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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)):
Good afternoon.

This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 27, of Tuesday, March 13, 2012. This meeting is televised. The orders of the day are, pursuant to Standing Order 81 (5), the study of supplementary estimates (C), 2011-12, votes 1c and 5c under Citizenship and Immigration.

We have before us today the Honourable Jason Kenney, who is the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism.

He has a whole bunch of staff, some of whom we recognize, and we'll let him introduce those people.

Thank you, Minister, to you and to your colleagues, for coming.

You have the floor.

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism): Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and colleagues.

I am joined by Peter Sylvester, Associate Deputy Minister; Claudette Deschênes, who is obviously the Assistant Deputy Minister and whom you are very familiar with; Catrina Tapley, Associate Assistant Deputy Minister; and Amipal Manchanda, Chief Financial Officer.

Thank you, colleagues. Today, I am pleased to present to the committee supplementary estimates (C) 2011-2012.

I would like to use my appearance before this committee to thank all of you for the important report you submitted in the House of Commons last week, titled "Cutting the Queue: Reducing Canada's Immigration Backlogs and Wait Times."

[English]

Your committee did a thorough job in examining this issue of backlogs and wait times in the immigration system. The evidence you gathered and the constructive recommendations you made will be very helpful for my department going forward, and I can assure you that a formal government response to the report will be forthcoming.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration is keenly focused on finding solutions to the long-standing issue of wait times and

backlogs. I would go even so far as to say that eliminating backlogs is possibly the biggest challenge for Canada's immigration system in general at this point in time.

As members of this committee are well aware, backlogs simply aren't fair. They aren't fair to those applicants hoping to immigrate to Canada, who can be forced to wait for years—sometimes eight years or longer—merely to find out whether their applications will be successful, in the meantime often putting their lives on hold, nor are they fair in serving Canada's interests; they hurt our economy. We need fast and uncomplicated procedures to get talented newcomers into Canada's labour market to meet immediate as well as longer-term needs and to help ensure that our country remains a destination of choice for the best and brightest from around the world.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, there are people from every corner of the globe with skills our economy needs now, and they want to come to Canada. But it is hard to welcome them now if some of our focus is on processing people with skills we needed five years ago, or people we may not have needed then.

We hope to bring younger skilled immigrants to Canada because they will be active members of the Canadian workforce for much longer than older immigrants. We don't want those skilled immigrants growing older as they pointlessly wait in a queue for years before we can welcome them to Canada and make use of their talents.

[English]

As your report outlines, CIC has made a number of strides over the past few years in our efforts at reducing the backlogs that plague our immigration system, but we have some way to go before we can claim success. We are examining other possible ways of further reducing the backlogs, and many options are on the table.

We are looking at how other countries with similar immigration systems have dealt with this challenge. New Zealand and Australia have had notable success; for instance, by introducing changes in recent years that have made their systems nimbler and more flexible in dealing with modern labour market realities than before. Of course, as we continue to tackle this problem we will be taking into account the recommendations that this committee recently made.

You will note in the main estimates for the coming fiscal year that we are devoting additional resources toward our efforts in this area, although, as your committee understands, the problem with backlogs in our permanent residency programs is not a problem of a lack of operational resources. Canada has welcomed the highest sustained levels of immigration in our history over the past few years—more than a quarter of a million a year, on average—and we are welcoming the highest per capita number of immigrants in the developed world, at just under 0.8% of the population per year.

We are meeting our targets and in some years exceeding them. The problem is not that we are failing to meet targets because of a lack of operational resources. The problem, as you understand, was a policy mistake in the past that loaded into our system a potentially infinite number of applications, with the legal obligation to process all of them, even though, of course, in our managed immigration system we only admit a finite number of people based on our targets. The annual surplus of applications received over the number of immigrants admitted over time built up these huge backlogs, and they will not be eliminated without taking significant steps.

[Translation]

As you know, the government has introduced a number of measures in recent months that are designed to strengthen the integrity of the immigration system, whether it be our anti-fraud initiatives, our efforts to crack down on human smuggling, or the measures to further reform our refugee system, introduced last month as part of Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act.

That bill contains important measures to provide legal authority for creating a biometric visa system. We plan to use biometrics as an identity-management tool in the immigration system beginning next year, and, of course, Bill C-31 will enable us to do so. Mr. Chair, I am very excited about this development because I think it is a long-needed and historic improvement to the integrity of our immigration system.

[English]

In our existing system, people who are applying to Canada for temporary resident visas or for study or work permits only need to initially provide written documents to support their applications. But documents can be easily forged or stolen. Biometric data—essentially photographs and fingerprints—are much more reliable and less prone to forgery or theft. Implementing biometrics will therefore strengthen immigration screening, enhance security, and help reduce identity fraud, and in so doing, we believe, it will facilitate the travel to Canada of legitimate visitors, because we will have a greater degree of confidence that they are who they claim to be, that they are admissible, that they do not pose a security risk. Over time, tools such as biometric visas could very well result in a higher acceptance rate for temporary resident visas and in better service for the many—the vast majority—who are bona fide travellers.

At the same time, it will prevent known criminals, failed refugee claimants, and previous deportees from using a false identity to obtain the Canadian visa. I can't stress how important this is. We are aware of many cases in which foreign criminals received convictions in Canadian courts and were lawfully deported, only to come back

into Canada under false documents—fake passports—and when they went to obtain a visa at a Canadian mission with their fake documents, which looked authentic, we were unable to identify that they had been deported from Canada.

Some of these cases are shocking. We have the case of Anthony Hakim Saunders. He was deported ten times on convictions including assault and drug trafficking and kept coming back to Canada under false documents. We had Edmund Ezemo, convicted of more than thirty counts of criminal conduct, including theft and fraud; he was deported eight times and kept getting back into Canada—on fake documents, we presume. I suppose theoretically he could have snuck in across the U.S. land border or snuck in some other way, but we suspect that this individual came in under fake documents.

Dale Anthony Wyatt, convicted multiple times of trafficking of illegal substances and possession of illegal weapons, was deported four times and came back to Canada at least three times.

Mr. Chairman, this is unacceptable. It has to stop, and only a biometrics visa system will give us the tools to stop it.

In a time of global uncertainty, Mr. Chairman, and when our own domestic labour force is aging, the government recognizes that immigration is vital to our long-term economic health and international competitiveness. We want our immigration system to fuel our future prosperity. To let it do so, we need to select those newcomers who are ready, willing, and able to integrate into our labour market and fill roles in our economy that have existing shortages.

As the Prime Minister said in his speech in Davos, Switzerland, earlier this year:

...we have maintained the high levels of immigration that our ageing labour force of the future will require. ... We will ensure that, while we respect our humanitarian obligations and family reunification objectives, we make our economic...needs the central goal of our immigration efforts in the future.

And so far we have taken action toward that end.

We have introduced the Canadian experience class, allowing foreign students and higher skilled temporary foreign workers to transition into permanent residency on a fast-track basis, a model program for success for newcomers.

We've brought in the action plan for faster immigration, which has started to bring the number of applications under control, and the new applications under the identified occupational categories for those with a prearranged job are coming in on a fast-track basis.

We of course improved the integrity of the system, cracking down on crooked immigration consultants and on various forms of fraud, including most recently immigration marriage fraud.

We have worked with our provincial partners to improve foreign credential recognition of newcomers through the pan-Canadian framework. The result is that we've seen a much better geographic distribution of newcomers through our huge expansion of the provincial nominee program.

I could go on, but let me conclude by saying that I look forward in the months ahead to introducing additional and essential reforms that will constitute transformational change of Canada's immigration system to ensure that newcomers who arrive succeed, because when they succeed, Canada succeeds.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Opitz has some questions.

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

Minister, yesterday when I rose in the House and I spoke on Bill C-31, I referred to seven different examples of serious criminals—and some of them you just mentioned yourself—who had been removed from Canada and re-entered numerous times, and of course sometimes four or eight or ten—up to 21 times. I noted that you said four and eight, but some of these get quite extreme.

I think most Canadians would find that these numbers are shocking and would want to stop this. I see that in supplementary estimates (C) there is a section on funding for biometrics. But I also note that the opposition—both NDP and Liberals—voted against this funding, which I find disappointing.

Can you please tell us what you think about using biometrics overall and whether it will be effective in preventing serious criminals from using Canada basically as a revolving door over and over again?

• (1645)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thank you.

Let me say that, first of all, many of our peer countries have already adopted biometric visa systems, or are well on their way to doing so: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and various European Union member states. In fact, the EU Schengen zone, as I understand, is moving towards a comprehensive application of biometric visas. So this is becoming the new normal.

Quite frankly, it is something that Canada should have started to do a decade ago in the new global security environment post-9/11, but for whatever reasons—political, I gather—chose not to. We have made the necessary investments. I think in total, over the course of the initial life of the program, we're investing in the range of \$340 million in the development of the biometric visa. The department has already been working on the policy framework and the logistics of it for the past few years.

We have just identified, through a request for proposals process, a vendor to be the primary vendor for the technology. It will be available at our missions and at certain visa application centres abroad. It will begin in certain higher-risk countries. We don't have the funds to roll this out with 100% coverage overnight, so we're taking the Australian approach of a phased rollout.

Here's what's going to happen, very simply. For those countries for which the biometrics requirement comes in, a visa applicant, initially for any form of temporary resident visa—that would include work permits, students, and visitors—will have to either go to one of our missions or a visa application centre that is licensed by us to do this and furnish ten fingerprints and a digital quality photograph, which we will then check against our databases of people who are known to be inadmissible.

We will also, of course, continue to use our information-sharing agreements with international partners to share this information. If we find that someone, for example, is a known terrorist or a convicted criminal, or if they've been deported from Canada before—or let's say they've made a refugee claim in Australia or New Zealand and have been rejected and now are making one in Canada—in those instances we will be able to identify that person against our databases or those of certain foreign partners. In those cases, we will either call the person in for additional questioning, or request additional information, or reject the visa application.

That means that when these criminals who have been deported multiple times come in to our visa office and give us the fingerprints, we'll be able to say “You're not the guy you are claiming to be on the passport; you are this individual who has already been deported from Canada.” Then they will be denied the visa.

Most visitors will be approved with their visa, will come into an airport or port of entry, will go through the Canada Border Services Agency primary screening, and in most cases they'll have the visa—they will have obtained it after an initial screening—and everything will be fine.

In some cases, if we think there might be a problem, we'll ask them to go off to CBSA secondary at the port of entry and provide their fingerprints so that we can verify that the passport holder is the person who provided fingerprints back in the country of origin.

We are benefiting from the experience of other countries, so we are learning from some of the logistical mistakes they've made. We believe this will be a self-funding system funded by application fees. Again, it's the absolute *sine qua non* of immigration security. This will improve Canada's immigration security screening by orders of magnitude, and it is an essential commitment in the Beyond the Border continental security perimeter agreement that President Obama recently signed with our government.

Mr. Ted Opitz: I think it's great that we're also incorporating lessons learned from other nations, and I think it's extremely valuable. Being able to keep out undesirables is obviously going to maintain and enhance the security and safety of our families and people in Canada.

But let's talk about biometric data in another way. You mentioned facilitating the entry of temporary foreign workers and others into this country faster by the use of biometric data—another positive spin in terms of immigration of temporary foreign workers and so on. Could you comment on that?

• (1650)

The Chair: You have one minute, Mr. Opitz.

Mr. Ted Opitz: I'll ask Madame Deschênes to answer that.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): On the facilitation side, there are two things. We'll be able, once we've identified someone through biometrics, to give multiple and valid documents for a longer period of time. Then we'll be working with CBSA to make the arrival in Canada much quicker for legitimate travellers, for example. Once you've cleared your primary, we may, because of a risk, look at things. It will be easier to clear through customs and get your luggage and move on.

So we believe it's a two-step process. It helps us from an enforcement perspective, but it certainly helps us from a facilitation perspective also.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Minister, for appearing before us, and particularly for accommodating the change.

Minister, you've been the Minister of Immigration since what year?

Hon. Jason Kenney: It's since November 2008, or actually the end of October 2008.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you. I think we all know—it's common knowledge—that the backlog currently worldwide is more than a million applications that are in the queue. Wait times, I think we can all agree, are unacceptably long and have gotten longer in that time period. I was going to quote you, from a recent speech that you delivered to the Economic Club, but you have repeated the phrase today, saying that you're intending to bring in change that you call “transformational” in the months and I guess years ahead.

Would you agree with me, Minister, that the need to transform or fundamentally change our immigration system is an admission that it is fundamentally not working well right now?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Minister, there is nothing in the supplemental estimates that I have seen that addresses the processing times for immigration applications. I would like to focus just a bit on spousal sponsorships.

During our study on the backlog, department officials testified that there is no backlog in spousal or child applications because they are immediately put into processing. Now, there was a case in British Columbia a few weeks ago, an inland spousal application, in which a woman who married a Canadian citizen was pregnant and put her application for permanent residency in. According to the news reports, the department reported to her that they don't even open an inland application for at least a year.

Is that your understanding? Is that typically how long it takes to even open an envelope for an inland spousal application?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, I don't think that's typically the case. I think there was an aberrant delay in the processing of inland family class 1 applications.

Madame Deschênes, could you please supplement that?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes.

First of all, we consider those applications in Canada to be humanitarian-compassionate. There's a whole variety of those applications. But the problem with the case that you highlight is that we made a decision—and in hindsight, maybe we shouldn't have, operationally. We were rolling out global case management into Vegreville, so rather than open files, create them in one system, and then put them into another system, we just held some of those files until that time. That was the problem.

Mr. Don Davies: I'll quote from the news report:

Because of backlogs at the immigration processing centre, the department confirmed applications like Aitchison's—from within Canada—aren't even opened until almost a year after they're received.

You're saying that's not a common thing, that it's an aberration?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That was an aberration in terms of the decision we took.

Hon. Jason Kenney: But it has been corrected now.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: But just to be clear, those cases still take a lot longer than the cases overseas that we said—

Mr. Don Davies: Yes, because they are inland.

It's also my understanding that wait times for spousal applications are growing, and in fact have grown, by four months over the past year alone. Is that consistent with your experience, or do you think it's getting faster?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I don't think it's getting faster, but I think the growing is a temporary measure. As I said, in the last year we rolled out global case management throughout the system overseas, so there were delays in some of those, and we're now working on some modernization improvements that will get us to a shorter time. So unfortunately, it has gone up to go back down, I think.

Mr. Don Davies: Outside the skilled workers category, which is something we've heard a lot of evidence on, is it correct to say that wait times have lengthened in every type of immigration file that we receive?

Hon. Jason Kenney: The question, I guess, would be from what date, from when?

Mr. Don Davies: Let's say from 2008, when you took office.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I think it really depends; there are so many inventories. For example, in various programs, some would be longer and some would be shorter. That's the tightest answer I can give you.

• (1655)

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

In that same case, the Aitchison case, the woman, of course, famously was reported to have had to have her child in a hotel because she could not get a letter from CIC that simply confirmed that she had a permanent resident application filed. She made multiple phone calls, had difficulty getting someone on the line, and was finally told that CIC could not even give her a letter simply confirming that her application had been received.

Is that acceptable conduct by your department, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I don't know the individual case. I always avoid commenting on details of an individual case, especially when I don't have a privacy waiver.

Obviously our department strives to provide good service to applicants and to clients but is often overwhelmed by demand. I feel people's frustration, including the frustration of that individual, if indeed those facts are the case.

When I became minister, I would say that technologically the department was stuck in the 1970s. It was a huge paper-run system with hundreds of thousands of applications on filing shelves all around the world, with people literally pushing trolleys loaded with hundreds of dockets around overcrowded hallways, with an early 1980s-based computer system. Quite frankly, this department was in urgent need of modernization.

We've made those technological investments, and I think you're going to see that between those and the policy changes we have made to control incoming applications, within a couple of years we're going to move beyond this era of unacceptably long wait times.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

The Chair: You have one minute, Mr. Davies.

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

Here we are, four years later, and someone who asks for a simple letter confirming receipt of an application can't seem to get one. I think I could speak for all Canadians when I say that they expect more from a government department. It should be able to provide a letter to someone that simply confirms an application.

I'm not trying to get into the specific situation, but that was the holdup. We hear this quite frequently: it's hard to get someone on the phone in your department; it's hard to get someone to speak to. I think you should know that as minister.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I do, believe me, loud and clear.

Do you have a comment on that issue?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes. I guess I would comment that in daily operations sometimes cases fall into cracks. One of the key things we want to do through modernization is create the file as soon

as they arrive. Of course, we want to go to an e-application, which would make it instantaneous, and then acknowledge right away that we have the application. We have been working on that. We've started with some of the things that are in global case management.

In that case, if it had arrived once we had global case management in Vegreville, it would have been created fairly quickly and they would have received a letter. We are moving there; we're just not there, and sometimes errors happen.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Lamoureux.

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

I think I'll start off by complimenting the staff, and particularly those individuals who are assisting MPs' offices, who do a phenomenal job—I know first hand—in terms of the number of calls we have to make. We're very dependent on the immigration staff people, and we appreciate the work they do overseas.

Having said that, I want to get right to the point and ask the minister to keep his answers short, because I have a very limited amount of time.

The super visa, in my opinion, was a super disappointment. Will the minister change the health requirements so that people will be able to afford the opportunity to get a super visa?

Hon. Jason Kenney: No, because they can afford to get a super visa. The vast majority of people who would meet the income requirement are getting the visa. I believe it's important that we protect Canadian taxpayers if elderly visitors who are staying on extended stays get sick in Canada. I don't think the bill should be paid by taxpayers; it should be borne by the family members.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Minister, what about those individuals who are 70-plus who come from countries from which visas are not required? You don't have any health requirements for those individuals, correct? Yes or no, please.

Obviously it's no.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, because people who are.... If the question is whether there is a requirement to obtain insurance, if they're coming for the 10-year multiple-entry visas with the two-year stay permits, yes, they are required, because it's an extended stay.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Is someone who is coming from Hong Kong, where a visa is not required, who is 70 years old required to get health care coverage if they want to come for six months?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Visa exemptions are for periods of six months. People who want to stay for longer than six months are required to obtain visas, so whether you're coming from the United States or Hong Kong, if you want to stay for two years on a 10-year multiple entry—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I only have five minutes, Mr. Minister—

The Chair: Stop the clock for a minute.

Mr. Lamoureux, you have to let him finish his answer.

• (1700)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I just don't want him to use all of my five minutes.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I tried to provide—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Well, I'm not—

The Chair: You're interrupting him every time he answers a question—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Because as soon as he starts getting—

The Chair: That's my ruling.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Does the minister believe the average immigrant family from the Philippines or India has the extra \$4,000 necessary to purchase health insurance so they can apply for a super visa?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, just on your point, Mr. Chairman, if I get imprecise questions, it's not possible to provide a one-word answer.

The Chair: I'll tell you what we're going to do—and I'm not stopping the clock.

If you continue on, we'll just move on to the next questioner. You have to let him answer the question.

Hon. Jason Kenney: The answer to this last question is that I think it is entirely reasonable that we ask elderly visitors who have much higher rates of health care consumption to obtain private health insurance if they're coming to Canada on extended visits, so that those costs do not fall to taxpayers through provincial health care systems. Yes, I think it's entirely reasonable, and it's precisely through that program integrity measure that we've been able to expand access for longer visits for parents and grandparents.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Does the minister believe that the average immigrant family from the Philippines or India has the extra \$4,000 necessary to purchase health insurance so they can apply for a super visa?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I reject the premise of the question.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay.

The provincial nominee program has been a huge success in the province of Manitoba. Will the minister provide a guarantee that Manitoba will be able to maintain its current number of certificates that have been issued to it in the past couple of years?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Mr. Chairman, levels planning is done in consultation with the provinces on an annual basis, not spontaneously at committee. I don't know what Manitoba is going to ask for in future years. I don't know what other provinces are going to ask for. So the answer to that question will be made through consultations with provinces, including Manitoba, in our annual levels planning.

The Chair: Stop the clock.

Mr. Lamoureux, you and I don't seem to be getting along today, but you have to talk slower so the translators can translate your questions.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes.

Manitoba is very dependent on the nominee program, and I would ask the minister to what degree he is prepared today to give assurances that they'll be able to continue to use that program as a way in which they can acquire the needs they have for provincial growth for their economy.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, I just had a very good conversation with the new Manitoba minister for immigration on this point, and we agreed that the PN program has been a great success in Manitoba, thanks in part to our government expanding the PN nationally by more than tenfold over the past five years. And I expect that will continue—not that rate of growth, but rather the current levels for PNs nationally will continue.

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay. So based on that answer, is the minister then implying that for the Province of Manitoba we would be able to continue with the same sorts of numbers that we've had in the past? Could you give us that assurance for the next year or two?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Again, I'm not making the annual levels plan here at this committee prior to consultations with the provinces. We have massively increased the PN program. I'm happy generally with the results.

We have asked provinces to tighten up the program in some respects, such as bringing in mandatory minimum language requirements, to avoid nominating people who have access to permanent residency through federal programs, and we look forward to working with the provinces on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Menegakis.

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

Minister, welcome. Thank you for appearing before us again today.

Thank you to the senior officials for taking the time to join us as well.

I know, Madam Deschênes, that certainly you've been here before.

Also, Mr. Sylvester and I were together this morning at the languages committee.

Minister, I know that Quebec has a different arrangement when it comes to immigration than the other provinces do, and that also appears to be the case when it comes to settlement funding. I also know that you've moved all the other provinces—outside of Quebec—into a national funding formula that is based on the number of people who settle there.

It seems to me to be the fairest way of distributing the funding, the money. Is Quebec's settlement funding determined the same way? Can you explain what formula is used?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, you will note that there is a \$25 million adjustment in the supplementary estimates for the Canada-Quebec accord on immigration. That is because every year there is a huge increase in federal transfers to the Government of Quebec to provide notionally for settlement services as per the Canada-Quebec immigration accord.

When that accord was negotiated, it established a funding formula that obliged us to increase transfers based on a formula of the number of non-francophone immigrants arriving and based on increases in federal government spending. There is no ceiling on that formula, but there is a floor. For example, if we cut federal spending this year in the budget, that will not negatively affect Quebec's transfers. But in some previous years, we've seen between 7% and 8% increases in federal funding, and therefore the Quebec transfer has gone up, even though the number of immigrants arriving in Quebec has not gone up and even though they haven't increased proportionately their investment in settlement services.

This is a concern now, because we are arriving at a situation where the per-immigrant funding for settlement services across the country outside of Quebec is about \$3,000 per immigrant, and it's now about \$6,000 per immigrant, or it's headed toward \$6,000 per immigrant, in Quebec. This inequity is a reflection of the funding formula.

• (1705)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Minister, I'm curious about the Institute for Canadian Citizenship. I know we fund them. Why do we fund them, and what are their activities? What do they pursue?

Hon. Jason Kenney: This is a non-governmental organization that was established as a result of an agreement between the Government of Canada—the previous government, actually—and former Governor General Clarkson in 2005. I gather it's become a tradition for governments to establish so-called legacy projects with former governors general.

In this instance, Madam Clarkson and at the time the government of Prime Minister Martin agreed that the government would provide matching funds of up to \$7 million a year in a contribution agreement to this organization, which promotes the value of Canadian citizenship and civic literacy, if you will, or an understanding of the obligations of citizenship. They work with my department in many ways, promoting special citizenship ceremonies and projects like the parks pass and the museums pass for new immigrants.

So we have a legal obligation to fund matching contributions of up to \$7 million a year as a result of the 2005 agreement.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

How am I doing for time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have about three minutes.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Wonderful.

I'd like to weigh in on the discussion on biometrics, if I may. A previous witness to the committee was concerned about privacy issues around biometrics. He used the example that if 99% of the people are not a security risk, why are we putting the system in place?

I made the point, and I think it's a valid one, that even if 99.9% of people who come to Canada are not a security risk, that 0.1%, if you take the average of 254,000 people who come into the country, would mean that we would allow 254 people a year into Canada who are a risk.

I'd just like to get your feelings on the importance of biometrics and how close it will come to reducing the risk of those high-risk people coming into our country.

Hon. Jason Kenney: The introduction of biometric visas and their eventual global application will be by far, by orders of magnitude, the most important measure that Canada has ever taken I think with respect to immigration security.

We all know, in the post-9/11 environment in particular, that immigration security is essential to national security, that there are people around the world who would do us harm. We must take every prudent measure to prevent such people from being able to enter Canada. This will allow us to do that—not with 100% certitude, but with a much, much greater level of integrity than in the past.

As I say, given the level of technology we have at our disposal in the 21st century, it's a bit ridiculous that our entire immigration security system is based on biographic data on old paper documents that are easily forged.

So it's really about getting with the times.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Great.

Is it fair to assume that by sharing some of this information with other countries that have biometrics and that are friendly to us, when we know that the integrity of their security system is—?

The Chair: Mr. Menegakis, you have one minute.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes, that's absolutely essential, and part of the Beyond the Border agreement with the United States includes an expanded information-sharing agreement for immigration security screening purposes. Allies such as the United States, quite frankly, have much more robust data on who constitutes a serious security risk than we have, I would say. We will benefit enormously in terms of our own national security from being able to bounce fingerprints off larger databases like that.

Obviously, with limited use and limited time.... There would be parameters in our legal agreements with the United States, all of it respecting Canadian privacy law, but this would massively improve our immigration security screening.

• (1710)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Groguhé.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister and his colleagues for joining us.

One of the department's duties is to guarantee the security and integrity of our immigration system, and that is indeed important. In that context, how can the family reunification process be enhanced and accelerated, especially when it comes to children who don't have to go through security screening? Do you have any solutions for those types of cases?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes. That's along the lines of Mr. Davies' questions regarding spousal and child reunification. That's a priority. We try use our system to process family reunification applications involving children abroad as quickly as possible. That usually takes a few months.

Do you have anything to add?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: The minister and our colleagues who work on policies are currently reviewing the system. I think that will enable us to focus more on children and spouses. We have some problems abroad—especially in terms of temporary resident visas and immigration—including managing backlog and inventories, a time-consuming exercise, and providing answers to members.

One of the objectives of those changes is to focus on such cases. I think that our risk management has already helped us shift the focus somewhat, in the sense that not all cases are processed in the same way. However, we clearly need to do even more.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Thank you.

Minister, during a committee meeting, I raised an issue regarding the detention conditions at the Laval detention centre for refugee claimants, more specifically regarding longer detention periods. In addition, studies on refugee claimants indicate that there is a significant number of people suffering from psychological trauma stemming from those detention conditions.

Do you plan to take that problem into consideration? If so, does your government already have guidelines in place for immigration officers dealing with refugee claimants with mental health problems.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Mr. Chair, I am not aware of those specific problems. Detention is a key tool in all immigration systems around the world. Canada uses that tool much less often than other democratic countries. For instance, Australia uses detention in almost 100% of refugee claimant cases, the United Kingdom uses it for all claimants from designated countries, and the United States uses it in most cases. The same goes for France and other countries. In Canada, we use detention for immigrants in few cases, compared with other democratic and liberal countries.

That being said, the management of immigration detention centres is the responsibility of the Canada Border Services Agency, which is not part of my department. That comes under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Public Safety. I would be happy to communicate to him your concerns with regard to that issue.

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Only one minute? Okay.

Female refugees are more likely than male ones to come from countries generally considered to be safe. How will the new provisions of Bill C-31 make it possible to take that gender-based data into consideration?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Could you be more specific?

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Female refugees are more likely than male ones to come from countries generally considered to be safe. How will the new provisions of Bill C-31 take into consideration that gender-based data?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I would say that, for the vast majority of refugee claimants, Bill C-31 will lead to further verifications of their case, since we are suggesting that a refugee appeal section be created for claimants whose application is denied by the Refugee Protection Division. That way, the vast majority of women who are denied by the IRB at the first hearing will have access to a thorough appeal process.

I think that's a positive change for female refugee claimants, especially the ones who come from countries that are well known for the persecution of and violence against women.

• (1715)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Leung.

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

Welcome to the hearing, Minister and staff.

My question relates to the discussion around the super visa. It has been three months since it was implemented in December. So December, January, February...it's now three months. Perhaps you can give us a sense of how it is working with respect to the issues that we're trying to address.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, we actually issued a report on this on March 5, and we announced the super visa as a key part of our action plan for faster family reunification last year. We started issuing the super visas, I believe, in December. We issued an initial report last week indicating that 77% of the applications have been approved and that almost 99% of super visa applicants who meet the requirements, such as the income requirement, were approved.

The main reason why people are not being accepted is because they don't have the minimum necessary family income, which is the same level required for them to successfully sponsor their parents or grandparents for permanent residency. That's the same benchmark, and, frankly, it's a sensible one. It basically says that we don't want families to overburden themselves with the costs of bringing in parents or grandparents. So at 77%, I think it's very effective.

Mr. Lamoureux said something about \$4,000 in insurance. The reason I said that I reject the premise of the question is because I know there are much less expensive insurance packages available for individuals. There is a dynamic marketplace now offering health insurance packages, and I anticipate that over time prices will come down because of that new market and that new competition, which.... And by the way, if people don't want to apply for the super visa, they are still welcome to have their parents come on the regular visitor visa, for which there is no health care requirement or minimum income requirement.

The super visa is there for particular purposes. It's for people who want their parents or grandparents to come on extended stays or to obtain a 10-year multiple entry visa that permits stays of up to two years at a time.

Now, there are a lot of people who don't necessarily want permanent residency for their parents. The parents want to maintain a home back in their home country, but the parents do want to come around family moments like childbirth. This is an ideal tool for those longer stays. If they want to come for a brief visit, we advise them to apply for a regular visitor visa, which will allow them to come in for six months. That does not require health insurance.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Is there a limit to how many times they can apply for the super visa?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, there's no limit to how many times they can apply, but as I say, the super visa is issued for a 10-year multiple-entry period. Presumably, elderly people aren't going to be using that multiple times, but maybe a couple of times.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: A quick question I have is with regard to biometrics and their effective use. In our immigration system and our visa system, there are a lot of timelines that we must address: for example, three years and five years of residency in Canada, or a 30-day visa, or if you come in without a visa, you need 60 days. Does this mean that we need to have some sort of entry-exit control in order to control this?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Yes.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Perhaps you can elaborate on this.

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Mr. Leung.

Hon. Jason Kenney: It's fair to say that virtually anyone who has looked at the integrity of our immigration system has identified the absence of exit information as perhaps the single biggest gap we have, as the Auditor General has noted in previous reports. I think she estimated a few years ago that there were in the range of 40,000 foreign nationals on removal orders whose whereabouts are unknown to the Government of Canada.

Some of them may have gone back to their countries. Some of them, frankly, may have crossed the land border illicitly. Many of them are likely living underground without status in Canada. If we were to adopt some kind of exit information system so that we would know when people have left the country, then we would know who is in the country, making it much easier for us to identify and remove foreign nationals who are inadmissible or who are here illegally.

This is also a central commitment to the Beyond the Border continental security action plan.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gill.

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister and the officials for being here with us today. This is not my regular committee. I'm filling in for my colleague, Roxanne James, today.

I'm happy to see you here today, Minister—

Hon. Jason Kenney: But you're not completely unfamiliar with immigration matters—

Mr. Parm Gill: No, absolutely not. As you know, in my riding of Brampton—Springdale, immigration is a huge issue. Demand is very high.

I do want to take this opportunity, Minister, to thank you and congratulate you for some of the decisions you've made since becoming Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

We all agree, I think, that the immigration system overall was broken. There was a huge backlog, which the Conservative government inherited from the Liberals. Some of those changes may not necessarily be popular politically, but you've made the decision, which is the right decision, and I'm getting a lot of feedback, not just from my riding of Brampton—Springdale, but from other parts of the country as well, on things such as the super visa.

On the super visa, I know there was a release issued or a statement made about a week or so ago on the 77% approval rate, which is huge. I know that my colleague opposite mentioned the \$4,000 figure for the insurance that individuals have to purchase, possibly, if they want to bring their parents or grandparents over on this super visa, which is not true: the premiums are far less. That was the myth that was initially there when this program was launched, but I'm now finding out—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Chairperson—

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Stop the clock.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: On a point of order, Mr. Chairperson, with all due respect, I've had both the minister and the member say \$4,000 for an individual; I have clearly said \$4,000 for a couple. That would mean \$2,000 on average for an individual.

Thank you.

The Chair: Just carry on.

Mr. Parm Gill: I would also like to acknowledge some of the other changes, Minister, that you're working on and that you've made, such as cracking down on crooked consultants, the refugee reforms, and also recently announcing the five-year ban on newly sponsored spouses in regard to stopping them from getting married and sponsoring a spouse again. There was an earlier limitation that was imposed on the sponsor, but now it's also on the sponsored spouse. That was also very well received in my riding. I got a lot of positive feedback.

Moving on to the questions, one of my questions, if you're able to answer it, is, why are we paying the provincial Government of Quebec an additional \$24.7 million? Why was this not budgeted in the original funding allocation?

Hon. Jason Kenney: When we prepare the original budget and estimates, we have to literally estimate how much some of these programs are going to cost. I explained earlier the formula for the Canada-Quebec immigration accord transfers. In that case, I suppose we underestimated what the level of federal spending would be, so we've had to go back and add an additional \$25 million.

What does really concern me is that we've made some really tough decisions. First of all, when we came to office, we tripled settlement funding across Canada so that we could get settlement funding levels up to where Quebec was, more or less, but then the formulas kept increasing in Quebec, and we can't afford that, quite frankly, everywhere else. So I'm really concerned about an inequity building into the system. This is raised with me by other provinces: by Ontario, by provinces in the west, and by provinces on the east coast. So it's something that I think we need to discuss.

I do know that the Government of Quebec spends a lot less than what we send to them on settlement services. So I think a reasonable question should be asked: how are they using the funds that we transfer for settlement services? Are they actually going 100% to language training and integration services? And if not, where's that money going?

Also, Mr. Gill, you mentioned—

• (1725)

The Chair: Go ahead.

You have about 30 seconds, so either one of you can take it.

Hon. Jason Kenney: You mentioned the super visa, Mr. Gill. I should have mentioned that we have, as of March 5, processed more than a thousand of those. And here's great news: 80% of them were processed to a final decision within 41 calendar days, well below the target of eight weeks.

As for the old program that Mr. Lamoureux's party had established, with the seven- to eight-year wait times, well, people could make an application and wait for eight years on a decision for permanent residency. Now they're able to get a decision on a super visa in a few weeks for a ten-year multiple-entry visa.

In terms of being able to afford it, my question is, what responsible senior would travel overseas for up to ten years without health care insurance? Do any Canadians go to the United States or Mexico for a month without ensuring that they have travel

insurance? Why would we expect any foreign national to come into Canada for years, especially if they're elderly, without acquiring health insurance?

It seems to me that we're simply asking people to be responsible.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sitsabaiesan.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of you for being here with us today.

Minister, you mentioned that biometrics has already been researched. You're in the policy-writing stage right now at the department, and the policies have been developed over the last three or four years.

So why is it that we're studying now, in this committee, as to whether we should have introduced biometrics into our immigration system? Why is it that the government proposed that we study biometrics when clearly it's already been done for the last many years?

What does that say about the witnesses who have come in and said, you know, we should or we shouldn't, maybe or maybe not?

Hon. Jason Kenney: Well, first of all, the committee is the master of its own business. I don't dictate what studies the committee chooses to do.

Secondly, my understanding is that the committee has decided to study immigration security broadly speaking, and not just the question of biometrics.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Absolutely.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Thirdly, I think this does give the committee an opportunity to understand better what biometrics means and to offer comments. We haven't started the new system. We've been working on the policy framework for about three years. If the committee has suggestions about certain things it would like to see, I would imagine that this report would be a good opportunity to express those.

But there are a lot of non-biometrics-related security issues that need to be addressed.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Absolutely, and we have been bringing those up as well throughout our study.

I'd like to ask you, if I may, about the phased rollout that you spoke of with the biometric visa. You said that you'd be phasing in the rollout starting from "high-risk countries", if I may quote you.

Which are these high-risk countries, and how are they being identified? Perhaps you could provide the committee with the criteria used to identify the high-risk countries, and also the list of the actual high-risk countries.

Hon. Jason Kenney: We don't yet have a final list to share, but I can tell you that we look at criteria such as the rate of...

Okay, here we are. We look at multiple factors, including patterns in immigration volumes, refugee claims, deportations, and risks of identity fraud. For example, if a country is known to be a more problematic source of fraudulent travel documents, that would be one of the criteria. If we have one country to which we end up deporting a lot more people and that's a source, perhaps a disproportionately high source, of inadmissible individuals or foreign criminal convictions, that would be another one of the criteria.

It would be criteria of that nature that we'd look at across the globe.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Is it possible to have it sent to the clerk, if it's publicly available, so that we can actually see the wording of the criteria used?

Hon. Jason Kenney: I'd be happy to send a letter summarizing that, yes.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Fabulous. Thank you very much.

I have a question that goes right to my constituents. I'm sure many of us are facing the same thing.

We hear from witnesses and constituents regarding unfair and arbitrary visitor visa denials. The constituents are frustrated with form-letter denials that provide absolutely no detail as to why they're being denied. When my office, or MPs' offices, follow up, we're told that it's because they don't believe the person will return to their country. This is even after the person provides numerous documents showing their attachment to the country, leaving their spouse and two children behind, or two homes, or whatever it may be.

You mentioned that with biometrics you expect to have a higher rate of acceptance. Could you explain how?

● (1730)

Hon. Jason Kenney: Let me explain that the legal basis for decisions on temporary resident visa applications is established in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. It's known in plain language as the bona fide test: whether to the visa officer someone has demonstrated in the balance of probabilities the likelihood of their returning to the country of origin at the end of their authorized stay. The officers are trained to look at such criteria as assets, employment, income, family connections, and so on in their country of origin. Do those outweigh the pull factors that might cause them to overstay in Canada? That's basically the system we've always had.

I should say that last year, I believe, we approved 82% of temporary resident visa applications. There were 920,000 applications, which was up from 800,000 in 2005. We're issuing more temporary resident visas with a slightly higher acceptance rate.

I'm simply saying that I think biometrics will give visa officers a little bit more certainty that they know for sure the person is who they claim to be and that they do not represent a possible risk in terms of inadmissibility or criminality. That should result in greater confidence in approval decisions. That, I believe, is the department's view.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Kenney and your colleagues. We appreciate you coming.

We were going to have another hour, but we'll have to blame the House leaders.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I'm happy to stay, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No, I think they've had enough, but thank you very much, sir, for your presentation to the committee.

This meeting is adjourned.

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