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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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•(1115)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting seven, on Tuesday, November 1, 2011. This is a televised meeting.

Our orders of the day, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), are to continue our study of the immigration application backlogs in light of the action plan for faster immigration. The meeting will be shorter because of our meeting in camera for the first 15 minutes.

We have two witnesses who are present here in Ottawa.

Martin Collacott is the spokesperson for the Centre for Immigration Policy Reform.

Good morning, sir.

Mr. Martin Collacott (Spokesperson, Centre for Immigration Policy Reform, As an Individual): Good morning.

The Chair: You appeared for Bill C-11 in the past, and we appreciate your coming again.

We have Mr. Justin Taylor, who is the vice-president of labour and supply for the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association.

We also have, via teleconference from Burnaby, British Columbia, at the other end of the country, Mr. Roger Bhatti.

A voice: It's not working.

The Chair: It's not working.

Well, hopefully by the time we proceed with the first two presenters, the video conference from Burnaby will be working.

Each of you has up to eight minutes to make a presentation, and then members of the committee will have questions of you.

Mr. Collacott, you may go first. You have up to eight minutes. Thank you for coming, sir.

Mr. Martin Collacott: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I haven't had a chance to speak to most of the members of the committee before—I think only you and Mr. Dykstra have been in previous meetings that I've been at—I'd like to give a quick background on my interest in immigration and my connection with it.

I was involved some years ago in programs for immigrants when I was the citizenship adviser for the Ontario government. I was

responsible for services for English and citizenship classes, and teachers throughout the province. After that, I was sent by the Canadian International Development Agency to the Malaysian state of Sabah, where I spent five years training English teachers in Chinese schools. That gave me some exposure to the immigrant experience in other countries.

Later, when I worked for Foreign Affairs, I served as Canadian High Commissioner and ambassador in a number of countries where there were high flows of immigrants and refugees to Canada. For the last 10 years, I've been a senior fellow at the Fraser Institute. Then last year we formed a new group, the Centre for Immigration Policy Reform, to try to raise public awareness of immigration and refugee issues, and encourage informed public debate on these topics. I'm the spokesperson and chair of the advisory board.

Finally, on a personal level, I would mention that my parents are both immigrants. They're from Britain. My wife is an immigrant from Asia, and some of my in-laws are boat people from Vietnam, which gives me an interesting refugee perspective on issues.

I'll make some comments about the backlog in general, as well as the backlog of sponsored parents and grandparents in particular, since the latter is perhaps the most sensitive from a political perspective. With respect to the overall backlog, the problem has been developing for some years. Until recently, Canada had established annual target levels but not annual caps, which meant that the number of people applying to come here who could meet the requirements were often much greater than what we needed or could absorb.

In contrast, the U.S. puts an annual limit on how many people it will admit, and applicants are under no illusion that they may have to wait quite a long time to come in if they don't make the cut for the current year.

As Minister Kenney has pointed out, there's no shortage of people who want to immigrate to Canada. In 2008, the government wisely took action that gave priority to the applications of those who were most likely to succeed in Canada and benefit Canadians.

I would question the solution proposed by some that we raise our immigration levels in order to admit all those who are currently in the queue. There's abundant evidence that we're already bringing in far more people than we need.

I'm not going to have time to go through all the reasons why levels are much higher than they should be. I'll just mention a few.

To begin with, the prosperity of a country doesn't depend on a constantly growing population or workforce. Our prosperity depends on having sound economic policies that stimulate increases in productivity and make the best use of our existing workforce, including women, aboriginals, immigrants who already here, and older people.

Some claim that high levels of immigration are necessary if we're to meet our anticipated labour shortages. The fact is that we already have potential labour forces and the educational infrastructure required to meet all such shortages.

One figure that has been given, by Professor Marcel Mérette of Ottawa University, who's a demographer, is that if you raise the average age of current retirement of Canadians by one year, from 61.2 to 62.2 years, that's the equivalent of bringing in an extra 65,000 high-qualified immigrants. If you raise it to 65, you have a tremendous impact. There's evidence that people are already starting to retire later. That began long before the recession, but it's accelerating.

The Economic Council of Canada's landmark study of the social and economic impacts of immigration, which was done ten years ago, concluded that immigration was not justified in today's Canada, on either economic or demographic grounds. The study pointed out that almost all labour shortages could be met domestically if wages were allowed to rise, and more Canadians were attracted by the higher pay and acquired the training necessary to fill the gaps.

The head of the economics department of the University of British Columbia, Professor David Green, made the same points earlier this year. He told the annual Metropolis Conference that natural market responses to labour shortages, such as pay hikes, can be obstructed when immigration increases the supply of workers and thus reduces wages. If you're looking at immigration as a major driver of economic growth, you're looking in the wrong place. David Green, by the way, is also a research associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Just last week, a committee of the Labor government in Australia issued a report saying there was little evidence to support claims that immigration was an important driver of per capita economic growth or that it could alleviate the problems of an aging population. Similar conclusions were reached in a House of Lords report in the United Kingdom, in 2008, and in the bipartisan committee of the U.S. Congress, in 1997.

• (1120)

I mention these points to underline that while immigration has played a major role in Canada's development at various times in our history—and Canadians are justified in viewing it positively—there is nevertheless strong evidence that current immigration levels are far higher than what we really need and are very costly for Canadians. The cost was touched on by previous witnesses who pointed out that it could be as much as \$16 billion to \$23 billion a year. Not only should the intake of skilled workers be significantly reduced and more emphasis put on the training and employment of Canadians, but other programs should either be reduced or eliminated completely.

The live-in care program as a path to permanent residence, for example, is particularly ill-conceived and should be eliminated with a minimum of delay.

Neither the investor nor entrepreneur programs have much to justify them and the government has already begun some moves on that.

There should be concern over the rapid expansion of the provincial nominee programs. It's important that the provinces be consulted on immigration issues that affect them, but far too much authority has been delegated to them.

As for what to do with the backlog, the action the government has taken to date to deal with it makes a good deal of sense—give priority to those most likely to be a success and contribute to the economy—although I would qualify this by referring to my earlier statement to the effect that we're still taking in far too many immigrants, whether well-qualified federal skilled workers or not.

What I'd suggest is that given the unexpected length of time many in the queue will have to wait to get their visas, they at least be given the opportunity to cancel their applications and receive a full refund for the fees they have paid. There is a legal obligation to process the applications that have been made to date, but we never guarantee the particular timeframe for letting people in. I think the government is quite right in concentrating on those whom we need the most.

I'll conclude my remarks with a few comments on the sponsorship of parents and grandparents.

I think it's quite understandable that newcomers would like to bring their parents and grandparents with them, but bringing them into Canada is very costly for Canadian taxpayers, particularly with regard to health care. Based on data summarizing the average health care costs of different age groups in a study released by the C.D. Howe Institute earlier this year, the health care costs of the sponsored parents and grandparents who have come here since 1990 could amount to as much as \$84.4 billion.

If you include all those who have come since 1980, the costs rise to over \$103 billion.

• (1125)

The Chair: Perhaps you could wind up soon, Mr. Collacott. You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. Martin Collacott: Okay.

These costs don't include old age security or the guaranteed income supplement.

One final comment on parents is that when Australia introduced tougher measures for bringing in parents, it was predicted that good immigrants wouldn't apply because they couldn't bring their parents with them. That simply wasn't true and they got just as many applications. If you can bring your parents and grandparents with you, that's a bonus. If you can't, that's hardly going to be the deciding factor on whether you immigrate to another country. So that is a bogus argument.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Mr. Bhatti, can you hear us out in Burnaby, British Columbia?

Mr. Roger Bhatti (Immigration Lawyer, As an Individual): Yes I can, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: That's good. I will speak to you in a moment.

First, though, we will hear from Mr. Taylor, who is with the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association.

We thank you for coming, sir. You have up to eight minutes.

Mr. Justin Taylor (Vice-President, Labour and Supply, Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association): Thank you for inviting me here today.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the many steps that the government has taken to respond to labour shortages in this country, in particular the decision to maintain immigration levels at their current levels throughout the recession, while many other countries chose to reduce numbers significantly.

The restaurant sector considers itself to be the unsung hero of the Canadian economy. We represent \$63 billion in annual sales and 4% of Canada's GDP. Unlike other sectors, our industry is present not only in every province and territory but in just about every single community across the country. Over one million full-time jobs exist in our sector, and we're the fourth-largest private sector employer in Canada. We're among the top three tourist attractions in the country, and Canadians visit our establishments 18 million times a day. We're at the heart of ethnic communities across the country. Often the way you can tell you're in an ethnic community is the high concentration of restaurants in that neighbourhood.

We do face some significant challenges with labour shortages. Our industry is traditionally youth-centric. Currently one in five jobs in Canada for youth is in our sector. While many other sectors are seriously concerned about the looming labour shortage, the demographic shift we're continuing to experience in Canada, with fewer youth and an aging population, has a very significant impact on our sector because of the high proportion of youths who traditionally work for us. According to the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, the restaurant sector will face significant labour shortages by 2025, with over 142,000 full-year jobs projected to go unfilled.

Currently under the ministerial instructions, chefs, cooks, and restaurant managers can enter Canada under the federal skilled-worker program. Our shortage will be in occupations requiring both a higher and lower degree of formal training. For example, we will be short 16,000 cooks and 47,000 food-counter attendants. Even now, in these precarious economic times, our third-quarter restaurant industry outlook indicated that 30% of restaurants are concerned about the shortage of qualified labour.

Specifically on immigration in our sector, we are the number one first-time job for Canadians. Seventy-nine per cent of Canadians agree that working in a restaurant teaches you how to be part of a team. Fifty-nine per cent agree that working in restaurants helps new Canadians develop crucial skills for life in Canada. Fifty-one per cent agree that the restaurant industry is a great industry for new Canadians to gain experience in.

Other sectors face significant challenges when immigrants come into the country and their credentials cannot be immediately recognized. Often foreign training and experience is highly valued in our sector. Immigrants from countries with strong hospitality or culinary culture thrive in our industry, and we have significantly lower problems with foreign credential recognition than other sectors. The explosion of ethnic cuisine in Canada means that foreign-trained chefs and cooks are in very high demand and are able to integrate into the labour force immediately. Because our industry will face shortages in occupations that require both a high and lower degree of formal education, immigration policies that allow workers with significant training and experience in our industry as well as those that encourage young families to come to our country are both important for our long-term success.

We note that there are some problems with backlogs in immigration currently, but many of those backlogs have been significantly reduced due to the reforms in 2008. The current delays mean that primary applicants and their families are not able to come to Canada immediately to fill the jobs that are waiting for them. Individuals who are eager to come to Canada are therefore often coming in as temporary foreign workers, and this is putting increasing pressure on provincial nominee programs with some unintended consequences.

For example, I recently was speaking to the head of human resources for a national chain, who was saying that they're experiencing major problems in Alberta where they're bringing in temporary foreign workers only to have those foreign workers leave Alberta immediately and move to Saskatchewan, where the PNP is more generous. Also, this is creating problems for the arranged employment stream of immigration. This is a stream of immigration that is not well understood by employers in our sector, and there is significant concern about the uncertainty for processing times. Backlogs mean that employers cannot count on those employees to arrive in the timeframe required, and often they'll have to fill those vacancies in other ways while waiting for those immigrants to arrive in Canada. We look forward to working with the government to help solve some of these problems and to increase awareness about this stream of immigration.

● (1130)

I also wanted to provide a few concrete examples of success stories in our industry that many immigrants have had. I had the opportunity recently to meet someone who came to Canada 10 years ago. Their first job was as a dishwasher in a Swiss Chalet restaurant. They are now the proud owner of two Swiss Chalet franchises.

I also had a bit of a different conversation with the operator of an Indian restaurant just north of Toronto, who was complaining that he brings in Indian chefs and after three years of working for him, they keep opening their own restaurants, creating more jobs in our industry.

In summary, the impending labour shortage means that Canadian restaurant operators are increasingly relying on a supply of new workers through steady immigration streams.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Bhatti, good morning to you. It's 8:30 out there. Have you had breakfast yet?

Mr. Roger Bhatti: I have not yet.

The Chair: Okay. Well, you will have to wait until after you speak.

You are an immigration lawyer, and you have up to eight minutes to make a presentation to the committee. We thank you very much for coming.

Mr. Roger Bhatti: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm a lawyer who's been practising for 27 years now in Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey is unique in Canada. It's one of the most ethnically diverse and multicultural parts of this country. The face of that community has been substantially changed by immigration.

While there have been the inevitable growing pains in Surrey, the greater Vancouver area really stands as a testimony to Canada's forward-looking immigration policies, including the principles of multiculturalism and family reunification. I find this time and time again when I'm meeting with clients.

It's with those principles in mind that I address you on the issue of immigration application backlogs. I know that the members of this committee have heard a lot of statistics, a lot of studies, and so forth. I'm going to give you a couple of very recent examples of what's happening in the spousal category.

Last week, a woman who was originally from Nigeria but is now a Canadian citizen came into my office. She told me that she wanted to sponsor her husband, whom she had recently married. She asked me what the processing time would be. I looked it up on the Immigration website. The processing time in Accra, Ghana, which is the central processing centre nearest to Nigeria, was 22 months. When you add the 70-day processing period in Canada for the sponsor, this Nigerian Canadian sponsor will be waiting a minimum of 23-plus months, just under two years, to sponsor her spouse.

She then asked me what the waiting time was in China. I told her it was four months. She asked me why Nigerians were treated so differently. I didn't have an answer for her.

To the members of the committee, this woman deserves an answer. We shouldn't be treating sponsors and applicants differently in these categories according to what country they come from. We need to fund our consulates and processing centres in a manner that treats the applicants equally. We shouldn't have situations where the wait for a Nigerian spousal applicant is six times the wait for a

Chinese or an Indian spousal applicant. There is simply not enough justification for that. We have the resources. It's a matter of allocating them properly.

I have a second example. Yesterday, a client of many years called me. He had recently returned from Angola. Selso made a refugee claim in Canada several years ago. While Selso was waiting for his refugee claim to be adjudicated upon, the civil war in Angola ended.

Now, a noticeable change in the way we reference rejected refugee claimants seems to be particular to recent years where they are now being referred to, whether it be by the honourable minister or others, as "bogus" refugee claimants.

In this instance, this man was simply a victim of the civil war having ended and not a situation where his claim was not credible, but one in which it was no longer valid. In the meantime, Selso had been married to a Canadian woman and they'd had a child. Selso was deported back to Angola.

One of the changes that this administration has made that has added greatly to the delays in spousal sponsorships has been the handling of the authorization for re-entry to Canada, or the ARC. This is something that previously would add approximately 60 days, perhaps 90 days, to an application in order for the person to get special clearance from the minister or the minister's delegate to return to the country.

Selso phoned me yesterday to thank me for the work I had done for him. It had taken him three years to return to his wife and child, a child that he doesn't know any more, a wife who's not sure if they still have a relationship any more.

• (1135)

Certainly there are tangible things that can be done with respect to the allocation of funds and with respect to the handling of ARCs that can speed up this processing. Clearly, with respect to the situation for parents and grandparents, I would submit that the suggestion that a ten-year multiple-entry visa be granted to alleviate the difficulty for those waiting in the queue is an important consideration. It's a good suggestion. It's one that my clients definitely have a positive reaction to, and it is a positive step that would alleviate some of the distress that's been caused by the increase in the wait periods, which are now approaching seven years for most parents and grandparents.

I close in saying that in my community, the presence of grandparents, parents, and extended families has added greatly to the cultural mosaic in Surrey. It's a success story, and whereas it's been said in other presentations that we should be looking to what other countries in Europe are doing, in fact what you'll find, if you look at many of those studies, is that many of those countries are looking—and rightfully so—to this country, to what we've done and what we've done correctly, at a forward-looking immigration policy rather than simply a populist one.

Thank you.

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

We appreciate the contribution that the three of you made to the committee in its work on trying to solve this backlog problem.

Now members of the committee will have some time to ask questions. This segment of the meeting will end at 12:10, and so I will be strict on times. I may even cut you off in mid-sentence.

We'll go to Mr. Weston and then Ms. James, please.

• (1140)

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

Thanks to our guests today.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you especially, Mr. Collacott. I think we often meet with people who devote themselves to the betterment of Canada, and I know you've done that. Whether we disagree or agree with all of your opinions, you're constantly trying to make the country that you love better, so thank you for being here today.

I'm going to ask one question and then we can move on to my colleague.

Our immigration system, which was created in 2002, requires our government to process every application, no matter how many we receive.

Mr. Collacott, you pointed out that there's no shortage of people who are interested in moving to Canada. Does this make sense, given that legal obligation? If not, what would you do to change that?

Mr. Martin Collacott: Thank you for the question, Mr. Weston.

I suggested that, at the moment, there is a legal obligation to process and that's why, in 2008, legislation was passed that said we can't possibly accommodate all these applications, so the minister has the right to simply not process some applications.

We do have this backlog under the old legislation that we're obligated—as far as I know, although the lawyers in CIC would know better—to process. But we can't possibly take in all these people without swamping the system, and I don't see that we have a legal obligation to actually issue their visas within a specific length of time. This is the problem, because we raised the expectations, probably, that they would be. But by the same token, we didn't anticipate getting all those applications. It's a problem for the government.

But I would simply have to say, okay, we'll process your application, but you won't necessarily get your visa, because we have hundreds of thousands of other people trying to come in here; if you want to withdraw your application, we'll give you your money back—“with interest”, someone suggested, which I don't take exception to.

This is the only sensible way to handle it. We're never going to bring in all of those parents and grandparents. Why not give them their money back if they'll take it? Otherwise, they can just wait. Unfortunately, many of them will probably be dead before they get their visas.

We've just had 35,000 more applications for parents and grandparents last year. Just about everyone would like to bring their parents and grandparents. It's a great boon. I mentioned that it could

be up to \$100 billion in their health care costs, so why not bring in your parents and grandparents?

Mr. John Weston: Thank you.

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

My question is to Mr. Collacott as well. I'm just going to kind of go on with what my colleague John Weston mentioned.

If you could think of three recommendations for this government to help reduce the backlog, what would those three be? Actually, a previous witness and colleague of yours stated that the federal government had lost control of immigration and that urgent reforms were needed. I think we can all agree with that statement. That's the reason we're here studying backlogs.

I'm just wondering if you could give me three recommendations that you think would help this situation the most for Canada. I know that you touched on several of them before. Could you talk about the three top recommendations?

Mr. Martin Collacott: There are concerns in different areas. I didn't mention our humanitarian program, but I think we need a total revisit of our refugee program and our humanitarian program.

We should definitely establish annual levels so that we're not misleading applicants. They know that if they don't fit in to the current quota, they won't have expectations that they're going to come in quickly. I think we should have done that years ago, and I don't know why we didn't.

Certainly in the case of parents, that program should really be revisited. The Liberals, in fact, looked at it back in 2004, and they realized that it was costing us a mint. They reduced the intake to one-third. There was pressure from immigrant communities, and the next year the levels shot right back up. They knew that something had to be done, but they got cold feet. I hope that after much discussion and after getting everyone's input, this government hangs in there. This is a program that is hugely costly.

I think refugee policy needs to be looked at.

I think overall levels have to be looked at. There is no reason why we have among the highest net per capita immigration levels in the world. In terms of the backlog, we just have to bite the bullet and say that there are a lot of people in that backlog we can't accommodate, and they should have to accept it. Now, there will be terrific opposition from immigration lawyers and immigration advocacy groups, and there should be a public debate on this. I think the facts, as far as I can make out, are quite clear as to what we need to do.

I don't know if I gave you three, three and a half, or four recommendations.

• (1145)

Ms. Roxanne James: I think you got at least three, so that's good. Thank you.

You made mention that obviously we have an immigration backlog problem. It's a million-plus at this point in time. You mentioned the United States. I believe you said there were caps per year. I'm just wondering whether you can kind of make mention of what other countries are doing, such as the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. How are they dealing with immigration, and how are they dealing with their backlog situation, if they have any?

Mr. Martin Collacott: I'm not sure what their backlogs are, but they've certainly tightened up in certain areas.

The U.K. has. Australia, in fact, passed legislation back in the 1990s in terms of backlogs of parents, because they were getting huge numbers of applicants. They said basically two things. One was that if you want to bring your parents in, you pay for the medical costs, because they're considerable. The other interesting thing was that they said that they would operate on the balance of family. That is, if the program is based on the reunification of families and bringing them back together, it doesn't make sense if most of the parents' children are somewhere else. So at least half the children have to be in Australia or in some other country than where they're coming from. That cut down the numbers rather dramatically.

Under our system, if you're a sponsored parent, you can bring all the sponsored siblings with you without their having to meet any requirements but health and security. That makes it a very attractive proposition for someone who has four or five siblings. They can come in, and in some cases they can get engaged to someone from back home whose family will pay up to \$50,000 to marry a Canadian, and then they can bring in their parents, and you begin a whole new chain.

One of the things the Aussies did was to say balance the family; you can't bring your parents in unless at least half their kids are already...or you're splitting the family up, you're not bringing back—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Collacott. I'm afraid the time has expired.

We'll go to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to particularly welcome Mr. Bhatti to the committee. He is from the west coast and is joining us by teleconference.

Mr. Bhatti, I want to focus a bit on one of the suggestions you raised. We have over a million applications in the backlog worldwide. Figures given to this committee are that 150,000 of those applications were parents and grandparents in the queue. One suggestion that has come before this committee is that we create a ten-year multiple-entry visa that we could give to these parents as a means of alleviating the backlog on the assumption that a large percentage of those parents would withdraw their application for citizenship if they could get a ten-year multiple-entry visa, and then just come and visit their children when they want.

Researching this, though, I find that Canada has had a five-year multiple-entry visa that's been available to people. Just this summer I found a press release from the government saying that they had increased that to ten years. But nobody seems to have heard of it.

Members of this committee thought that this was a good idea to create this visa; members of this committee weren't even aware that we had such a visa.

So I'm thinking that this five- and ten-year multiple-entry visa is not used very much, not publicized very much, or not granted very much. I'm wondering if you could tell us, in your experience as an immigration lawyer, how many people, how many parents are getting five- or ten-year multiple-entry visas now.

Mr. Roger Bhatti: It's not happening often. There's a level of lack of knowledge, in the communities that sponsor most of these parents, of such avenues.

When I raise the issue with clients, they're often surprised to discover there is even such a concept available to them. It's underutilized. When I do discuss it with clients, more often than not they regard it as a very attractive alternative. For many of the families, they have a cultural aspect of living in extended families, and their parents often still want to maintain some kind of presence in the home country or be able to visit there again.

At the same time, the ten-year multiple-entry visa is going to allow our medical system some benefit. These visitors will then be obtaining private insurance for their visits. The potential concern about the stress and strain on Canada's social structure will no longer be as acute. So it's a very good alternative, one that my clients, once they're made aware of it, are very much in favour of. Of course, my clients, being Canadians, are very much aware of the impact their relatives', their parents', or grandparents' arrival in Canada may ultimately have on the Canadian health care system.

It's also important to note that these people undergo rigorous medical examination, and we have seen in the courts a lower and lower threshold in terms of what constitutes medical inadmissibility. So when these people arrive in Canada, they're not arriving with illnesses. They're not arriving with pre-existing conditions. They're healthy. That's an important factor to note.

But I do think this would be a very attractive alternative that provides a number of benefits and allows the social structure to maintain itself while allowing some family reunification on a regular basis.

• (1150)

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Mr. Taylor, I had the pleasure of meeting with several of your members a week or two ago. If I understand the perspective of the restaurant industry in Canada, it's that you perceive a looming skill shortage that cannot be filled by the domestic Canadian population. You would like to see a temporary foreign worker program expanded to permit more of those workers who come and get trained and established in your members' establishments the opportunity to, perhaps, apply for permanent residency, maybe the same way as people do under the live-in caregiver program, so that if they come and work for two years in a four-year period, they could then have a path to permanent residency.

If I understood your members' response, they thought that would be a good thing. After going through the trouble of training the workers and getting them established, they would like to hang on to these workers.

Is that right?

Mr. Justin Taylor: That is correct. In many provinces their PNP programs currently do have similar programs where, after working a period of time as a temporary foreign worker, you can apply for permanent residency.

Initially when we supported these types of policies, we were concerned that workers would simply leave once they became permanent residents, leave our industry, and move to different parts of Canada. We've done follow-up studies with our members, and we've found that the folks who come to Canada as temporary foreign workers working in our industry gain experience, end up moving up through the chain in the restaurants, and, once they are sponsored for permanent residency, stay in the restaurants. We've had very little complaints about the loss of that labour.

So this is definitely a policy that would be very attractive to us.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

The Chair: You have less than a minute left.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Collacott, if I understand your testimony correctly, you don't think we need immigration to meet Canada's domestic labour needs. Citizenship and Immigration Canada on its website says that Canada, because of aging population and reduced birth rates, will be dependent upon new immigrants for 100% of our new labour growth in five years. I'm going to ask you whether you think CIC is wrong about that.

Second, the Conservatives, when they took power, increased immigration levels from an average of 220,000 a year to 254,000 a year, a 14% increase. Last year they let in 280,000—the highest in half a century at 0.8% of the population.

Do you think they were incorrect in doing that as well?

Mr. Martin Collacott: Well, first of all, yes, the statement that increasing the labour force will depend entirely on immigration is correct. In a sense, I've already answered that, though. The increase in the size of the population or the labour force is irrelevant, and I think in that sense that statement is rather misleading. It implies that, well, because 100% of our increase will depend on immigration, we've got to have it.

• (1155)

The Chair: We're going to stop there, Mr. Collacott.

We'll have to move on to Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If you listen to the government and the messaging that's kind of going out through the Minister of Immigration, they are setting the framework to introduce caps. That's what I believe.

A big question is that once you implement caps, what you're really saying is that there are hundreds of thousands of people who will likely never get the opportunity to come to Canada. So it is a bit of a slippery slope.

Having said that, the question I have for you is that...and you make reference to the U.S. You put in a cap. How do you—in a very short answer, if you could, please—implement a cap? How do you

say no to the hundreds of thousands of people who want to come in? What would be your primary source? Would it be a lottery?

What would you suggest the committee look at?

Mr. Martin Collacott: The Americans do have a portion of their immigration program that is a lottery. I think that's ridiculous.

I think you have to set your caps and then decide on what basis you're going to accept applications. Up until now it's been based on who makes their application first, and priority under the previous Immigration Act was given to family class. I think the government's quite right in saying the first priority should go to who we need, but the government can set standards and selection standards and choose from the applications. I can't see why not. Who do we really need, and who's going to benefit Canada the most?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay.

Mr. Taylor, I appreciate the efforts and the challenges within the restaurant industry, very much so. I think the association does a fabulous job in terms of representation.

Having said that, many will argue that we should look around—there are people in Canada. If we invest in them and we train them, they would be able to fill these jobs.

I for one don't believe that would work. We do need to bring in immigrants, foreign workers, to be able to sustain the industry.

Can you provide a comment to those individuals who would say that within Canada we have enough people to meet those employment opportunities?

Mr. Justin Taylor: That's a difficult question to answer.

Right now, as a matter of fact, one of my colleagues is testifying before the finance committee. One of our recommendations is to remove many of the disincentives to work, through EI reform and other types of reform.

I do think that the response to labour shortages cannot simply be focused 100% on immigration. Immigration needs to continue to be a component. We are seeing long-term demographic shifts that mean that there will be fewer working-age Canadians. There was a mention earlier about the statistics for just simply replacing our labour force.

We are actively working to try to attract under-represented groups as well—those that are chronically unemployed—but there must be a multi-pronged approach to addressing labour shortages across industries in Canada.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Bhatti, you made reference to the visiting visas, and I want to look specifically in terms of spouses. We talked about parents and grandparents and having those multiple-year visas.

What about where we require visas where spouses would be allowed to come while they're under process? Is this something that you can maybe provide comment on—the benefits of it?

Mr. Roger Bhatti: This is something that in my experience is very rarely utilized. The instances in which spouses or prospective applicants are granted visas are few and far between.

One of the reasons for that, I would think—to be presumptuous of CIC's approach—is that they fear that a subsequent application would be made from inside Canada, since there is a process to be sponsored within the country. Certainly that could be alleviated if the applicant entered into an undertaking not to file such an application from inside Canada. It could be made binding upon the applicant, and that as well could alleviate some of the discrepancies that we see

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Bhatti, more specifically, it's those individuals who are actually married—they go to India, let's say, or they go to the Philippines, they get married...and allowing their spouses to be able to return using visas.

Could you comment on that?

Mr. Roger Bhatti: Again, that rarely occurs. Generally when spouses are married in a country such as India or in any country, they have to be sponsored in order to be able to return. If they apply for a visitors visa, they're very likely not going to get it. However, there would be a mechanism to make that easier if the person undertook not to file a sponsorship application from in Canada and actually was required to file from outside Canada before they applied for the visa.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bhatti.

Mr. Opitz, then Mr. Leung.

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

To Mr. Bhatti, the NDP has asked for a significant increase in the proportion of family members and refugees we accept every year, compared to economic immigrants, so I want to clarify these proportions.

Family members actually currently constitute the highest proportion of immigrants we let into the country, albeit through different streams. So are you suggesting an increase in the number of family members at the expense of economic immigrants?

Mr. Roger Bhatti: The way you pose the question is an either/or situation. I think it's a situation where a forward-looking aspect of policy can contemplate increases in both. It doesn't have to be an either/or situation.

We've seen tremendous success in our family reunification program. We've seen tremendous success in our skills immigration programs. I believe it's possible to increase both.

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

My question is for both Martin Collacott and Justin Taylor.

The Centre for Immigration Policy Reform indicates that there's a tremendous cost associated with training immigrants to perform certain jobs. At the same time, I'm hearing from Mr. Taylor that, yes, we need to bring in these skilled workers to handle some of the first-entry jobs.

There seems to be a mismatch here, because we're faced with retraining our own people and we're training immigrants that we bring in. Why are we not providing this employment opportunity for Canadians?

Mr. Martin Collacott: As for the immigrants, I think better selection is going to have a better match of their skills with what we require. For instance, on credentials, the Australians require that before someone gets a visa, their credentials are going to be accepted in Australia.

On the other question—it's a broader question, though—if you don't bring in immigrants, wages will go up, including in the restaurant industry, and you're going to have to pay people more money. Both the Economic Council of Canada and David Green at UBC found out that enough people will take training...and when I say “Canadians” will, that includes immigrants already here.

Normal market forces will take care of most, though not all, of the needs; some of them are too long term. Probably 95% of labour shortages will be taken care of when wages go up and more people take the training. It's not as fast as bringing in temporary workers. That's the quick way of doing it. They work hard. You keep wages down that way.

So it's a bit complicated, but those are the basic issues.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: I'd like to hear from Mr. Taylor, please, on that same issue.

Mr. Justin Taylor: As far as employing more Canadians, we think there need to be steps taken to reduce the disincentives to work in Canada. We have a number of examples across the country where folks are saying that they would prefer to continue to collect employment insurance because of the enriched benefits, versus taking a part-time job or some of the jobs that are available in our sector. So that is a challenge that we think needs to be addressed.

As I mentioned, we are facing a shortage, both in jobs that require a significant amount of formal training, like chefs and bakers and those types of careers, but also in the lower-skilled occupations.

So in terms of this requirement for training, I don't necessarily think our industry faces the same challenges that other industries do face.

As well, often when we're looking at immigration studies about the cost of retraining these immigrants once they arrive in Canada, as I mentioned, our industry is one of the few industries that actually value foreign training in culinary arts, often above Canadian training in culinary art, because of the need for ethnic cuisine specialists.

So I think our situation is a bit different from the traditional numbers you will see.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Thank you.

I have no more questions.

• (1205)

The Chair: I'm going to close it, then, at this point.

Mr. Collacott, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Bhatti, all three of you are obviously very experienced in this topic, and on behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you for your presentations and for answering the questions of the committee members. Thank you for coming.

This meeting is suspended for a moment.

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1210)

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to reconvene the meeting.

We have three witnesses. Two are via teleconference, and one is here in Ottawa.

Monsieur Dan Bohbot, who represents the Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association, is here with us.

Good morning to you, sir.

We have, by video conference from Hamilton, Professor Arthur Sweetman from the Department of Economics at McMaster University, who appeared also on Bill C-11.

Good morning, Mr. Sweetman. Can you hear us?

Professor Arthur Sweetman (Department of Economics, McMaster University, As an Individual): Good morning. I can hear you, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We have a video conference from Toronto. I see one person, but I see two names.

Felix Zhang: is that you, sir?

Mr. Felix Zhang (Coordinator, Sponsor our Parents): Yes. Unfortunately, the other representative couldn't come today.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. I'm glad you are here.

You are the coordinator of the organization called Sponsor our Parents.

Mr. Felix Zhang: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

We will start with Monsieur Bohbot. You have up to eight minutes to make a presentation, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Dan Bohbot (President, Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association (AQAADI)): Thank you Chair. My presentation will be in French.

Thank you for inviting me to speak before you today. I was admitted to the Bar in 1990 and have been practising immigration law ever since. Moreover, I am President of the Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association.

If you've followed the debate surrounding what is known as the backlog, you'll remember that in 2008, the former Minister of Immigration, Diane Finley, had already reported 900,000 pending applications. That was three years ago already. In 2008, critics accused the government of putting a cap on human resources in

certain embassies and of making sure that the backlog was greater in certain regions than in others.

It would be interesting to know, concerning the backlog of millions of files, which embassies are responsible for dealing with these files. Delays are longer or shorter depending on where the immigration application is filed. We will probably realize that, in fact, there is a regional quota. And so, by limiting human resources in certain embassies, one limits the number of persons from the region who can immigrate to Canada.

Approximately three years ago, while working in the field, I could not help but notice an important shift in the philosophy related to a stricter application or enforcement of the Act, particularly with regards to spousal sponsorship, to alleged war criminals, to citizens, to refugees and also, even though there is no direct link to immigration issues, to passports. There were examples of this shift in the media, this summer.

I haven't seen—and I don't know that there are any—the merits of the punitive measures that the present government has imposed to immigrants. We don't know if we are getting our money's worth and if what immigrants are blamed for, that is for having supposedly forged documents or become citizens by fraudulent means, as the Minister claims, is so costly to Canadian society that it becomes necessary to launch an investigation in order to strip them of their Canadian citizenship by means of a lengthy and costly judicial process. We don't know.

The Minister of Immigration's words are alarming as are those of the Minister of Public Safety. He warns that according to certain surveys, most of the world's population wants to immigrate to Canada. He believes that the situation will only get worse. We know, for example, that he refuses to accept that refugees come to Canada by illegal means. He says that these people should get in touch with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He calls the refugees queue jumpers. According to him, refugees are involved with terrorist activities, with gunrunners and illegal alien smugglers. He instils fear in Canadian citizens when he talks about refugees in this manner and with those words.

I believe that the government has clearly decided to reallocate its resources in order to challenge and deny landed immigrant status and to prevent refugees from reaching Canada rather than to accelerate the immigration selection process.

Immigrants believe in Canadian values. They come to this country because they believe that Canada is committed to family reunification. This is a principle that is found in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. If Canada wants to attract the best immigrants in the world, we will have to let them decide whether or not to bring their families here, otherwise we won't have the best immigrants but rather, the most desperate ones, particularly from a financial point of view. The present government's stance jeopardizes Canada's credibility on the international scene and more and more immigrants decide not to remain in Canada.

The minister cannot hide behind political choices that aim to restrict the number of employees in its embassies and to create an ever-increasing backlog in order to bring all of Canada to adopt its point of view and its solutions to deal with the backlog. In law, “no one can be heard to invoke his own turpitude” and this is exactly what the minister is attempting to do when he speaks of a million cases. It is clear that the minister wishes to have more discretion in this matter. He even says so when he mentions the minister’s directions and states that they should apply to sponsorship cases. By exercising his discretion, he places himself out of the reach of the Federal Court that he accuses of not being sufficiently accommodating. By doing so, he has challenged the principle of judicial independence, a pillar of our democracy.

• (1215)

Immigrants who have paid in order to have their immigration application examined by Canadian authorities have the right to a decision. This decision must be rendered in a fair, equitable and impartial manner in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice. In breaching this principle, our government stands to be challenged in a court of law and such challenges require even more money and resources. The only path that the government can follow is to respect human rights.

And so, I invite this committee to act with caution in its recommendations to the government. I invite you to require more information from the Minister of Immigration in order to understand what is really going on and to be aware of the issues involved.

I thank you.

• (1220)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Sweetman, you have up to eight minutes, sir.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear.

Overall, in characterizing the origin of the immigration backlog, I’m going to use some very approximate numbers for illustrative purposes. Canada currently receives roughly 450,000 applications per year, grants roughly 250,000 admissions, and observes approximately 100,000 unsuccessful files. This leaves an excess of 100,000 applications. It’s obvious that if such a context endures, a backlog will accumulate.

These numbers also reveal that, relative to its population, Canada has a very large immigration program, in fact one of the largest of any developed country. My belief is that the substantial scale of this program requires much more careful management than would a smaller one. A superficial analysis suggests a few alternatives to preventing a backlog. The government might take action to, first, increase the number of admissions per year; and/or second, reduce the number of applications; and/or third, increase the number of unsuccessful files.

While I recognize that there are several feasible ways to go forward and that the system is complex—with layers of ministerial instructions overall and immigration-class-level annual targets and immigration-class-specific processing priorities—I’m going to put

forward a package of three proposals for the skilled worker program. These proposals are regarding, first, the elimination of the backlog; second, the operation of a system that does not accumulate a backlog; and finally, I’m going to offer a quite specific recommendation for managing an aspect of the immigration flow. Given time constraints, these can be thought of as examples of a consistent approach to immigration selection.

First, regarding the current backlog and focusing on the skilled worker program, I believe the backlog’s existence is problematic to the operation of Canada’s immigration system. Further, the associated problems become more serious as time passes. Therefore, I conclude that eliminating it quickly is beneficial.

At the national level, the existence of the backlog is detrimental because of its impact on Canada’s reputation, the operation of the immigration system, and its negative implications for the labour market.

At the individual level—for the new immigrants themselves, that is—I believe there is convincing evidence of an age profile for successful labour market integration. Among immigrants of working age, younger immigrants have better lifetime labour market outcomes. This implies that if an individual sits in the queue for three, four, or five years, there’s a simultaneous deterioration in that person’s ability to integrate into the Canadian labour market, and it reduces that person’s lifetime earnings profile.

On the labour market demand side, it also seems credible that during the current period of slow growth following the recent recession, the need for specific occupations, as provided by the ministerial instructions, is reduced relative to that expected in the cyclical upturn that I believe will arrive in a few years.

Putting this all together, given that Canada has a legal and a moral obligation to process those in the backlog at some point, this is the time in the business cycle when admitting those who do not have an occupational screen is least detrimental. Moreover, the longer people in the backlog remain there, the poorer, on average, their labour market outcomes will be after arrival.

This logic immediately leads to my first proposal: imposing very tight restrictions on acceptance of new applications for a short period and processing the existing backlog expeditiously. I’m not talking about any changes to the immigration targets; I’m simply recommending a new strategy regarding the priority for processing. Assuming we need to address the backlog at some point, it seems sensible to bite the bullet and eliminate it sooner rather than later, since the costs of doing so later are probably larger than doing so at present.

I'll turn to my second proposal, with respect to the ongoing operation without a new backlog being built up. As discussed in the recent evaluation of IRPA, when that legislation was introduced, the thinking behind it was that the flow in the skilled worker program would be managed by adjusting the minimum points required for entry. However, this aspect was never undertaken. Clearly, most agree that it is unfair to change the points threshold after an application has been submitted. But with appropriate warning, the points cutoff could be adjusted on an annual basis for each upcoming year, much like the levels are at present.

●(1225)

This contrasts with the current government's approach in recent ministerial instructions, which impose a quota. Although a quota may be an important backstop, and it certainly limits the number of applications, it is not necessarily the best first-line treatment since it does nothing to improve the labour market outcomes for new immigrants whereas increasing the points threshold would do so.

This is important, since it's well documented that the labour market outcomes of new immigrant cohorts have been declining for the past few decades. We should not address the backlog in isolation from other important immigration policy issues, and this proposal has the potential to address the two simultaneously. It's also a return to what was envisioned for this legislation at its onset. Updating the points system to attune it more closely to, for example, Canada's changing demographic situation also seems sensible. However, that's not directly related to the backlog.

The third and final part of this set of proposals recognizes the value in making ongoing adjustments to aspects of the immigration program to simultaneously avoid a backlog and improve the efficiency of immigrant selection.

I believe the federal government should get out of the business of selecting immigrants in provincially regulated health professions where a sizeable proportion of the workers are funded by provincial governments. Rather, I believe that such workers should be admitted through the provincial nominee programs.

At the top of the list for this group would be physicians and nurses. I'm actually making a very narrow proposal here—

The Chair: Mr. Sweetman, could you wind up, please?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I'm at the very end.

I'm actually making a very narrow proposal, since this is a very special set of occupations given the nature of our medicare program. Provincial and federal governments are facing substantial challenges integrating international medical graduates into our health care system.

Domestically, provincial governments have very strict quotas and central control over the number of individuals accepted into Canadian medical schools, since this is one of the primary mechanisms by which medicare expenditures are managed, and simultaneously, health care services planning is undertaken—

The Chair: We have to move on.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: —but this control is lacking at the federal level. Shifting this to provincial control would seem to improve efficiency and the backlog.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Zhang, are you there, sir?

Mr. Felix Zhang: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Sponsor our Parents group. My name is Felix Zhang, and I'm the representative of Sponsor our Parents, which has more than 1,500 members across Canada.

We are Canadian citizens and permanent residents sponsoring our parents to Canada. We'd like to draw to the attention of the committee the long-standing issues of imbalance in processing times and the huge backlog in the parents and grandparents sponsorship class.

First, processing times for our parents in sponsorship's step two vary drastically—from six months to five years—around the world. Ottawa imposes particular quotas by country. Why do some sponsors have to wait much longer than others just because their parents live in a different country? We believe this is discrimination against origin and this must be corrected immediately.

We urge CIC to centrally manage the two-step immigration process through a single queue rather than assign quotas by country. This will enable all applications to be processed on a first come, first served basis, which will ensure fairness to all sponsors.

In addition, CIC should allocate more resources to the longest-waiting visa offices to clean up the backlogs and balance processing times among all overseas visa offices.

Secondly, the backlog in the parents and grandparents sponsorship class has increased dramatically in the past few years. As of the end of June 2011, more than 168,000 applicants were waiting for immigration visas or sponsorship approval.

Hundreds of thousands of Canadian families are anxiously waiting to reunite with their parents or grandparents. However, despite the fast-growing backlog and wait time, CIC did a deep cut of the visa quota by 30% this year. Even the minister repeatedly promised to keep the same level as previous years. In the last five years, the admission quota for parents and grandparents counted between 7% to 8% of all immigration visas. We urge CIC to reverse the recent cut and maintain the same ratio for parents and grandparents in the coming years.

Thirdly, based on the annual admission quota for this year, the current backlog will require more than 15 years to be processed. That is simply not practical for aging parents. If a reform is necessary in order to reduce the wait time, we urge CIC to ensure the fairness, consistency, and transparency of any change.

Today I would like to take this opportunity to present a few very practical and feasible solutions suggested by our members. The most popular one is that parents should have a higher priority because they are closer family members than grandparents, brothers, and sisters. This is very reasonable and widely supported by group members.

The second one is that aging parents without a child living in the same country should have a higher priority because they're much more vulnerable than others who are younger or who have children living in the same country to take care of them. Their applications should be fast-tracked.

The third one is that only Canadian citizens or permanent residents living in Canada for a minimum of three years are eligible sponsors. This will ensure sponsors have a long-term plan to stay here and contribute to the Canadian economy.

There are other suggestions, such as to collect an up-front health premium from the sponsor and then give a tax refund over the ten-year sponsorship period. This would allow the government to enforce the sponsor's minimum financial requirements and ensure the tax revenue from the sponsor.

The reunification with parents and grandparents is very important to new Canadians. The extremely long wait time will not only make other immigration programs less attractive but will also leave new immigrants with no choice but to move back home to take care of their parents. This will definitely have a negative impact on the efficiency and the effectiveness of Canadian immigration practice and policy.

• (1230)

Just recently, a group member from Brampton said he applied for the sponsorship four years ago but his father has passed away since then. He couldn't wait any longer and decided to sell all his assets in Canada and move back home to take care of his mother. He said his parents would have brought substantial money to Canada and they would have contributed to the Canadian economy.

This could have been a win-win situation had his application been processed fast enough. Unfortunately, both he and the Canadian government failed.

In short, we are very frustrated with the current practice called the family sponsorship immigration, and urge CIC to provide fair, responsible, and practical solutions to ensure all applications are processed within an equitable and reasonable timeframe around the world.

Thank you.

The Chair: And thank you, sir, for your presentation.

Now members of the committee will have some questions for all of you.

Mr. Menegakis.

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

Thank you to all of our presenters today. Thank you for being here and presenting to us.

I'd like to talk a little bit about how we got here. The backlogs at the moment, as we all know, are about a million-plus people. It was a little bit higher than 800,000 people in 2006, which the Conservative government inherited. It's a huge backlog, and we need to deal with it.

In hearing some of the comments today, I want to direct my first question to Mr. Zhang. I understand families want to bring their parents and grandparents to Canada. What number would you suggest, Mr. Zhang? We need to have a concrete number for what we're talking about here.

• (1235)

Mr. Felix Zhang: We are suggesting to lock the ratio rather than having an absolute number. In previous years, the ratio was about 7% to 8% of all immigrant visas. We are suggesting to keep this ratio for the coming years.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Last year, 280,000 new Canadians were welcomed to the country. That was a historic number, as we previously heard, and 250,000 has been the average over the last five years with this government.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Sweetman and Mr. Zhang in particular, as I found Mr. Bohbot's comments to have been highly partisan and I don't care to ask any questions.

The Chair: Mr. Menegakis, you can't make comments about witnesses. That's most inappropriate.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: All right, well, I'll apologize then, Mr. Chair.

But there were many comments made about the minister—

The Chair: No, no, continue with your questions. I'm concerned, and I'm not even going to stop the clock on this. You know better.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: My question is regarding the practical limits as to how many people we can actually allow into the country every year.

What would be your feedback on that, Mr. Sweetman and Mr. Zhang?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I'll go first. I don't know that we have an answer to that question. Canada right now is among the top two or three developed countries in the world in terms of the percentage of the population we allow in.

We know that in our society over the last 30 years or so there has been a very sharp and marked decline in the labour market outcomes for new immigrants who are arriving. We've seen a decline.

It's very difficult to say a number, especially given how we allocate that number across various classes. If you were talking about increasing the percentage of skilled worker principal applicants, that's a very different thing than talking about parents and grandparents. I think we want to be very cautious.

I also believe that we don't necessarily want to have an annual limit. I'm one of those people who believe that we should have a total number over the course of a business cycle and that we should adjust our limits with the business cycle to allow economic integration. We know that economic integration is more successful when people land—and that people will stay in Canada, rather than returning or going to some third country—at the peak of a cycle versus during a recession.

I don't think this is a simple question, and I don't think we know the answer with any real certainty. Thank you.

Mr. Felix Zhang: I don't have the numbers on how many we should admit each year. I believe that once we admit skilled workers, for example, they have their parents living in their home country.

If we don't have a locked-in ratio like 7% to 8% for the past few years, if we keep cutting that ratio, that means more and more new immigrants won't be able to reunite with their parents in Canada, and then they'll have to go back home to take care of their parents. I think the immigration policy should allow us to bring our parents here so we can stay here for a longer term. Otherwise it's going to be a short-term stay, and then we have to go. I don't think that's the right direction for this country.

Thank you.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: A previous witness to our committee suggested that people should provide the government with \$75,000 if they want to bring parents or grandparents to Canada to cover the costs of social services over their time here. What do you think of this suggestion, and do you think that \$75,000 seems like a fair amount? Why or why not?

Mr. Felix Zhang: Our group members are against this idea. I don't know where this \$75,000 number comes from. We obviously are suggesting a non-refundable health premium. It will create a fast-track queue for rich people and it treats the others as second-class citizens. So if that idea stands, does that mean we should charge a premium for patients if they want to wait less and just let other people wait longer? This is unfair.

• (1240)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Sweetman, do you care to comment on that?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: In some sense this is in line with what Canada has done for a long time in asking families or sponsors of family class refugees to guarantee that the new immigrants won't be responsible for a social assistance burden on our society. I think we can push this too far, however, and make immigration something for the rich rather than something for the general population. This is consistent with what Canada has done in the past in some dimension, but we need to be careful about this because we can certainly push it too far.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sweetman.

Ms. Sitsabaiesan.

[Translation]

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. My first question goes to Mr. Bohbot.

In your capacity as immigration lawyer, why is there a backlog in immigration?

Mr. Dan Bohbot: You're talking about the immigration backlog?

[English]

You can speak in English, if you wish. I do understand English.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: What would you attribute the backlog to?

Mr. Dan Bohbot: There has always been a backlog in immigration. This is nothing new. The difference is in the quantity, really. It's only accumulating.

So in 2002, when they implemented IRPA, there was already a backlog. The then government decided, well, they were no longer going to process the old files, they were going to just start with the new ones. That led to a class action and the government lost.

That's why I think the government has to be really careful how they try to eliminate the current backlog.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Do you feel that the backlog has significantly increased because of the ministerial instructions that happened, or are you...?

Mr. Dan Bohbot: No, no, I'm not saying that. The backlog has always existed, and the ministerial instructions are trying to address part of that backlog—definitely, yes.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: My next question is for Mr. Sweetman.

It seems we've both moved on from Queen's, Mr. Sweetman.

You mentioned that the longer people wait in the backlog, it significantly decreases their ability to integrate well into Canadian society. Given the labour market needs that have been raised by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, that in about five years 100% of our labour market demands will need to be filled by immigrants, can you comment on how Canada will be able to attract the skilled workers we need if we place limitations on family reunification?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: That's a multi-faceted question. Canada has never had any trouble attracting immigrants. That's why we have a backlog. So I don't think Canada will have trouble attracting immigrants in the future. I don't think that's really an issue.

The issue is in some sense dealing with the backlog and selecting immigrants who will have successful labour market outcomes. I think that's a challenge we face.

I think my second proposal, about increasing the points threshold for the skilled worker program, addresses that point to some extent. I think if we increase that threshold, we'll simultaneously decrease the size of the backlog.

So I think we can deal with that, at least for skilled workers, in a relatively straightforward way, although it will take some political courage to undertake that.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: But, Mr. Sweetman, if I may, most of the immigrant community that I'm well-versed with in the Scarborough community are people who enjoy and feel that extended families are of value to their individual families, as well as to the community.

If we're trying to attract skilled workers to fill our labour market needs, how is it that we're going to be able to continue to attract the good, the best and the brightest of the world, if we're telling them that they might not be able to bring their parents or family with them?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: You may have noticed, since you're asking me the question again, that I never really answered that part of your question.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Exactly.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: It's true that one of the advantages that Canada offers to new immigrants is our family class, with the provision that parents and grandparents can immigrate. It's a matter of doing that in an appropriate way.

I personally don't have a big problem with increasing the family class size a little bit, but there are limits to what we want to do in terms of costs that our society wishes to bear.

Personally, I think the diversity that immigration brings to our society, and that parents and grandparents bring to our society, merits those costs.

• (1245)

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you, Mr. Sweetman.

Mr. Zhang, you've mentioned also that we have very imbalanced processing with respect to families who are waiting from different visa offices. Last week we had a witness who also mentioned the same thing. Depending on which visa office they're applying to, they end up waiting from 14 months to 55 months for their family to be reunited or for their application to be processed.

What are your ideas about the actual imbalance with the processing time, and what are your ideas for improving the situation?

Mr. Felix Zhang: This issue has been there for a long time. All we're suggesting is that we manage all applications through a single queue rather than assign quotas to visa offices. If we could manage all applications as step one, and, once step one has passed, if there's no queue at each visa office, that means all processing times for all sponsors will be pretty much the same.

That's our suggestion.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you, Felix.

As well, because you're from a community organization that's about sponsoring our parents and grandparents, can you elaborate on the consequences that we'll be facing on capping or putting quotas on the actual immigration of parents and grandparents?

Mr. Felix Zhang: Currently the backlog is already huge, and it's not practical for aging parents. If we are putting caps onto new applications, or just even to further reduce the annual admission

quota, that will hurt the community. The people staying here, they have a longer-term plan, but if such a thing happens, it leaves the new immigrants no choice but to leave.

Put simply, this is going to hurt Canada.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

I just want to reiterate, about the one example you used about a Brampton man who has now liquidated all of his assets in Canada and moved outside of the country because his parents weren't able to be reunited, that I think that type of example is happening all across the country. By not allowing our parents and grandparents into this country, your example and many of the other examples show that we're actually seeing an economic net loss, rather than a net profit, by not allowing more immigrants' families to come into this country.

Mr. Felix Zhang: Exactly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Sweetman, I want to follow up. You emphasized a lot in terms of the age and economics. If you take a look at the family class sponsor, in particular with the parents, many of these parents are relatively young. They may be in their late forties, early fifties, and they'll have dependants who they'll be coming with.

Now, if you tack on to a lengthy processing backlog time... For example, you might have a 51-year-old couple who have 17- to 21-year-olds living in their home, and then you tack on that processing time.

Can you give us some insight in terms of your take on something of that nature? I'm thinking in terms of their productivity and how we might be denying that productivity by having that lengthy waiting time. Is it better for us to establish a separate stream for that type of parent?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I don't know if we want to establish a separate stream or not. I think that the first person was arguing for a global stream, and we're moving that way with our global case management system, which will be a big improvement for Canada's capacity to deal with people fairly around the world.

In terms of age at immigration, it's reasonably well established in the research literature that there is an important relationship between age at arrival and long-term labour market outcomes. On average, younger immigrants do much better and find it easier to integrate socially and economically into Canada. We want to be thinking about that quite a lot in terms of the delays that we're imposing on people in the backlog.

For parents and grandparents, it depends on whether or not they actually intend to enter the Canadian labour force. One of the things that was suggested earlier for people not interested in entering the labour force is long-term multiple admission visas. Perhaps that's an alternative we might want to think about for that particular subset of individuals.

•(1250)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: What about the internal policy the government has in terms of...? If you're a 22-year-old, and you're just beginning that process—as a parent, you can expect to be in the process for, let's say, seven years or more now—you're obligated not to go into the work environment, because then you lose your dependant status. You have to stay in some sort of public educational facility.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Or should we look at changing that particular issue?

I realize it's a bit off-topic, but we were talking about the age.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I'm not entirely sure I understand what you mean by losing status. For people who have immigrated to Canada, once they've immigrated, status is irrelevant. We know that the spouses and dependants of a skilled worker principal applicant look very similar to the spouses, partners, parents, and grandparents of people who enter in the family class.

One of the things we might want to be thinking about is this comparability of individuals across classes who are in some sense similar. What I'm saying is that spouses and dependants of the skilled workers look like the spouses, dependants, and parents coming in through family class.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I know we sometimes make these artificial—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I'm suggesting that we need to think even outside of the backlog, in regard to your comments about economics and age. If I'm a 24-year-old dependant with my principal applicant, my father, and he has to wait seven years, I cannot work. I have to stay in school.

That requires a government regulation change that would enable me to remain a dependant and still be in the workforce back in my home country while my case is being processed, if you follow what I mean.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: Sorry; I understand your question now.

I'm afraid I'm not familiar enough with the details. Is it the age at the time of entry that matters or age at the time of application that matters for dependants?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: It's actually age at the time of entry. You have to be attending a publicly accredited educational facility or you'll be classified as an independent, and you'll have to put in your own application and start the process all over again.

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I was not aware of that, but it makes good sense that it would work that way. That implies that there are important implications for dependants of being in the queue for an extended period, especially dependants who are older children at the time of application.

That's actually a very important ramification of having a long backlog that I hadn't thought about before.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I appreciate your comment.

I don't know how much time I have, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You don't have any time.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you for your time—all presenters.

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra and then Mr. Weston.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Sweetman, I appreciated the three points you made. One of the difficulties we sometimes have is really getting our witnesses to drive through to recommendations that deal with the backlogs. I know it's difficult for folks, because they do want to talk about issues that are in the current queue, but what we're really trying to study here is the reduction and to work through our backlogs.

I wondered if you could give me a brief and more detailed answer on an issue you touched on. We ended up with this system in 2002 of accepting absolutely every application—whichever category it came under, Canada was obligated to follow through with each one of those applications.

Do you think we're at the point now where we need to change that system? Do we need to find a way to work through this in a proper way that gets to the economic development that you're speaking of, while keeping a balance and ensuring that families are, in fact, able to spend their lives together?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I think we've already done in the economic class immigration what you recommend through the ministerial instructions by imposing quotas, especially for the skilled worker category. So half of your question has already been accomplished.

The real issue that I think you're questioning is whether we should impose similar quotas for family class, and I don't know; that's a moral question rather than an economic question whether people believe that having parents come is particularly important. I think for individuals in our society, it is. For recent immigrants, it's very important to have their parents come.

The question we have to ask ourselves as a society is how much we're willing to bear the risk of health care costs associated with those parents and grandparents.

•(1255)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: We all make decisions in life with respect to a priority scale that we work through to determine which outcome of one of those priorities allows us to make decisions.

Do you think the number one priority for an individual who is determining to come to Canada to become a permanent resident and eventually a Canadian citizen is to bring their family here, their parents and grandparents? Or do you think their priority lies more with their potential to develop their careers, when they're not able to do so in their country of origin, and with the fact that they want to bring their children here for a better opportunity, a better life within Canada?

Prof. Arthur Sweetman: I suspect there is a wide diversity of opinions and desires among the thousands of people who are entering, and that some are less interested in bringing their parents, but that for many of them bringing parents is quite important.

I don't think there's a single answer to that. I think there's quite a wide, heterogeneous answer.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I appreciate that. Thanks.

Felix, this brings me to the question I have for you. I know that you made a presentation when we dealt with wait times. In fact, your presentation then was almost identical to your presentation now.

We had hoped to have folks come here to speak specifically to the backlogs and the reductions and present what recommendations you would make respecting those reductions, or at least for trying to deal with the backlog. I'm sorry if we weren't clear enough in terms of what we were expecting with respect to a presentation.

I have the same question for you as I've asked Mr. Sweetman. That is, your presentation and your focus is heavily laden with your issue with respect to parents and grandparents. You understand, do you, that Citizenship and Immigration is a very multi-dimensional ministry and that immigration isn't solely focused on the issue you are bringing to the table?

Mr. Felix Zhang: We totally understand that.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: So why is it that this is the only issue you bring to the table versus...?

I know I don't have the time here, but it would be interesting to see why you made the determination to bring yourself and your family here to Canada—for a better life, obviously—and how it has worked out for you. I'd love to sit down with you sometime and do that. But I'd really like to get a clear understanding in the other categories.

Why did you make the decision to come to this country? Is it in fact one that is better for your immediate family—for you, for your wife, for your children?

Mr. Felix Zhang: Yes. I came to Canada about ten years ago as a skilled worker. That is my personal experience.

Today I'm representing a group, Sponsor our Parents. Basically we are a group about sponsoring our parents to come to Canada. That is the reason I only talked about—

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I'm sorry, Felix. I appreciate that fact, and I know you have a great story, and it's an important one, but I didn't want to get—

The Chair: Stop the clock. Mr. Davies has a point of order.

Mr. Don Davies: I do have a point of order.

Mr. Dykstra asked the witness a question—why he came here—and asked about his immediate family. The witness is starting to answer, and as soon as he starts answering he gets interrupted.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: No, I didn't. That wasn't my question.

The Chair: Actually, you did. It's a valid point of order. Let the witness finish.

Mr. Zhang, you can continue with what you're saying.

Mr. Felix Zhang: Thank you.

The reason I'm only talking about the issue of parents and grandparents is that I'm speaking on behalf of the Sponsor our Parents group. Our group is focusing on this class.

We understand that Canada has an interest in bringing skilled workers to backfill vacancies in the workforce. But family reunification is very important to new immigrants. I think the government should give us a choice of which family members we want to sponsor. It could be a child, a spouse, or parents. But eliminating or capping the parent category is not a solution, we believe.

The Chair: The time is up. I'm afraid that's it, Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Zhang, Professor Sweetman, Mr. Bohbot, thank you for the contribution you've made. It's a difficult subject that we're into. You have contributed to it, and we thank you for it.

Thank you very much for coming.

This committee is adjourned.

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