

We have been connecting business with skilled workers. We have also been operating in the employment and economic development area. We believe it's a win-win situation.

There are a lot of service gaps, however, for new Canadians. There is insufficient support for workplace language training. There is not enough recognition of prior work experience and foreign credentials. We also need to have programs that bridge and connect employers to skilled immigrants. We also really need to address the skills sort of issues that have been spoken to by some of the panellists here. Also, we need to have pre-settlement services.

Let me talk a bit about how we can overcome those barriers. We believe we need to have a systematic approach in changing the accreditation. We need to have a reliance on prior learning assessments. That means that before the new Canadians come to this country we should have that in place. We have to have programs to fast-track the certification of new Canadians' qualifications in occupations subject to public regulation. We should also have standards. For example, in health care occupations, trades, engineering, IT, and accounting, we need to have new initiatives to facilitate assessment and recognition of foreign credentials.

I heard some questions earlier today, and if you ask me those again, I will offer you some other suggestions.

We need to have more investments in our new Canadians. To me, new Canadians are like newborn babies. We invest a lot of money in our new babies when they move here; we are not investing sufficiently in the new Canadians who have come to our shores.

• (1055)

We need to have integrated bridging programs, and we need to have more resources to provide people with language training, skills training, vocational training, and the kinds of apprenticeships I heard about here today. We fully support that kind of approach.

We also have to address regional skills shortages through pre-settlement services. What I mean by that is orientation at Canadian institutions before new Canadians arrive on our shores. We need to provide them with road maps on credential recognition. We need to provide them with training courses and bridging programs in our labour market, language professions, and trades. We need to provide them with assistance in acquiring Canadian credentials.

The bottom line is that we're looking for leadership, and we're looking for leadership from the federal government. If there is one message I want to leave with this panel, it's that if the federal government provides that leadership, I truly believe the rest of the country will follow. We need to have connections and we need to have cooperation in terms of governments, service providers, professionals, trade associations, trade unions, the business community, and new Canadian service organizations like ours. We need to have coordination. We need to have people like you and like those in different government departments coordinating efforts.

This is a country that relied on new Canadians to build it. This is a country that was built by immigrants. We have to move forward, in the 21st century, by working together as a group.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan.

We're going to start our first round of questioning. I think we're going to have time for two rounds today.

Mr. Regan, please commence. You have seven minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm not sure where to start with so many questions to ask.

To Mr. Chan, first of all, it sounded like you were interested in having a chance to talk more about your suggestions in terms of foreign credentials recognition. Perhaps I can start with that.

Mr. Tung Chan: Thank you for the question, sir.

I alluded to the fact that leadership is important. What do I mean by that? If you look at how we deal with different issues, how we deal with health issues or aboriginal issues, I believe the new Canadian settlement issue is worth being put on the national agenda.

When our first ministers meet every year, they have agenda items to talk about. So why not put this issue on the first ministers table? Looking forward ten or twenty years, the Canadian labour pool is going to come from new Canadians coming to our shores. We have to get some solutions here. I know government moves slowly, so let's start now and move quickly.

There's another suggestion I'd like to make. If you look at health, for instance, and look at the BNA Act or our Constitution, health is not a jurisdiction of the federal government. Yet the federal government provides that leadership. We have the Canada Health Act, which lays out the framework. We also use funding to entice the provinces to come together at the table.

We need to set out a nationally recognized, consensus-building policy, and we need guideline principles to get the provinces to come to the table. We need to use funding there as well.

Health clearly is not a federal government area, and yet the federal government can still influence the provinces to provide a standard of care. I believe it's important that we do the same thing here.

• (1100)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Let me turn to the other gentlemen, from the ironworker and painter and allied trade groups. It struck me, as I heard you guys talk, that on the one hand we have the tight-wire walker, and on the other hand we have Spiderman. And I say that in a very complimentary fashion. It's daring work, and you have to be courageous to do it. I think a lot of Canadians admire people who do that, because we have a history of building great bridges and buildings in our country. It's remarkable work.

Now, I'm from Nova Scotia, and I have the impression that a lot of people are going west. Workers of various kinds are going. Are you seeing people in your trade, for example, coming from the east, and if so, in what numbers? Although you talked about why some of them aren't, I have the impression that a lot of people generally are coming from the east. But are these groups not coming?

Mr. Perley Holmes: We call them travel cards. We have about 100 travel cards working right now out of this area. In 1981 and 1982 we had approximately the same membership, but we had over 6,000 ironworkers within a two- to three-year timeframe come from eastern Canada—well, from right across Canada.

Hon. Geoff Regan: And only 100 now?

Mr. Perley Holmes: It's because there isn't the need. As well, in the early eighties there were a lot more camp jobs and there was a lot more overtime, so it was more lucrative. Right now, we're concentrating more on training.

At the time, we had double the apprenticeship classes; we were flush with—

Hon. Geoff Regan: Are they needed in your trades in Alberta? There must be some of them.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Not the ironworkers.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Not the ironworkers. It occurs to me that's not really tar sands type of work exactly.

Mr. Perley Holmes: No.

Hon. Geoff Regan: With the economy booming in Alberta, you'd think there were all kinds of things happening as a result. They're probably building buildings, too, and other things, but not to that degree.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Yes. In the early eighties there were a lot of mines in this province. You had the Mica Dam and Revelstoke Dam, which were huge camp jobs. You had Tumbler Ridge and a lot of golden.... There were a number of mines going on, which were typically camp jobs, making it a lot easier for a person to come from back east or wherever. However, I've worked all over this continent as an ironworker and have not stayed in camps.

Hon. Geoff Regan: But that helps to explain why in the interior in the Kootenays, as you say, you have a higher level of unemployment among tradespeople.

Again, coming from the perspective of Nova Scotia, we have the impression that in B.C. and Alberta everybody is employed. There's so much work out here that you hear about, that's the impression you get. It's interesting to hear that's not the case in some areas.

Mr. Pat Byrne: Exactly, and that's part of why we're here, to try to get away from the false impression that everybody out here is working. There are some great opportunities here and a heck of a lot of work to be done here, but unfortunately, we're seeing some people trying to put a spin on things that, gee, I can't find guys, I can't find guys, I can't find guys. What they're really saying is they can't find guys who will work for less than the prevailing rates out here.

Part of the problem, too, in why some workers aren't coming out here is that they may be sitting in an area of Canada where they've got a bit of a depressed economy—there are pockets around Canada where there are areas of unemployment, with ironworkers and some other trades—where they'd be more than willing to move out here to take a job if they could get the price of a plane fare and maybe a week's accommodation in their pockets. That's why I'd like to see perhaps the federal government take a look at that surplus we've got in the EI program. Maybe somehow through that we can provide some type of an incentive where a guy perhaps gets the price of an air ticket and one week's accommodation. He's at least got a foothold to get himself into the area and get started.

• (1105)

Hon. Geoff Regan: But I think you're saying the employers don't mind paying to have a foreign worker fly in because it's going to be a little less expensive for them, but they won't pay to have someone fly from Newfoundland, for example. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Pat Byrne: Unfortunately, I find that's starting to happen.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I just have a second left, and I want to come back in a few minutes to the whole issue of foreign workers versus getting people to immigrate here, and what to do with people who are illegal workers in Canada. In the U.S. election there was a lot of talk about the guest worker situation, as they call it.

But let me go to Mr. Kramer for a moment. I want to ask him about the issue of wheelchairs. You talked about the cost of your wheelchair as \$25,000. Is there an average cost? I'm trying to figure out what the numbers are normally. Frankly, that's a surprising number. I shouldn't be surprised; I should know this, but don't, so thank you for informing us about it. What kinds of costs are you looking at, generally speaking, for wheelchairs?

Mr. Ken Kramer: First of all, it's a very good question. There is a broad range of costs throughout this country, and it really depends on the individual per se. I represent somebody whose cost is probably at the high end, because my chair has the ability to allow me to tilt and recline, which is really what adds to the cost of my piece of equipment.

Although I don't have any specific numbers to provide you, I would suggest the average cost would be somewhere in the \$8,000 to \$10,000 range, where you have a basic wheelchair without all the bells and whistles I have.

Hon. Geoff Regan: That's motorized, I take it?

Mr. Ken Kramer: It's an electric wheelchair, yes.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

We're going to move to Madame Savoie.

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your presentations, each coming from different perspectives, which really help with that puzzle of employability, skills, and training.

I was interested in the suggestion to increase the credit for the completion of apprenticeships, because I think it's one of the issues that hasn't occurred in Quebec—although the province does have a good model. Do you want to talk more about the differences between what B.C. did on apprenticeship, and why it created problems, compared with what Quebec did?

And I have a couple of other questions on that.

Mr. Pat Byrne: I can tell you this. One of the things that I saw happen was at the time when we knew we were coming into a high period of employment, when we were going to be requiring more people to work in the construction trades, the provincial government of the day walked in and, without any consultation with anybody, essentially kiboshed the entire apprenticeship program, cancelled ITAC, the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission, which existed in British Columbia. It's now the ITA, Industry Training Authority. They essentially got rid of the entire system, threw the baby out with the bathwater, without any real road map or idea of what they were going to really replace it with. It has been flying by the seat of its pants. It's taken a couple of years or so, but we're starting to finally get that thing turned around and get back on track, but there's a two-year gap that I see in which we've lost an opportunity to train individuals.

Ms. Denise Savoie: How are you getting it back on track?

Mr. Pat Byrne: To be quite honest, the building trades—I'm sure purely through their apprenticeship program and ours—have had to grab the bull by the horns and we're working in partnership with various employer organizations. I myself sit on the Glazing Contractors Association of British Columbia. It's made up of both union and non-union contractors, and we all have a common interest in training the apprentices. We've had to take a look at perhaps changing how our apprenticeship program is delivered. We're moving to more of a module-style program in the glazing trade, which is my particular trade.

Modularized training to some people is a bit of a dirty word, but I don't see a problem with it unless you don't have everybody completing the program and moving through each one of the individual modules. There's a move afoot in some cases to give individuals partial training. You'll get this module and this module and this module. You don't train to the standards of the red seal; therefore you're limited in what you're able to do. We want to be able to make sure that everybody goes through the program, completes the apprenticeship program, and winds up with the red seal at the end of the day.

Ms. Denise Savoie: That's where we're going with the red seal, because there were some efforts by this government in the last budget on the red seal program in terms of encouraging it.

Are there many other fields where we could develop a red seal right now? How many do we have? It's been suggested at other hearings that there might be up to 300. Is that creating the modular problem of giving a red seal for just partial training, or in your opinion could we expand that red seal program?

Mr. Pat Byrne: Go ahead, Perley.

• (1110)

Mr. Perley Holmes: The provincial government has eliminated all compulsory certification, so essentially to get your certification for any trade is voluntary. There is no reason in this province to even pursue that. I personally believe that was all part of a constructive effort to de-skill the workforce in this province. It also works hand in hand with bringing in unskilled foreign workers, because if you have no benchmark or standard to measure a person to...and that's happening right now. The fraud that's going on between citizenship and immigration is just incredible. People are being brought in and are being described as people who are skilled in a trade, but they have no knowledge of that trade whatsoever. That was done, all hand in hand with the compliance team that was set up by the previous government that investigated these kinds of issues. That was the first thing this provincial Liberal government did. They eliminated that compliance team, which was CIC, Human Resources Canada, and employment standards.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Right.

Mr. Pat Byrne: If I could just jump back to something we were touching on when you asked your question originally about the completions, that we want to see completions, I'll give you an example. A couple of administrations ago we had a fair wage program in British Columbia. While I wasn't crazy about the fair wage program in its entirety and the wages that were paid, one of the aspects of the fair wage program that I did support was that it required that at any provincially funded projects in British Columbia you had to have trades-qualified workers working on the site and

you had to have apprentices registered. That was a great idea, but part of the problem that was happening in that case was they were registering apprentices essentially as cheap labour, and when the job was done, they were cutting them loose.

That's why I see the issue being completions. You want to not only get them into the system—that's a great idea, and I'm glad to see the government is taking steps in that direction—but you want to see them get all the way through the program, whether it be block-release programs or modular-based programs, and get the red seal at the end of the day so that they're employable anywhere in Canada.

Ms. Denise Savoie: I attended the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum earlier this year. There's what I think is a pretty compelling study that shows the benefits to employers of hiring apprentices, even from the beginning. I like the distinction that was made between foreign workers and new immigrants and new Canadians and supporting those efforts and so on. I appreciated the comments you made about this not being about not wanting foreign workers to come to Canada.

Mr. Pat Byrne: My father was a foreign worker.

Ms. Denise Savoie: I think most of us fall into that category, but they should be paid wages that allow them to live decently, not just brought in as cheap labour.

Mr. Pat Byrne: Absolutely.

Ms. Denise Savoie: So that was an important distinction.

The Chair: You have thirty seconds left.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Okay. In the next round, if we have the chance, Mr. Chan, I'd like you to talk about immigrant and settlement services and the gaps there.

Mr. Tung Chan: I think if you look at the gaps, there are plenty of them. Simply put, if you look at—because we're talking about human resources, the first thing is language. We have now in this province provided language support training for adults up to a level three. But in Ontario it's supported all the way up to a level seven. We really would like to see that new Canadians coming to B.C. would be supported in the same way as they would if they went to Ontario. So that's the first thing.

We've already talked very extensively about the prior work experience and foreign credentials. One thing I need to supplement too is that this is not just a government issue. It's not just a trade organization or a professional organization situation. It is also a commercial industry situation. People come here wanting a local job, let's say in a factory or for a service provider, be it in the insurance business or the financial business or what not. Generally, they're told they do not have Canadian experience. And if they don't get a job in Canada, how can they get that?

I think one of the things the government can also do is provide tax incentives for people to hire new Canadians for their first job, for their first six months, to give them a chance. Give them some incentives. Currently there is no incentive for anyone to hire a new Canadian.

• (1115)

The Chair: What would that incentive look like to you? You know, you're obviously writing off employment as an expense. So would it be a factor, like 1.5%?

Mr. Tung Chan: It's similar to what my colleagues on the panel here were talking about, which is apprentices. You can hire someone as an apprentice and give them some incentive. The actual mechanics of it I've not worked out, but the general idea is what I wanted to present to this group there.

The Chair: It's very dangerous to leave the details up to government, I can tell you that.

We're going to move over to Ms. Yelich for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): I'd just like to first of all ask the steelworkers something. We're lucky we don't have the Bloc here today, because they would really jump on any suggestion to have incentives to move to western Canada. You might even get some trouble from Saskatchewan, because we have a hard enough time keeping our people there. I think your incentives to get people to come out here would not be acceptable to some of our provinces. We have a hard enough time keeping them. And let's not even mention your beautiful climate.

I want your comments on something. If you are offended by foreign workers coming in, what are your thoughts on the replacement worker legislation before the House right now? It is probably going to be law.

Mr. Perley Holmes: I'm not offended by foreign workers coming in. What we're seeing happen is that people are bringing them in and paying them far less than whatever the market rates are, going to the extreme of paying people \$3.50 an hour. When you are issued a work permit, you can only work for that employer.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Yes. Actually, I would like to see some evidence of that, because I understand that the only way the companies are even allowed to bring in any foreign labour is to pay equivalent wages so that they're not undercutting our own people here in Canada.

But the replacement worker legislation is really what I want to hear you comment on. Without saying you're offended, what do you think of that replacement worker legislation at a time when you have a shortage?

Mr. Perley Holmes: I'm not aware of it. I sent a proposal in to Human Resources Canada a couple of months ago.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Also, I would like to ask Mr. Chan a question.

Perhaps you could elaborate on this. From what I understand—I'm going to talk about professions, and I believe this is in the health sector—one of the problems is that people who do get their training in Canada can't get a place because local governments don't do it. So how does that happen at the federal level? If people get their training here in Canada, they can't get the practice because perhaps the health district won't open up a space.

Is that a common problem, and if it is, again, what do we do as federal...?

Mr. Tung Chan: I think what you're referring to is the situation with the health professionals, particularly doctors. When foreign-trained doctors come here, they need to have spaces to get their accreditation and they need spaces in hospitals to allow them to be trained. That clearly is an issue in B.C. I understand the provincial government has taken the first step by increasing those spaces.

If you ask me if that increase is sufficient, I would say no. As well, if you look at the need for those trained physicians in the interior, currently, I believe, sufficient space has not yet opened up for people to be trained in hospitals in the interior. Clearly, that is something in the provincial jurisdiction.

Your question is on what the federal government can do about that, and I would refer to what I suggested in terms of the service standards. There might be a place in the federal government to set up certain standards. For example, I understand the Ontario government has put in a piece of legislation requesting that all provincially registered bodies, the licensing bodies, make sure their licensing processes are transparent and are not biased against new Canadians. If the federal government were to adopt that kind of standard and make it mandatory for any agencies or provincial government bodies—anybody who is receiving federal government funding—that is something....

• (1120)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I'd like to go to Mr. Kramer for a minute. I also have questions for Ms. Blank.

I think we do need a pan-Canadian vision for disabled people for wheelchairs and other resources by doing such things as having a national database for wheelchairs. You often wonder what happens to some of these wheelchairs when they are no longer in use. Do they sit in somebody's house until there's an auction sale or whatever? I think we do need to address issues like that.

This is maybe not a question you want to answer, but I wonder about visible minorities in the workplace. My question is, does having someone like Mayor Sullivan, who I've met here, help to bring attention to what's needed in your city, in your province, and some of the shortcomings or gaps? Does it help, having someone in a wheelchair as mayor?

Mr. Ken Kramer: I'm sorry, who are you referring to? I missed that.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mayor Sullivan, your mayor here in Vancouver.

Mr. Ken Kramer: Mayor Sullivan, absolutely.

Our province, in terms of leadership, has set an example, obviously, by having a person with a disability in a position of leadership. And obviously, within your own government you also have a representative who is there as a representative for the disability community.

I think, though, we need to remember that those individuals, like me, represent a very small minority. And really, our purpose today is to talk about those who are not able to be out here to speak for themselves about this.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I was thinking of asking the other two or three people who are beside you, then, when this is brought to our attention.... And the mayor obviously shows.... He's a very smart man. His wheelchair doesn't inhibit him very much.

I wondered what each of these fields, including Ms. Blank's field, and the steelworkers.... That might be touchy. But what would you do to encourage us to have more disabled people in the workplace? Are you willing to start thinking of ways to encourage us to have more disabled people employed?

And Ms. Blank, you didn't mention that you're short of any skills and labour. You asked about incentives. What have you done in order to have more immigrants apply to your profession? What stops or problems or barriers are there?

Ms. Bonnie Blank: I would say the barriers are access to care on the part of Canadians in terms of their access. We in British Columbia are very fortunate that as dental hygienists we are able to have an independent practice. So we are able to take portable equipment chairside into long-term care facilities, looking at that extreme end of the disability range, and provide oral health services to these individuals.

We do treat severely immuno-compromised individuals and provide the oral health care they need. But we're not able to bill directly. So you have veterans in long-term care facilities who aren't able to access our services without paying out of their own pocket because we are not recognized by their dental plan as the primary oral health care provider.

In my 38 years as a dental hygienist I've seen a great change in terms of accessibility in private practice settings where we have much more.... Our operatories are larger. It's very wheelchair accessible. I think there has been quite a lot of movement towards making that an option.

But what we're calling for is the request to be able to have dental hygienists more in the community. I think with an aging population, that's really where we need to go, by the way.

• (1125)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yelich.

I'm going to take a few minutes here to ask a couple of questions that piqued my interest. I know we talked about tax credits, Mr. Byrne, for completion of trades. What is the exact suggestion then? You're going to make a recommendation. I'm assuming you like the fact that as a government we started talking about that to get people in the trade. But what you're suggesting is, great, we're getting people started, but no one's finishing the job. Is your suggestion a tax credit upon completion of the trade, or in year four, or whatever, how many years?

Mr. Pat Byrne: Upon completion of the trade. We want to see them actually attain red seal certification.

The Chair: So some type of incentive for completion. You're not opposed to the incentives to get started, but it would be nice to see something to help us get it all the way through.

Mr. Pat Byrne: It's a great first step and we support that. We really do.

The Chair: That's good. I've heard that from some of the people who were in my office, and I think that's an excellent idea.

I don't know if it was Mr. Holmes who talked about red seal modification...maybe Mr. Byrne again. What was the suggestion in

terms of modifications to the red seal? Was the comment just that we need to have more trades red sealed? I missed the context.

Mr. Pat Byrne: Number one, I'd like to see more support for the existing red seal. The federal government has the responsibility for overseeing how you achieve red seal status. Unfortunately, I find from province to province to province there isn't quite the same level of commitment from each province to getting people through and getting to their red seal and completing their apprenticeships.

Look no farther than the province right next door, Alberta. They're doing a terrific job over there. Their completion rates are probably amongst the highest in Canada right now. They've got a great apprenticeship program that is in many respects similar to the one we had here before the change in administration. If you ever want to take a look at an apprenticeship program that's working well, look no farther than Alberta. They've got a great program there next door.

The Chair: So taking what a province is doing well and trying to replicate that across the country is a possible suggestion.

Mr. Pat Byrne: Absolutely.

The Chair: Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Quebec and Alberta are the only two provinces where it's compulsory to be a registered apprentice and/or be a certified journeyman. That's the answer; there's no other.

The Chair: And you're looking for leadership from the federal government to strongly encourage the provinces to follow suit.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Any job that the federal government puts money towards such as the Golden Ears Bridge, the RAV line, the rapid transit line—there are all kinds of examples. I've talked to numerous labour ministers in the federal government and suggested this over the years, saying you have the hammer, the power to do this; all you have to do is say on those jobs all tradespeople will be either registered apprentices or certified. Then perhaps the provinces might clue in.

The Chair: Okay. That's great.

I just have one more question for Mr. Chan in terms of pre-settlement services. Once again, I'd like your comments specifically. I know you had some general comments, but do you have any specific recommendations?

Mr. Tung Chan: In terms of pre-settlement, I believe we need to have two steps before they come here. One is before the people who have potential actually apply. When they put in their applications, we need to, in our consulate area, provide sufficient information and tell them the plan—rather than simply giving them a brochure, tell them—to let them know what steps they have to go through, so they have a general idea. From application to the actual granting of admission takes some time. They can then prepare and use that time to upgrade their skills, be it language or be it trade, whatever is needed, so they know clearly what they need to come through.

Once they get admitted, I believe we have an obligation to then provide, if we can, further information or actually direct training for pre-settlement. Or we can work with the licence-granting organizations to look at how they can get that. Give them a very clear road map. Maybe provide them with assistance, and also hook them up with local employers who are looking for people. I think all those things I mentioned are doable. It's a matter of providing the right funding and the right focus.

The Chair: Sure. Through HR we have had some programs in the past for training that related either to students or seniors and so on, so you're suggesting that we have them for new immigrants. That makes some sense, and I'm sure it will be in our recommendations.

I know that one of the things... I understand that the foreign credentials recognition program we're looking at tries to educate people as they come over as to what's available. Certainly that will be one of our recommendations as we move forward.

Ms. Blank, in terms of your organization, and this may be overarching.... I want to tie in to your question and go back to Mr. Chan again.

One of the issues we have in terms of different organizations is that people say they come over here and they have a hard time with the foreign equivalencies. It's actually tougher to deal with some of those than to actually write the board exam for pharmacists, or whatever occupation it is. There seems to be this notion of gatekeeping. I realize that if you get trained to a certain standard here in Canada, you certainly want to make sure that you're maintaining that and that people can't fly in under the radar.

In terms of your organization, Ms. Blank, this is an organizational.... You're asking the federal government to come in and say, listen, we want to bust up this monopoly. What are you asking us to do in terms of your organization as it relates to the hygienists?

• (1130)

Ms. Bonnie Blank: I'm really asking that dental hygienists be recognized as primary oral health care providers within the scope of their own individual practices, and that the clients we treat be able to access their dental plans and be paid or have their services paid for. An example of that would be the veterans who are able to access dental care.

Really, at the current time, we are licensed to provide services for individuals on a private basis, but we're not able to bill for them. It's only out of social consciousness and the kindness of the dentist's heart that he would allow us to use his billing number so our clients are able to access dental preventative services by a dental hygienist. It's an opening of access to care. So we're not really asking for

anything other than to follow suit with the other plans that already recognize us and have that as their service.

Did you want me to speak to foreign trade?

The Chair: I'm going to leave that. We'll come back.

I know that Madame Savoie is going to catch a plane, so I'm going to go to her so she has a round. We'll come back to Mr. Regan and then back to Ms. Yelich.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Thank you very much for accommodating me. I am short of time this morning, so thank you.

I want to go back to clarify in my own mind the reference to providing credits to increase the credit for the completion of the red seal. You were talking about credits to employers as well. It's not just hiring at the low end, at the unskilled level, but that they keep them on until completion. Is that correct?

Mr. Pat Byrne: I'll tell you what happens sometimes, in my trade, for instance. You might end up working for multiple employers out there. You might have one employer who hires the guy on and gets the credits for that. I don't know really how you structure that. If a guy stays with an employer all the way through his apprenticeship program, it's pretty simple. That employer got him in and got him all the way through the apprenticeship program. At the end of the day, that employer would get the credit. Right? What do you do when you have multiple employers? I don't really know what we would do there.

Ms. Denise Savoie: But that's what you were suggesting.

Mr. Pat Byrne: I was suggesting there's some sort of incentive for the employer. You've done a good job, you're trying to help solve some of the problem of the shortage of skilled workers, and therefore you should benefit from this too—not only the skilled worker.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Thank you. Great.

I want to come back to the tax credit for hiring new Canadians. I can see it could have a perverse effect, an opposite effect, and I wonder if you've thought about that and if you want to comment.

Mr. Tung Chan: I understand that. Any time we use a blunt instrument like tax to deal with a problem...but we need to start somewhere. If we can do something that allows employers to have some incentive to hire people who need to get local Canadian experience, that's a plus. It doesn't matter what program we put forward, there are always going to be some unintended effects and loopholes. But if we think something is worth doing, and you look at a cost-benefit program, are you better off to leave people who couldn't fully integrate into this country or leave a few dollars so an employee can explore a little bit? Which one is better?

From my perspective, having served so many new Canadians, I believe we should err on the side of the new Canadians and get them jobs.

• (1135)

Ms. Denise Savoie: As the chair said, the devil's in the details.

Mr. Tung Chan: Absolutely.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Have you further thoughts on that? I wanted to come back quickly to the issue of student loans and speak to an issue and ask a question that concerns students right across the board, and that's the reference to improved student loans.

Two things. One, what kinds of improvements are you suggesting?

On the other, I know from speaking to many students that it has been shown to be inflexible and it needs a real overhaul. I was curious that you mentioned improving loans but made no reference to re-establishing a needs-based grant system to ensure that students don't end their education programs with \$24,000 worth of debt, as we hear is the average, and in some cases higher.

So there are those two things.

Ms. Bonnie Blank: I ran out of time for that part.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Okay.

Ms. Bonnie Blank: So it's in your summary of the presentation. We were looking at the impact the elimination of the grant programs in most provinces has had. The suggestion was that the federal government should extend the first-year grants for low-income students to all other years, and in addition the 50% or \$3,000 cap on these grants should be replaced with a sliding scale, based on assessment of student and family income and number of family members.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Okay. That's an interesting one. Thank you. That's useful.

Mr. Regan has a bill to that effect in the House that I'm going to be supporting, and that does what you've said about the access grant, extending grants on a needs basis.

Ms. Bonnie Blank: Yes. And we do address the aboriginal need there as well, so it should be in your handout.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Did we get that? It's in there. I haven't had a chance to read it yet.

Do I have more time or have I run out of time?

The Chair: You have about fifteen seconds.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Thank you very much. There's a lot more to be said, because I wanted to hear more about that recognition system. That's key to eliminating some of the backlog. Any final wise words on that?

The Chair: Quickly, Mr. Chan.

Mr. Tung Chan: I want to come back to the tax incentives, because my colleague Barbara has mentioned two things to me. One is similar to the targeted wage subsidy under the EI system. We now have targets for different employers. The other one is diversity training for our employers. So those two.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Are we going to see you in Calgary?

Ms. Denise Savoie: No, I won't be in Calgary, but you'll see my colleague.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and have a safe journey back.

Mr. Regan, five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Chairman, I can't feel too bad for Ms. Savoie. She lives in this beautiful province, and she has to go to Victoria today. We have the best weather in the country I think, so my sympathy is diminished by that.

But we'll look forward to seeing you back in Ottawa.

By the way, Ms. Yelich was talking about anti-replacement worker legislation at the federal level. It's being considered. It's actually coming before our committee soon. That will apply to things like telecommunications, railways, ports, the things under federal jurisdiction. That's why perhaps you haven't heard of it. Just so you know what she was talking about when she said replacement workers, that's what she meant.

With respect to my bill, by the way, the Speaker has ruled that it requires a royal recommendation. That means it involves an increase in money, to increase the Canada access grants to all four years for people who are low income or people with disabilities. Therefore, it requires that a minister give this a seal of approval. I'm hoping my colleagues will convince the finance minister to do that as this goes on. Even doing it in the next budget would be pretty good. Even if it isn't my bill, just getting it to happen would be good. We'll see.

I want to ask about a couple of things.

You were saying that there isn't a shortage of workers in your field. In terms of looking forward, what's the average age of tradesmen—you were talking mainly about the Kootenays and the interior, and there's a lot going on right here—just so I understand whether the picture is going to change a lot in five or ten years.

● (1140)

Mr. Pat Byrne: The average age of my membership right now is 46, so it's up there.

Mr. Perley Holmes: Ours is slightly lower. We've had quite an intake of young people. We put a school together, and we've really done a lot of recruiting, so it has lowered our age.

According to Canada's own statistics, there's a requirement for only about 100 additional ironworkers per year over the next three years. That's easily met. As well, there are ironworkers from across Canada who are available.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I'm going to turn to Mr. Chan for a minute.

One thing I've heard in recent months is that we are starting to see signs of decreasing immigration from places such as China and India, because of the economic activity there. In some cases, people are choosing to go back, and in some cases they are choosing to stay for various reasons. What do you foresee in that regard? What's happening, and what should we be doing about it?

Mr. Tung Chan: Thank you for the questions.

Let me put it this way. Under our current skilled worker point system, we're attracting people who to some extent are already established in their own country. They have certain expectations when they come here. They want to settle down. They want to be part of Canada. Then, when they come here, their credentials are not being recognized. They can't find jobs. To them, it's like Canada has opened its arms and invited them to a dance party, but when they come, not only can they not find a partner, there's not even music being put on. So they decide to go home. When they go home, they tell their friends.

That's why the interest has slowed down. That's why I said earlier that adaptation has to be mutual.

Hon. Geoff Regan: On both sides, sure.

Mr. Tung Chan: Both sides, not just one side.

Hon. Geoff Regan: There was an interesting paper written a couple of years ago—I mentioned it when we were in Halifax—by the fellow who was arguing that in Atlantic Canada, for example, we want more immigrants. We have to do a better job of not only tolerating people but welcoming people, because it's a matter of the heart, where you decide to go, moving somewhere new. We have to do a better job of that. That's part of the argument.

Let me ask you about illegal workers and the answer to that situation. As I said, we heard a lot about it in the U.S. election. On the one hand, there's the argument that we need workers—in some sectors, at least. On the other hand, there is the view, particularly by people who have been immigrants to Canada, that people should get in line and follow the process the way they did.

One of the great worries is that people who are here as illegal foreign workers are perhaps being treated very badly or that they don't have any protection. That's a real worry. What do we do about that?

Mr. Tung Chan: That's an interesting question to answer. What I'm saying may not be representative of what my agency believes in. Today is my fifth day on the job.

I believe we should allow amnesty for people who are illegal here as long as they have been paying taxes, have a legal job, and have regular employment. There are people who say that if we do that it will simply open the floodgates. But if we look back in history, Canada has a number of times allowed amnesty for people who are here. I remember that in 1973 and 1974 we allowed people who were here as students to have a six-month period to apply. At that time, the critics said if we did that everyone was going to come here and take advantage of it. History has proved that didn't happen.

I remember when we found a group of people who came here on a rusty ship that washed ashore on Vancouver Island. People said that if we let them in and didn't send them back right away, we'd be inundated with other refugees. It did not happen.

So I think it's something I would recommend.

• (1145)

Hon. Geoff Regan: I was hoping to hear from Mr. Holmes and Mr. Byrne.

Mr. Pat Byrne: I support Mr. Chan's position on an amnesty of some type, as long as they have a job here, are not in the black market economy, are acting in every way, shape, and form as Canadians contributing to the fabric of society, and are paying taxes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: But isn't the bigger problem people who are in the black market? They are the ones who are most likely to be abused and everything else. My focus is on them, because it seems to me that if they're paying taxes, they're less likely to be illegal. I don't know about that.

Mr. Perley Holmes: There is a solution. The solution is to certify your contractors, because most of this is in the construction industry. It's so easy to launder money. It has all broken down. That's where there are a lot of illegal immigrants. Because they're temporary jobs, a lot of them are cash only. You go up the street here to Quebec and Second Avenue and the sidewalks are lined with people who work for cash in the morning. I've seen that in San Francisco too. Guys hop in the back of a pickup truck and away they go. They get \$50 cash for a day's work.

But it's the contractors—that's the answer. Stop it there. You're always going to have people coming here who are desperate to get into North America one way or the other, but it's the contractor you have to deal with.

Mr. Pat Byrne: The black market economy doesn't affect just foreign workers. There are Canadians who are pretty active in the black market economy because they want to avoid taxation.

Hon. Geoff Regan: We know that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Regan.

Ms. Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Thank you.

I guess I shouldn't have cited only replacement legislation. I was wondering how that affects Canada as a whole. I'd just like your view.

But right now I'd like a recap from each and every one of you. If you could leave us with one point today, what would that be? In our questioning we've been talking about employability, particularly skills and labour shortages. I want to know from each of you what message you would like to leave with us to take back to our committee study.

Mr. Ken Kramer: As a basic minimum, people with disabilities want to work. They're eager to work. They're educated. They want to get out there in the community and be contributing members of society.

The challenge is that they need a basic foundation; they need their legs. If they don't have a wheelchair they're not going to get to work. If they don't have the ability to fund that wheelchair or their employment creates a disincentive for them to work, they're not going to work and they're going to be a further drain on government. So I think a wheelchair is a basic sort of foundation.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I thought that was a good recommendation you made.

The Chair: Ms. Blank.

Ms. Bonnie Blank: I would request that you reintegrate the mouth to the rest of the body and look at the impact that oral health has on the health of Canadians. Open up access to care by allowing direct payment for dental hygiene services.

Mr. Perley Holmes: As far as I'm concerned, there wouldn't be a skills shortage in the construction trades, which is the industry that provides tradesmen for the rest of the industries. For example, if a hospital needs a plumber, they don't start an apprenticeship; they take a plumber who typically comes from the construction industry and he goes and works for the hospital. Factories don't have apprenticeships. Construction is the factory that produces tradesmen.

If the governments in the past across Canada had supported training and apprenticeships, such as they've done in Alberta and in Quebec, there would be no skills shortage and there would be plenty of people lined up to get into the apprenticeships, whether they come from offshore—

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Thank you both for suggesting that Alberta and Quebec have models. I think that's going to be very helpful.

I also want to say I do admire your careers. I think that is a real laudable career to have, to do some of that height work.

Mr. Pat Byrne: It's the best view in town and you don't have to pay for it.

What I'll leave you with here is to put Canadians first. Let's look locally. Try to hire Canadian skilled workers locally. If there's nobody locally, let's look provincially and make sure there's nobody around the province who is unemployed. Beyond that, let's look beyond the borders of our individual provinces and make sure there are no Canadians unemployed.

After that, I have no issue. If there is a genuine shortage of skilled workers in a trade and we have a foreign worker who possesses those skills, let's get him in. Maybe he's going to wind up being a new Canadian.

I'd also like to see us refocus our attention on the apprenticeship programs in Canada too, and really strengthen the trades again. For

too long, too many people thought the trades were a dirty thing and something you did if you weren't smart enough in school. It's absolutely amazing how far the trades have come, how much knowledge you have to possess, and how much technical knowledge is required to perform the trades that we perform.

So it's a really viable future for young people in all of Canada. I want to see more young people getting into it, because an average age of 46 years is not saying much for our trades right now.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thanks, Pat.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Tung Chan: Thank you. I'm going to keep it short.

What are we asking for? The one impression I want to leave with you is to call for leadership. We want the government to act in this role, to bring people together, to put this issue on the national agenda. If we can't put it on the first ministers' table, let's put it on the ministers' table, so that when the ministers of industry meet nationally, they put it on the table and make it welcoming for new Canadians to come here. Create a cooperative effort to connect new Canadians with business, with communities, with trade unions, and with employers.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Once again, I would just like to thank all the witnesses for being here today. It is very important for us to get a national perspective.

As you heard from some of our colleagues earlier, when we were in St. John's, Newfoundland, they weren't really thrilled with the thought of maybe sending trades across the country, but here we are in B.C., where we hear the message loud and clear. You'd like to see Canadians have an opportunity first. We do have to deal with this vast, great land that we have and try to accommodate everyone with the requests we have.

So once again, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here today. It is greatly appreciated, and we wish you the best for the rest of the day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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