



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

PACP • NUMBER 034 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, November 23, 2010

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Chair

The Honourable Joseph Volpe

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.)): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm delighted that we're all here. We can begin very quickly.

Today's orders of the day are chapter 3, "Service Delivery", of the fall 2010 report of the Auditor General. We have with us several individuals from the Office of the Auditor General. We have Monsieur Sylvain Ricard, assistant auditor general; Marian McMahon, assistant auditor general, and Mr. Glenn Wheeler, principal.

I never understood that, the principal and assistant, but anyway, you can give us that lesson later.

From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have Mr. Neil Yeates, deputy minister, and Madame Claudette Deschênes, assistant deputy minister, operations.

I want to thank you all for coming. We will proceed almost immediately to the business of the day, but I guess I have to go through the appropriate pro forma, and that is, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, November 4, 2010, chapter 3, "Service Delivery", of the fall 2010 report of the Auditor General of Canada, referred to the committee on October 26, 2010, here we are, ladies and gentlemen.

I think we're going to begin with Monsieur Ricard.

[Translation]

Do you want to begin? You have five to 10 minutes.

[English]

Mr. Sylvain Ricard (Assistant Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Yes, with a brief opening statement.

The Chair: "Brief"—voilà. That's how we translate five to 10 minutes in French. *Merçi*.

[Translation]

You have the floor.

Mr. Sylvain Richard: Mr. Chairman, Thank you for this opportunity to discuss Chapter 3 of our 2010 fall report, Service Delivery.

Joining me at the table are Marian McMahon, Assistant Auditor General, who was responsible for the portion of the audit that examined the Canada Revenue Agency, and Glenn Wheeler, Principal, who was also responsible for the audit.

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

Our audit looked at the practices used by three organizations—Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency—to set their service standards, monitor and report on their service performance and act on this information to improve service quality.

[English]

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

Citizenship and Immigration Canada has been working to develop service standards since 2007. In April 2010 the department published a preliminary set of service standards and associated targets for four business lines.

This set of standards is very limited considering that the department provides more than 35 different services. There are no standards for some major services—for example, the citizenship program. Without a complete set of standards, the department cannot comprehensively evaluate its service performance and may not be able to ensure a consistent level of service to its clients. In the absence of standards, the department was using operational data such as intake, output, processing time, and inventories to provide some indication of performance.

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

[Translation]

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

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

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ricard. The others have nothing to add? All right, thank you.

I'll now go to Mr. Yeates or Ms. Deschênes.

It will be you, Mr. Yeates? Go ahead.

Mr. Neil Yeates (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Neil Yeates, and I am Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. I am joined by Claudette Deschênes, Assistant Deputy Minister of Operations, at CIC.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak. Today I will focus my brief remarks on Chapter 3 of the Auditor General's report, and afterwards we will be happy to answer your questions.

[English]

First of all, CIC does agree with the Auditor General's recommendations related to improving service delivery in our department. To that end, our goal is efficient and effective service delivery that is integrated across our global network, is facilitated by technology and partnerships, and is guided by thoughtful risk management and quality assurance.

As the Auditor General observed in her report, the department has already taken some steps to improve our services to the public, both in Canada and overseas.

I would also like to mention our action plan for faster immigration, which is helping us improve our services for federal skilled worker applicants. As of March 31, 2010, the overall inventory of federal skilled worker applications has been reduced by 16% and processing times have dramatically improved.

Mr. Chairman, we have introduced and improved our service standards for our key business lines, but I'd like to take this opportunity to point out to the committee that it is challenging for us to introduce timely service standards for business lines when there is no control over intake. Our immigration plan sets limits on how many applications we will process in a given year. However, in many immigration streams, there is no limit on the number of people who can apply. This results in lengthy processing times and makes it challenging to set service standards.

This year we introduced a service declaration and service standards for four services. We will implement a second phase of service standards on April 1, 2011. The second phase will incorporate lessons learned and feedback from applicants during the implementation of phase 1 earlier this year.

We are also committed to establishing an online relationship between applicants and CIC through the use of electronic accounts, application forms, and status updates. This means that we would be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our aim is to make it easier for people to apply online by helping applicants overcome the often confusing information overload that may lead some to seek the services of an immigration consultant.

We expanded our online services and increased the use of online applications in order to provide more accessible and efficient services. Our online services are now also available on a mobile site, which provides a more convenient service to applicants using a mobile device.

• (1110)

[Translation]

The department also publishes the most current processing times on its website for applications in all immigration categories. This enables applicants to access accurate and timely information on their application.

For over a year, international students using our e-Suite of Services have been able to apply on line for an off-campus work permit, confirm their eligibility on line and extend their study permit on line while in Canada.

[English]

Building on the success and popularity of these online services, our e-suite of services has now been expanded beyond students, allowing 98% of in-Canada temporary residents, including workers and visitors, to apply for work permits or an extension of their visit here in Canada. Also, this fall we launched a new electronic form for temporary resident visa applications, which will make the application process easier and will reduce errors, making the application process faster.

Extending our online services has significantly improved the application process by providing faster, more accessible, more efficient services, and CIC intends to make all types of applications available online in the future.

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

As well, we are developing video tutorials that provide step-by-step instructions on completing application forms. In developing these, it is our goal to reduce applicants' dependency on paid immigration consultants. We also expect these videos to help increase efficiency in processing applications, since they will help reduce the number of errors on application forms.

Finally, the department has also entered the array of social media to further engage applicants and the broader public through Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We have begun an ongoing dialogue with the public about our policies and programs.

In addition to improving our online services this year, we piloted initiatives that have shortened processing times for business visitors and many students through the business express program and the student partners program.

We also accelerated the processing of sponsorship applications from Canadian citizens and permanent residents who have close family members who were significantly affected by the earthquake in Haiti.

As well, the global case management system, GCMS, is currently being rolled out overseas. GCMS will replace two legacy systems and will improve our processing capabilities overseas, where the majority of applications are received.

[Translation]

In closing, I would like to highlight some of our progress to date in response to some of the Auditor General's specific recommendations.

[English]

We're ensuring that applicants for citizenship and citizenship certificates receive consistent and clear information on processing times. In May 2010, we made changes to the citizenship acknowledgment letters, which now refer applicants to our website for accurate processing times. This allows applicants to access more accurate and timely information.

• (1115)

[Translation]

CIC also began work this year to improve our collection and analysis of feedback and complaints from applicants, based on the recommendations from the audit.

[English]

We'll also launch a survey of applicants by the end of this fiscal year, and the results should be available in the 2011 fiscal year. These results will inform our future work in improving service standards and setting new ones. We plan to report on these results publicly.

These are just some of the ways we are working to improve our service and address the Auditor General's concerns in a timely way. I'd be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Yeates.

Ms. Deschênes, have you both finished?

I'm going to go immediately to Mr. Navdeep Bains so he can ask the first questions.

[English]

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Good morning to everyone.

The overall focus for me today is going to be on service delivery and customer service, and particularly on issues in my constituency office with respect to out-of-date and misguided information provided by CIC. That was further highlighted in the report by the AG.

My staff documents numerous examples—as you've probably come across through many MPs' office—of challenges and issues they face in simply getting responses to routine updates. In fact, many of the clients you refer to cannot get simple, routine updates and they come to us. This is a common problem that we face.

In light of all these concerns we raise with you from the constituency level—many of my colleagues from all political parties have raised this with me and it is a problem across the country—why is CIC's customer service being outsourced to MPs' offices? That's the feeling we get.

There's a great sense of frustration here. Why can't the system respond to simple, routine cases and let us focus on some of the more complex cases, where we can deal with the constituent in a more effective manner and allocate resources accordingly? Could you respond to that, please?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. I can start. First of all, it's certainly not our intent to outsource services to MPs' offices. We know you get a lot of inquiries on citizenship and immigration matters.

Depending on what line of business you are dealing with, with respect to what we deliver, there are different avenues that can be accessed. We have a call centre. To provide more immediate access, we have a special number for MPs. We continue to update the quality of the information available on the website.

We realize we have further to go. We are working on the introduction of a "My CIC" account, so that clients can check the status of their applications directly. That's where we're working to get ourselves to. We expect—we hope—that will take a lot of the business out of your offices if people can check directly.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Yes.

Go ahead.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I would add that with the rollout of the global case management, the next thing we want to be able to do is push information consistently out to the clients so they will actually know where their files are in the process. We're looking a system of e-mails. We could tell the clients that every six months they're going to receive an e-mail from us, and even though the file may not have moved, they'll at least know we're still working on it.

One of the other challenges we had is that because of the volume of applications, some offices, for example, have a harder time creating files in a timely fashion. So in the last year, we've spent a lot of time making sure files are created. We've been putting our efforts there so that we can then, when the system is rolled out, be able to acknowledge that the application is in and then give periodics, so that you wouldn't have to deal with routine inquiries. Because we know that is a problem.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Yes, that's right. It is a problem. You described what you're doing, but the reality is very different, and the problem is getting worse, actually, from what I experience and what I hear. I wanted to share that with you so that you're fully up to speed on the reality on the ground versus what you've described.

The second point I wanted to make has to do with the accuracy of the information. Again, this is a challenge I often encounter in my office when I deal with constituents directly. The AG says, for example, that you have a problem with consistency, and your response is to remove the dates from the letters. Now you say you're going to be referring them to the website. But shouldn't CIC be focusing on the accuracy of the information as opposed to where they get the information from? That's the core issue.

I'm not sure that your action plan, which I've looked at, addresses this. It's not where they get the information; it's the accuracy of it. That's the frustrating part, because that's what people are looking for, and they're unable to get that information.

• (1120)

Mr. Neil Yeates: We certainly agree that the accuracy of the information is important. We made the change with the letters because those are computer generated and we had trouble with having to update those continuously. We thought it was better to send people to one more authoritative source.

Yes, we do believe it's very important to make sure that information is as accurate as possible. The situation can change and fluctuate quite often, which is one of our challenges.

If you're dealing with overseas applications in terms of different missions around the world, the situation can be quite different. In terms of what's available on the website, we've dealt with mission-specific information and then overall for that class of applications, depending on the particular program. Those could be two quite different things.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I'll come back to the mission-specific and resource management issue, but I have one more quick question and I'm not sure how I'm doing for time.

The question is with regard to people receiving their citizenship and the time it takes. Again, my experience in dealing with this in my office is that it takes over two years for people to receive their citizenship. These people are here and they've met all the requirements. Two years seems to be very excessive. They have fundamental rights that they want to exercise as citizens, but they have to wait two years.

How do you justify this? How does one justify having them waiting two years to get their citizenship? What's the issue there?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. I think the issue fundamentally is... I guess the good news story is that we've seen an increase in immigration

over the past 10 years. Canada, as members will know, Mr. Chair, has a very high rate of naturalization, so the number of people applying to us has gone up fairly significantly. Fundamentally, we've not been able to keep up with the volume of cases that has come in to us. We've had temporary funding at one time or another over the past few years that has allowed us to catch up somewhat, but that funding has been temporary.

So we're doing two things at the moment. One, we're working on a permanent funding fix to the shortfall we've had in our capacity. Secondly, we're focusing on the process re-engineering in terms of what it is that we do and what we're asking people for, and also on the coordination and connection to our regional offices, because of course they go to the CPC in Sydney for the initial processing and then go out to our regional offices. We're working on those two pieces.

We would agree. We would like to be making significant improvements in the processing times.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Absolutely. I think it's unacceptable for people to wait two years, so I'm glad you're working on it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains.

[*Translation*]

I would like to introduce some political science students—future politicians—from the Université du Québec à Montréal. Today they are watching Ms. Faille work.

Ms. Faille, you have the floor.

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): In fact, perhaps it's time for my friend Mr. Kramp to say how good a member I am and how good my research is. It's time, today. Thank you. Oh, oh!

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Meili Faille: I could use my English words: I'm astonished.

In fact, it's a pleasure to have the students from UQAM here today. Among other things, this morning, we talked about the various programs and the exercise being carried out by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Earlier I promised not to be too hard on Deputy Minister Deschênes. I know she has held various positions, in case management, among others, where she did a tremendous job, especially resolving the most complex cases.

Now you're facing a very complex challenge, Ms. Deschênes. The Auditor General didn't go easy on the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. You offer more than 35 services at the department. Only four services have service standards.

Can you tell us what measures you intend to take to ensure the other departmental services have standards? I believe you're aware of the problems that causes for the management of provincial programs as well.

Earlier my colleague talked about problems related to obtaining citizenship and passport services, but the question of the right to vote is just as important.

Often, particularly in reunification cases involving people in the refugee class, family reunification, there is already a long waiting period before the family is reunified with the person who has been accepted as a refugee. Until a family has been recognized or has its citizenship card, it cannot take advantage of government services. The problem remains intact.

Perhaps you can first give me an answer regarding service standards. What actual measures have been taken, apart from those related to the computer system? In concrete terms, with regard to the CIC registry, what measures are being taken to expedite services?

• (1125)

Mr. Neil Yeates: Thank you.

I can start and then Ms. Deschênes can add something.

I can tell students that

[*English*]

I as well studied political science, a very good thing to study. It's nice to see you here.

First of all, we started with four areas in our initial service standards: labour market opinions, family class cases, permanent resident cards, and grants and contributions.

[*Translation*]

We realize our services are very important for clients, of course. We accept that.

[*English*]

We're proceeding now to look at the rest of our business lines and basically phasing this in over the next two to three years. What it will mean initially is starting with our processing times, which we've been publishing for years, and basically converting them to service standards of one kind or another.

One of the challenges we've had as a department is that we have struggled with the issue of service standards versus processing times. We're not happy with the processing times, either. We face various challenges, whether it's our immigration levels—we only take in so many cases every year, so in some of our business lines, that is a boundary for us that affects processing times and will affect service standards—or others, such as citizenship, which we were just discussing. We've had other challenges in our capacity and the processes that we've had in place.

Our basic plan is to go through all of them systematically and establish service standards for each line of business.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Mr. Yeates, your predecessor previously told us those same things when he came to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

In concrete terms, have you put in place a working committee by service or by line of business? That's what we're interested in hearing.

Since 1996, the department has come in for a number of criticisms in this regard, and has been the subject of recommendations by the committee. I also really want you to tell me about concrete action.

[*English*]

Mr. Neil Yeates: Very basically, we've tabled an action plan with the committee chair. What we've laid out there is basically a three-phase approach to doing this. Phase 1 has included the service standards I referred to. The other two phases, which will incorporate the balance, will be done over the next three years.

We have a very concrete plan to roll all of those out in three phases. Phase 1 is in place now. The other two phases will come in spring 2012 and spring 2013.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Internally, are you facing other challenges in establishing service standards? Among other things, I'm thinking of the fees you charge clients. When a person files an application, there are administrative fees related to that. You're supposed to have a financial model supporting the cost evaluation and to charge people who request a service an amount to process their request.

As citizens, if we consider the fact that you haven't established service standards, we sometimes get the impression, at MPs offices, that people are dragging their heels in certain sectors. I could give you an example. In the parent and grandparent classes, people wait eight to nine years. You cash the cheques quickly, but processing then takes an enormous amount of time.

Are you facing any challenges of that kind? Have people challenged you in those areas?

[*English*]

Mr. Neil Yeates: There are perhaps two pieces that I can speak to there, Chair.

One is that yes, it's quite true, we take in fees; it's a significant amount of revenue each year. Those fees go to the consolidated revenue fund. They don't come directly to the department. We are obligated to take those fees in immediately and they are done based on costs.

In the case of the parents or grandparents class, in terms of the annual levels plan, we aim to admit about 18,000 per year and we currently have applications in the range of 145,000. We have seven years of work to do there. That, for us, is just the reality, or the boundaries of the annual levels plan. Therefore, yes, we are going to have a service standard in that case that will be several years long.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Allen.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you who've come here today.

I noticed, Mr. Yeates, that you referenced what you call a “My CIC” account. I'm assuming that it's somewhat modelled on...I know it's now called the EI system, but it's the old UIC to me. I never believed in “employment insurance”, unless of course you were paying someone to let you keep your job. EI has a similar type of thing that you can access.

But my experience with that system—I'm making an assumption and I'm going to let you clarify if they're going to be modelled somewhat similarly in context—is that the intent of what that account intended to do is nowhere near the reality of what it actually does. It was going to actually let you turn your account on and off. In other words, you applied for EI, went back to work, and then went back out on EI. You could actually turn it on. That was the intention of the pilot program that I actually was involved in at one point when I worked for the union. It has never materialized. It's really an application intake process and a reporting process, period. It's not much more than that.

My question is, if you're using that as somewhat of a model, how much faith should we be placing in an account that starts out looking like it's the cure-all and becomes nothing more than an intake process that doesn't really help clients any more than that they've sent in an application...? As Mr. Bains said earlier, and as I'm sure the rest of my colleagues will acknowledge, they line up at our doors. I'm not suggesting that you outsourced it on purpose, but I'm here to tell you that you outsourced it to us. That's perhaps not on purpose, but you've simply outsourced it to us, because that's where they show up.

I think all of our staff would probably indicate to you that we spend somewhere between 40% and 60% of our day actually doing immigration. I don't think that's what we thought we were going to do when we set up, but that's our reality, so we're actually sharing your burden here. Perhaps you can tell me a little bit about what you intend to do with the My CIC account.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Very basically—and Madame Deschênes could speak further to this—it's really a system to allow people to check the status of their application, very simply.

Madame.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes. The other thing that the system permits us to do—and certainly in Canada we're already doing it—is that if we need something more to finalize your application, we can easily use that as a two-way communication to say that “you need to get us this document” or “we acknowledge receipt of this document that we asked you for”.

The My CIC account is part of our strategy. The other strategy is to make sure that all the applications are in the system so we can actually acknowledge them, because one of the problems we have is that sometimes it takes a long time for us to get them into the system.

The other thing we want to do is to tell clients that every x period of time—and it could be six months, it could be nine months—we will send them an update as to where they are in the process, because My CIC really works when you're actively processing a case. But we also know that cases sit awaiting their turn to be processed, so we need to find a way to reconfirm to the client that their application is in the queue and that it's likely to move into active processing at

such-and-such a period so they do not go into the MPs' offices to ask for that information.

Then there are other things, of course, in terms of more precise processing times, so that people actually know how long it's going to take to get into the process.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: I have two questions that spring to mind from that.

One is my previous experience around when another department moved toward this interactivity of my account electronically, and what it does to folks who aren't quite as savvy, or who don't have the access. And I don't want to hear, quite frankly, what I've heard before, which is to “go to your public library”, because they'll simply line up at my office asking if I have a spare computer and if they can use it to access this from my office.

This becomes an issue that becomes a staffing issue, quite frankly, as offices actually start to shift personnel out, away from personal service and away from accepting paper, which you'll actually see at EI. It's illegal to refuse you paper, but try getting a piece of paper from EI. The laws says they must. They don't. I'm hoping we're not headed in that direction. I'll let you respond to that.

The other side of my concern with interactivity when it comes to the Internet is that it's a wonderful tool, except that it sets up what I call the McDonald's syndrome. I mean McDonald's not in the sense of “E-I-O”, the farm, but McDonald's of the golden arches, where one expects an instant return from an instant request. We end up with a system that gets inundated with folks who, once they have interconnectivity, continually send requests to you for updates, even though you're saying, “You're number Y and your waiting time is x ”. They simply continue adding into it, and then they're looking for a response that they're not going to get, quite frankly. They will then come to us and say, “They're not responding to me and I sent in a request”. Since it's almost instant, they expect an instant reply.

The worst thing in the world about one of these is that when someone calls you electronically, they expect you to reply regardless of what you're doing. You may set up an unrealistic expectation of how quick you can actually do this. Have you thought about what you will do in reply to all of those bits and pieces of that interconnectivity?

● (1135)

The Chair: You have three questions to answer in 45 seconds.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Again, I'll give just a quick response, and Claudette can add to this as well.

We have the call centre for people who don't have access to the Internet. In our experience, both in Canada and overseas, access to the Internet has been very good. It's higher than we might have expected, so we've been pleased with that. The call centre has its own challenges in terms of the volume of calls going in there.

We would agree with you. You're quite right that there is this dynamic about what people expect in terms of a response. In terms of the capacity of our system, some of that is not realistic. For people wanting to know where they are in every little step in the process, that's not possible. We really have to be clear, I think, with clients and the public and say, "You're in this block and that's the basically the best we can tell you". Otherwise, we spend more time chasing around after individual applications for some small incremental step in the process, which is time consuming, as you know.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for the Office of the Auditor General.

When you talk about setting service standards and monitoring service performance, are you mostly talking about processing times or you also looking at other service standards? For example, how do you measure client feedback?

Mr. Glenn Wheeler (Principal, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Processing times are one of the variables we would be expecting a department to consider as it's trying to establish a service standard. There are also other variables that departments must and do consider when they're trying to establish standards. They have to balance the cost of providing a service against the timeliness. As a department is trying to determine a service standard for a particular program or service, they need to consider how much funding they have available and how best to use it, while at the same time providing service in a meaningful way.

Another thing that goes into the whole issue of service standards is consulting with clients. We know that in various places in the report one of the ways departments can identify good service standards is to consult with clients to get a sense of what's important to them. Those are some of the issues that go into....

Mr. Andrew Saxton: I think one can measure service standards in several ways. One is quantitative, in the sense of measuring processing times, and perhaps the number of complaints that one gets, but one can also look at qualitative standards. Is this something you consider when you're measuring service standards? Are there qualitative measures as well?

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: When we're looking at what departments are doing to establish service standards, we would certainly be looking to see whether they have looked at whether they're looking at the qualitative aspects of service. So there are the quantitative aspects of the service and also the qualitative aspects. As I mentioned earlier, soliciting feedback from clients and conducting focus groups, as we talk about in the audit report, is one way for departments to identify what matters to clients, which all goes into the mix of developing service standards.

• (1140)

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Can you share with the committee some of the service standards CRA and HRSDC have used? Are there some lessons to be learned, some positive results from those two departments?

Mr. Glenn Wheeler: Mr. Chair, I can speak to a couple of examples.

In the case of the Canada Revenue Agency, we note in the audit report that they did a lot of work 10 years back or so to identify what clients wanted and needed in terms of the main services they provide to Canadians. As a result of that, some of the standards identified include answering the phone within two minutes, 90% of the time, when someone calls one of their 1-800 numbers. That's an example of where a department has taken into consideration what clients want.

A second quick example is from HRSDC. They heard from Canadians across the country that while the Service Canada centres are an excellent way to obtain services, often the hours the centres kept didn't allow Canadians who work during the day to get there. What HRSDC did in response to that information it was receiving from Canadians was to extend the hours of Service Canada centres. That way, it modified its services to better provide information to Canadians. Those are two examples of where departments listened to what Canadians were saying and made adjustments.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you for those examples.

My next questions are for CIC. The report notes that in the 2008-09 fiscal year, CIC authorized 247,000 people to live in Canada as permanent residents—almost a quarter of a million people. It processed applications for over 1.5 million visitors and also granted citizenship to 186,000 individuals. Those are significant numbers. Is that a typical year for CIC?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, that is a typical year for CIC. Some of our business lines continue to grow. The area of international students is an area where we are starting to see some significant growth, at about 10% a year. We think that's good news for Canada. This is part of our educational marketing. That's good.

We've seen growth in temporary foreign workers. It tends to follow the economic cycle, but over 10 years it has grown fairly substantially. The temporary movement is high.

There is growth in visitors from certain countries, such as India and China. We've never exceeded 100,000 visitors from China. It's typically in the 90,000 area, but we expect that this year there will be 135,000 visitors from China. There is massive growth in particular missions.

It's all part of the challenge we have in trying to manage our workload across a global network. So yes, it's growing, it's growing over time, and in some particular areas of the world, it's growing very, very substantially.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Is the increase in China partly due to receiving the approved destination status?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, we think that is a factor in terms of tourism, but it has been growing over time. But yes, we're seeing a big spike in 2010, and we think that's part of the reason.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

Can you share with the committee some of the ways in which you are responding to the OAG's recommendations?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Certainly. Earlier this year, we developed a service declaration in terms of what clients could expect from us. We did consult with clients in developing that and it has now been published.

We have an e-mail feedback form in all our offices overseas that clients can use. We do public opinion research. We monitor our website quite carefully and look at the feedback we get through that. Then, more broadly, we've tabled a plan with the committee to develop service standards for all our lines of business over the next three years.

What that means for us, essentially, is sorting through all the channels through which we communicate with clients. We mentioned the web and the development of a My CIC account. But it also means sorting through the role of our call centre. Right now, we receive a lot more calls than we are able to handle in a timely way. A fair number of those calls are for routine information that's available on the website, so we'd really like to redirect more people to the website and keep the call centre for people who have very case-specific requests that require the intervention of the staff.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yeates.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

I'm going to go to the second round.

Monsieur D'Amours.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you. Mr. Chairman. Thanks to the people who are before us this morning.

First, I would like to speak to Mr. Yeates. I believe you told the Office of the Auditor General that you wanted to submit an outside report on your service standards in the spring of 2013. Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. That is correct.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That's good; I wanted an answer as brief as a "yes", as you've given.

How much time do you need when an outside audit has to be conducted? How much time is necessary for an outside audit to be done? Are we talking about two months, six months, a year?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: We'll report every year on the progress we're making on our service standards. We'll report on phase 1 next spring.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Yeates, I'm asking you how much time is needed for you to be able to get an outside report. When you request an outside report, it's an outside firm that prepares it. How much time does it take for you to get a report?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: I'm sorry. We're not doing an outside report. We're reporting ourselves.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Okay.

Mr. Neil Yeates: There may have been a misunderstanding in the way it's worded. Excuse me, Chair. We're reporting ourselves.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Could the Office of the Auditor General clarify that point? In the comments you made, Mr. Ricard, you said that an outside report on its performance against its standards would be prepared by the spring of 2013. You say the department has developed an action plan. That's in your statement.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The department is referring to the fact that it would like to publish a report by 2013, not have an outside audit conducted.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: All right.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The idea is to make the information available to the public.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I have a problem with something, Mr. Yeates. Let's suppose you publish the report by 2013, as you would like to do. You would nevertheless have taken three years to establish roughly four out of 35 standards.

Now you're presenting your action plan and you say that each of phases 2 and 3, individually, will be done within six months. It's acknowledged that more than four standards will be established under phase 2 and that more than four standards will be established under phase 3.

You'll understand that what you're presenting to us this morning seems quite optimistic. However, I'm skeptical. You'll need three years to develop four standards, but you're going to put on a burst of energy every six months and establish about a dozen—12 or 15 standards, depending on the situation—so that you can ultimately prepare a report.

Don't you think that's presenting matters in a somewhat optimistic light and that we'll ultimately be disappointed with the department's performance again? You have to be realistic. You haven't been able to do this, and suddenly you're going to do it.

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: Well, as we were saying earlier, I think that one of the challenges we've had is trying to deal with challenging processing times across our lines of business. What we're committing to now is to basically transform those into sets of service standards, recognizing that we as a department are not going to be very happy with many of those processing times; they're longer than we would like them to be.

Our program is always changing. We're doing reforms and making changes to the programs. Things happen around the world, and that has made it challenging, I think, for this department to take on service standards. But basically we've made the decision that we need to proceed, we need to get these into place for better or for worse, and we need to get on with it. That essentially is the point that we've come to, Chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: When you mentioned earlier that you had additional funds from time to time to enable you to provide adequate service, you said it was occasional, which means that it happens once in a while.

Did you in fact say that you no longer have those additional amounts?

[English]

Mr. Neil Yeates: It depends on the business line, Chair.

We had some temporary funding for our citizenship processing. That was available last year and has been available a couple of times in the previous five years. This year, we reallocated resources internally, within the department, to put some additional resources into citizenship processing.

We do have the action plan for faster immigration, which is dealing with the federal skilled worker program. That continues for a multi-year period.

• (1150)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: You mentioned that you go on Facebook and so on. I don't know whether you know it, Mr. Yeates, but the number of characters that can be used to write a message on Twitter is relatively limited. It's extremely small. I don't know what kind of messages you'll be able to send people. I don't know whether you're aware of the number of characters you can use to write a message on Twitter, but note that, to inform a client, the message could be short. Don't you think so? That's my first point.

Second, for those who don't have access to the Internet—and that was mentioned earlier—do you guarantee that you'll nevertheless send them a letter as part of the service after six months? Will those people nevertheless receive a letter?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. D'Amours, I'm afraid you've kind of cut him off, so perhaps he may want to incorporate his answers, because some of it might have been actually rhetorical in the question.

You might want to do that as you go forward.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome to all.

If I may, I will certainly respond to the courtesy of Madame Faille. I absolutely will acknowledge, in the presence of my colleagues here, that while we do have an occasional difference of opinion or philosophical approach, for the most part Madame Faille comes here unbelievably well prepared, and we somehow find an accommodation to portray and exhibit results here, rather than sometimes the embarrassment that is normally seen in question period, which honestly is not a reflection of the work we do here.

Madame Faille, thank you.

Now I'll go to our colleagues here, and to our guests, perhaps to the CIC and Mr. Yeates or Madame Deschênes.

It was mentioned, of course, that regular processes are one thing, but in a humanitarian crisis, whether it's Haiti or a tsunami, your services were called upon to sort of do above and beyond.... Now, when you do that, do regular processes suffer? Do we start to fall behind in our regular processing or are you able to accommodate that with extra budget and/or extra allotment?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I think the short answer, Mr. Chair, is that we do have to divert some of our existing processing capacity when situations like Haiti arise. But we do our best to keep up with everything.

Madame Deschênes actually had the lead on that, so maybe we could have her speak to the terrific work that was done.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Definitely. Because in a crisis we normally need experienced officers or experienced resources, we do divert resources. We will often get some additional money to cover travel costs or accommodation costs to put a team in place. But really, in the short term, we need to move resources because we do not have a special task force to deal with a crisis situation.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Perhaps I'll go again to the actual backlog at immigration. There are a lot of numbers bandied about—close to a million dollars, \$30,000—and there are a lot of differences over the years. Can you give us the progression from 20 years ago, 10 years ago, and today as to what the approximate numbers were and what the timelines for processing expectation would be and are?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I don't think we have numbers with us from 20 and 10 years ago, but I can give you a rough approximation. The immigration levels that we're taking in now are somewhat higher than they were 10 and 20 years ago, so it would be 250,000 a year now. It was around 225,000 to 200,000 a while ago, and a bit less than 200,000 earlier. Again, the levels plan.... So you take that 250,000 and split it between all of the different categories that we admit, from family class to skilled workers. Also, provincial nominees have really grown now in terms of a program. It used to be at less than 500 and now it is at about 40,000, so there's a big, big change there.

For refugees, those numbers for refugees tend to fluctuate over time as the circumstances around the world change.

We've seen some very significant progress on federal skilled workers. Before we started the action plan for immigration, we had a backlog of around 640,000 cases, and we're down to about 340,000 cases now. We've made very substantial progress on that. We have used what we call "ministerial instructions" to limit the number of applications we will accept to specific occupations that are seen to be in demand across Canada. That's one of the tools we've used to control intake, which is really critical for us in terms of responding to people's applications in a timely way.

• (1155)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: In order to move forward and potentially some day hopefully even eliminate a waiting period so we can deal with things—but of course that's pie in the sky—what would it require? Obviously, money, a budget to staff this, would be one of the components, but of course money isn't everything. What about the expertise? What about the security concerns that we face in today's world and the facilities...? Are these other factors at play? Where would you rank these factors?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I think the biggest factor, the starting point, really, is how many people Canada wants to admit every year, and then you work backwards from there. How many applications would we need to take in order to provide a reasonable response time to people? Right now, by and large, our application system is completely open-ended, so we accept applications continuously.

I think if we want to respond to people in a timely way, for us we would say that typically a six- to twelve month period would be reasonable, given security clearances, health and medicals, and things that need to be done. *Grosso modo*, we think that would be reasonable. Then we would need to restrict the number of applications we accept in any one year. In fact, we've just done that for the federal skilled worker program. We've set a cap of 20,000 applications that we will accept. This puts us much more in the realm of the number of applications we can review and process in a one-year period.

But that, from my perspective, is the key.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Nadeau.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My question is for the representatives of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. I understand that you're overwhelmed. We read in the report that there are overwhelming situations.

One-third of the citizen files at my constituency office in Gatineau concern immigration in all its forms. This morning I was talking to my colleague from Ottawa—Vanier about the urban constituencies. Three-quarters of his files concern immigration and citizenship.

I'd like to get an answer from you. If you can't give it to me today, I would like a written response at some other time.

Why is the Citizenship and Immigration Canada office in Gatineau only open two hours a week? I repeat: two hours a week. I'm going to say it in Latin as well: two hours a week.

We know there are special immigration agreements in Quebec. People go to the Ottawa office and come back to my office because there are specific issues. We have to have this service. I'm about to tell Citizenship and Immigration Canada that, if they want to have an office in my office, that's not a problem for me, provided the office is open longer in order to process all the applications.

Is there a rule? Is it an exception that the office is open only two hours a week in Gatineau? I'd like to understand your point of view on this matter and with regard to the processing of applications?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Part of our challenge is to see how we can use the resources to really expedite the case-related process. The Gatineau office is open only two hours a week because we can take advantage of those hours to answer very specific questions from applicants. We have to find a mechanism to get very specific answers for the people who come to see us.

We're then faced with a number of questions: Is the information available? Is there a way to do it effectively in order to provide clients with the information they need, without our office necessarily being open eight hours? Because that might not be a good use of resources. During the remaining six hours, we can make decisions and move files forward.

That's somewhat our strategy. The idea is to see how we can do the job better. Among other things, we want to get a better understanding of the dynamic of MPs' offices so that we can have a system that will help them receive fewer clients and so that we can provide information more effectively.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: We're going to check. We're quite willing to send people to you, but not two hours a week. People use public transit; they manage; it's not easy. These are often newcomers who don't know the mechanisms. So there's work to be done in this regard. As far as assistance goes, that would be very important.

I'm going to speak on behalf of my colleagues from the rural constituencies. I'm thinking, for example, of Serge Cardin, from the constituency of Sherbrooke. In 2007, 10,923 passport applications were filed; there were 10,436 in 2008, 12,186 in 2009 and, currently, 8,070 for 2010. You can look at the blues; I won't go back over the figures. On average, it's 10,000 applications a year, 27 a day.

Since the number of applications is very high, isn't there a way to get offices that meet the needs of the urban constituencies such as Sherbrooke, far from the major decision-making and processing centres—my office processes zero per year; I send them directly to the Hull office; it's easier and faster. We don't want to turn people down. When we've gotten to the point where we're processing 27 applications a day, 10,000 a year, it's no longer a constituency office... We're waiting for your quota for this work. I'd like to know your opinion on that subject.

•(1200)

[English]

The Chair: Madame Deschênes.

[Translation]

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We obviously have a problem. The difficulty is determining exactly what it is. We also want to establish a way for our clients to book an appointment. One of the problems with our clients is that we give them appointments and they can't show up at the right time. That means they have to start over again at the MPs' offices. That's another way that we've established.

You mentioned passports. Do you mean you process passport applications? That's another department.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, madam.

[English]

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming out.

I have a quick comment for Mr. Yeates. "CIC agrees with the Auditor General's recommendations": that's a fairly standard comment that we hear, actually. Have you made this comment? Is this a standard comment that's been made?

What I'm wondering about is this. In saying that, have those comments and those recommendations been followed up on since the last one in 2000? Secondly, why are they being followed up on now? Which is good, quite honestly....

I have a second part. You've now developed an action plan that is taking us forward. I think that is great. I'm just wondering, why now? I think CIC has had years and years of problems, quite honestly, in terms of getting its act together.

Don't misunderstand me for my lack of bad words.... I understand the complexity of it, I really do, but it would seem now that there actually.... In fact, Mr. Yeates, as you said, it's a complex problem, but if we don't do this, we don't have a direction on which to base goals and objectives. Is that the thought process now?

There has been a significant push to actually get it together. Why hasn't there been before? Is there an issue about why these recommendations from 2000 on, for example, are just coming into play now?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Well, Chair, I think for the department, I can speak for my time here, and Claudette has worked for the department much longer than I have. But what I have seen just in terms of the history of the department is that there has always been a lot of change under way. The program has been changing. We've been working for the past number of years to implement a massive new case management processing system that is now being rolled out around our missions around the world. We've been waiting for that.

In some ways, I think the department has been waiting for a more stable environment in which it can implement service standards, but that never really seems to arrive. Things keep changing. I think

we've concluded that we need to get on with this. We're going to have to deal with the good, the bad, and the ugly here. We accept that. I think we're sort of turning the corner here. We just need to get on with it.

It's never going to be an ideal time. I think the department historically was hoping it would have a more stable period in which to do this. That never really seems to occur. There's always something that goes on, so we feel that we just need to get on with this. As I said earlier, we will have some service standards that we expect our clients will not be that happy with, but that's the reality of the circumstances within which we work. We do feel, as a department, that we will be better off with those standards than without them.

I think that's the turning point or the tipping point that we've come to.

•(1205)

Mr. Bev Shipley: The next question is this. You talked about how HRSDC and Canada Revenue have standards. Can any of them be used by CIC? Is there a transfer, a coordination and cooperation? That's to you.

Secondly, then, in terms of CIC, you talk about the amount of online technology, the use of technology, and the encouragement for and education of people to actually use it. Do you have projections on how that will grow and where that will be so that the body behind the phone will actually have more time to deal with those situations that are complex or falling through the cracks? Then it will actually take some of that off the desks in our constituencies.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. We're sorting through what we would call our service channels. We tend to divide clients into different groups: tier one, tier two, and tier three.

In tier one are people who just want very basic information. We would like to redirect as many of those clients as possible to the website self-serve for basic information. In tier two and tier three, you're starting to get into case information, where people need more specific advice. That's where we'd like to reserve our well-trained people: to provide assistance to them.

We're now sorting through how best to set up each of these service delivery channels in regard to what extent we can apply technology for that and use the call centre, use the Internet, and so on. That really is our challenge. Right now, as I mentioned—as a very short example—we feel we're getting too many tier one clients trying to call our call centre, so we're trying to change that.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Education.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Allen.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Thank you, Chair.

The question has been asked a couple of different ways, but I don't know if I actually heard the response. Clearly, when you looked at some service delivery, it was almost three years ago that it was identified. Now we're looking at 2010 and, as I hear you, Mr. Yeates, you've said, well, I guess we have to do it now. So in the intervening period, what were we doing?

Mr. Neil Yeates: The department has actually been doing a lot of work on trying to re-engineer and redesign its services and bring technology on board. I mentioned GCMS, our big new case management system, which is getting into the implementation phase. Implementation is now well under way this year. We set up a service innovation office to look at the re-engineering of these business lines. Actually, a lot of work has been going on.

We did introduce the first four service standards—we would admit they are modest—and it has given us a starting point. I think it has given the department some confidence that this is a reasonable way to proceed. There's a fair amount of trepidation. People don't like to put in place standards that they can't meet.

A lot of change has been going on during the past three years. As I say, we feel now that we have to get on with it.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I would just add that about four years ago we brought all the operations under one area. We've worked very hard to integrate knowledge, both geographically and across business lines, so we can start talking about risk in the business and really focus our energies so that maybe 70% of the cases can be done much more quickly.

So there has been a lot of work done on program integrity, risk-tiering, where is the best place to do these things so we can actually move to baseline, and how much time it actually takes. We've also brought all of our data together in terms of processing times, so we can analyze from end to end. Because we had a tendency in the past to talk about how much time it takes in Mississauga and how much time it takes overseas, and we kept saying that from a client perspective, they don't see themselves in that. We need to talk end to end. We've done a lot of that work over the last few years.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Yes, I know that it's easy to get the impression of the “you and us”, so to speak, and I know that folks in the immigration offices quite often probably feel that way, to a certain degree. But the service standards need to be such that.... As was pointed out earlier, I received my citizenship in 1975. I didn't wait two years to get it. I came here as a landed immigrant. After I met the requirements and applied, my family applied.... I was a young adult when I applied, so I had to apply separately. I didn't wait two years.

You can imagine the folks who come here voluntarily, who want to come here, and who go through the process, which is in itself arduous, to meet all the compliances. They are excited about getting it done. They then feel as if they've been pushed off the table and told, “Just hang on and we'll get to you”.

I'm not suggesting that's how you intend it to be. That's the reality we see on the ground. Folks are saying, look, there's an election coming up, or they want to travel, or there's something else coming up where they need their citizenship, and they can't get it. How are you going to move that? Do you need additional funding?

• (1210)

Mr. Neil Yeates: In terms of citizenship processing, it is a combination of two things: increasing the capacity in our system, which we will look to do through reallocating resources in our department, and re-engineering. As the committee probably knows, our budget is frozen for the next two years, so we will look internally

to do that. I would say that what is equally important is that we have to re-engineer our process. It's not as efficient as it could be.

Those two things are going to turn around the citizenship processing and get us into a reasonable space in terms of processing time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yeates.

Mr. Young.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Yeates, I think the theme of this discussion should be “no control over your intake”, like an open-ended system. I've served in different companies and businesses of all sizes for over 30 years, and there's nothing to compare it with. Everything is a moving target, in your case driven by international events to a large degree with the refugee determination, and by political decisions.

But I'm looking at the transition you've made which is basically from the 20th-century paper economy to the 21st-century digital. It's a massive, massive transition. My question is, how much do you expect your total productivity to increase once the case management system is in and working the way you want it to?

Mr. Neil Yeates: It's difficult, Chair, to put an absolute figure on that, but I think we are moving into a regime or a period of time, an era, in which we can fairly readily meet the processing requirements for the annual levels planned, for a clientele of 250,000.

We've gone through periods of years when it was quite a challenge for us to meet that in terms of processing capacity around the world. We feel we are now at a point where we do have the capacity and we do have the efficiency and the productivity to meet that fairly readily, all other things being equal. It's allowing us to focus more efforts on fraud detection and some of the other parts of the program that perhaps have not had as much attention as they might have, historically. We feel that's a very good thing.

Mr. Terence Young: Mr. Bains pointed out that there is a bottleneck. We know that 45 million people worldwide would like to come to Canada and—

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes.

Mr. Terence Young: —that's unlikely to change.

But as well, we can only accept so many new citizens who can be fully integrated. We know, for instance, the funding to the provinces to help citizens become integrated is the highest in history. We know that the largest number in history came to Canada last year under our government. So there are things pushing on either side.

One of them is that immigrants, when they decide to immigrate to another country, make an application, and sometimes, unlike in the case of Mr. Allen, they do not want to come right away. Some of them know there's a waiting period so they apply in advance because they have a lot to do. They have to settle.... Sometimes somebody has to finish school or they have something they want to do in their job. There might be a bonus at the end of the year in their job. They have to sell property. They have to say goodbye to their friends. They have to prepare emotionally and pack their bags. There are a whole lot of things that might take time.

So in an ideal situation, if you get to where you want to be, what would be an ideal waiting time for someone to come Canada? What would it be, so that people don't defer and say they're not going to wait that long, that they're going to go to Australia, and so that on the other hand, they have time to deal with what they have to deal with? And then we would be able to absorb and help integrate those people into our society, to help them find homes and a job, and to get the children in school, etc.

Mr. Neil Yeates: We think that an ideal processing time is in the six- to twelve-month time horizon. As the member has said, they do take into account how long it's going to take their application to be processed in terms of how they are interacting with our system.

But information gets out of date. When there are long waiting times, then information gets out of date. Ideally, we'd be in that six- to twelve-month period and people would be finding out one way or another—of course, we don't approve all applications—what their situation is. We do find that annually there is what we call a wastage rate on visas that we issue and are not taken up. It's typically fairly low, but we do factor that into our calculations.

The member is quite correct. Canada remains a very popular destination of choice. There's no shortage of people who want to come here.

• (1215)

Mr. Terence Young: So all things being equal, with no international emergency and a government that still wants a lot of immigrants, as our government does, when can you get there? When will you be where you want to be?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Well, the big structural change in terms of our system is in moving away from an open intake system and setting limits on the number of applications we will accept by category every year. We've done that this year for federal skilled workers with the 20,000 that we have identified.

That, in our CIC ideal world, in terms of processing this stuff, would be done where practicable for all of the immigration categories that we have. For some, like refugees, you can't really set a cap, but for the rest of the categories, that would be the case.

Mr. Terence Young: So you've conducted two pilot programs, which I think are a great idea, and I'm hoping you learned a lot from them. That's what I wanted to ask you about.

From the business express program and the student partners program, what have you learned that you can apply to your whole spectrum of clients to make a system faster, better, and more efficient?

Mr. Neil Yeates: I'll ask Madame Deschênes to speak to those.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: One of the key things we found in those two programs is that we need to identify the risk and mitigate risk. So the more we can get the application perfected, with as much information as is easily verifiable, the faster we can process those cases.

The other thing we need in the student partnership is a loop back to be able to see if those who have come to Canada are really studying. Schools can tell us "yes" and then we would know if our risk is correct or not.

Mr. Terence Young: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bains.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much, Chair.

This is just a follow-up with respect to the question I asked earlier. Some other members on this committee have asked this question. With regard to the excessive waiting times for citizenship, the question is whether the minister has given the department any directive on how to reduce that time. Is there a plan in place to reduce the waiting time for those who want to obtain their citizenship? Is there something in the works?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes. As I say, we're doing two things. We have added some resources this year. We started in the summer. We're doing that and are looking at our ability to continue that on a permanent basis. We feel that we do need to make a permanent adjustment to our capacity for processing. That's part 1.

Part 2 is re-examining our process from end to end to make sure it's as efficient as possible and we don't create a new bottleneck. We have had a bottleneck at our processing centre in Sydney, so we need to sort that out. We don't want to create a new bottleneck in our regional offices in terms of running the citizenship test and the ceremonies and so on. We have to make sure that we have capacity right from end to end to make this work smoothly.

That's what we're sorting through now, the sort of "re-look", if you like, at all that of process. But in regard to our time horizon for that, we hope to be through a lot of this in time for next year.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Have any targets been set that you are working toward?

Mr. Neil Yeates: In terms of processing times?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Yes.

Mr. Neil Yeates: We haven't landed on that, but we would like to reduce them very significantly. I can tell you historically where we've been. We've been in that four- to six-month time horizon on citizenship proofs and we would like to get back to that. We're at about nine months right now. We're in that 15- to 19-month range on grants, and for sure we'd like to reduce that to less than a year.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: So that's roughly what you would like to go to, the historical target, and you are trying to anticipate that change will take place in about a year's time. Is that a safe assumption based on your analysis?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, within the next 12 months.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The next question is with regard to the gap in processing times. This is something that we've talked about as well and was brought up in the AG report.

I understand that there can be certain one-time challenges. For example, we've seen a spike in applications with respect to the challenges we see in Haiti and the pressures afoot. There are those odd exceptions.

But how do you explain, for example, that someone in Ghana in the economic class takes 86 months to process while the same application for someone from Italy takes 29 months? Why the large discrepancy? The issue I see here is one of resource management. How do we allocate resources to manage these processing times, particularly the large gaps that exist in this case between Ghana and Italy? I think that's pretty large. I just want to get a better understanding of that.

• (1220)

Mr. Neil Yeates: I'll start and then ask Madame Deschênes to follow up.

We try to keep track of that fairly carefully. We are concerned when we start to see significant differences between missions. Things happen. The character of the applications does vary a lot from one mission to another. One part of the world may have very significant security review issues, for example, and may need to go for review through CSIS. That may take a fair bit of time before the file comes back to us.

Then, we have our own issues about allocating resources as these circumstances change. We're always in a bit of a lag in responding to them. Other than on a temporary basis, it's never a quick fix to move more staff to a mission overseas. That's always a challenge.

Claudette.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: The other thing I would comment on is that certainly some cases are more complex than others. I'll note that the processing times are historical, right? They look at the cases you've processed in the last year, so if you have a lot of old cases that you've put in the process, your processing time is going to be longer.

What we've done now that we have global case management is that we're going to move to one case management process, which will permit us to centralize the intake of some types of applications and process them as one inventory, as opposed to the past, when the inventory sat in missions. Therefore, as Mr. Yeates has said, in the past the only way to deal with them was to send more resources. That's costly and there's not always the space and so on.

Now we're intaking them all in Sydney, and we'll be able to shift them to the missions and do some of the front end and the back end in Canada in a centralized fashion. We hope to deal with some of those issues of very different processing times in the longer term.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Deschênes.

Mr. Dreeshen.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here today.

I want to go specifically to the report. I noticed on page 9 that "the Department solicits feedback from its front-line employees and also monitors service quality at its call centres to help identify service issues". You've just mentioned global case management. I'm just curious as to whether that might have been a consequence of some of the employee feedback or where it was that you decided this might be the best method to solve some of the issues that have come up.

Mr. Neil Yeates: One of our challenges has always been spikes in workload across our network, throughout the world and across Canada. We have not had a case management system that would allow us to share the workload in an efficient way. GCMS basically allows cases to be processed anywhere in the world, so if we have a situation in which we've had a caseload buildup, we could take the next available flexibility in the network and have them do processing work on those cases.

That is a huge step forward for us. In the past, we would have to physically ship paper files around the world in order to do that, which was, as you can imagine, expensive, time-consuming, and so on. To be able to do this electronically is an enormous step forward for us.

As I say, it has been our experience that we deal with these peaks and valleys in workload around the network, and to make ourselves as productive and as efficient as possible, we needed a way to share that workload in a very quick and instantaneous kind of way. GCMS is the system that allows us to do that.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Getting back to employees and the responsibilities they have, and perhaps some of the ideas you have seen from this, I know that you have national working groups on improving service. I wonder whether there are examples you could share with us that have come from these working groups.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Sure.

Madame Deschênes.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Certainly the call centre is monitored in terms of the calls they're getting and how we can solve some of the problems. The deputy spoke about tier one, tier two, and tier three. To improve the information available, what we're trying to do is get feedback from the call centres about the types of questions we constantly get. That's one aspect.

Then, of course, we also use the call centre when there are urgent requests for cases that are in the backlog, to identify them, and then sometimes they'll come to us to explain that they're getting the same questions because it's not clear what our processes are. So we work on operational guidance to ensure that the intent of the act is actually the way we're delivering it. That's the type of thing.

Now we're doing a lot of work in, for example, citizen redesign. We're canvassing staff and asking what things work well, what things are duplication, and what we could be and should be doing better. That's all part of the work we're presently doing.

• (1225)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Is it part, then, of the service innovation office? Is it related to that and the leadership and coordination for service delivery? Are these the same types of issues as those related to that office?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Well, I'd make the comment that the deputy moved the service innovation office into operations, so now we're doing the service innovation office. Plus, all of the operational managers are very much involved in taking control of where we need to go and in making some decisions.

Obviously, modernization is messy, so we're anticipating that there may be some things that won't work out perfectly, but we think we need to move, so the commitment is there that we're going to move in the next short period of time.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

Let me go back to Monsieur Ricard, but just before I do, I thought in the introduction that Mr. Yeates used the word.... Perhaps I misunderstood.

I thought, Mr. Yeates, that you said that you disagreed with the Auditor General. Is that what you said?

Mr. Neil Yeates: No. We said that we agreed with the Auditor General in terms of the recommendations that have been made.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ricard, you identified 35 business lines—when I say you, I mean your department—and the department has responded with an action plan for four of those 35. We've had now about an hour and a half, and I think Mr. Yeates and Madame Deschênes have attempted to be as forthright as they possibly could.

Does it trouble you at all that the department would respond with four initiatives in an action plan when you identified 35 business lines on which you would have wanted some action?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I guess I should start with clarifying one thing. Where we refer to the four, it's in fact four that are in place right now. The action plan is to address, I guess, the other 31, with some priority-setting. What we understand is that there is a plan in which there are a few phases. I guess they will prioritize where they can start and the challenges they face while setting those standards.

But just to clarify, the action plan is to address the other 31.

The Chair: Because the committee responds to the Auditor General's view of the way that government operates and what it does, I'm wondering whether you're satisfied that an action plan by any department—in this case, it's CIC—says that “we will attempt to establish standards over the course of the next x number of years”.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, for sure it will be a challenge, and I think the department realizes that, but at the same time they seem to be committed to that, and they've put in place some initiatives, like some committees and the service office there. What we sense is that there may be a momentum. But as an auditor, you will understand that we can't go any further than that, because we can't talk about how we will evolve.

The Chair: So what you're telling us is that you really won't be able to give this committee or Parliament an indication that any action with respect to service standards will actually have an impact on the service, until such time as those standards are established and they're presented with their analysis through your next audit.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, I guess one doesn't necessarily preclude the other, but our message is that without indicators and measurements and reporting on it, you can't draw your performance story or your performance message in terms of how you're achieving those standards.

Without the standards, they won't be able to really measure the progress they're making. They may be taking some actions in parallel to that, but again, without the standards, they won't be able to measure the results.

• (1230)

The Chair: You're satisfied that the department is beginning to establish those standards?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: As I said, we can't talk with them. We can't read the future, so—

The Chair: Thank you—

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We do a future follow-up audit at some point. As you know, we're doing follow-up audits. Clearly, then we will be able to draw the picture.

The Chair: Mr. Yeates, on a couple of occasions you gave an indication. The first time I wrote it down as a direct quote—and I hope the Hansard will indicate the same—but then you paraphrased it. You said that you “only take in so many cases” per year, and then—and now I'm paraphrasing—on the line-by-line items. You've explained, and as I said, you've been fairly thorough in that. That has an impact on the efficiency of service that you provide, does it not?

Mr. Neil Yeates: Yes, it does. That's why I indicated earlier, Chair, that when we convert our processing times across all of the lines—particularly the immigration business—and translate them into service standards, some of those are going to be quite lengthy because of the number of applications we have relative to the number of people we're able to admit each year.

The Chair: So it's only fair, then, to be judged only in those lines where you have already made that kind of decision. It would be unfair for us to read an OAG's report on the absence of standards when you already have some but you make decisions as you go along for that particular line.

Mr. Neil Yeates: Well, I think one of the things that's a challenge for us is that we call them “processing times”, but actually very little of that period of time is actually spent processing the case; most of it is waiting in the queue to be processed.

But we call it processing times because an individual wants to know how long it is going to take for their application to be dealt with. I think from a client's perspective, that's completely fair. From our perspective, the amount of work involved on actually processing the case may be, you know, a day's work...I don't know. But it is that kind of magnitude in terms of the difference.

The Chair: Mr. Saxton, I think we can move on—

Mr. Andrew Saxton: To committee business. The Liberal Party has had a lot of questions today. Thank you.

The Chair: As always, your views are taken into great consideration, especially with the weight with which they are presented. Thank you very much, Mr. Saxton.

Mr. Ricard, just before we go, the department has said before this committee that notwithstanding the moneys it takes in for processing fees, that money doesn't go to the department. It really goes to the consolidated general revenues. Did you take that into consideration when you made your observations about service delivery?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No. I don't know if you can clarify the link you make there or...

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Chairman, let's move on. This is ridiculous. You've taken up almost 10 minutes now. That's more than anybody else in this committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Saxton. I'll just keep going.

Mr. Young, a point of order.

Mr. Terence Young: When this committee was constituted—you were not the chair—we took a full meeting to discuss how we would arrange questions so that the parties had relatively equal time. It's a democratic principle on which that's done, on how that was done, so that we would take up the amount of time in these meetings in proportion to how the voters sent us to this Parliament. As far as I know, it's the way every other committee works.

When Mr. Murphy was in the chair or when any other chair... By the protocol of this House, they ask questions to clarify. That's the tradition in the protocol. I don't think anybody in this committee has any question about that, about you asking questions to clarify.

But since you became chair, in these meetings you end up taking time that would otherwise go to the other parties, and effectively maybe not doubling but increasing questions from Liberal members by maybe 50% or more. That's unfair. That's basically unfair. So we're just suggesting—we're asking—that you go back to the parliamentary protocol, ask questions to clarify, and not try to take up time that expands the time of the Liberal Party in this committee. We're just asking that on the basis of fairness and equity.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Young.

I thought the question that I asked was a clarification question. The committee members all want to know what the Auditor General has in mind when the Auditor General presents an item.

But for your clarification, I went back, because you raised this before, and I went through the number of words that the chair has used over the course of this calendar year, without objections. I noted that on at least two occasions, the number of words, because that's the way you measure these, exceeded 1,000, and in one case 1,500—sorry, three occasions over 1,000. No objections.

Only once did I go over 1,000 and there was an objection. So I'm going to ask Mr. Ricard to finish answering the question and then we'll go on.

Mr. Ricard.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: You're referring to the fact that the fees are going to the CRF, and no, we didn't spend much time on considering that in our audit work. Here's what our audit was about. Do they have standards? Do they monitor? Do they report? Do they learn from what they find in terms of the monitoring of their results?

So we didn't go there in terms of assessing the impact of where the fees are going.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I hope that answers your question.

The Chair: Yes, it does. It helps me understand better what you said.

Thank you very much.

We are at the end of this session. I want to thank each and every one of the presenters for their interventions.

Monsieur Yeates and Madame Deschênes, I'm sure that everybody has profited by the exhaustive fashion of your answers, and I mean that positively.

Monsieur Ricard, Monsieur Wheeler, and Madam McMahan, thank you very much.

We're going to suspend for about two minutes and then prepare to go back into committee to discuss the report we left last week. That will be in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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