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—
Chair

Mr. Norman Doyle

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• (1340)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC)): We're back in session. We're waiting for Roberge Transport, whose people are not here yet, but we do have Kramer Ltd. and the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters.

So I want to welcome you here today. We will get your comments officially on the record.

Mr. McLellan is part of that delegation, of course, as the CEO and director general of the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce. Welcome, Mr. McLellan.

Generally, you know how it works: we go with five- to seven-minute presentations.

Feel free to start. We are now back in session and are recording.

Go ahead, Mr. Kocdag.

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag (National Board, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters): Thank you, Mr. Chair and esteemed colleagues. I have five copies of my quick notes, which I'll just pass on to you.

We have an opportunity to relay the concerns of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters. I sit on the national board of the CME, whose member companies have been involved in the foreign worker program and the SINP, the provincial nominee program, over the last five years. I could certainly speak to the benefits of the programs, but I guess the purpose of the hearing today is to find out what areas we can do better collectively in, and perhaps the areas of concern for us and our members.

The first area I'd like to raise is the lack of apparent cooperation and communication among the provincial organizations, Service Canada, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada. What we found throughout the process is that different levels of government operate in silos; there's very little exchange of information and documentation, both electronically and physically. Therefore, we are having significant delays in processing.

We also found that information seemed to be processed at every level, without any integral impact on the different levels of the government, including the visa posts. Our issue here is that throughout the process, the foreign worker program does not operate on its own; it actually needs cooperation from the visa posts and the local and provincial offices. Unfortunately, we do not see any kind of effective cooperation at that level.

The second area of concern I'd like to raise is the duplication of required documents. Generally, when people apply for temporary work permits, the documentation is also required for the provincial nominee program and for the permanent residency applications as well. It creates a huge problem for the applicant, making the processing difficult and causing significant delays.

In terms of the labour market opinion rules, we have a significant problem in terms of the advertising requirements and the fact that we're required to prove and re-prove that certain types of skills are still in shortage, even though both the provinces and the federal government do have their own skill shortage lists—and these are nationally published lists—but these are not necessarily considered by Service Canada for LMO purposes.

I had alluded to the difficulty with processing times, and some of our members also encountered difficulties from additional information requests after the original application was made. As an example, when the wage became an issue or was perceived to be an issue by Service Canada, one of our member companies was actually required to produce a union contract to prove that the employees were going to be paid x number of dollars. It just creates a difficult environment, where the lack of trust becomes very apparent, and it's not necessarily a productive work environment.

We are also finding that once the LMO is done, once the block of visas is approved in principle, it is very difficult to go through the process and actually get those visas, especially if you need any assistance from the visa post, from which it's impossible to get any consistent answer. Most of the time you don't even get anybody answering the phone, because the work hours are so limited at the visa post overseas. When we have any kind of information...the only reference is to go to the website and find the answer we're looking for there, which is almost impossible.

So there are a lot of areas that they could improve upon. As a business association, and commercial businesses ourselves, we see the relevance and the benefit of the programs, but hopefully with cooperation on both sides, you'll be able to improve the overall performance significantly.

Thank you very much.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

Jan, please.

Ms. Jan Katerynych (Human Resources Manager and In-House Counsel, Kramer Ltd.): Thank you very much, once again.

We've already been talking over lunch about a lot of the problems that we, as employers in Saskatchewan, are running into with both the federal and the provincial process.

First of all, I want to let you know that I'm here in a dual role. At lunch, I was talking in terms of Kramer itself and the experience we've had there. I'm also here representing the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce, along with Steve. I'm on the youth, education, and training committee, and this is one of our main focuses on that committee. So we're looking at immigration and the labour market from a provincial perspective on behalf of all industries. My notes for this particular presentation are based on that viewpoint.

We've talked a lot already about how the system is not working here in Saskatchewan. There are ridiculously long waiting times in order to get labour here. It's a ridiculously confusing process, and the level of employer frustration throughout the entire province is growing.

There's a lot of finger pointing going on between the province and the federal government and employers. This is a result of the confusion and frustrations that are going on. However, we are optimistic, because we have a new government in Saskatchewan, which seems to be focusing on immigration. As well, we have a relatively new minister in Ottawa. So we're hoping that we are going to see changes of a dramatic nature in the very near future.

Saskatchewan is way behind the pack in terms of access. While real world numbers have been increasing in recent years, only 1.1% of the permanent residents and 1.3% of the temporary foreign workers who entered Canada in 2006 chose Saskatchewan as a place to emigrate to. And I'm not sure if everybody is aware of this, but Regina and Saskatoon are the only two large western cities where the number of refugees is greater than the number of economic immigrants—and this is significant. It is a significant difference within the province. It does give us some really good settlement services within the province, but it doesn't do a lot for business.

We are, and will remain, welcoming to refugees in Saskatchewan, but we really, really need to expand our numbers in the other classes of immigration.

Regarding the proposed changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the chamber and I are not of the view that any extraordinary powers have been granted to the minister by the proposed changes. I and the chamber believe that these changes are only going to serve to enable the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to better implement targets that the business community agrees with. We agree this is sensible and measured legislation, serving to reduce the number of newcomers allowed into the country, to ease the backlog of applications.

I understand that the proposed modifications—and the spirit behind the proposed modifications—are intended to permit CIC to select among the new applications received and to choose those that they determine will best suit Canada's labour market requirements. If that is in fact the spirit of the modifications—and I understand it is the spirit—they can only benefit us here in Saskatchewan.

While a valid point can be made that increased levels of family class immigrants can aid overall retention rates, we're of the view

that a balance has to be found. Of the immigrants let into Canada in 2006, 103,000 were family class or refugees—with, arguably, similar levels of economic contribution—versus 138,000 economic class immigrants. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada's own data, the number of refugee and family class immigrants has been steadily growing while the number of economic class immigrants has been largely flat.

However, there are also many bright spots in immigration policy, such as the greatly increasing numbers of provincial nominees. Particularly in the example of Saskatchewan, our own immigrant nominee program needs to continue to work diligently to increase the numbers, and our chamber will continue to lobby for that to be accomplished.

● (1350)

Overall, the last 10 years of immigration statistics did not give Canadian business confidence that a solid plan was in place. For Canada to meet its labour market needs, we need to overcome past precedents of fits and starts and keep a steady course on immigration policy. For this reason, we feel that the proposed amendments to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act are reasonable. The Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce supports them as such.

The provincial chamber will explore these issues at an immigration forum next week in Saskatoon in an effort to help employers in Saskatchewan gain a greater understanding of the immigration process.

Only a short time ago, some members of this committee—and I was lucky enough to be present—attended a lunch hosted by the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce that put our province's business community and the committee together to share experiences and hopefully convey some of the frustrations and delays in our experiences with the immigration process in Saskatchewan.

The provincial chamber also organized a teleconference meeting with the Minister of CIC last fall so that Saskatchewan businesses could directly convey their experiences. I was present at the meeting, and in short order we asked her to streamline the process of immigration. We asked her to shorten the timeframes. I talked specifically about the issues with the Manila embassy, which have caused us a lot of problems in Manila. We want the Manila embassy problems fixed, and we want the policies updated to represent the current situation in Saskatchewan. The economic situation has changed, and we really need to meet the change in Saskatchewan.

We are also having speakers at the Saskatchewan chamber's annual conference on business address the subject in an ongoing effort to maintain dialogue with the province's business community and officials responsible for immigration. In addition, the committee I'm part of has prepared a brief on the immigration process for the benefit of our members' reference, and we'll be presenting policy resolutions, some specific policy changes that we are suggesting, and we're going to be making those at the conference on business and immigration, with recommendations that we hope will be adopted by the federal and provincial governments.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ)): Thank you very much.

Mr. McLellan.

[*English*]

Mr. Steve McLellan (As an Individual): The bulk of the information and the good news has been presented. I would like to make a couple of comments and just reiterate, perhaps, some important points. One was referenced earlier today, and that's to enhance the structure to welcome families, not just individuals. That is an absolute criterion for our immigrants to be long-term Canadian citizens, should they choose, and more importantly to enhance their time in our country. It's absolutely critical.

Also, I think I would encourage you and the department to look at opportunities to allow, and more important, to welcome provincial government representatives to work within the consulate offices in select countries. We've talked here in Saskatchewan about picking three or four countries that are important to us in terms of key origins of our needed workforce. If we were to have an opportunity where it was easy for us not just to be allowed but, as I said a minute ago, welcome to have our folks in those consulate offices, we think the process would be much more expedient.

I don't want to leave this session without congratulation for the announcement made just a few months ago—and Ed was kind enough to be in Regina to make the announcement on behalf of the government—of expanded dollars to the settlement process. As Jan has just said, that's critical to the success of the immigrant to the province. We have some hard-working folks in this province who have done a good job of it, and we congratulate you and once again thank you for those announcements.

My final comment will be not a threat or a warning but a caution. Other countries that have challenges to their immigration system—one just south of us—have found that when people couldn't get in the country legally, their illegal immigrants were of significant number and were therefore a long-term, significant challenge. We don't have that challenge in Saskatchewan now. I think in Toronto and perhaps some of the larger centres there are more folks who are indeed, by definition, illegal.

I say it again, not because our business community is starting to move in that direction but because our business community is in dire need of workers. They are looking at creative, legal opportunities, but the confusion you've heard today, and I'm sure you'll hear as these sessions continue, will drive some of these folks to say, "What other opportunities have we?"

As the Saskatchewan chamber, we are not advocating and we are not supporting anything that would bring in an illegal worker. However, I say as a caution to you that if we as a country don't get this issue solved to bring in these people who want to be here, the demand will be not only on our businesses to look at these as options but—more importantly and more likely—from the immigrants themselves, when they see what their options are where they live now and what the opportunities are in Canada. They will take the chance, cross the border, and do as they have done in other countries.

I hope that doesn't happen. We're not anxious for it to happen, and we'll work against that, but I need your support in order to make sure the process is fluid enough so that it isn't a requirement of doing business in or living in this country.

Thank you.

• (1355)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you very much, Mr. McLellan.

We should have time for seven minutes per member.

Mr. Carrier.

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

Welcome to our committee meeting. I am a member of Parliament from Quebec. We are looking forward to getting to Ontario and Quebec to see if the provinces are similar, but we are starting in western Canada. We are learning a lot about this problem. I have a number of questions. I will start with Mr. Kocdag.

For temporary workers, you said that an employer's requirement to prove that his needs cannot be met locally is not really adhered to by the Department of Immigration, and, as a criterion, it is vague. Can you give me some specifics about that and say what your recommendation would be?

[*English*]

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag: Excuse me, if you could, please clarify the question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: You mentioned that the requirement for an employer to prove that he has looked at every internal possibility before considering temporary workers is used to differing degrees when approving temporary workers. Do you understand?

• (1400)

[*English*]

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag: Yes, I do. Thank you.

Our situation, as we were given the information from Service Canada, basically leads us to believe that before we can make a job offer to a foreign national to come and work in Canada for a period of time, we are required to prove to the Canadian government that we have exhausted every opportunity to hire a Canadian resident, whether a Canadian citizen or a landed immigrant. That requires us to advertise nationally, and we have to make sure that we do have evidence of advertising, evidence of looking for people and interviewing the skill categories to make sure we have made a reasonable effort and have offered them the wages the Government of Canada requires us to or deems to be reasonable. If that whole process fails, then Service Canada will consider giving us the go-ahead, based on that labour market opinion, to hire somebody from outside of the country.

We think that given the labour market conditions today, it's extremely onerous, totally unnecessary, causes extreme delays, and really doesn't take the international competition for skilled labour into account. To give you an idea, when we started interviewing people outside of the country for the jobs we have, most of the original applicants we offered jobs to ended up in places like Europe, Australia, Brazil, or Singapore, simply because it was significantly faster to get processing in those countries than it was in Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Katerynych. You mentioned that, in Saskatchewan, there are more political refugees, refugees of various kinds, than landed immigrants, immigrants of various kinds. You seemed to find that regrettable. If I understand correctly, you want there to be more immigrants than refugees. I would like to know what problems are caused by refugees and not by immigrants. Why do you consider that perhaps the ratio of refugees to immigrants is too great?

[English]

Ms. Jan Katerynych: I apologize. I didn't mean to give the impression that I think it's by any means disappointing or deplorable. I'm just trying to put forward the business community's opinion that we need more economic immigrants, as opposed to increasing numbers of refugees. We are receiving a significant number of refugees here in Saskatchewan, and once they are received by the settlement agencies, and if English language skills are provided and so on, they do become economically contributing to Saskatchewan. But right now what we need is skilled workers who can come in and actually start to help contribute to our economy right away.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: In my constituency in Quebec, I had to deal with the case of a person who was a refugee in Saskatchewan. She was very unhappy because she knew no one. Given that she had family in Quebec, she decided to move there. That is the kind of problem, perhaps.

In your opinion, do you receive more immigrants in Saskatchewan than elsewhere in Canada? If so, do you know why? Is it because you ask for them specifically?

[English]

Ms. Jan Katerynych: I have to be honest. I'm not sure how the numbers are determined as to how many refugees actually come into Saskatchewan. And I don't think it's a disproportionately large number of refugees; what I think we have is a disproportionately low number of economic immigrants.

And I agree; I know that retention of our refugee population is also a problem here in Saskatchewan. A significant number go to places such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Quebec, where the family supports are and where the community is. We lose a significant number.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you.

Mr. McLellan, you would like to identify countries where people could be recruited and be given temporary worker status. How do

you see that? Is it your opinion that the Department of Immigration should be responsible for recruitment in designated countries?

[English]

Mr. Steve McLellan: I don't think it should be the Canadian government necessarily that makes the determination of these countries. I think the provinces should.

Your constituent is a good example. When people travel to Canada or come to Moose Jaw... If I were from the Philippines, I would like to have a welcoming community, but I'd also like to have some other Filipinos around, so that when I chose to celebrate my cultural holidays I'd have people with me.

What I'm suggesting by that is that we need, as a province, to start to focus on those countries where we can build a community of Filipinos, Ukrainians—whatever the case is. The province needs to make those decisions, not necessarily the federal government.

What the federal government could do, though, would be to determine that once a province has made those decisions—that this half dozen or these four countries are those that Saskatchewan truly wants to focus on and truly wants to attract a community from to their province—then you should, as a federal responsibility, start to say, “We will welcome the Saskatchewan representatives in those consulate offices, we will fast-track those applicants through those countries, and we will work with you to expedite those people”, not to the disservice of others, necessarily, but recognizing the focus on those countries.

This is the concept we're talking about in this province that I think has great merit. But again, the decision needs to be made by the province.

• (1405)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you very much.

Mr. Komarnicki, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I'll just make a few comments, because we've heard a lot of what you've had to say.

From a point of encouragement, when we met last fall, we had an opportunity to speak to the minister, indicating to me a process of a certain amount of collaboration and partnership between the business community, the federal government, and the provincial government. I know we had the opportunity to hear of new changes from the province and from business, and I think that's a good thing in the start of this whole process. I certainly would encourage that. Being here today in Saskatchewan and hearing from you, many of our committee, I think, find things happening in Saskatchewan that need some immediate attention, and we need to start working toward that end. I am encouraged by what I see.

I know the LMOs have been a big topic. That's under human resources, not our committee, but it's important because it ties in eventually to immigration. The provincial minister and I have talked about that. We have talked at the federal level and made representation to add temporary foreign worker units in Alberta and British Columbia. Some offices opened up in the east in Ontario to deal with expediting those and to deal with occupations under pressure.

I certainly hear what you're saying, and I will take that back. I will say that Saskatchewan's economy is really at a critical mass, and we need to see if we can include Saskatchewan in that. I know the provincial representative this morning said that might be a long way away, but I think we need to keep working on it, because it's a cumulative effort.

Another thing is that the settlement immigration funding, as important as it is, is also tied into numbers that are coming in. I am fully convinced that the provincial nominee program is the vehicle through which a lot of this can happen. I think we've demonstrated that this morning, and we've talked about it. As Saskatchewan increases its numbers, it will also increase the funding that comes to it; we've seen a \$1.5 billion increase in funding from one year to the next—which is a lot—but there is a long way to go and to grow. I think we need to keep that in mind.

In terms of illegal undocumented workers, my sense is that our system has not allowed people to come in through the legitimate way, so they try to come in some other way or in an underground way altogether. It seems that if we want to fix the system, we need to deal with them in some fashion. More importantly, why are they there?

I hear it from all of you. We don't have a nice simple stream, so we need to find a way to match newcomers with the demands of the economy. I think a lot of people have not yet caught on to the fact—whether they're in administration, bureaucracy, or wherever—that the economy is growing exponentially and that there is no internal way to meet those needs. The way to meet them is through external means, but we need to have a system that matches better. I am hopeful that the legislation you spoke of will play a part in that, but I realize it's a process.

Having summarized what I've heard here today, I would ask each of you, if you had one comment or direction to the committee, to say what that might be. Give us a quick one-two, and my time will be up.

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag: From our point of view, I think the most important thing that we would really like to see is concrete evidence of cooperation and communication among the departments involved—both provincially and federally, including the visa process—so that only one set of documentation would be used.

• (1410)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Okay.

Ms. Jan Katerynych: I would comment about transparency and the confusion between departments. At the very beginning you said the LMO is actually HRSDC, not Immigration. To the general public, they are Immigration, and that in itself is confusing.

I know that when you're intimately involved in the process and so on you understand that it's HRSDC versus Immigration, but to the

general public, the business community, and so on, an LMO means immigration. That in itself is indicative of the level of confusion that starts right at the top, moves all the way down, and filters down throughout the entire process. We really need to see some clarity, some education, and some understanding as to how to streamline this process.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Just to add to that, I find the smaller communities that want to attract newcomers to their community have a difficult time knowing where to start, because it is a complex system. How do you figure it out and know what you have to do to encourage newcomers coming in?

I announced in Lethbridge, in Moose Jaw, and in other centres where we're working something called the small community toolbox. It's some things you need to know if you want to succeed in attracting and keeping people and making sure they stay. It has become a very complex system, and I find at times I'm muddling through it and wondering how this thing really works. There is that hit-and-miss aspect to it, and there shouldn't be. We do need to concentrate on that area for sure.

Ms. Jan Katerynych: In conversation before we started, we had this chat at the beginning. We're intimately involved in the process of immigration—lawyers by trade—and we found we're still confused by the process. It's very confusing.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Right, and having worked with some constituents through some processing, I found that I have experienced some difficulty. I'm just wondering how an individual would be able to work through that on their own.

Mr. Steve McLellan: If I were to make one quick recommendation, it would be that you, through your efforts, and your colleagues in Ottawa change the fundamental function of Citizenship and Immigration from a philosophy that keeps out those very few Canada may not want into a philosophy that brings and welcomes the very many whom we do want. If you change that philosophy from being a goalkeeper to being a centre, you're going to make some difference.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I appreciate that. When I talk to staff people working in my office, I say, "Don't look at why something can't be done; let's look at what we might be able to do." Just a change in attitude sometimes makes a big difference.

Mr. Steve McLellan: A huge difference.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: That's a fair point.

I guess I'm done.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you.

You have spoken a good deal about the cooperation between the provinces and the federal government. Now, provincial governments have many responsibilities to new arrivals, who need to be looked after in health, education, settlement services, training and employment.

When it comes down to it, would it not be easier for the whole immigrant selection process to be looked after by the provinces? Quebec does its own selections under a special agreement. In that way, provinces could tailor their programs to their specific needs. The feds could still look after security, health concerns as they affect safety across the country, and territorial control.

What do you think about that?

[English]

Ms. Jan Katerynych: In theory, I think it sounds like a great idea. There's nothing there, as far as I'm concerned, in having Saskatchewan people focusing on future Saskatchewan residents; I think it's great in theory.

However, it is still the federal government's role, with respect to security, to actually get those people processed in their home countries and get them to Saskatchewan in the first place. That in itself also needs to be ironed out. If the permits or the papers were issued at the home consulates or embassies quickly and easily, that would make it a lot easier within the province.

Settlement services themselves, if they were funding.... I don't know, but I know they're certainly handled at a provincial level or through non-profit organizations, as it is. But we still need to iron out some of the federal processes, even if we did change the rest of it to provincial.

• (1415)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Chair, if I may interject, the provincial nominee program we talked about could advance the opportunity for the province to nominate; then what's left to the feds is security and health provisions, which is along the lines you're speaking of. That's why I say it's a great vehicle for the provinces to wake up to and use to the max, if they can.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Fair enough.

[English]

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag: One comment I'd like to make is that I agree with Jan, in the sense that it would be great to have more responsibility and more operational functionality reside in the province. That will only help speed up the process; we would agree with that. However, personally, I don't know what the other implications may be on the federal system.

I also have to focus on the difficulties we have at the visa post. For example, for the employees we're able to bring from overseas, we have just as much problem, if not more, at the visa post as locally or at the federal level. Solving the problem on one end is not going to be enough in itself; we have to complete the circle and make sure that the visa-issuing offices are required to improve their performances as well.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): What you say is true. While Quebec chooses most of its immigrants itself, at least all the economic immigrants, you often hear the complaint that once someone is selected, we no longer have control over the time that the federal government takes to do the health and security checks. In Quebec, we really have this problem with immigrants in the investor

category. We try to get a competitive advantage by doing the selection very quickly. We are among the quickest in the world, but once Ottawa gets the ball, we have no more control over the process.

In all cases, whatever the level of autonomy that the provinces have, there could be a requirement that, for example, the federal government should process 80% of cases within six months. Then we would be able to have an idea of the amount of time that the federal government puts into processing applications for security and health. Would you be receptive to that idea?

[English]

Mr. Gurcan Kocdag: Absolutely. If it were possible, once it's determined to be x number of months, at least then you can make a business decision as to whether or not that's an avenue you wish to follow.

To give you an example, we are receiving three employees from South Africa within three weeks. We started that batch 19 months ago. So eight months certainly is a dream come true. But, definitely, if you knew. What makes it more difficult for us is the uncertainty. We don't know how long each application is going to take. Provided all the information is given to the processing officers, we know from that point on it's going to take three months, six months, eight months. At least we would have the ability to make a business decision. Right now, we don't.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you.

Are there other comments? Would members like to ask any questions? Ms. Grewal? No?

Thank you very much for your testimony. We are going to take a break for a few minutes in order to give the next witnesses time to join us.

In fact, Mr. Batters, the member for this area, suggests that we take advantage of the break to hear from two people from his community. First, I would like to find out if this is acceptable to all members of the committee. Not all the witnesses in the next group are here. We could set aside 30 minutes. Our two guests will have to take their places immediately so that we do not fall too far behind.

• (1420)

[English]

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): I'll introduce them.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): We just agreed to take 30 minutes with those two persons. It's the Saskatchewan day.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: In Saskatchewan we see lots of people, lots of action.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): We could give each witness five minutes to make their presentations, which would leave us about 20 minutes for questions and comments.

We can start with Ms. Blanchard.

[English]

Mr. Dave Batters: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'll introduce Ms. Blanchard. She is from Moose Jaw, representing the Moose Jaw Multicultural Council; she is its executive director. She wanted to come today—she only found about our visit to Moose Jaw yesterday, unfortunately—and speak on issues regarding refugee and immigrant settlement.

Following Tara will be Darcy Dietrich from the Regina Open Door Society, and he'll speak on topics very similar. Because of the short notice, they do not have materials prepared, but they talk about these subjects every day in their work lives, and I think they can do an excellent job without preparation, with our indulgence.

And then I'm sure we'll be anxious to ask questions when they're done. I agree with you, Mr. Chair; I think five minutes per witness would be great.

• (1425)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Ms. Blanchard.

[English]

Ms. Tara Blanchard (As an Individual): *Merci.* Thank you very much for having us here today on such short notice. I'm the executive director of the Moose Jaw Multicultural Council. Our agency has been active in our community for almost 35 years, providing settlement services to refugees and immigrants.

We prefer just to say “newcomers”, because there is not much of a difference between a refugee and an immigrant. They still have needs when they arrive in Canada. Sometimes they still need some language training; they still need some settlement services to overcome culture shock. They are new to our country and they need services.

We were sitting in the back and heard some of the comments of people who were here earlier. One of the comments that tweaked our interest was about the need for skilled workers. We're certainly not disagreeing about the need; there is a need in Saskatchewan for skilled workers. But I think the refugee population is overlooked as a viable source of labour pools.

A lot of our refugees come with lots of skills, lots of different qualifications. They sometimes have a language barrier, as do a lot of newcomers to Canada. The difference with refugee clients is that they are given one year and sometimes two years of assistance from the federal government to go to school to learn English and sometimes to go into an employment class and learn a little bit about the Canadian labour market and labour standards.

They may take a little longer to enter the work force or to become self-sufficient, but we certainly take great steps to ensure that they are well prepared before they go into the workforce or enter into further education or anything of that nature.

Another thing I want to comment on is the retention rate. Ms. Katerynych just indicated that the retention rate for refugees hasn't been that great.

A few years ago, we probably would have agreed with that. In the last four or five years, we've had really good success with retention

rates because of some of the changes that CIC is making to the way refugee clients are destined to us: with group destination, with listening to the clients, putting requests in for their families to be destined to the same cities—instead of having family here and family in Vancouver or something, sending everybody to the same place—and building on existing communities.

At the beginning of the year, we usually sit down with our local immigration office and tell them what kinds of existing cultural communities we have and what their retention rates are like. Do we want more of a certain kind of clientele? Are we open to accepting new types of clientele? Are there services in place for these people when they come? Do they have people they can form friendships with? Do we have interpreters who are available?

We look at all these things and are trying more and more to make educated decisions when it comes to the destining and acceptance of the refugee clients in our communities.

Another thing is family reunification. I know the federal government is taking great strides to reunite families, because people are more likely to stay in a community if they have that family support. That goes for everybody.

Then I'll mention the existing cultural groups. We have a lot of cultural groups—16, actually—that belong to the Moose Jaw Multicultural Council, and all of them are very open to accepting immigrants or refugees and welcoming them. Our agency has been put in place to welcome newcomers to Moose Jaw, and as I said, I think for the past 35 years we've done the best possible job we can of providing services for newcomers, welcoming them into our community.

There are a lot of benefits to living in a smaller community—the cost of living and the transportation time and so on. Sometimes smaller communities are overlooked. I don't think they should be put aside or disregarded as a viable source for people to relocate.

Is that my five minutes?

• (1430)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): You can take 30 seconds.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: I think I've covered the clients. I'll let Darcy talk about the existing relationship between CIC and the province.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you very much.

Mr. Dietrich, you have five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Darcy Dietrich (Member-at-large, Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance (CISSA)): Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak with all of you today. I wish I'd had a little bit more time to prepare, but in any case, thank you for having Tara and me come up and speak with you.

The Regina Open Door Society has been serving the community of Regina for about 35 years. In the past year and a half, we've grown from 35 to 75 staff members. This is in large part due to additional opportunities through Citizenship and Immigration, but as well, as you all know, the Province of Saskatchewan is now playing a greater role in trying to attract and retain immigrants.

I'd like to speak a little bit about the fact that we feel presently—and I think since the Saskatchewan Immigration Branch was created—that there hasn't been a good relationship between the federal government and the Saskatchewan Immigration Branch. We often feel that we're put in the middle of that, and it creates very difficult circumstances for us.

Traditionally we have served all newcomers to Regina. The province seems to be pigeonholing us as having only worked with refugee clients, and that is not true. Definitely, with our settlement services—the resettlement assistance program and the immigrant settlement and adaptation program—we've worked intensively with refugee clients to ensure that they're successful in participating in our community, but over the years we have always served all classes of immigrants. Actually, our employment service has traditionally been serving about 65% to 70% immigrants, and in language training the number of immigrants is going up and up.

I have a problem with the fact that everyone seems to be talking about the need to separate the refugee and the immigrant. We very much see ourselves and our agencies as a gateway for all newcomers to Regina or Moose Jaw, and we would like to welcome our community and be viewed by our community as the gateway and as the experts in the field.

As well, I'd like to talk a little bit about some of our challenges around funding, although a recent increase to funding in Saskatchewan was announced from Regina Open Door Society in December.

In reality, what's happened because of the funding formulas is that Saskatoon has received a much larger amount of that funding. Of course, we realize that's based on a formula that takes numbers into consideration. I think it's probably highly weighted in terms of numbers, but I think we all know many immigrants don't necessarily require the same level of support to be successful as our refugee clients do. I think that needs to be taken into consideration; if one region is working with a lot of refugee clients with more complex needs, we need that additional funding to support them to ensure they're going to be successful, participating, employed members of our community.

When I look at what's happening in Ontario right now, I see the funding of welcoming centres. Millions of dollars are going into welcoming centres to bring agencies together to create sort of a gateway, a one-stop shop for newcomers. That's what we're all about in Saskatchewan. We've always done that. We deliver the settlement services, the family support services, employment training, and language training, and we would like to see more support in order to fill the gaps we have and to be the welcoming centres in Saskatchewan.

We'd like to see that encouraged. Instead what we seem to see is—and I'm not saying this is the federal government, because it might be the provincial—a preference to segregate and to create competition.

It's not that competition is bad, but it's at a level at which people aren't willing to work together. In Saskatchewan and in Regina that's what we're all about. We've always been about building partnerships and ensuring that our clients are getting absolutely the best service possible so that they can be successful.

I would very much encourage Citizenship and Immigration and the Saskatchewan Immigration Branch to look at how other provinces are working together. In Alberta there's a very good relationship, and the sector is flourishing. In Saskatchewan the opposite is happening; because there's not a good relationship, the sector is being pulled apart. We're not being encouraged to work together to ensure more successful outcomes for newcomers coming to our province.

• (1435)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you.

Who wants to weigh in on this?

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Blanchard. I hope that you still speak French, given that you provide immigrants with settlement services.

We talked a lot about refugees earlier. You also said that retention rates for refugees have improved, but you did not provide any figures. We still see it as a problem. The president of the Chamber of Commerce suggested that Saskatchewan be targeted for immigration to a greater extent so that immigrants can in turn be directed to communities able to receive them. This targeting of regions or of countries could apply to refugees just as well as to immigrants.

At the same time, some participants have called for better collaboration between the federal government and the provinces. It looks like it is the provincial government's job to target regions appropriately so that newcomers are better integrated into your communities. I suppose that receiving refugees takes more staff, more effort and more time and if the refugees move on after six months or a year, it is seen as a great waste of everyone's energy.

Would you like to see the provincial government getting more involved in targeting newcomers in the province more effectively?

[English]

Ms. Tara Blanchard: I think Darcy hit the nail on the head. Basically, in the past few years we've seen a real fragmenting of services. As he said, our agencies started welcoming all the newcomers to Saskatchewan; we did not differentiate between the refugee clients and the immigrant clients. Now we have the federal government funding us to work more with the refugee clients; we have the provincial government funding us to work more with the immigrant clients.

What we need to do is forget how they came to Canada. It's irrelevant. And we have existing centres in place. Instead of reinventing the wheel, the services are in place. If you bring the people and they're served correctly and they're served in the best possible way and are given the tools they need to succeed, they are going to stay in our province.

Look at existing cultural groups; look at bringing their families with them. If the family is happy, then the person who was brought in to do the work will be happy. If they have a cultural group to support them and everybody is happy and satisfied and well-adjusted in their community, they're going to stay. And they're going to have an agency they can go to, where they can access services.

What's very difficult is that we're notified of the refugee clients, but we're not notified of immigrant arrivals. We advertise a lot in the community. What's very frustrating is to hear stories of immigrants who have moved from our community who say, "Nobody was around to help me." Well, if we're not notified of their arrival and don't know they're in our community, how can we possibly help them, though we are here to help them?

There have to be a few changes put in place in that regard, such as notifying the settlement agencies of immigrant arrivals—we're already notified of the refugee arrivals—and giving them more information, before they arrive in the province they're destined to, telling them where to go and where to access services.

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: I'd like to add that in terms of refugees coming to Saskatchewan in the past couple of years, the large group process done with the Karen refugees was highly successful. We've resettled a couple of hundred Karen refugees in Regina over the past year; as far as I know, to date not one has moved on. This has been a very good exercise to develop, and I think we need to do more of that.

In terms of the immigrant groups, I definitely agree that various regions of Saskatchewan will require immigrants with varying skill sets to meet the labour needs within that community. However, support must be there.

I'm disappointed in the provincial government. I'm not sure at this point what their vision is. It seems to change a lot. The way I see it is they've given seed funding for a couple of years for a bunch of volunteers in the community to come together to try to meet the needs of the immigrants settling there. I don't know if they envision that after two years everyone is just going to have loved it so much that they want to volunteer to do it for the rest of their lives.

The reality is that we have a strong settlement sector in Saskatchewan. It was small, but we were very involved provincially and nationally. I represent Saskatchewan on CISSA-ACSEI, a national organization. We've been attending all sorts of conferences and participating for many years, so I feel that what should have happened was that they should have built on the settlement sector in Saskatchewan.

We had proposed a vision whereby initially, when the numbers were small, we could have had an outreach worker in each agency overseeing a region and helping communities to develop settlement plans. That didn't happen, and now, as I said before, we're feeling a real disconnect. We have many groups contacting us and saying they need to come to our agency and learn what we do. We don't like to say no, but in reality it's draining us somewhat of our ability to really focus on our community when we're trying to assist all these other communities.

Had they simply been invited to join the settlement sector in places where a large number of immigrants were settling in

Saskatchewan, I think they would have seen after a couple of years whether it was going to continue to grow or whether it would dwindle off and we wouldn't need an agency there. However, if there was an agency where it did continue to grow and the numbers were still coming in and there was a need for services and professional expertise, then I think settlement sector agencies should have been encouraged.

I'm still hoping we can pull this together.

● (1440)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Ms. Grewal, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): What types of services do you give in your agency? Do you help with language skills, finding a job, or writing résumés?

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: We have people who do all of that. We deliver the resettlement assistance program for government-assisted refugees, the immigrant and settlement adaptation program, and the LINC program—language instruction for newcomers to Canada. We have about 200 adult newcomers on site.

Every day we have a day care. We're actually moving to two day cares soon to support our clients so that they can access language training and employment services. We want to make sure they have the support through day care so that they don't have to worry about their kids. They can stay in language training over the summer. We have all sorts of employment services, such as the ELT program. We have a very successful ELT program.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: We have all the same services that the Regina Open Door Society does, but on a smaller scale.

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: We could leave a couple of calendars of our ELT project, just to show you how successful it is. This project is serving highly skilled immigrants in getting them back into their field of work. We have high-end employment services. We also have basic services. We have an introduction to employment and Canadian work culture, a program called Steps to Employment. We have a family services unit that we are building. We have an unusually high number of refugee clients with complex needs. There has been a lot of wonderful jointly assisted sponsorship.

We have a vision. When the changes were made to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, it was decided that we would deal with more compassionate and humanitarian cases. But the money wasn't available for it. So we set up on site, without funding, a health assessment clinic with Public Health. We have a formal partnership with the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region and the Regina Community Clinic to deliver specialized and culturally sensitive health care. We have initial assessments done with all our refugee clients. Now we are getting some funding through the United Way to have a full-time social worker on staff to help our settlement staff. Some settlement caseworkers don't have the education or the skills to deal with some of the complex situations that come up, so the United Way has helped us. We can now refer clients from our settlement unit to our family services unit.

We have everything from airport reception to services for highly skilled immigrants. There are still some gaps—we're trying to do more for children and youth. But we would like our province and our nation to be proud of the hard work we've done. We want to serve everyone at the same level, and we don't want to see barriers obstructing those of us who are trying to help and welcome newcomers.

• (1445)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: On the one hand, you have people who are looking for jobs. On the other hand, there is a shortage of workers. Are you coordinated with the construction industry, the hospitality industry?

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: We have just received funding to hire somebody to deliver a special bridging project within our employment services. It's looking at sector-specific training. We have a meeting coming up in a couple of days with career and employment services, Can-Sask. They would like us to entertain the idea of partnering with some other community-based agencies, such as aboriginal family service agencies, to deliver some trades training.

They wanted us to look at the idea of opening some of our services to non-immigrants and refugees. Of course, that is not our mission, and we have to be careful about mission drift. Within the bridging project, we are looking beyond the hospitality and cleaning industry. They are important and we have clients who need those jobs, but we are also looking at some of the higher-skilled positions and trades, because we want to try to get more newcomers into trades in Saskatchewan.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What is the success rate for getting people jobs in the construction and the hospitality sectors?

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: It is high. I've been at Regina Open Door Society for 20 years, and I've been in this position for seven. I remember when I was employment services manager doing the cold calls, trying to open doors for newcomers. But now, with Saskatchewan's economy growing, there is a great need for more people to fill labour shortages, and there is a huge turnaround. We now have employers and government, the City of Regina, knocking on our door asking for a better way to refer clients. They want to adapt so we can include newcomers in our workplace.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What is the total number of new immigrants in your agency?

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: On a yearly basis?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes.

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: We served 190 government-assisted refugees, but beyond that we are dealing with about 2,000 clients a year. That's growing. In the past year, it was much higher. That's everything from people who need intensive services for two or three years to those who need only a résumé.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: Last year we received 57 government-assisted refugees and another 20 to 25 immigrants. So it's about 100 a year.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: How do you deal with the people who don't have basic English skills? Do you have interpreters?

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: Yes.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: We have local interpreters who volunteer to help them out.

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: And we get some funding for interpretation.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you.

We have six minutes left. Two people can speak for three minutes each.

Mr. Carrier, you wanted to...

[*English*]

Mr. Dave Batters: Is it a full round?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): You will have another three minutes.

Mr. Dave Batters: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: I will be brief.

We were in Alberta yesterday and there was a lot of talk about the problem of temporary workers who were exploited by their employers, mainly in salary and housing. Their rights were not respected like those of other workers. The matter was so serious that the representative of the Alberta Federation of Labour said that Canada's reputation was at stake.

We touched on the matter a little this morning, but we did not hear from people as close to the workers as you are. I would like to hear what you think. This morning, we were told that it is not a problem here, and that in Saskatchewan, it was not as widespread as in Alberta. Is there a danger that the situation in Saskatchewan will get worse and that people will be exploited as well? Do you have assurances from your provincial government that labour standards will be fully upheld? It is not the federal government's role to oversee that. I would like to hear your comments.

•(1450)

[English]

Ms. Tara Blanchard: All of our clients, immigrants and refugees, come as permanent residents of Canada. The only difference between a permanent resident of Canada and a Canadian citizen is the right to vote.

My clients who are immigrants or refugees have every right, good or bad, extended to permanent residents. Temporary workers are different. It's not as though they've done something wrong. But an employer could take advantage of them. He could remind them that they're only here on a temporary basis and could be sent back.

I have to agree with your comment. I haven't heard of any temporary workers not being treated the same as other workers. I know of no examples, really, in Saskatchewan.

All I can say is that maybe more efforts could be made to bring people in on a permanent basis, rather than bringing them in temporarily.

Mr. Darcy Dietrich: It is something new for us to have significant numbers of temporary workers. I attended the last ISSA conference in Alberta, and I went to a session just to learn a little more. I heard a lot about some of the challenges they're facing.

I think we still have time in Saskatchewan to implement some supports, some processes. Some of the stories I heard in Alberta were new to me. For instance, I heard that some employers might buy a house and have maybe 10 immigrants living in the house, all paying a lot of rent. My understanding is that nobody is monitoring that situation.

I don't know whether there's any way, whether some governing body could be put in place to do spot monitoring to make sure that employers don't take advantage of temporary workers. I know something of the kind has been done to control immigration consultants.

I've been talking along these lines with respect to health and education services for children and youth. We still have time in Saskatchewan to make sure that we have the supports necessary to ensure successful outcomes, but I'm a little worried.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): I have to interrupt you now.

Mr. Batters has the floor for three minutes.

[English]

Mr. Dave Batters: I want to thank you both for appearing today on very short notice and sharing some of your insights. You do excellent work. I've toured your facilities, and they're impressive organizations with impressive staff members. You truly make a great deal of difference in people's lives.

Tara, I was happy to hear you back up the comment I made this morning. Neither I nor my office staff have encountered temporary foreign workers claiming to have been abused. It's a phenomenon that we're not yet familiar with in Saskatchewan. Let's hope that we're never familiar with it.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: I agree.

Mr. Dave Batters: This committee is looking at a vast array of different issues, but one of the things we have been focusing on most is the labour shortage that currently exists in Canada, particularly in Saskatchewan now. Our economy is on the verge of a boom like we've never seen before. The growth potential in Saskatchewan is limitless, and I talk about that with great pride, but right now, in terms of the backlog.... The Liberals grew the backlog in immigrants from 50,000 only a few short years ago to between 850,000 and 900,000 people today, so that's the bottleneck we're looking at.

Today we've had groups of people before us who are desperately looking for specific skilled workers. We've also had groups before us looking for semi-skilled workers. A gentleman from Tim Hortons was here talking about the fact that he cannot find people to pour coffee for \$10 an hour in his Tim Hortons. This is a desperate state of affairs right now.

I'd like you to comment a little bit on what you see. You're seeing the federal government going through some efforts toward legislation right now with Bill C-50 to try to end this bottleneck, to be able to satisfy the labour needs, to be able to fill those needs as appropriate. We know we need doctors and nurses. We also need construction workers, welders, and tradespeople. We desperately need truck drivers here in Moose Jaw. We need semi-skilled workers, as I have referred to as well.

The current wait list is six years. It's projected to be 10 years by 2012 if it's not addressed now. We are trying to take immediate steps right now to flip it around and start to change the whole pendulum, so instead of the waiting lists getting longer, they get shorter. That is going to mean that the government will be able to pick and choose based on the needs for employment here in our country, which makes perfect sense to me. If we need truck drivers, we're going to go out and get truck drivers. If we need doctors, likewise. If you have a doctor who is number 300,000 on the list, who is an obstetrician/gynecologist, maybe that person would soon then become number 300 on the list, because we need that person in a certain community to perform those activities.

I'd just like to hear both of your opinions as to what our government is doing in terms of trying to address specific labour needs that are desperate right now.

I want to add, before you respond, with your indulgence, Mr. Chair, that we're not at all talking with this proposed legislation about affecting anything to do with refugees or family reunification efforts—nothing—but we are going to try to pick the labour that is required and expedite that process, because it's out of control and it's getting worse and worse. In Australia, six months is the processing time for immigrants; in Canada it is six years.

I wonder if you could comment on that.

•(1455)

Ms. Tara Blanchard: Yes, six years is ridiculous.

First of all, I saw Minister Finley on *Canada AM* when she was discussing this, and she said they were going to start moving some of the caseloads from these offices that are extremely busy to ones that aren't as busy. That's a really wise idea.

I've never been to a visa office, but we do go to national seminars where we have our colleagues from these offices come to present. They say they input your file, and two years later is when they look at your file—look at it, not even start processing it. That needs to be changed.

As you said, I totally agree that we should fill the need where it is and start expediting these applications.

We need to talk to the guy at Tim Hortons, because we have clients who can pour coffee for \$10 an hour.

Mr. Dave Batters: Absolutely, you should.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: We need to get out in our community. We've done it already, but you can't get out enough in your own community and publicize yourself and tell them what services we offer and what kind of people we have.

Mr. Dave Batters: Tara, please do that.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: I will.

Mr. Dave Batters: The individual just presented today at this panel, and I can get you his name. I have his business card. He was saying they have real problems finding people to pour coffee for \$10 an hour.

The gentleman's name is Chris Thomas with Tim Hortons in Calgary. You can get that information from the committee.

We have slaughter plants that are closing. The Nature Valley Farms slaughter plant here in Saskatchewan, in Wolseley, I believe, is closing its doors, or is contemplating that. It is not my riding, so I'm paraphrasing what I've heard from one of my colleagues. They're contemplating shutting the doors just because they don't have the workers to do the jobs. We're talking about \$25-an-hour jobs, good paying jobs, but they don't have the people to fill the spots on the kill floor, for lack of a better term.

Definitely, if you could reach out to these individuals....

Ms. Tara Blanchard: I can talk about one initiative that Moose Jaw undertook.

A lot of our refugee clients don't come with proper documentation. Because of the situation of having to flee their country so quickly, they don't have documents, they don't have birth certificates, they don't have high school diplomas.

XL Beef, a few years ago, was crying for workers. You had to have a grade 12 diploma to work at XL Beef.

Well, we had clients whose immigration papers, which were the only documents they had, said "12" under "years of education". Some visa officer had believed them or had seen documentation at one point and had written on that paper that they had 12 years.

We went to XL Beef and, working with them, said, "Is there not something we can do? You need the workers. We have the people. There is a gap here." They relaxed the regulation a little bit and said that if they could prove they had 12 years, or a grade 12 diploma—either/or.... We have a lot of clients who have been working for the past three or four years at XL Beef, and they're very happy there. That's just a small example of what can be done to accommodate people and to get more workers.

●(1500)

Mr. Dave Batters: Thanks for all your efforts and for the great work you do in Moose Jaw and Regina. It's greatly appreciated by everyone in our province.

Ms. Tara Blanchard: Thanks.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you very much for having taken the time to come to testify before us at such short notice.

The reason why I let Mr. Batters go blithely on past the amount of time he had been allotted is that the next member of our panel has still not arrived, if I am not mistaken. He was scheduled for 3:30 p.m. and it was not possible to reach him in order to ask him to come earlier.

The committee will have to decide what it wants to do. I suppose that we could perhaps agree to have a short session as soon as he arrives, and hope that he arrives a little earlier. Is that agreeable for everyone? Do not go too far, because if he arrives before 3:30 p.m., we will start again right away so that we wrap up as quickly as possible.

We will take a recess.

●(1515)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): As we agreed earlier, we are going to start a thirty-minute session right now.

[*English*]

If you want to have translation to French you can use those.

[*Translation*]

You can speak in French or in English.

You have seven minutes to make your presentation; the remaining 23 minutes will be for questions and comments.

●(1520)

[*English*]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun (Senior Immigration Consultant, Culture Connect Int'l Ltd): Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee on some of the issues affecting the immigration consulting industry in Canada. I'm an immigration consultant with Culture Connect immigration consultants in Regina and a member in good standing of the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants.

I've been a member of this organization from its inception, but I've been working as an immigration agent and consultant for almost 15 years. Certainly, I was happy when an organization was created to regulate immigration consultants. My first reaction was that the public interest was finally being protected and that consultants could be regulated in Canada and abroad.

Alas, it appears that CSIC, the organization charged with the responsibility, has not lived up to my high expectations. There are many consultants practising today who are not members of CSIC, and some of these consultants provide services that cannot be justified. The question is, why are these consultants not members of CSIC? While some do not have justifiable reasons, others have legitimate, although inexcusable, reasons for not joining the organization. CSIC is not yet a self-governing profession, and the operation of phantom consultants is being fuelled by the actions of CSIC.

I'm not before the committee to destroy CSIC. I'm here to advise the committee that CSIC is not fulfilling the mandate intended for it by Parliament.

Why would I say this as a member of the organization? CSIC's initiative is suffering greatly because of actions and decisions taken by the initial board members. The initial board members have not delivered a self-governing profession, as was their task. Rather, they have usurped authority in all areas making up a self-governing profession and have denied members their rightful role. The go-it-alone attitude is, in my view, destroying the profession.

Certainly, we will say that in theory the board is accountable to its members. In 2007, in the aftermath of the *Toronto Star* exposé, a CSIC spokesman remarked that "evaluating CSIC is a job for its members". But in practice that's not the case.

CSIC operates without input from its members, and in fact the board operates a dictatorship system of government. There is a huge suppression of members who have voluntarily, in the interest of the public and the profession, submitted themselves to self-regulation.

Here are some of my reasons for coming to this conclusion. First, CSIC by-laws stipulate that an AGM must be held in person and any amendment must be approved by its members. The board unilaterally decided otherwise and has not held the 2007-08 AGM to date. CSIC chose an electronic AGM, though the bylaw was against it. It does not allow members' participation. Members could not speak or make contributions. The meeting was eventually cancelled for lack of a quorum.

I agree that an electronic meeting is possible today, but the way it was organized by CSIC was a failure. Unfortunately, CSIC has failed in these areas.

Second, the initial directors were appointed to run the affairs of CSIC before members were able to complete membership prerequisites. They unilaterally removed the right of members to call for a special meeting, as is the practice in most regulatory bodies in Canada.

A third concern is the lack of transparency. This relates to other matters you're dealing with: the issue of governance within the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants and the issue of unlicensed consultants. The board has not been forthcoming in providing information, and there are serious questions with respect to the administration of this society.

• (1525)

Personally, I have initiated and I've also been part of several letters and petitions to address this concern with the board. I've written

several e-mails and letters to the board. It appears that all these appeals fell on deaf ears. Today, members do not have opportunities to see the minutes of the board meetings.

CSIC year-end is October 31, but up to today no financial statement has been given to any members. Another concern is the excessive spending by the board and inadequate explanation on the spending. The board approved its own compensation without members' input. The compensation was then enshrined in the bylaw without members' consent. The financial statements are presented in such a way that it is difficult to know the content of the expenses, and CSIC—in this case the board—is not forthcoming in providing explanations to members when asked.

To support the board's excessive compensation and flamboyant travel expenses, members are also charged an unreasonable annual membership fee and additional fees to attend mandatory continuous professional development. In an attempt to have a monopoly on the educational consultants, CSIC allocated greater CPD points to its own program and significantly reduced CPD points for other educational programs that have greater value and content than that of CSIC. In this way, the board undermines valid industry initiatives, to its shame. Programs with similar or better content organized by other organizations, like the Canadian Association of Professional Immigration Consultants and the Canadian Bar Association, charge significantly less than CSIC's programs, and members are made to pay \$800 or more to watch a video of some of the events.

Though there are other options, CSIC chose a location for its office that is very expensive, on Bay Street—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Mr. Adebogun, your seven minutes are up. We now move to the period for members' questions and comments. You can use your answers to finish your presentation.

Mr. Carrier, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Adebogun. I am pleased to meet you. We have already discussed this matter of immigration consultants employed by the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants. You are now confirming, in fact, that this society operates very badly, that it lacks respect for its members, that it charges exorbitant prices and that it incurs unjustified expenses.

You say that you have written a number of letters and started petitions. Were they sent to the minister responsible for this organization, the Minister of Immigration?

[*English*]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Thank you for your question.

It's on record that I did send some e-mails to the minister's office at some point. Some of the documents delivered to the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants were delivered by Fedex, paid for by my organization. With some of these petitions that were written, I would write them, send them to some members, people would sign, and we'd send them to them.

To your question directly, some communications were sent to the minister's office; some were delivered by e-mail, by fax, and by regular mail to the society.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Could you tell us approximately when? Was it very recently? Was it in 2007 or 2006?

[English]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: We started sending these things out in 2005, 2006, and last year there were a few documents we also sent out. Of course, if you require some of these documents, I could get them from my computer.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: To your knowledge, did you receive any response to your attempts to communicate with the minister's office? Did you at least get an acknowledgement that they had been received and a commitment to solve the problem?

[English]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: No. From the minister's office, no, and even from CSIC. Sometimes they will ignore; other times they will give a blanket response. The other part that's funny now is that they've made it a crime basically for members to speak against the organization. That's now considered part of professional misconduct, which I have challenged.

We're polite. I believe in writing politely to them and saying the right thing, but I also feel strongly that the board cannot contain that.

I ran as a member of the board before, because I thought by being part of it we could effect some changes. Unfortunately, I did not win, but that's not the problem. My rationale for running for the office was to make sure that at least as a voice we could say no. One of the things I said in my platform at that point was that I chose not to be paid, but I would work with the board and I did not want to be paid.

• (1530)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: I can understand how the organization itself might respond to your accusations negatively or evasively. But you have received nothing from the minister's office suggesting that they are going to live up to their responsibilities and correct the situation. If I understand correctly, that is the situation.

[English]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Unfortunately, no, no direct response. And as I mentioned in my write-up, the only response we got is more in the public domain where they're saying, well, CSIC is self-regulating.

I don't think the government should leave CSIC alone at this point. It's great to make sure we have regulations, but the government still has a role to play, particularly the office of the Minister of Immigration.

I did not get a response other than, of course, that the generic e-mail acknowledgement came. If you send e-mails to that office, by default you get the "read receipt", more like a generic e-mail. That's all I got.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: I can understand how discouraging it can be that the Minister of Immigration makes no commitment to correct the situation in an organization with responsibility for all the immigration cases that we have been looking at carefully since Monday morning. It must be discouraging when consultants like you who deal with these files see that the minister herself is not interested. Is that how you see it?

[English]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Correct. That's a good way to express my feelings. The office of the minister has a role to play. So far it looks like CSIC has been left alone. No, we cannot do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: You are aware that, under the division of powers of the federal and provincial governments, professions are regulated by provincial governments. This body was created by the Department of Immigration. Would it be possible to get each of the provinces involved so that the profession becomes recognized, serious and regulated? In Quebec, the Office des professions du Québec ensures that all professions operate properly. Sometimes, some go off the rails and make mistakes. But the Office des professions is there to make rulings. Is this an approach that you would like to see?

[English]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: I'm going to say yes and no.

I'll use Saskatchewan as an example. There are very few immigration consultants in this province. If I count, we're probably just three, outside the lawyers. I think there are two lawyers primarily full costing in that area, Merchant Law Group and another one in Saskatoon. Going through the phone book—for instance, the Regina phone book—you probably only have two organizations listed, or three. So if you create a provincial covering for that small number of people, that could be a concern.

Should the consultant be regulated federally? I say yes, that's a good thing to do. At some point, there might be a need to go provincial.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Mr. Komarnicki, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I won't use them up. I just wanted to make a couple of comments. I've heard what Kay has said, so I won't repeat those, nor do I necessarily agree with all of the comments.

We have heard from a couple of witnesses along the lines that you're talking about, on some of the concerns you have with the process, things like annual meetings, governance things, having some say as the membership, and so on. We've noted those comments, I've noted your comments, and we do intend to have representatives from CSIC. I believe it's going to be in our Toronto hearings where we'll certainly put many of these questions to them, to hear directly from them, as well as have a review of your bylaws and some of the documents that govern how it works. Then we'll simply ask about the history, how they came into place, and so on.

My sense is, from what you've indicated.... Hopefully you will file your material with us so we do have your concerns documented.

Having said that, would you agree with me, just from a public policy and protection point of view, that those who are consultants would need to meet certain standards with respect to professionalism or competency, and that there would need to be some mechanism to enforce discipline and to deal with ethical issues, and that some form of association or group is necessary to sort of regulate the whole area of consultants and those who maybe would like to consult but are not prepared to be bound by a system?

• (1535)

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Yes, I think it is correct that consultants should be regulated. I agree with that. There is a need for discipline. I support that.

The concern I have is the fact that CSIC is not enforcing this thing. So far, there have probably been only one or two hearings since their creation.

In terms of standards, yes. We all went through that. We all had to write the professional exam. We all had to write the English exam. So I agree with the need for standards.

But in terms of enforcement, we are not seeing much in that area, and that's why it's easier for ghost consultants or phantom consultants to do their own thing.

Rather than putting money into discipline and full regulation, to me the board has just paid itself a huge amount of money that could be diverted to that area.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It seems to me that whenever you have a new organization in its development stage, there is a period of time where it needs to mature and it needs to develop into a place of respectability and where membership finds it acceptable. And this organization hasn't been in existence very long.

First of all, would you agree with me that it's still very much in the infancy stage and there is room for improvement, but that you need to get the membership taking some ownership of whatever that vehicle is going to be, to deal with those areas that I think are the core areas of an association like CSIC?

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: That's the reason, some of us, despite what is going on, are still part of the organization. I mean, even though I am not happy with what's going on, that's one of the reasons I said, "I'm going to run for that board. If I win, I do not want to be paid, but I will work for that organization."

So, yes, there is room for improvement. There is no doubt about that. But the reality is that I don't think some of the current board members see it that way. They see it as a way to enrich themselves.

If you can get it, this committee can at least look at the financial statements and see how much is being paid to these individuals.

Education-wise, probably some only have high school diplomas and that's it. Two of the board members just took a course that was paid for, from our understanding, by the society.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It almost seems you need a system within the system to regulate the ethics within the system. But the fact of the matter is that it's not always wrong for people to be paid for jobs they

do. It needs to be transparent, it probably needs to be fair, it needs to be open, and it needs to be in such a fashion that the majority of reasoned members would find it acceptable. And if there are excesses, then you need to deal with those.

But my sense is that when you're in the growing stage of an organization, you're going to have problems. It really is up to the membership, and I suppose to those who are in the executive, to ensure that what they do in the end meets the approval generally of the membership.

Certainly the department of immigration has an impact on the organization of it, and I suppose they have a role to play there too. But overall, it should be the membership in the organization that governs itself.

I know in other professions it's the profession that sets the rules and sets the bylaws and that governs itself. I find generally when they're working and functioning properly, they're harder on themselves than a government agency that controls them. So keep that in mind as you're working through the system, that sometimes it's a timing thing as well.

• (1540)

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Well, I think what's happening with CSIC is not about growing pains; it's about people who saw an opportunity and jumped on it.

Yes, we know there will be problems, just like with any other organization. It's just a normal process. Members cannot govern at this point. With a special meeting being removed completely, no AGM, you send an e-mail and you get a response back.... Speaking up is becoming professional misconduct. There is a problem.

So I think the problem is with the foundation. Yes, there will be growing pains—that's standard, that's true—but at this point there is a problem with the foundation. And once we deal with that foundation, bring all these things back.... I have some of those suggestions in my paper. Yes, we will have challenges, but we can govern ourselves in that process and then people outside will need to join.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I can tell you, rest assured, we'll ask some very pointed questions to those who will be appearing before this committee, and we'll certainly cover many, if not all, of the areas you raised in your talk and in your paper.

Thank you very much for appearing.

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Now we will go around the table for a second time.

Mr. Carrier, you have four minutes.

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you.

Could the fact that you received no answer from the minister about the problems with the operation of the Canadian Society of Immigration Consultants indicate the lack of importance that she attaches to it? In another presentation, yesterday or the day before, we heard that, to become a member of the organization, you just had to take a one-day course in Toronto. If you could not go, you could do the course by video. Anyone with an interest in those cases could become a member.

Do you really see a use for the organization? Do you think that being a member really gives you the qualifications expected of an immigration consultant?

[*English*]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: First, thank you.

I just want to say this. Do I think the regulation is important to the minister's office? My take on it is yes, it is important. Being a member of CSIC, do I have any benefit or do I think it's good? My answer is yes, especially abroad. I think it is good to have consultants regulated, and you can say you're a member of an organization. In all my contracts—I put it there—you can report to me if there are concerns, if we cannot resolve it.

Having said that, what you're referring to is the continuous development point. It's not to be a member. It's just that CSIC makes it mandatory that you have to go to Toronto for that seminar. I refuse to go because it is not economical. I'd pay \$800 to fly there, pay for my hotel—no, it doesn't make sense. They now say, fine, stay at home, watch the video, and pay \$800. No, that's not acceptable. The CBA is not doing that. The lawyers are not doing that, so why insist on going in this direction?

Again, I will go back to the point that the foundation is faulty. We cannot leave CSIC alone. My submission is that the office of the minister left CSIC alone too soon, and that's part of what I think is causing the trouble. There is no monitoring process at this point.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: So you are saying that there are significant criteria and standards that people who want to become members of your organization must meet in order to be accepted. To your knowledge, are there people who have been rejected because they do not meet the criteria, or can anyone become a member with a reasonable effort?

[*English*]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: Thank you.

Are there criteria that are higher to meet? Yes. We had to write an initial exam. I had to write the English proficiency exam, and I had to write the full membership exam, which I passed. Now, the web people did not, and CSIC was not very creative with the law, and

that's another reason why there seems to be an increase in some of these other consultants who are practising. But they are not members.

I will use an example. Some of the points required for the English exam to me were too high, even for people going for the master's programs. I was not required to have that when I did my post-graduate studies. So for a regulation body like CSIC just starting, asking for that level of English language proficiency—even higher than what CIC is asking for—is just too much.

● (1545)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Thank you.

If I understand your presentation correctly, basically, you are not questioning the relevance of a regulatory body for the profession, nor the need for an organization to mature and evolve over time. But you do question the democratic governance of your association and the members' ability to genuinely influence the association and become involved in the democratic process. Is that what you said in a nutshell?

[*English*]

Mr. Olukayode (Kay) Adebogun: That's part of what I've said so far. But beyond that, there are other suggestions that are laid down in my little piece here, which I think will help the organization to become a true profession. Another suggestion is to actually criminalize the operation of immigration consulting, without being a lawyer or a member of an association. The only way that can happen is for an amendment to come for the IRPA. Right now, it's not a crime for anybody to open shop and help clients. The only thing they cannot do is they cannot submit their name with the application, and people know that already, so they help them do all the work until the clients submit, and they monitor it without putting their name on it. There are lots of people who are doing that. So I don't need to be a member of CSIC just to get paid. It's just that I cannot go before CBSA; I cannot go before CIC.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Thierry St-Cyr): Fair enough.

The committee members who were here, as well as those who were not here, will receive a copy of your presentation and will be able to take a look at it. Your contribution is one that the members of this committee find interesting.

We are now going to end our meeting and resume our task tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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