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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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•(1130)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number four, Thursday, October 20, 2011. We are televised today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying immigration application backlogs in light of the action plan for faster immigration.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem. We're half an hour late already. We have a choice. Mr. Davies, you'll notice that in the second round of witnesses we only have two witnesses. The third one was from the NDP list. That person got involved in a motor vehicle accident and is unable to come. That's the reason why there are only two names.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Yes.

The Chair: We are already half an hour late, so I quickly need guidance from the committee. We have a choice: we can make the meeting shorter, or we can go past one o'clock.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chairman, speaking for the official opposition, we'd be more than happy to extend the meeting by half an hour so that we can have the benefit not only of the minister's full time, but also of the two witnesses, one of whom is Mr. Kurland, who have traveled from Vancouver. In fairness to those two witnesses, we should do them the courtesy of hearing from them.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Agreed.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Yes. If I had a choice, Mr. Chair, my choice would be that we deal with the witnesses first and then have the minister come back when we could have him for two hours, but I don't think I'm going to get that choice.

The Chair: No, you're overruled.

Welcome, Minister Kenney. I appreciate your coming today to help us with this issue. Two of your colleagues were here at the last meeting, and if you wish, you can introduce them.

You have the floor for up to 20 minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism): I will try to be quicker than that, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

My thanks to all the members of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. It is a pleasure for me to appear before the committee for the first time since this Parliament began its work.

I would like to congratulate all the members of the committee on the activities they are undertaking. I would particularly like to thank the committee for choosing the backlog in our immigration system as its first study topic. This is quite a serious problem that we must all work together to resolve.

I am pleased to be here with some senior officials of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. We have our Deputy Minister, Mr. Neil Yates, our Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Mr. Linklater and our Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Ms. Deschênes.

Mr. Chair, allow me to say that, as minister, I am very fortunate that the officials at all levels of the department are so capable and dedicated.

Mr. Chair, I would like to provide you with a presentation showing the principal elements of the problem of the backlog in our immigration system. I must say at the outset that the backlog problem is partly a reflection of the fact that Canada is the world's most desirable destination.

•(1135)

[English]

So I can tell you that the problem we have with inventories.... The technical term in the ministry is inventories; the common English is backlogs. Whatever we call them, they are partly a reflection of the fact that Canada is, I believe, the most desirable destination in the world. In fact, last year Ipsos Reid did a global poll, from which they estimated that at least two billion people around the world would like to emigrate to Canada right now. This includes 77% in China, 71% in Mexico, 68% in India, etc. They didn't actually survey every country of the world.

This is a reflection of the good problem we have, that Canada is seen as such a land of opportunity, prosperity, and democracy. This of course is why we must have a managed immigration system. The objective of that managed immigration system is to attract and select those people to Canada who will make the maximum economic contribution to our country, in part. It is in part to deal with the challenge of our shrinking labour force in the future because of our aging population. It's in part to try to counteract that aging demographic, so we have more people working and paying taxes, contributing to our country and economy and its prosperity in the future. Of course, as the country that now receives the highest per capita number of resettled refugees in the world, we also seek through our immigration programs to discharge our humanitarian obligations.

There's that huge, almost infinite, supply, if you will, of people who are what we would call in immigration policy a huge push factor from all around the world. How do we do in terms of receiving people? On slide 2 we can see that Canada has very high levels of immigration. In fact, over the course of the past five years our government has received the highest sustained level of immigration—that is to say, of permanent residents, not just temporary residents—of any government in Canadian history, with an average of 254,000 admissions. Admissions is a term that used to be called landings, but that basically means when someone comes here and has the right to stay permanently to work and to live in Canada. That compares to the previous 12 years, when the average was 222,000.

To put it in relative global terms, this represents about 0.8% of our population that we add on average per year. That is the highest per capita level of immigration in the developed world. I say the developed world because many third world or developing countries don't really have control of borders or managed immigration systems, so they're not a fair comparator. The only country that comes close to our levels right now would be New Zealand.

During and since the recent global economic downturn, many other countries actually cut their immigration levels. I'll give you one example. The United Kingdom has a population about twice our size, and they are right now restricting immigration to about 100,000 a year, when our average intake is a notch over a quarter of a million a year, so three to four times more on a per capita basis. That just gives you one point of comparison.

[*Translation*]

The backlog problem facing us is quite simple, in a way. Backlogs are a function of very simple mathematics.

[*English*]

Backlogs are a function of very simple, basic math. Here is the calculation. When you get more applications for immigration than you're able to admit, you end up with a backlog. When total applications exceed total admissions, you get a backlog. When that happens year after year after year, the backlog grows. As the backlog grows, of course so do processing times. Even though the time it takes our ministry to process a particular application may shrink through operational efficiency, the total time it takes someone to go from the point of application to the point of admission gets longer. This is not because of operational inefficiencies but because they're simply waiting in a growing queue.

The inverse mathematical formula is when the total number of admissions exceeds the total number of applications, backlogs shrink and processing times speed up.

I invite you to remember this basic mathematical formula through today's hearing and during all of your studies. There are a lot of interesting issues to be discussed, but at the end of the day it's a very simple mathematical problem.

Let's see how this works out in any given year. I'll just take, for example, 2008, which is the last year for which we have full stats, and it's an average year in terms of numbers for the past several years.

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

So, on page 5, we can see

[*English*]

—and I hope you see that we have these video screens—that we established an operational target for 2008 for admissions in the range of a quarter of a million, which is about average for the past several years. We assessed those applications and we found that about a quarter of a million met our criteria and could come to Canada, and about another 100,000 applications were rejected. But here's the problem. We received about 450,000 applications. That is to say that the total number of applications that we received exceeded the total number that we were able to consider that year by about 100,000. This is the problem we've had year after year.

Another way we could look at this is to think if we were to actually try to process everyone who would like to make an application, based on the Ipsos Reid poll, that would be over two billion people. I just throw that in there just to give us a sense of perspective about how much supply there is versus our capability to accommodate that demand to come to Canada.

As another way of looking at this, a metaphor I often use is to look at how a transport company would sell tickets, because it's a good way of considering the problem of backlogs.

This is essentially what happened. The problem really picked up momentum following the adoption of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act by the previous government in 2001, because that act created a legal obligation on my department, on the government, to process all new applications to a final decision, regardless of how many people we plan to admit or practically could admit. So there was, frankly, I would say, an irresponsible policy decision that threw completely out of alignment the number of incoming applications with an obligation to process them versus the capacity to admit people and settle them in Canada. That is one of the primary reasons we've seen this problem.

So one way of explaining this metaphorically would be to say that over the past decade or so the Government of Canada was on an annual average basis selling 400,000 or more tickets on the plane to Canada to that market of two billion people who would like to buy those tickets. Yet even though we've been maintaining our highest average levels of immigration in our history, the highest averages in the developed world, unprecedented levels of immigration to a developed country, notwithstanding that, we've been admitting about, on average, a quarter of a million people. It was a little less than that under the previous government, a little more than that under the current government.

So every year selling 400,000-plus tickets, admitting, let's say for sake of argument, a quarter of a million people, what does that mean? It means 150,000 customers, if you will, who bought their tickets to Canada, who paid their fees, and those fees went into our general revenue fund and we cashed those cheques. And they end up at the airport, saying, "What happened? You oversold the plane by 35% and we're left sitting here." We say, "Yes, sorry about that". Next year we come back and we sell another 400,000 tickets. We say there are a quarter of a million spots on the plane to Canada and then that crowd at the airport grows to 300,000 the next year. Then the third year we do it again. The next thing you know there's a growing number; in fact, there are 450,000 in the backlog. Year after year, that's how you end up with a backlog of over a million people.

Here I will admit that our government did not act quickly enough to reverse the policy mistake of our predecessors to align the number of applications with a capacity to accept newcomers to Canada. This is not the fault of one government. We must accept some of the responsibility for not having acted more quickly to better align applications with admissions. This is why we've now ended up with a total backlog in all programs of just over a million. In fact, I think it has just gone back down below that.

● (1145)

Let's look at this over time, in the past decade. On slide 8 you'll see that in 2001 the backlog was just under 700,000. But here's the interesting thing. The bottom line shows the immigration target. This is what we call our operational target. And you'll see that it's gone up over the course of the past decade to about a quarter of a million a year.

The red line above it shows the number of applications received, and as you can see, the number of applications received over the past several years is consistently over 400,000. That means there is a consistent, perpetual surplus of applications over admissions. And

because of the basic math formula I talked about, that's why you see the growing backlog.

The backlog, incidentally, was at about 150,000 when our government came to office in 2006. The good news is that in some of the programs we've begun reducing the backlog, and I'll address that in a moment.

What are the possible solutions? Well, they really boil down to two very simple possible solutions. One would be a massive increase in the level of immigration to Canada, by orders of magnitude. So if we wanted to just maintain what we would call a working inventory, or a just-in-time immigration system, without limiting the number of new applications, then we would have to increase overall immigration levels to over 400,000 a year. That's a massive increase, an increase by orders of magnitude.

Or we could limit new applications, find ways to control incoming applications or at least our obligation to process new applications. Or we could do a combination of both.

Let me just say that there are some people suggesting that we actually open up whole new huge avenues of immigration to Canada. For example, I believe my friend Mr. Davies suggested recently that we find a pathway to permanent residency for all temporary foreign workers. Excluding those who already have a pathway to permanent residency, that would mean adding about 140,000 additional people to the immigration queue.

So if we want to prevent the further growth of backlogs merely by increasing admissions, we'd have to increase admissions to over 400,000. If we then wanted to add new PR programs, as Mr. Davies has suggested for temporary foreign workers, we'd have to increase it by about another 140,000, and that would bring us up to well over half a million permanent resident landings per year to Canada. And a valid argument could be made for that. I don't think there are many Canadians who support that, but if that's where people want to go and if that's where parliamentarians or this committee want to go, I invite you to be explicit about wanting to invite over half a million immigrants, essentially more than doubling immigration levels to Canada. Let Canadians participate in that debate.

I have a little dynamic video here and I have a mad scientist here who is going to show what happens when you try to do this. Some have said we should just increase processing resources for the department. Give Claudette more money to hire more visa officers around the world so they can make these decisions faster. And that's one of the suggestions that's come from the opposition, faster processing. Well, here you can see what happens when you're trying to take the demand—that is to say, the number of applications we get—and put it through a funnel, so it goes slowly. The number of people coming, the volume that is received, comes through that funnel, but you see it goes up to the number of people we can accept, which is about a quarter of a million.

Let's say that we hire a whole bunch more visa officers and process the applications faster. Well, guess what. You end up with just the same number of people admitted to Canada. So that's not a solution. Let me put it this way. Backlogs are not a function of a scarcity of operational resources in the department. Yes, our department could always function more efficiently, and we are doing that. In fact, I'll get into this perhaps in questions and answers. Through our implementation of, for example, our global case management system—which is a new worldwide electronic IT platform—together with other aspects of modernization, we are seeing our whole system operate more efficiently. But at the end of the day, if there's not an alignment between the number of new applications and the number of admissions, it doesn't matter how quickly you can process them. You could hit your targets in the first quarter of the year, and if the surplus of applications over admissions ends up waiting in the airport lounge, so what?

I'm someone who believes we should listen to Canadians on immigration.

• (1150)

[Translation]

I do not want to see here the problems that we see in Europe, for example, where immigration policies do not reflect the will of the public. In Canada, fortunately, people are on the whole in favour of immigration and diversity.

I want to keep our minds open in that way, Mr. Chair, but I am conscious of the fact that about 80% of Canadians tell us that immigration levels must be frozen at present levels or reduced.

[English]

Consistently, only about 10% of Canadians indicate that immigration levels are too low. About eight out of ten Canadians are saying that they're too high or high enough. There was a study that came out this week that points out that immigrants to Canada are those who are least likely to support increased immigration levels, and that's consistent in the polling.

Let's look at how we might fix the problem. In 2008 we had to overcome opposition, but we managed to pass Bill C-50, which gave the minister the capacity to limit the number of incoming applications. This power we have applied to the federal skilled worker backlog—that is, the point system. Had we not taken those actions, the federal skilled worker backlog would now be over a million. But as a result of limiting those applications to 10,000 a year, we are at 475,000 overall, so we've had a significant reduction.

We've applied the same logic to the investor immigrant program, and we are doing the same thing with the privately sponsored refugee program. But there's one program where we have seen real problems with backlogs and we've not applied that logic—parents and grandparents. The backlog when our government came to office was 108,000; it's now 160,000. Last year we received almost 38,000 applications for the program. On average, over the course of the past decade, we've been admitting about 18,000 people. Just to freeze the backlog would require that we double the number of parents and grandparents coming to about 38,000 a year, which would be moving that up from about 6% to maybe 14% of total immigration to Canada. That would mean cutting economic immigration. Increasing admissions to that program, even doubling them, will not eliminate or even significantly reduce the backlog in the program. We could not achieve this even if we cut applications in half.

My hope, my vision, is that by using some common sense, we can in the next few years arrive at a just-in-time immigration program where applications received for our various programs are processed in the same year, and people are admitted without having to wait longer than a year. I hope that we can have a constructive debate about how to get to that just-in-time immigration system.

Merci beaucoup.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. James.

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you, Minister Kenney. It's always a pleasure to hear you speak on this important issue.

My first question is related to filling labour market needs here in Canada. I think that we can all agree as members of this House that we believe immigration is needed to help fill those market needs. However, I think that we may be overlooking some of the groups of people who are already here in Canada. Many of them could also form part of our labour market but may not be fully participating at this point. People in this category include our aboriginal community and also our youth.

It is my view that we as a country should look at ways of increasing the participation of groups that are already in Canada right now. We need to get these people participating fully in our economic process and in employment. I'm wondering, Minister Kenney, whether you would agree with my views, and if you could expand on them.

• (1155)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you, Ms. James.

Yes, I agree entirely. First, we all know that we will be facing a growing challenge of a shrinking labour market as the baby boomers retire and as the average age of the Canadian population gets older. We project that in a few years all net labour force growth in Canada will be attributable to immigration.

Those who think we can solve that problem through immigration alone are profoundly mistaken. The C.D. Howe Institute has calculated that for us to merely maintain the current average age ratio in the Canadian population through immigration alone would require that we more than quadruple immigration levels to go up to about 4% intake per year of our population. That would require us going to over one million immigrants a year right now and bringing in seven million a year by the end of the decade.

Perhaps some people think that's viable. I don't. Eighty percent of Canadians are telling us immigration levels should not be increased, and I don't think those Canadians are saying that because they're hostile to immigration. On the contrary, they want to make sure newcomers succeed and that we have the capacity to integrate them.

We cannot solve the labour market challenges through immigration alone. It has to be part of the solution. Another important point is that of the immigrants we currently receive, only about 20% of them are what we would call primary economic immigrants who are assessed according to their human capital. About 80% of immigrants we receive are either the spouses and dependants of economic immigrants, or they're subsequently sponsored family members, or people in our humanitarian classes like refugees and asylum seekers. So eight out of ten immigrants to Canada are not primary economic immigrants.

Maybe we need to look at increasing the ratio of those who are primary economic immigrants to address the labour market shortages. Those who would seek to reduce the overall percentage of economic immigrants are undermining one of the primary objectives of immigration policy and the rationale that we present to Canadians for consistently high levels of immigration.

Finally, I would agree entirely that we need to do a much better job of greater labour market participation in Canada. We have certain regions and populations with long-term high rates, double-digit rates, of unemployment. We should not be in a situation where we have some regions in the country with double-digit unemployment, but businesses are telling us that they cannot get Canadians to work and they need to bring in temporary foreign workers. There's something profoundly wrong with that. So whether it's helping aboriginal Canadians in the west, for example, to move to gainful employment or other labour market remedies, we do need to increase participation in the workforce by people who are already in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Minister, for coming.

I don't want to quibble with numbers, as you've thrown out a lot of numbers, but you said that Canada let in 8%, the highest in history. It's a little misleading, isn't it? You let in 8% of population last year when you let in 280,000....

Hon. Jason Kenney: That's 0.8%.

Mr. Don Davies: It's 0.8%. Canada's population is 34,619,000. You said there's an average of 254,000 over the past five years. That's 7.3% of the population. Pardon me, that's 0.73% of the population, and we hit 0.8% last year only. Is that right?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Mr. Davies, if you want to quibble over stats, 0.8% is the general average over the last decade plus in terms of immigration of permanent residents to Canada. If you want to get into a discussion about statistics, I'm delighted, because you keep putting out statistics that say that Canada has reduced—

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Minister, I just know—

Hon. Jason Kenney: —immigration levels and so on by comparing one year's landings, 2006, to another year's landings, 2010. If you want to avoid being intellectually dishonest about statistics, you have to take multi-year averages in immigration, because any one year will have aberrations in particular programs.

We look at long-term averages, and our government has increased permanent immigration to Canada by 14% on average over the average of the previous government.

● (1200)

Mr. Don Davies: If I could get into that, Mr. Minister, I did take a five-year average. I thought the best average would be your years in government. I thought I would take the record since you formed government in 2006, and took the five years that we have figures for from your own department.

Again, the math is there. In family class applications, you've dropped 14.6% in that time, and you've reduced the number every year: 70,000; 66,000; 65,000; to less than 60,000. In spouses and partners, you've dropped 10%, dropping the spousal visas every single year: 45,300 to 44,900 to 44,200, etc. There has been a 23.4% reduction in parents and grandparents—

Hon. Jason Kenney: No, that's all wrong. It's all—

Mr. Don Davies: —and even children.

The Chair: Let him finish the question, please.

Mr. Don Davies: Those figures show you've consistently dropped family class visas. Could one of the reasons that we have a backlog in family class—as of the end of last year, it's 204,000—be that your government has reduced the number of visas granted in the family class?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Mr. Chairman, I'm sure this is not being done out of malevolence but a misunderstanding. What we have just seen is a classic example of statistical sophistry from Mr. Davies. He did exactly what I predicted he would do: he took 2006 and compared it to 2010, rather than taking averages.

Mr. Chairman, last year, for example, we had a spike in the federal skilled worker admissions for a precise reason: while we were bringing in ministerial instructions we also increased admissions to reduce the backlog in that program. Something similar happened in one year on family programs—2006.

But if you look at the average admissions under our government, the number of sponsored family members—these are spouses, kids, parents and grandparents—has been 63,500, from 2006 to last year. The average number of family-sponsored admissions under the previous five years of the Liberal government was 60,000.

There has actually been an increase—for example, among spouses and children, the average under the previous government was 39,935; under our government, it has been 46,963. And in terms of parents and grandparents, the average admission in that program under the previous government was 17,500, and over the past five years under our government it has been 17,000—essentially flat.

Mr. Chairman, those statistics are completely misleading.

Mr. Don Davies: Thanks, Mr. Minister. I mean, they're your figures.

Again, I am not comparing to the previous government; I am comparing your record—

Hon. Jason Kenney: Why not? That's the bottom line.

Mr. Don Davies: May I please finish up and ask a question? On one thing you were asked about, you used a very cute little analogy with an airplane. One thing that air carriers sometimes do when there is more demand by the people who want to buy tickets is that they put on a bigger plane. Have you considered doing that?

I'll give you a couple of facts and ask for your comment.

We know your own department says that in five years we're going to need immigration to fill 100% of our new labour growth. You have commented on the aging population and declining birth rates. We can replace our jobs now with natural growth, but within five years we need immigration for our economy to grow. Have you considered increasing the levels, say closer to 1%—300,000 to 340,000?

I also note that when you consulted with people in the summer you noted something in a letter to the potential witnesses. You said: "Although increasing levels would be one way to mitigate some of these pressures, it would require broad buy-in from the public, and additional funding."

What was that buy-in from the public from your consultations this summer, Mr. Minister? Would you share the results of those consultations with the public, with this committee, and tell us if you're prepared, as a government, to put in additional funding?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Sure. There are three questions there: funding, consultations, and levels.

In terms of levels, thank you very much for your letter. I do appreciate being specific and your giving us input on this.

In Mr. Davies' letter of October 14, essentially what he suggested is up to 1% of the population, which would be 336,000 admissions.

Your first question was whether we had considered putting on a bigger plane. Yes, we have already done so. We've increased average immigration levels by 14%, as opposed to the levels under the previous government. The previous government admitted, on average, 220,500 people. This government has admitted 254,000, on average. That is an increase of 14%.

Second, going to what you're suggesting, that 336,000 would have a negligible effect on backlogs and processing times, that is really the problem that I don't think you're grappling with. You can have a thoughtful discussion about the optimum rate of levels for the Canadian economy or what have you, but in terms of backlog reduction, which I believe is the focus of the study, if you don't significantly limit new applications, moving admissions up to 336,000, as you've suggested, won't do the job.

I think you're being a bit incomplete in the way you're presenting your views. Because in the same letter, Mr. Davies says that preferably he urges the government to provide an option to all temporary foreign workers to apply for permanent residency. That would be an additional 140,000 people in the queue.

What you're really saying is 336,000 plus 140,000, which would be 476,000 people. Mr. Davies, if that's what you're advocating—doubling immigration—that's fine, but I hope you are transparent about that with your constituents in British Columbia, 80% of whom are saying immigration levels are high enough or too high.

In terms of consultations—

•(1205)

The Chair: We have a problem, Mr. Minister—

Hon. Jason Kenney: The consultations we did online reflect those public opinion polls. And in terms of funding, as I've pointed out, speeding up the processing won't solve the backlog problem as long as applications exceed admissions.

The Chair: We're going to have to move on. We're a minute over already.

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

I find that's the biggest problem. The minister, on the one hand, says he wants to have this wholesome discussion and I'm all for that. I've a lot of ideas in terms of how we can improve the system, and I want to be able to participate in improving the system. I think we need to have dialogue.

The study for a number of weeks on the backlog... Personally, I'd put that on the back burner and have the Minister of Immigration here where we can have a roundtable discussion, questions and answers, and be a part of a process that would actually look at coming up with answers so the public would be better served.

I spent more time asking questions of the minister of immigration at the provincial level when I was an MLA, because time allowed for MLAs to actually question, thoroughly question, and get answers from a minister. Here, I'm given five minutes to be able to question what affects the lives of millions of Canadians. That's simply not good enough, dealing with the backlogs.

Having said that, let's take a look. One of the more sensitive issues is in regard to the parents. What we've seen is that the lower end of the target has now been reduced for parents, yet the greatest problem on which we're getting the most phone calls is in dealing with those backlogs of parents. Yet the targets have been reduced. In fact, if you look at last year, we were at the low end in terms of accepting the number of parents coming into Canada.

So I have some difficulties in terms of how the government has prioritized. I have some ideas that I would love to share with the minister, and I will share them with him, but I only have five minutes here. If you want to give me leave, I'll be more than happy to do that.

Mr. Chair, I want to talk about the specific issue of backlogs, and ask a question, a very specific question.

Imagine your son is wanting to sponsor you. You're living in the Philippines. You're 50 years old. You have two children. One's in university, the other one's in high school.

Now you're getting into the system. You can today expect it to take seven years in order to be processed, if you're coming from the Philippines. You are obligated to keep your university student in public education until the time you are issued a visa. That means, at the end of the day, we're saying to that student that they don't have a choice; they can't go into the workforce. If they do, they lose their dependency.

These are the types of nuances that need to be changed. And this deals strictly with backlogs. We have people who are put into positions in which, in some cases, they're having to possibly misrepresent themselves because of bad government policy.

My preference, when we have meetings like this, is that these are the things we should be talking about. We shouldn't be constrained to a few minutes of questions and answers.

Here is a very specific question that I would ask: will the minister commit to allowing dependants who have achieved the minimum of a three-year post-secondary course or program to remain as a dependant of a principal applicant if the principal applicant has been in the system for a minimum of 12 months? That would then allow... For example, if I'm a parent and I'm being sponsored by my son in Canada, my child, who now has a three-year degree—but I still have another five years before I'm processed—could actually go out and work and support himself and not have to be worried about being dropped as a dependant.

That's only one example of the types of discussions I believe we should have.

The minister is right, Mr. Chairperson. It's not a question of resources. We have the resources in the embassies across the world. Our issue is that we have to deal with the numbers and how we are processing the applications.

I don't question that. I do question to what degree we are being afforded the opportunity to have that wholesome debate. That's what the minister says he wants, a wholesome debate. I think you have a wholesome debate when you enable opposition critics, who have a responsibility that is broader than their own constituency, to ensure that there's accountability on the issue of immigration and citizenship. You have to provide them the opportunity to be able to ask all of the questions, not limit it to five minutes.

The question I would like answered by the minister—

• (1210)

The Chair: You're out of time, sir.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: —is does he agree that we need to open up the system so that there can be questions and better dialogue?

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, thank you very much.

Madame Groguhé.

My problem, Mr. Minister, is I'm bound by rules to follow. You may want to respond to him, but I'm bound by these rules. Unless the committee authorizes me to change those rules, that's the way the cookie crumbles.

On a point of order, Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Chair, could we solicit the members of the committee and ask for leave so that the minister can respond in as wholesome a manner as he would like to my question?

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Ms. Groguhé.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Minister, my question deals with the solutions under consideration. You mentioned the possibility of limiting the number of new applications. I would like to know which classes would be the priority if that solution were adopted.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Which solution?

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Limiting the number of new applications.

Hon. Jason Kenney: First, we have set a limit on new applications under the skilled workers program. We have done the same for new applications under the investors program. We are also doing it for the private sponsorship of refugees program.

Those are the priorities in our ministerial directives for limiting the number of new applications. The only other program with a significant backlog where we have not done so is the program that allows people to sponsor parents and grandparents.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Could you provide a little more detailed information about the obstacles that you see to the option of getting rid of the backlog by increasing the number of immigrants?

I would also like to know if you could possibly tell us your options. That would help us to better understand the various options you have considered. What are the pros and cons?

Hon. Jason Kenney: As I have already mentioned, the government has increased overall immigration levels by 14% over the previous government. We have even increased the numbers in the family reunification class. As I said, on average, we have raised it from 40,000 under the previous government to 47,000 under the current government.

As I said in my presentation, increasing admissions under the sponsorship of parents program will not solve the backlog problem. Even if we doubled the number of parents and grandparents arriving in Canada between now and 2018, we would still have a backlog of around 70,000. So increasing the number of admissions would not be enough to clear the backlog.

• (1215)

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: If we are not talking about increasing numbers in order to affect the backlog, is there anything in your plan that decreases admissions in certain classes? If so, which ones?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I guess the answer to that question is that I am looking for solutions.

During the election campaign, I made the commitment to consult Canadians so that we can come up with an action plan to reduce the backlog in the reunification program for parents and grandparents. We are now involved in those consultations and I feel that this committee's current study is part of that process.

I would like to find the best solutions. If doubling the number of parents and grandparents arriving in Canada is not a solution, is the department going to have to issue directives limiting the number of new applications that we receive? I think that it is a solution that we have to consider.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Do I still have a bit of time?

Mr. Minister, since you have a vision and you have made projections, could you tell me which specific class you are thinking of in terms of impacts and solutions?

Hon. Jason Kenney: First, as I said, there is the skilled workers program. For the first time, in June 2009, I issued a ministerial directive designed to limit the number of new applications. Before that, the number was 20,000. Since last June, we have kept the number at 10,000. So we will be getting only 10,000 new applications under the skilled workers program. As a result of that limit on new applications, we are seeing a major decrease in that class.

[English]

The Chair: We have to move on.

[Translation]

Hon. Jason Kenney: This summer, we imposed a moratorium on new applications under the investors program and we are doing the same thing under the private sponsorship of refugees program.

[English]

The Chair: We have to move on. I'm sorry.

Mr. Leung.

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to share my time so the minister has time to answer Ms. Groguhé's question.

The Chair: You're wonderful.

Carry on, Mr. Minister. I interrupted you in mid-sentence and he's letting you finish.

Hon. Jason Kenney: That's okay. I managed to get it out.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: It's wonderful to talk about airplanes landing, seats, and so on, but perhaps to simplify this a restaurant analogy is better.

You have a long lineup of people and a maître d'. You have people who are seated, and so many meals to be served. If the capacity was increased you could bring in more people, but I think the person who is the gatekeeper, the maître d', has to inform the people in the lineup, "If you stand in line at this point it's going to take you 15 minutes. If you stand in line at this point it's going to take you 20 minutes."

Using standing in line for a restaurant as an analogy for how we manage the backlog, at some point we have to look at the input and how many meals we can prepare—in the context of a nation, how many settlements we can handle.

Do you not agree that we have to look at some controls in the lineup? We should be transparent to people and say "Look, it's going to take you seven years if you want to stand in the line".

• (1220)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, I do, Mr. Leung.

Here's the problem: a system was created with a legal obligation to receive and process an unlimited number of applications. So we've got a world with almost infinite demand on Canada, a legal obligation to process all the applications that we receive, but obviously a finite number of people that we can accept.

I repeat: that finite number is a big number. Notwithstanding Mr. Davies' quibbling over whether it's 0.72% or 0.8% in any given year, it is the highest per capita level of immigration in the developed world, with, I believe, the sole exception of New Zealand right now. And it is the highest sustained level of overall immigration of any government in Canadian history, at 254,000 in average admissions.

By the way, we expanded the restaurant. We bought a bigger plane. We increased immigration by 14% over the admissions under the previous government. But as I have said, we could expand the restaurant again, buy an even bigger plane, and that would not solve the problem of backlogs and long processing times unless we also use the tool of limiting new applications, which is why Parliament gave the minister the power to do that under Bill C-50 back in 2008. So yes, it's absolutely essential, because I don't think it's fair, to use your analogy, to have our customers—those people who dream about coming here—waiting in a queue for seven or eight years.

You know, one of the reasons we created the action plan for faster immigration on the skilled worker program is that many of the world's best and brightest were able to immigrate to Australia and New Zealand, two of our key competitors for human capital. They were able to immigrate there in about six months, but we were telling them to wait in the back of our skilled worker queue for seven years. So which country do you think they chose to go to?

Thankfully, now under our action plan for faster immigration, at least new applicants in that program are able to get an answer and come to Canada in less than a year. And I can tell you I've met some of these people, and they are happy customers. They applied eight, nine, ten months ago and they're now in Canada. We're talking about very bright people coming in through our skilled worker program. That's where we need to go. When the customers show up outside the restaurant, when they buy a ticket on the plane, we should tell them that if they qualify, if they meet our criteria, we will welcome them within a year. That's where we need to go.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Weston.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, you are on top of things in your department. You also know who wants to come to Canada. On behalf of the Canadians I represent, thank you for the energy and the effort that you put into the work you are doing.

You mentioned again the system that was started in 2002, requiring each application to be considered. Do other developed countries, such as Australia, the United States or Great Britain, have a system like Canada's under which each application must be considered even though it is not possible to accommodate them all?

Hon. Jason Kenney: That is an interesting question. I think that Canada is the only developed country with an immigration system that requires every application to be processed and decided upon.

I know that New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and countries in Europe restrict the number of

applications they process. I do not know why the previous government created a system with no limits on new applications. It made no sense.

In the United States, they use a lottery for new applications. In Australia and New Zealand, there is a processing period lasting several months for economic immigration applicants, whereas it is several years in Canada. That reflects the different policies in each country.

• (1225)

Mr. John Weston: That is very interesting. Did those countries previously have long delays in processing immigration applications? If so, what did they do to get a handle on the delays?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I am going to ask Mr. Linklater to answer your question as he is more familiar with that.

Mr. Les Linklater (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration):

Mr. Chair, in response to the question about applicants in the economic category in New Zealand and Australia, there is almost no delay because of the processing system they have. In the case of New Zealand, there is a kind of

[*English*]

“expression of interest”

[*Translation*]

which is a pool from which they choose the applications that meet the needs of the labour market. This model will shortly be adopted by Australia, as of next July 1, with the creation of a pool of applications from which Australians can look for those that most meet their needs.

In the family class, especially for parents and grandparents, Australia does have a backlog; wait times are about 10 years.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you. If I have any time left, I will share it with Mr. Opitz.

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you.

As a new MP, I did learn from my esteemed colleague how to set a record for number of words in five minutes, but I will ask for a fulsome comment from you related to what Mr. Weston just asked, Minister. I think it's appropriate that we situate where we are right now and take a step back.

I'd like to know a little about more about where Canada's immigration level is right now compared to the rest of the developed world. For example, do some of these other countries accept roughly the same number of immigrants per capita as Canada? Do they have similar streams, for example parents, grandparents, live-in caregivers, foreign skilled workers, and also related to the proportions of these things, like family class, economic class, refugees? Could you take a moment to clarify those issues?

The Chair: You can take 30 seconds.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I would say that the two countries with systems most similar in terms of the mix of immigration and relative levels would be Australia and New Zealand. Australia is a little bit lower than us per capita. New Zealand has developed the same per capita level of total intake.

The European countries are going in the other direction. In France this summer I think my counterpart announced that they're going down to, if I'm not mistaken, 25,000 economic immigrants they'll be admitting, for a country with a population of more than twice our size. Similarly, the United Kingdom is going down to 100,000. Our levels are orders of magnitude higher than in Europe.

The level of the number of economic immigrants—legal ones anyway—in Canada is significantly higher than the United States per capita and slightly higher than Australia and about the same as New Zealand.

The Chair: You have one minute, and I'm going to be very strict.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Right. I'm going to go really fast.

You said that with the federal skilled worker program you've had some success in decreasing the backlog. Right now the backlog seems to be in family class. Are you planning on putting a cap on family class, yes or no?

Hon. Jason Kenney: It's important to make a distinction, because there are two family class programs. There is family class one.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I have less than one minute. That's why I'm trying to go really quickly. Yes or no, are you planning on putting a cap on family class?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I can't answer yes or no.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: There are two categories. Sure.

Hon. Jason Kenney: There are two categories. The first one, which is spouses and dependent kids, is processed on a priority basis pretty much within a year of the application.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Yes, and that's basically just in time at this point. Right? That's the time that I heard from the—

Hon. Jason Kenney: Parents and grandparents is a different question.

What I'm saying is if we want to eliminate the backlog and speed up processing times we're going to have to do two things, probably increase admissions and limit incoming applications.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, thank you for coming this morning.

We had an hour with you, and I'm sorry I had to cut you off a couple of times. It's a difficult issue. I expect, hopefully, sometime towards the end of our witnesses we might invite you to come again.

●(1230)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you.

The Chair: We will suspend for a moment.

●(1230)

_____ (Pause) _____

●(1235)

The Chair: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, again.

We have two witnesses. I'm going to introduce Mr. Richard Kurland, who's a policy analyst. My notes say "attorney". That suggests you're an American, but we'll call you whatever you want to be called.

Mr. Richard Kurland (Policy Analyst and Attorney, As an Individual): I'm a member of the B.C. Law Society and a member of the Quebec Bar.

The Chair: Oh, you're a lawyer. Yes, sir.

You've appeared in front of this committee before. You appeared at the wait-time study. We thank you again for coming. We appreciate your knowledge.

Please proceed.

Mr. Richard Kurland: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are all well aware of the challenge of processing times. We know the existence of the backlogs. I don't think we need additional witnesses to provide whining and complaining. We need creative solutions to the backlog problem. What I'd like to do is look quickly at the big picture, focus on the two strategic backlog areas where solutions are needed, and then go controversial and provide policy solutions.

In the big picture, 60% of Canada's immigration inventory is fixed, cured. I'm speaking of the economic class, the skilled workers. The politically courageous decision to cap intake of federal skilled workers in 2008 was the appropriate solution at the time. In respect of the pre-2008 skilled worker backlog, we still have a chicken in the python to digest. I anticipate that this will disappear in the next two fiscals. So the complaint is not about federal skilled worker immigration to Canada.

We have also, better late than never, cured the inventory issue when it comes to Canada's investor immigration inventory. We accomplished this by capping the intake in 2011 at 700 cases. Operationally, there are big question marks on how it was done, but the fact is that by shutting intake you reduce the backlog growth trend: pure math.

Where we cannot fix things are in the categories affecting parents, grandparents, and spouses.

The spousal category should not be on the table, because, frankly, it's a just-in-time inventory. Processing times have been growing, slight slap on the wrist operationally or tug on the ear. That's 80% of cases being done in a lot more than the nine months committed to by this government. So that may need a quick tweak.

As to the parents and grandparents, that's going to need a novel approach.

So we have two inventories, backlogs, in Canada that merit the attention of this committee. One is investors, who represent \$9 billion cash to be transmitted to the Government of Canada, not into private sector businesses. This money is wire-transferred to the Government of Canada, \$9 billion in 22,000 cases.

The other inventory is an inventory of love and respect, parents and grandparents. The challenge is to introduce a temporary backlog measure that will create within the backlog inventory of parents and grandparents two new processing streams. A processing stream with an addition to our existing stream would require a political decision taken by the members here.

Let's face it, parents and grandparents are not expected to work when they arrive in Canada. There's no taking of jobs. They're not criminals, and they're not security risks. As a matter of fact, they're not even presenting significant health risks, because they must successfully pass immigration medicals. The real concern is money. When they are here, they have access to medicare. Unfortunately, during their working lifetimes they did not have the opportunity to pay premiums into Canada's medicare system.

My proposal is to allow them an opportunity to pay a lump sum to the Government of Canada in compensation for 20 to 25 years of medical insurance, the same way parents must provide travel insurance when they want to visit Canada for one year. It's not all parents should pay. This is a temporary measure. If you like analogies, it's like a bagpipe. You need to put an additional pipe into that inventory to reduce the pressure and outflow it.

• (1240)

The amount of \$75,000 is more than sufficient to defray the cost of medicare. I've gone into the field and asked families across this country what they think. In the greater Asian community it's a no-brainer. When the parents retire, they sell their property and the first \$75,000 off their million-dollar-plus residence goes to the government. The greater Indo-Canadian community have similarly responded, saying they do not expect a free ride, they do not want something for nothing. They say, tell us the amount, our family will raise it, especially if we're already paying \$6,000 a year in babysitting.

Economically, it makes sense. Ask Canadians if they would like these two additional streams: one, for \$75,000, you priority-process within the backlog; for the second stream, it would be the same deal, \$75,000, but if there's insufficient quota in that year you allow them forward—after they pass screening, criminal, and medical—on payment of the \$75,000 to the Government of Canada, on a 10-year visit to Canada. They can wait until their number comes up, cost-free to this government and to the taxpayer.

That's my opening eight minutes.

The Chair: You finished a minute ahead of time, sir. Thank you very much.

Our second witness today is Mr. James Bissett.

Good morning to you, sir. You are a former ambassador and you have been to this committee before. I think you appeared on Bill C-11, which is the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Mr. James Bissett (As an Individual): That is correct, yes.

The Chair: We thank you for coming again.

Mr. James Bissett: Thank you very much for asking me to be here.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. We appreciate your knowledge.

You have up to eight minutes.

Mr. James Bissett: It's going to be hard.

I'm going to start by saying that the most effective way of undermining or crippling the management of an immigration program is to allow a backlog to develop. Unfortunately, that's what happened when the 2001 immigration act was passed. It did not, for some strange reason, contain any mechanism for controlling the flow of immigrants, and the act said, paraphrasing section 11, that anyone who met the selection criteria "shall" be accepted.

Of course, the department should have realized that there are many thousands of people out in the world who can meet our selection criteria at any one time. What happened was that within months a backlog began to build up. The government attempted—I think in 2002, less than a year after the act was put into effect—to correct that by saying that all those in the backlog would have to meet a higher mark on the selection criteria. That, of course, was ruled by the courts to be illegal and unlawful.

So nothing was done about the backlog until 2008, when, by that time, it had reached a million people waiting to come in. That's like the province of Saskatchewan being outside, waiting to come to Canada.

There was an attempt in 2008, and it was moderately successful, by the previous minister to Minister Kenney, to control that to some degree by first of all changing the act so that it meant that anyone, even though they met the selection criteria, “may” be accepted, not “shall” be accepted; there was no obligation to accept everybody who met the criteria. That was an important step, and it was difficult to get through. In fact, it had to be included in the budget to ensure that it would get through.

At any rate, that was helpful. Later, as the minister said this morning, they put a cap on the skilled worker component of the movement. That, as Richard has mentioned, has also been quite successful.

The problem is that there still remain many thousands, basically of grandparents and parents, in the backlog.

One of the adverse results of having a massive backlog is that people who want to get here find other ways of doing so. That has resulted in what I consider to be one of the most serious implications of the backlog, and that is that it allowed the tremendous development of the temporary foreign worker program, something that we in Canada had always avoided, knowing what happened to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s with the guest worker program. Thousands of guest workers came into Germany, France, and other countries of Europe, but of course they didn't go home. They're there now and have formed a large underclass in many European cities. It's a serious problem.

We avoided that like the plague until the backlog developed and employers, who wanted and needed skilled workers, found another route of getting them: they got them as temporary foreign workers.

Last year there were 283,000 temporary foreign workers in Canada. That figure, when you add it to the 280,000 immigrants who came in, is significantly large. On top of that you have roughly 250,000 foreign students in Canada, and the foreign workers and probably many of the students are not going home. You can be sure of that.

That's the adverse impact, because many of the so-called skilled temporary workers are not so skilled. They don't have to meet any requirements, basically. They don't have to meet education skills or education and training. Many of them are unskilled and are the first to suffer if there is a layoff.

The problem here, really, if you look at it, is that the current government has lost control of the immigration program. Of the

280,000 or so immigrants who came to Canada, I would guess that only about 20% or fewer were selected or controlled by the federal government. I have figures here, but of the 280,000 who came in, 214,000 had nothing to do with the federal government except being checked for criminality and medical.... They were brought in by employers, they were brought in by provinces, they were brought in by relatives, or they consisted of refugees and humanitarian cases and several thousand live-in care workers or caregivers.

In effect, as far as I'm concerned, the federal government has lost control of the movement.

• (1245)

Add to that the asylum system, in which there is a backlog again of some 50,000 waiting. Again, even if they are found not to be genuine by the board, the chances are that they won't be sent home. That, I think, is a serious problem.

Until the backlog problem is resolved, I don't think that any department or any minister is going to be able to manage the program effectively.

How could the problem be solved? Richard has given some solutions. My own view is that we have a legal as well as a moral obligation to let the parents and grandparents in. I think it was a mistake to put the sponsored category in the act, as was done. Normally in the past we only accepted parents if they were over the age of 60 and grandparents if they were over the age of 65. Opening it up to parents of any age means we're getting a lot of parents who are in their forties and fifties and who are entering the labour force.

But that's beside the point. The current problem, I think, is that until you get rid of the backlog, you're not going to be able to manage the immigration program effectively. I would suggest that the way to do it is through a variation of what Richard is suggesting or by biting the bullet and letting the parents and grandparents in, at the cost that will accrue to us in health care and other things.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, both of you, for your presentations. Members of the committee will have some questions.

Mr. Menegakis.

• (1250)

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much for your presentations today and for being here. It is very nice to hear from people with your experience.

Your Excellency, it's always a pleasure to have you here with us, as it is to have you, Mr. Kurland.

In the debate on immigration and on backlogs, we often focus on the quantity, and not enough focus is put on the quality. I'd like to talk a little bit about that today.

To me and to many of us, it's not just the sheer number of people we let in; it's making sure that the immigrants who come here can properly integrate into Canadian society and that they're able to join the workforce and participate in our economy and become viable, contributing members of the community.

I know that the integration of new Canadians is a key goal of our government. I believe it's what Canadians want and what Canadians would certainly welcome seeing. Would you agree? And perhaps you can expand on what the practical limits are as to how many people Canada can welcome in a given year.

Mr. Richard Kurland: There should be a limit on the number of people Canada admits every year as permanent residents. We need to hear more from our consulting partners. Section 95 of the Constitution Act equally divides immigration and agriculture between federal and provincial jurisdiction. The point is well taken, because perhaps more provincial upload of information into this process is required to answer your question.

But I want to leap on the quality of the flow, which is an often overlooked point, particularly when it comes to parents and grandparents. Prioritizing single parents or those who are elderly and alone overseas should be a humanitarian and compassionate objective, which would reduce the total number of cases in that parent and grandparent flow. That's quality.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Would you care to comment on that?

Mr. James Bissett: I share your concern about the quality. The fact of the matter is that many studies have shown that the immigrants who have come since 1990 are not doing well. Many of them are living below the poverty line. They're not getting the jobs. A part of that is because of the pressure of numbers. To take a quarter of a million every year, and add to that an equal number of temporary workers and foreign students who all have to be processed, means that very few of the immigrants are even being interviewed by our visa officers now. They're not being seen. It's being done by paper. If you're an immigrant who applies in Bangladesh, you fill out your paper, and it's sent to London, where an officer inspects it or looks at it.

My view is that we have to see these people, interview them, and talk to them. Quite apart from quality, we find that many of the people who come with qualifications cannot get employment. We've all heard the story of doctors and engineers driving cabs, and there's some truth in that. The other part of the truth is that we shouldn't be letting professional immigrants in until they are able to meet the provincial licensing requirements.

If you're a medical doctor, an engineer, or an architect, you don't get into Australia until you have proven that the state government will accept you and allow you to practise, and you must be fluent in English.

We allow professionals in who may have had 12 or so years of education, but we don't know the quality of that education. We give it the equivalent quality of someone from Oxford, Columbia, or

Harvard. That's the basis of the problem with a professional who comes here and can't get work.

There's also the problem of provincial regulations and the professional requirements, but the base of it is we're letting in a lot of people who simply are not qualified. In my view, we were successful prior to 1990 because immigrants were not only interviewed and selected, they were counselled. They were counselled about what was expected of them when they came to Canada, what they could expect, what the union requirements were, and what cities they should probably go to in order to match their occupation.

That's all gone by the boards, and now it's a question of numbers.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

One of the suggestions we keep hearing, particularly from the NDP, for one of the ways of dealing with a backlog is to drastically increase immigration levels. Would you agree that drastically increasing immigration levels would severely impact our ability to be able to integrate immigrants into Canada?

• (1255)

Mr. Richard Kurland: Just on a purely non-partisan basis, increasing the size of the pie may be a quick fix. How big do you want to make that pie? Five percent more? Ten percent more? It's something for elsewhere, and the province pays.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Sure.

Mr. Richard Kurland: The province has to be consulted. It is one factor to consider. I don't think it's far off-base to consider both dessert and a poison pill. Increase the size of the pie somewhat to alleviate our challenge with the backlog, and as poison pill, cap a category or two. So it's a sweet and sour solution.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

How am I doing for time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You still have a couple of minutes if you want to take them.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Wonderful.

I have another question. I'd like to get your feedback on what you think the consequences would be to our economy—what they are to our economy, and our ability to be able to fill labour market shortages, etc.—of the fact that we have such a large backlog and such a large wait time.

Mr. Richard Kurland: This is what I'm missing in some of the testimonies and some of the questions. Our system has changed. More than 50% of skilled workers are provincially selected. The federal level has off-loaded the heavy lifting to the province. The most expensive skilled-worker files are provincial decisions now—soft trade, soft skills. That's the right question, because at the end of the day, the regional economic needs will be met by regional selection systems provincially. We cream off the easiest files to process federally, which is why we have that circumscribed list. We're getting off light.

The answer to the question is the province, and the elephant in the room, frankly, is the province of Ontario, which has fundamentally abdicated its constitutional responsibility to answer the immigration selection system in a serious way. That's the root cause and genesis of the federal backlog and hopefully of change for the future.

No longer should the federal level take the political hit for a provincial decision to abdicate its responsibility.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Do you care to comment on that?

Go ahead, Mr. Bissett.

Mr. James Bissett: I have just one quick point on that. Of the 280,000 immigrants who we took in last year, only about 49,000 were principal applicants or skilled workers selected by the federal government. That's a very small number, about 17%. My figure here shows that the provinces brought in roughly 36,000.

But I raise one caution on the provincial sponsorship. It's successful in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Everybody is happy with it there and I'm sure in British Columbia as well. But part of the problem is that many of these people are unskilled workers, and they're being paid wages that are less than Canadians would be paid. If you can easily get foreign labour at a cheaper cost than you can Canadian, you're going to take the foreign labour.

In addition to that, there's no control over these people. From the day they arrive in Quebec, they can leave for Toronto the following day. There's no follow-up or chasing.

The Chair: We're going to have to move on.

Mr. James Bissett: So if you have freedom of movement and one province brings in a lot of workers, those workers don't have to stay there. They can move anywhere they want. There's no follow-up, no tracing, no control. That's part of the problem I see with the provincial nomination program.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bissett.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I thought I would take the unique opportunity to express the official opposition's position on levels after my friends the Conservatives and the minister have mis-characterized what our position is, because I think it's important.

For the last ten years, we've received an average of 400,000 applications a year. The government sets the level of how many of those it is going to admit. The previous government to the Conservatives accepted about 220,000 and brought in, I understand,

a law that obligated the CIC officials to process every application to final decision. The current government raised those levels. They raised them 14% to take in an average of 250,000 a year.

Last year, of course, the government accepted 280,000 admissions, which is 0.8% of population. I guess the government considered it prudent to accept 0.8% of population last year. So the official opposition's position is that we should be looking at approaching 1% of population as one tool in the toolbox to maybe get a better balance between the applications and the number of admissions, so that we don't have this perpetual, increasing backlog.

It's the New Democratic Party's position that there are a number of tools in the toolbox that we can look at. I think Mr. Kurland quite aptly said that maybe we can be looking at caps in some categories, but I'm wondering if both of you can have some comment on whether you agree with the minister, who seems to think that the only tool in the toolbox for dealing with backlog is to cap applications. I'd like to talk about other policy options, like a prudent increase to levels as well as maybe creative ideas like perhaps implementing a ten-year multiple entry visa for parents, to take people out of the queue for citizenship, which I'm going to ask Mr. Kurland about in a moment. I'll talk about that in a second.

Do any of you have some comments on that position?

● (1300)

Mr. Richard Kurland: Indeed, and that's absolutely correct that more than a cap is required to cure our backlog situation. It's cap and growth of the total number. It's also creativity, which is why I and the witnesses are here to provide prospective solutions. Here's an example. Let's cure, in part, the parents backlog with the investors backlog. Here's a \$200-million-a-year solution. That's not \$200 million to spend, but to receive in cash.

For example, if federally we're processing 1,700 investors from the backlog a year, we can create, within that 1,700 people who are obliged to remit \$400,000 cash—wire transfers to the Government of Canada—500 priority processing places for volunteers who will upgrade their payments from the old \$400K level to the new 2011 \$800K level. They, instead of waiting nine years, will be here and have their file processed in one year, if for personal business reasons they want priority processing. That would raise \$200 million. With each investor case, we can afford—cost-free, without the \$75K solution—three parents per investor.

So it's that type of revenue-neutral jiggering of the inventory, operationally, that can cure some of the backlog—that and, as you say, look at our levels.

Mr. Don Davies: I want to give Mr. Bissett a chance to answer too, but why don't I get that second part and then I'll let you both answer.

One of my questions is what percentage of the parents and grandparents who are currently in the queue—and I think the number is approximately 150,000—do you think would take out their application for citizenship if they knew they could simply get a ten-year multiple entry visa and take care of their own health insurance. Many of them, I assume, simply want to come and visit their families. They don't necessarily want to become a citizen. That might relieve some of the pressure. What percentage do you think that would be?

Mr. Richard Kurland: That's probably the most astute observation that I have received in quite a long time. I hope that would be seriously considered as a resolution.

Mr. Don Davies: That's nice to know, after I've been called a sophist.

Mr. Richard Kurland: I shouldn't go down that line, but that's precisely the line of thinking that we have to consider, precisely that. From my experience anecdotally and in consultation with colleagues across the country, you would see 20% of the inventory, one in five, go by the road and deflate the numbers, but you'd have to control the artificiality of the annual report of that inventory, knowing that some of these individuals are in Canada. So that's the solution, practically speaking. Just add on to it the medical expense risk. Address that somehow.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Bissett.

Mr. James Bissett: I don't disagree with that, but I'd like to address the first part of the question, on levels.

I'm not in favour of setting a specific level. I think we should go back to how we used to run the program. Supposedly we're bringing in large numbers of immigrants to enhance our labour force. The whole idea of bringing immigrants here was to do that, primarily. Family reunification came along with it, and we have a responsibility on the humanitarian refugee side.

At one time about 60% of the movement was for labour force reasons. We didn't set a cap on it; we didn't set a level. We turned the tap on and off. If Canada needed labour and we had occupations that were in short supply, we went out and got those people and processed them very quickly. They got here, got jobs, and did well. The record of the immigrants who came before 1990 shows that.

Now, as I mentioned, we've set a level and the pressure is on visa officers to get the numbers and they haven't got the staff or the ability to do that. So they're shortcutting the system and not interviewing anybody. Can you imagine a Canadian employer hiring anyone they don't interview? Yet we're bringing people to Canada as future citizens when we don't even bother to look at them. That's wrong, and it's part of the reason, as I said earlier, that they're not doing that well.

I wouldn't set a level. I would ask what does the labour force need. If we can enhance that by immigration, do it, and do it quickly, as the Australians do.

One of the problems, if you're starting to bring in large numbers of immigrants to fill your labour force requirements, is it's a confession that there's something wrong with the country's labour force policy. Canada is desperately short of trade colleges and apprenticeship programs. James Knight, the head of the community colleges across Canada, says that 47% of those coming out of high school who want to be plumbers, electricians, or carpenters are not able to get training. Part of the reason for that is we're not investing in that kind of infrastructure because we're getting relatively cheap labour through the immigration stream.

● (1305)

The Chair: We have to move on, sir.

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to get a couple of general observations and questions on the record.

In regard to immigration levels, the issue with immigration levels is not as much what is the hard number, it's the actual mixture. For example, if you're going to have 100,000 immigrants come in this year and 100,000 of them are going to be grandparents, it's not going to work. The answer, when you talk about what should be Canada's number of immigrants per year, has a lot more to do with what kind of mixture of immigrants we're having come into the country. I would like affirmation on that particular point.

In regard to the backlogs, we've heard that the backlog problem is not an issue of staffing resources. We have enough people around the world, in our embassies, who are able and quite capable of being able to deal with providing Canada with the number of immigrants we need in a year.

Could I have very brief comments on those two points?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Absolutely.

In the context of solutions for backlog resolution in the parents category, point well taken, because there is provincial selection capability. In addition to my proposed solution of the two backlog priority processing streams paying cash, go to the province, the processing partner, and say, "Some people can't afford \$75,000. You're the ones paying medicare. How many tickets are you willing to pony up and allow to come forward cost-free?" Will the Government of Ontario allow a thousand parents to enter cost-free under that program?

So the mix is right. We have it at 60-40, and that's the way to go. There should be no question that spousal reunification is our priority—and not for reasons of love; demographically we need young people, young families, to build a stronger Canada.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I'm just going to get my last question in, because I only have five minutes.

Mr. Bissett, you can start off. One of the things I suggest we look at doing is to break down the family support stream, to break down grandparents and parents into at least two, based on age. Many parents are quite young, in their late forties or early fifties. You also have many who for compassionate reasons...for example, a single parent abroad whose spouse has died and who would love to be with their child. Do you see value in that?

Mr. James Bissett: Yes, I certainly do. I do see value in that.

I take exception, I think, to the idea that we have enough staff to handle 250,000 immigrants a year, because they do other things as well. I don't think they do have....

That's not a problem with the sponsored parents and grandparents, as such, because most of them are at an age where we're not too concerned about security or criminality. But some of the younger ones are a problem, and they should be interviewed. Even in the older days, we didn't always interview all the parents, but if there's a 45-year-old parent with four or five children coming, I think it's worthwhile interviewing to make sure that they are indeed who they claim to be and so on and so forth.

I agree, the mix is extremely important. But I go back to my point that the numbers are too high. They're simply too high. And the federal government, as Richard has pointed out, has almost nothing to say about it.

• (1310)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes.

Richard.

Mr. Richard Kurland: Overall the hard political question, the unpopular one that I'd propose—but my colleagues would not, at the immigration bar—is to prioritize another stream for the parents and grandparents. Put at the back of the queue the parents with dependants.

We're not running a parallel selection system. It's unpopular, and it may even be unfair, so...a grain of salt, that one. But if you have as priority processing the older parents, that's where our hearts should be. It's that target group that will see a coffin before a visa.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: So is it safe to assume—I just want to be very clear on this point—that, in both your opinions, we would be doing a service to Canadians if in fact we were to break up that family support at least into two, possibly three, categories? Is that a fair assessment?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Yes.

Mr. James Bissett: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Now, when we—

The Chair: That's it, I'm afraid. Sorry, sir.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Opitz.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, it's wonderful to have you here today. Thank you for your testimony. It's very enlightening.

What I'm going to do is put both of you, in turn, in the position of the minister. If you were the minister today, what initial steps would you take to fix the system—assuming you had carte blanche in terms of the policies we just discussed—as well as the department and perhaps provincial programs?

Mr. Richard Kurland: A dream come true.

Well, first off, I'd cap parent intake at 20,000 units a year to stave off a trend of increasing backlog while retaining our traditional compassionate humanitarian level for parents and grandparents.

Second, within the parent and grandparent inventory, I'd hive off for priority immediate processing elderly single parents overseas. Get them in, get them safe.

Third, I'd introduce two priority processing streams. Give them the opportunity to pay the \$75K for priority processing within the backlog. When that cap is filled, say 3,000 places, there's another category \$75K, and they come forward on a multiple entry TRV, visitor status ten years. Right away, you'll have clipped that backlog by 40% in the first 18 to 24 months of operation. The third priority class—a value judgment on my part—would be parents and grandparents with accompanying dependants.

Next, finance the whole thing by curing the investor backlog, by creating 500 cases a year within the investor backlog, where people pony up an additional \$400,000 to bring it to the 2011 investment level of \$800,000, and that's a wire transfer to the Government of Canada, no risk to us, no risk to the taxpayer. That alone will deflate the investor backlog.

The last thing I'd do if I were minister to cure this investor backlog, which is rather puffy—it's not as big as people think—is make it a requirement within the first six months to choose a facilitator for your immigrant investor fund and to open a bank account in Canada. Many will not be able to do it because opening a bank account in Canada triggers a Canadian bank's obligations on due diligence and know your client, including some of the source of funds, and you hive off to the private sector the task of separating the good from the bad in terms of source of funds, at no cost to the taxpayer. You'll see that investor backlog deflate real quick.

Mr. Ted Opitz: And the provincial programs, what would you do to those?

Mr. Richard Kurland: If I had the bricks and the bats—

Mr. Ted Opitz: You have the sticks.

Mr. Richard Kurland: —I would go for Ontario with fists flailing.

The other provinces are doing fine and dandy with their provincial nominee programs, including the separate Quebec program, which is fantastic. It works.

Other than that, just do a little more monitoring control, simple things such as linking databases, which is a little controversial. If your deductions at source 90 days after arrival don't match what you said to the federal government or the provincial government to get your selection, flag the file, bring them in. Little things....

• (1315)

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Bissett.

Mr. James Bissett: Quite frankly, I wouldn't take the job under any circumstances. It's a thankless one.

I think I would do what Bob Andras did when he was elected from the Lakehead and he arrived and found out he was going to be the minister. He started asking basic questions, like why do we have any immigration? And of course the bureaucrats, and I was one of them, couldn't give him a sensible answer. So he said we have to do a fundamental basic study on immigration. "Times are changing. We did need them when the west was wide open and we needed thousands of people to go out there and settle on the land, but do we really need them now?" So he set up a green paper study that went across the country.

Essentially, I think we have to figure out why we are bringing in immigrants. Most of the economists who know a lot about immigration and make it their field of study, like George Borjas at Harvard and many others, are saying that immigration doesn't really help the economy, not significantly. What you have to look at is whether it increases the per capita income of the current population, and most studies indicate that it does not. It does not. And our own economic studies dating back to the Macdonald royal commission, the Economic Council report, and Health and Welfare did an extensive study, significantly pointed out that immigration has very little impact on the economy.

The labour force may be a different thing. But again, if you're bringing in a lot of foreign labour, you are inhibiting the chances of people who are already here from getting training so they can get into the trades they want to get into. That should be a study. There isn't, in my view, a national labour force policy that makes sense.

You have high unemployment in the Maritimes. You have employers in Calgary who want 60,000 workers and can't get them. I don't know how you resolve that, but I think it's unwise to assume that you should keep doing this for labour force reasons.

The House of Lords in England did a study in 2008 and concluded that the British bringing in 190,000 immigrants each year was ridiculous. They didn't need immigrants for the economy, they were not helping the labour force, and they certainly don't help the aging. Yet Mr. Kenney, who was here this morning, will argue that we need

immigrants for economic development, we need immigrants for labour force enhancement, and we need immigrants because of the aging of our labour force. There aren't economists who buy into that. Most countries don't buy into that.

I think we need a fundamental reform of the system. Initially, the backlog is the first thing you have to tackle, and it's a tough one. But I think Richard has given some excellent ideas. My own view is that until you get the backlog off your back, you'll not be able to run a proper immigration program.

On the provincial nomination program, it's working reasonably well, but the danger there is that these people coming in do not have to meet any federal standards of education, skills, or occupations. That can be a problem if they start moving around.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Groguhé, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Mr. Kurland, and I thank him for being here.

You mentioned two new processing streams for parents and grandparents, and you mentioned a contribution to the system. Could you clarify for me the effect that this type of contribution would have on the backlog and how it would work? Could you tell me more about it?

Mr. Richard Kurland: The question was expected and I contacted families in cultural communities all over Canada in order to come up with an appropriate answer.

Families are certainly waiting for their parents and grandparents. They would like to find a solution that would cut down the waiting. It is stressful for them to wait from 9 to 14 years before seeing mom and dad, and they want to find a reasonable solution. As a principle, they have already accepted the basic rule that not everyone has the right to bring their parents in; you have to have the means to do so.

Under the same principle, they cannot all bring in their parents, because of certain social costs. What would be an appropriate level that would allow those people to come? The question is financial. Each province has its magic number for social service costs and for the pressures on the health insurance system. After doing research with appropriate sources, I calculated \$75,000 as a national average. I was in touch with economists and other professionals.

At the end of the day, the big question is knowing who is going to pay for it all, governments or families. For the families, the question is settled, without exception. They replied unanimously that they were prepared to pay for their parents to come. I would strongly encourage you to consult those families. Ask them this question: are you willing to pay such and such an amount to bring in your parents if that would get them here on a priority basis? That is the question to ask. But if you are not asking the people involved, you are not really holding appropriate consultations.

• (1320)

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: My colleague Don Davies mentioned parent visas as an option. Do you think that the option should be built into the parents and grandparents class?

I think you also suggested that parents and grandparents should be considered a priority because we know that an older person is not going to live for ever, even though their life expectancy may be longer than it once was.

Mr. Richard Kurland: Don't forget that those people have to pass a medical. People with serious medical conditions are not going to get into Canada. The grandparents who come will be the healthy ones. It is very important to emphasize that.

Grandparents' applications need to be processed as a priority. There are not very many, but they have significant value, especially for some cultural communities in Canada.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: My next question goes to Mr. Bissett. You suggested that the temporary worker program is a problem. How is it a problem? Could you explain that to us in more detail?

[English]

Mr. James Bissett: Yes. Just before I do, can I make one comment on family, which you have raised?

It might be worthwhile for the committee to look at what Australia does with the family. They will allow you to bring your parents or your grandparents to Australia, but only if the balance of the family are in Australia. In other words, if your grandparents and parents have other children living in wherever it may be—Germany, England, or in China—they do not allow you to bring your parents or grandparents because they argue that's splitting up the family. They are quite strict about that.

To go back to your second question, the problem with the foreign worker program, in my view, is that we are repeating, as I said, what happened in Europe with the *gastarbeiter* movement. They brought in thousands and thousands of so-called guest workers, but none of the guest workers went home. Most of them were unskilled. They didn't have to meet any skill or education requirements. They stayed in Europe, and formed a large mass of people, what people called the underclass, in Paris and in German cities. There are large numbers in Denmark, and they are not speaking Danish; they are not working; they are living on welfare. The Danes have had to do something about that.

I think we are repeating that by allowing more temporary foreign workers into the country than we do immigrants.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you.

You have the final word, Ms. James.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you. I think I had the first, and now I have the final too.

Some of my colleagues have asked questions concerning older parents. Mr. Kurland, you have stressed that you think that should be a priority, to bring in the older parents or grandparents. I know, on compassionate and reunification grounds, that is a wonderful idea. However, we have to take a look at the financial responsibilities that go along with that. I know there have been some questions, and you have said the questions need to be asked in the community and to the families, whether they would cover the expenses, specifically with health care. I know that's one of the major concerns.

With your expertise and knowledge of this area, what is your opinion? Do you think the families, or the person who is sponsoring an older parent or grandparent, should be responsible for covering the cost of bringing that older person to Canada for health care, for example?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Without doubt, that is the correct approach, but it has to be paid upfront. You do not want the government monitoring medicare usage and enforcement of promises or obligations post-arrival. It has to be a one-lump-sum amount paid upfront directly to the Government of Canada in the same way they are doing it now. When the parent comes to visit Canada, they are required to obtain one-year travel insurance. It's the same principle. Extend it to the permanent resident situation. That's the fast answer.

Ms. Roxanne James: Since I have the last word, I also want to thank you both and acknowledge you for indicating this government was politically courageous in 2008 for setting caps on skilled workers and also in the investor area. I appreciate your acknowledging that.

The last thing I want to go a little more into has to do with the NDP's position on increasing levels of immigration into Canada as a solution to eliminating or reducing our backlog. As Canadians, one of the main things we should focus on with regard to immigration is that we want to bring in immigrants who are going to succeed, have a fulfilling experience, and be able to take up the advantage or the opportunities Canada has to offer. We want to make sure they succeed. We don't want to bring people from other countries who have lived in poverty or have gone under the radar and have them experience the same things here.

I would like you to reiterate what your opinion is on increasing levels versus making sure we can support new immigrants so they can succeed. Instead of the quantity, let's look at the quality of what can be offered to immigrants and how they are going to achieve their success in Canada.

Mr. Richard Kurland: With apologies and the greatest respect to the other witness, this is where we fundamentally disagree. And this is, I think, Government of Canada, past and present regime, stroke-of-genius stuff: by having foreign workers in this country, paying taxes, what are the settlement and integration costs? Zero, when they upgrade to permanent resident status.

We never repeated the German experience intentionally. We will not do that in this country. And in terms of increasing the levels, we will have the capacity to do that by enlarging, making it easier for our existing pool of foreign workers who have fully integrated into this country to change their labels from “foreign nationals” to “permanent residents” through a just-in-time inventory process at the skilled worker processing stage. So in terms of making levels larger, as I said, you can't just spring open the gate and swallow the backlog. It's not the way to go. But you can increase it maybe 5%, or as much as 10%.

Ms. Roxanne James: But in your opinion, based on current resources and given the fact that we want to make sure that immigrants to Canada succeed, that they're not just coming to Canada and being swept under the rug because we can't really support them, we have to make sure that levels are kept to that level.

•(1330)

Mr. Richard Kurland: Yes.

Ms. Roxanne James: So increasing it, based on current resources, is not going to be the answer.

Mr. Richard Kurland: Increasing it based on current resources, or even on greater resources, is not the answer.

Ms. Roxanne James: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: We're out of time.

You've given us some great food for thought. I'm sure I saw the members' ears perk up. You've done this before. We appreciate your ideas; we may even change our direction because of your comments. So I thank you very much for your time and for coming.

We will conclude the meeting.

We're going to have a subcommittee meeting, so those subcommittee members will have to stay for a few moments.

The meeting is adjourned.

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