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Chair

Mr. Ed Komarnicki

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order.

I'm going to ask the clerk to distribute some budgetary information, and if the members would like, we'll take maybe five or ten minutes at the end of the meeting to discuss that. We can deal with it today, if it's in order. If not, we can deal with it at our next scheduled meeting. You can do that during the course of the testimony.

Today we have with us Mr. Leblond, from the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators, and Mr. Buy, from the National Association of Career Colleges.

The practice here is to have you present to us for about five to seven minutes, and then we open it up to a round of questioning. You have five minutes each, and that will be the procedure. If you could speak or read relatively slowly so the translators are able to translate, that would be helpful.

With that said, we'll let you commence, Mr. Leblond.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond (President, Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators): Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen members of the committee, it is an honour for me, as a social worker from Quebec, as well as for the organization of which I am president, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators, to have this opportunity to present our views on the study entitled: "A Framework for Success: Practical Recommendations to Further Shorten the Foreign Qualification Recognition Process".

Since this is our first meeting, I hope you won't mind if I take a few moments to introduce our organization.

As its name suggests, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators is a national association representing provincial and territorial social work regulatory authorities. In that capacity, we represent approximately 40,000 social workers right across the country who are our members.

The Council was established in 2009 in response to a desire on the part of regulatory authorities to create a forum for review, development and discussion of views and policies relating to matters

of common interest, as well as national and international issues related to licensing and regulations.

In other words, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators represents the preferred forum for discussion of issues relating to social work regulations at the national and international levels.

Even though we are generally proud of our performance when it comes to admitting foreigners into our profession—and I will come back to this point a little later—the work underway in your committee with respect to foreign credential recognition is of interest to us.

As a regulatory body, we are concerned about the harm that may come to people as a result of social phenomena. Indeed, pretty well right across the country, social issues are becoming more complex and, despite the efforts made by our governments, poverty continues to affect tens of thousands of Canadian families and children who do not have access to decent living conditions.

An aging population is also forcing us, as a society, to take another look at our relationship with seniors, particularly the most vulnerable among them. Groups and communities also need more and more support to make their voices heard and demand their rights.

At the same time, depending on the communities, a number of provinces are having to deal with or anticipate shortages of social workers of various magnitudes, particularly in rural communities or in such disciplines as youth protection and mental health.

Here in Canada, we are greatly in need of new blood in the field of social work and, that being the case, bringing more social workers from abroad would certainly be a welcome move.

Whether we are talking about pan-Canadian mobility or foreign credential recognition, our profession has done its homework and can certainly be cited as an example.

Clear evidence of that is the Agreement on Internal Trade signed in 1994 by the federal, provincial and territorial governments with a view to facilitating labour mobility, which has meant that, since 1999, social workers who are licensed by a provincial or territorial regulatory authority are able to practice their profession anywhere in Canada.

The Quebec-France Understanding on the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications signed by Quebec and France authorizes the licencing of social workers of French nationality who apply using a fast track process.

Again with a view to removing barriers to full mobility, the council has begun developing a Canadian competency framework for social work.

• (1535)

The purpose of this framework is to develop a pan-Canadian profile of the baseline social work competencies, in order to facilitate mobility while at the same time maintaining public safety.

This pan-Canadian competency framework will be an extremely useful tool in terms of facilitating and expediting file review and the admission of foreigners, as well as establishing national standards with respect to the skills required for social work practice in Canada.

As I referred to earlier, we can be proud of our performance when it comes to bringing foreigners into Canada who want to practice their profession as social workers here. However, it's important to review the figures. Indeed, using 2010-2011 as a reference, fewer than 200 individuals from the United States and other countries applied for foreign credential recognition or training with provincial or territorial social work regulatory authorities.

To my knowledge, the vast majority of these individuals had their applications processed and accepted within extremely reasonable timeframes. So, given the increasing demand for social workers in the coming years, and our effectiveness in quickly recognizing the qualifications of people wishing to practice our profession in Canada, we conclude that, were we more visible at the international level, we would be in a position to attract more social worker licensing applicants. And that's where you come in.

Indeed, with a view to developing the necessary tools to ensure optimal visibility internationally, the Canadian Council is in need of a financial contribution from the Canadian government. The social work profession must be included amongst the listed professions in the Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications, just as occupational therapy, nursing, engineering, pharmacy, speech therapy and audiology are.

Our hope is that a series of well-defined measures can be developed that will make it possible to promote the social work profession both here and abroad. In that respect, we believe there is a need to redouble our efforts here in Canada to introduce the social work profession to our youth, including in Aboriginal communities, to ensure that a new generation of professionals can emerge.

This financial assistance would also give us a chance to reflect further on how to organize and provide retraining or skill upgrading that some applying to practice the profession might require, or develop paid social work practicums for immigrants to allow them to acquire work experience in Canada. We are also considering setting up a Web site as a virtual bridge between ourselves and the world, as a means of informing immigrants that there is room for them in Canada within the social work profession.

In closing, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators is anxious to play a constructive role in supporting the government as it

takes steps to attract skilled workers to Canada in those areas where there is a demand, as is the case for social work.

We believe it would be possible to significantly increase the number of social work licensing applicants from abroad by developing tools to increase the visibility of social work practice in Canada, so that it becomes an attractive option to ever increasing numbers of individuals living abroad.

Here in Canada, social work regulatory authorities have done their homework. Bridges have already been built between the provinces and territories with a view to facilitating social worker mobility. Soon all the necessary components will be in place to admit licensing applicants from abroad, quickly assess their skills and thereby give them timely access, wherever possible, to a social work license.

• (1540)

If we want to substantially increase the number of applications, we will need to have a greater presence and be more proactive. I hope we can count on the support of committee members as we seek financial assistance from the Government of Canada.

Thank you.

• (1545)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you for that presentation.

Mr. Buy, go ahead.

Mr. Serge Buy (Director, Government Relations, National Association of Career Colleges): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, let me thank you for allowing the National Association of Career Colleges to make this presentation.

The issue of foreign credential recognition is a very important one. Career colleges throughout this country play an important role in helping newcomers to Canada have their skills and knowledge assessed, and also an important role in helping them obtain the Canadian requirements that will allow them to get their foreign credentials recognized. The National Association of Career Colleges is the only organization representing career colleges throughout our country. We have over 400 members and estimate over 160,000 students are registered in our programs this year. That's about the size of eight universities.

Career colleges are private institutions. This is not new. The National Association of Career Colleges itself has been around since 1896. We're celebrating our 115th anniversary. Some of you know us very well. As an example, Mr. McColeman was our landlord in our office in Brant. I was asked to remind you of that.

Some people frown upon the private sector being involved in the education sector. I've always found it amusing to look at the background of some of these so-called intellectuals and find out that they received diplomas from Trinity Western, Harvard, MIT, or Princeton, all private universities. It's good enough for them to go to private schools, but not good enough for Canadians looking at getting a leg up in life.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we can all recognize that the public and the private sectors can all play a role. The fact is that we don't compete against our colleagues in the public sector; we complement their work, and we do a fantastic job in our country with tens of thousands of students every year. For decades, career colleges have been an important part of our Canadian educational and training landscape. Let me give you concrete examples.

Discovery Community College's Nanaimo campus has been assessing newcomers to Canada for years and helps them complete their Canadian requirements prior to having their foreign credentials recognized. Thanks to Discovery Community College's efforts, we're able to help newcomers become nurses and enhance our health care system.

Three years ago the Saskatoon Health Region recognized their need to address labour shortages in health care and approached the Saskatoon Business College to become a training partner. To date, hundreds of our personal-care aides and medical administrative assistant graduates have been hired by the Saskatoon Health Region. This year alone, 48 graduates were hired by the Saskatoon Health Region, many of them new Canadians.

The Saskatoon Business College, led by young entrepreneurs, has been in operation for over 100 years delivering great services in Saskatchewan. It is a family business. Some of you have been in business before, and you know the only way to stay in business that long is to provide fantastic services to your community, and they do.

Academy Canada in Newfoundland and Labrador will soon be working with a major Canadian company to conduct foreign credential assessments and provide gap training. This is a major project associated with the offshore oil industry, which is having significant difficulties recruiting skilled trades workers locally. As a result, this forward-looking school will be helping welders, electricians, steamfitters, and pipefitters work in Canada, to help our booming oil sector on the east coast.

And there are many good stories in Ontario, in Quebec, and throughout our great country.

Businesses have recognized that career colleges are serious partners and can provide significant help to deal with the serious issue of foreign credentials recognition for newcomers. Various NGOs and local governments consider career colleges as partners in their efforts to solve this issue and provide support to their communities. If only the federal government could do the same. The human resources and skills development department has understood lately that career colleges could be a partner in helping on this issue and others. We recognize the great work done by this minister and her staff. We're looking forward to public servants also understanding that we have a role to play and involving us in their programs.

Mr. Chairman, Kai Frantz, a very young Canadian, with great parents, Jennie and Chris, and a fantastic future in front of him should also have a choice and be able to decide which institution he goes to and be supported by our government in his choice. I would like a newcomer from Poland with the proper credentials to be given the choice to benefit from an assessment in a career college and be given training in that institution to quickly become a productive member of Canadian society. However, Mr. Chairman, at this point we're noticing some significant issues in this process.

The Canadian government provides billions of dollars in training money to the provinces, which in turn use that money to subsidize their deficits. Two quick examples:

In the last couple of months, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador realized they had run out of money to help train people and as a result hundreds of people had to stop their classes in midstream. This is not a joke. We're giving advice to European governments, but the government doesn't know, in the middle of their financial year, what to do with their training money. Is this the way the federal government intended this process to work?

The Government of British Columbia has put a very low cap on the amount of money to be spent for training of individuals. The result: newcomers to Canada have to go through the public route and wait for years for the training they require, instead of having their skills assessed in compressed and efficient programs in career colleges. We understand this to be a way to support your public institutions. However, once again we're taking away the ability for people to choose.

The Canadian government does not provide Canadian students with grants to programs that are less than 60 weeks. A decision to change this could go a long way to help newcomers upgrade their skills and get their foreign credentials recognized by bridging the gap. We know the government is looking at this favorably. Our request: let's get it done; let's not delay the process. This is not a cost; this will lower costs on EI and other training programs for the federal government.

I'm not here today, Mr. Chair, to request money from the Canadian government; I'm asking you to make the process simpler.

Foreign students also wish to come to Canada and study. We know that's important, as some stay. Career colleges get regular requests from foreign students in the skilled trades, IT, and health care sectors. However, due to a decision that can't really be justified, students who go to career colleges cannot benefit from work permits, while the same foreign students attending a public institution can. It makes no sense to me. It should make no sense to you either. Why? When we asked the question, we were told "because". When we asked for the reason, we were given none.

While we understand this is changing. This is a decision that this government is changing, and we appreciate that, but it can be done faster. Let's not wait for lengthy processes involving various provinces. The decision should be made and implemented now. It can be done. We asked bureaucrats if they could make the decision now, and they told us they could. Again, let's do it.

HRSDC and Citizenship and Immigration Canada spend millions on foreign credential recognition programs with universities and community colleges. They've done this for years. How much have they spent for similar career programs with career colleges? Zero dollars. Why? Is it because we're private institutions? I don't know. At least an offer of a pilot project would be welcomed, and we're still waiting.

• (1550)

Bureaucratic delays only serve to impede our efforts to strengthen our economy. Career colleges are flexible and adapt to the needs of the Canadian economy. Career colleges provide quality education and training.

We're proud to be part of the solution, and hope, Mr. Chairman, that you will recognize this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that presentation, and the points you've made.

We'll open it up to rounds of questioning, and we'll start with Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming today.

I want to start with Monsieur Leblond. There were a couple of points in your presentation, and I just want to make sure I've understood them.

Under the agreement on internal trade, I'm understanding you to say that now social workers can move across provinces. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: Yes, that's correct.

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder: I also understand that different provinces have different requirements, in terms of qualifications for social workers—and this will relate to the foreign workers in a moment. How do they reconcile it? I believe Alberta has a substantially

different standard, for example, from British Columbia to qualify for social work. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: That is partly true.

Some social workers in Alberta received their license based on something other than a university degree.

There is a further difficulty in Saskatchewan. Some members of the Association of Social Workers received a license after successfully completing a two-year university certificate program, as opposed to the common baseline, which is a Bachelor's degree at a minimum. But there are ways of dealing with those two issues.

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder: If a foreign worker came into Alberta and was credentialed under the Alberta system, would they then be able to work because of the AIT, for example, in Ontario or British Columbia?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: That is correct. That is why we feel it is absolutely critical to develop a pan-Canadian competency framework, followed by standards, so that applications from foreigners with a social work degree will be assessed in the same fashion all across Canada. That will ensure, given the need for public protection, that whatever an immigrant's point of entry into the social work profession, he or she will possess the minimum professional skills corresponding to the requirements in place across the provinces.

• (1555)

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder: The analyst indicated that, at a minimum, there's going to be a shortage of 3,500 social workers in Quebec, and I believe that plays out across Canada as well, that there are going to be shortages in many provinces. In your presentation you referenced that in 2010-11, 200 people applied for recognition for their social work credentials in Canada. That's a very large gap. I know educational institutions in Canada are training up, but clearly there's a very wide gap.

We have heard from other witnesses that language and culture are very important when you're assessing people's ability to work in certain professions. Health care professions came up the other day. In the current system, is there a way to assess for language and cultural competencies?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: There is no doubt that language proficiency and knowledge of the culture of the host society are important to exercise a profession.

Furthermore, it is increasingly important to be aware of, and familiar with, the culture of individuals arriving in Canada. Having a different culture can also be an asset for Canadian society, giving us an opportunity to provide the service to people here in Canada who share that culture. At the present time, social work regulatory bodies have no certification powers with respect to language proficiency issues, with the possible exception of Quebec, where there is an obligation to have adequate knowledge of French to register with a professional body. I am not aware of the situation in other provinces in that respect.

Indeed, there is a very significant gap between the number of immigrants coming in and the demand for social workers in Canada in the years to come. It is clear to me—and that was the point of our first recommendation—that we first have to acknowledge that we will be facing a shortage. Then we will be in a position to prioritize that profession, as we have chosen to prioritize others in the past.

I have also been president of the Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec for 10 years now. Since at least 2004, we have been trying to demonstrate that there will be a shortage. In Quebec, the Ministry of Health and Social Services recognized that reality this year. At the same time, we did note a gap between what had been announced and the actual priority given to our profession in terms of those that need to be acted on. So, it is my hope that at the pan-Canadian level, it will not take as much time to make this happen. Canada's population is increasing, as is the demand for social workers because of an aging population. The need—

[English]

The Chair: You may want to wrap up here. Your time has been up for a while, so if you want to make a concluding remark, try to make it short.

Are you okay?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: I will keep my answers brief.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Daniel.

• (1600)

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for attending today and for sparing your time.

This question is for both of you, and stems from some of the conversations we've had with other witnesses.

The engineers, for example, have an agreement called the Washington accord, which allows engineers or engineering professions from certain countries to be able to be processed quicker, because they have equivalency already done. Is there anything in either of your groups like that? Do you have that kind of agreement?

Mr. Serge Buy: We represent schools that will assess credentials and look at helping people bridge the gap basically between their foreign credentials and what they require to move forward. There is nobody coming from Washington or any other country to suddenly

open a school here that we have to work with. We look at different professions and we help different professions. We have agreements with a number of organizations in credentials recognized to help newcomers to Canada bridge the gap. It really depends on the profession.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: As a general rule, the answer is no. There is no international agreement based on prior recognition of people's skills. In Quebec, we developed such an agreement with France and we may develop others with other countries. At the pan-Canadian level, however, there is no such agreement in place for social workers. There is no framework agreement with other countries. That is probably something that should be done.

[English]

Mr. Joe Daniel: Is that something that should be considered? I'm sure there are equivalent countries like Australia and Britain, where people are fluent in at least English, and you have France with French and other French-speaking countries, where you can quite easily say that their equivalent degrees or college degrees or diplomas are the equivalent of what we have here. And therefore you could process them quicker, almost to the point of saying that we could adopt a pre-certification or licensure process that would actually speed up the process of getting them licensed here once they come here.

Mr. Serge Buy: Sir, this is a very good idea, and I think it should definitely be implemented in different professions.

What we're noticing is a lot of the newcomers are really missing very few things. On occasion, what they're being asked to do is take back the wall diploma or go back for all their schooling while they're missing a very small portion. Our members do assess that, and they know very well that they are missing a very small portion. So we help them go through the process and move forward with the different professional bodies.

I think your point is a very good one, and I think this government could certainly push on some professions to open up some of those doors, for sure.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: That is a very interesting idea and it would in fact make it possible to see things from a different perspective, as opposed to on an application-by-application basis. For example, we could try and to see whether the social work profession in Australia is comparable to the profession in Canada. If so, does that mean that equivalent training is provided? Is there overall equivalency there?

If that is the case, we could sign a framework agreement or issue a license simply on the basis of a license to practice in another country. If it isn't the exact equivalent, we might be able to identify reskilling needs and—we can always dream—make that training available in the country of origin before the person even arrives in Canada. That is quite a challenge.

It would also be much easier to recruit people, since we would be able to very quickly recognize their professional skills.

[English]

Mr. Joe Daniel: Have I got time for one more?

The Chair: Yes, you have 30 seconds if you want it.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Okay.

Given the aging demographic trends in Canada, do you feel that the increased immigration levels and a streamlined foreign credential recognition process are critical for Canada to remain economically competitive?

• (1605)

The Chair: You'll have to make that answer very brief, if you could.

Mr. Serge Buy: I'll make it extremely brief.

Yes, absolutely, I think it's important to do that. But I do believe that when you're putting in a foreign credential recognition process, make sure that you involve all educational institutions in order to make sure that you're getting the best results in a quick and efficient manner.

The Chair: Mr. Leblond, do you want to answer that?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: It's not only about Canada's economic development; it's also a matter of looking after people.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to Ms. Perreault. Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Good afternoon. My questions are for Mr. Leblond.

I'd like to come back to the effects of the shortage you referred to previously. I personally know some social workers who practice their profession in my riding. They recently told me that the number of children they have to meet with on a weekly basis has doubled in recent years.

To what extent is the shortage of social workers being felt at this time? Is the situation pretty well the same in every province and territory?

Mr. Claude Leblond: In practical terms, it is felt through the current problems with recruitment. Depending on the region, the province or the territory, institutions and organizations are having trouble recruiting social workers. They are also having trouble meeting overall demand in the communities.

Yet the shortage is only starting to make its effects felt. At the present time, we are seeing that the demand for social workers is growing all across the country. The shortage is going to occur at a time when, in addition to increased demand associated with a larger population, people's socio-economic problems will begin to be felt. In Quebec, it's starting in 2013 in particular that the shortage will be felt.

Ms. Manon Perreault: In order to work in Canada, what is the process for an immigrant arriving here with foreign credentials?

My second question is related to the first one. On average, how much time does it take to complete the foreign qualification recognition process?

Mr. Claude Leblond: The time it takes may be fairly short if the individual has all the necessary information on file, including a degree or diploma from a recognized university and the extent to which the training that person has received is equivalent to the training given here in Canada.

At the present time, the process is based on comparing the content which leads to a degree.

Ms. Manon Perreault: I have another question for you.

Earlier, you talked about educational training, in terms of it being equivalent to our Bachelor's degree. However, once someone has begun to practice the profession, is any assessment done, after a certain period of time, to determine whether he or she is performing adequately?

Do employers wanting to hire foreign social workers face significant obstacles or irritants that may prevent them from meeting the considerable need for social worker services in Quebec at this time?

Mr. Claude Leblond: I'd say that the biggest problem is not the initial training. Sometimes there has been inadequate practical training to a certain extent, but the biggest issue for immigrants whose training is recognized is the fact that they have no work experience in Canada. Also, social services in Canada, as in the United States or anywhere else in the world, differ from place to place. So, their acculturation to problems experienced here, to the needs of the people they deal with and to ways of responding to them is more difficult. That is why we are proposing paid practicums to allow people to gain work experience in Canada by delivering social services, but in accordance with Canadian law.

Ms. Manon Perreault: If I understood you correctly earlier, you were saying that the Agreement on Internal Trade allows workers to be subject to regulations.

Does that mean that it is now easier for social workers to move from one province to the other?

• (1610)

Mr. Claude Leblond: Yes, it is easier, in the sense that this is now allowed on the basis of a license. We agreed that there would be no additional requirements such as, for example, a six-month practicum in a given province. The license received in another province is now recognized.

Ms. Manon Perreault: What could be done to cut back the average time required to secure that recognition?

Mr. Claude Leblond: Are you talking about people who come here with a foreign degree?

Mrs. Manon Perreault: Yes.

Mr. Claude Leblond: Well, I suggest that you continue to support our actions in favour of establishing a pan-Canadian competency framework and common standards that can be used everywhere to review and assess foreign diplomas. Also, you can help us to become better known internationally, so that we can attract people and facilitate these processes.

Reskilling will have to be made available. That will require cooperation among training communities, whether they are public or private. There will also need to be paid practicums so that people can acquire minimal work experience in Canada that they can use on the job market.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Leblond; your time is well up.

We will move to Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, it's great to have you here today.

One of the thoughts I had was to do with a linkage I made when I was in the constituency about a week ago. There's a mining operation that is looking for people, so I suggested going to the local college to try to link up with the college and see if they could work in the programs and partner.

I direct my first question to Mr. Buy. Is that an option, where you could link into various sectors with oil and gas, mining, health, and link up with those sectors and focus on getting the training done, even credentially, but also perhaps see some financial support from some of those private sectors, for instance?

Mr. Serge Buy: I think that's a very good question, sir.

We do it already. The private sector is way ahead of the government. The private sector has recognized on a number of occasions that they're facing shortages in skilled trades. They've gone to private colleges to help them because they know we're more flexible than maybe some of our colleagues in the public sector. I gave the example of Atlantic College in Newfoundland, in the oil sector. They're doing training onsite. For example, electricians will be trained onsite with the company that's hiring them in order to bridge the gap for the recognition of their credentials.

We already offer that service, and we do partner in a number of regions. In Ontario we have a number of colleges, such as Herzing College here in Ottawa and in Toronto. As well, a number of our members partner with private companies to finalize and bridge that little gap that stops a newcomer to Canada from being able to get to that stage where they can practise in the trade they've been trained in, in their country.

In terms of whether or not that can be funded by private companies, certainly private companies are putting some of their resources to help some of the people they're looking for. They're doing it themselves because the government is lagging a little bit behind. We're hoping to see a change in behaviour from the government as well. The solution is not always to take public money, put it in public coffers, then to recirculate it. I know recycling is a great word, but recycling money within the public sector is not always the solution. On occasion some of the best ideas have been found in the private sector. We're ahead on this.

The answer is yes, we are partnering with private companies, and they are putting their own money on occasion into the training. My concern, however, is why would we ask the private sector to put their money when some government programs exist to fund this? The government is still thinking they will do it for the public sector only.

The private companies are saying they can't wait for this. So let's get the government to change its perspective on this.

Sorry for the long answer.

• (1615)

Mr. Colin Mayes: I appreciate the answer.

Just to follow up on that, we had a couple of witnesses with us on Tuesday, one from Toronto, one from Vancouver, and they were telling us they have intern programs at the City of Vancouver and the City of Toronto to help those with foreign credentials to get into the workforce to meet their needs. Could you make some statements on whether that would be an obvious thing for provincial governments to get involved in? Are they already involved?

Mr. Serge Buy: Provincial governments are involved in some internship programs. We're noticing that in some sectors. I think the Ontario government recently announced some internship programs. We're hoping to see more initiatives on that front. We think it would be wonderful to support the internships because a lot of times those newcomers to Canada have an issue about having to have Canadian experience. It's difficult to have Canadian experience when no one is willing to give you an opportunity. So pushing those internships and those internship programs would be a fantastic idea. I think the federal government can certainly use a little bit of its powers of distributing some of those training program moneys to suggest to their partners at the provincial level some initiatives on that front.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayes.

We'll move to Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thanks very much.

Thank you both for being here today.

I would like to first get some clarification from Mr. Buy on his presentation about the particular problems with Newfoundland and Labrador, where students had run out of training dollars midway through sessions. Would it have been the fee payer component of their funding support?

Mr. Serge Buy: It actually is the money the government pays the institutions to train them for the program. Basically, money is given to students to pay for tuition, and that money ran out. Some students in the middle of their studies, who were to start again in a couple of weeks, were told, sorry, you have to leave the training program, we have no money available for you. It actually ended up in the news in Newfoundland and created some issues just before the election. It's certainly a concern for us.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: You indicated that the Province of Newfoundland was taking that money and applying it to its debt.

Mr. Serge Buy: What I'm saying, sir, is that every provincial government is facing difficult times right now. There are pressures from public institutions not having the budgets they should have, because the government has to tighten its belt a little bit. What's the best way to basically say that the training dollars they were to apply to the private sector should be, potentially, training dollars applied to the public sector?

Far be it from me to try to attack the public sector. What I tried to say in my presentation is that it's a matter of choice. If people want to go to the private—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: To square the circle, you may want to clarify the record. That's a fairly strong accusation to say that the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador is applying money assigned through the social transfer and the education transfer to its debt.

Mr. Serge Buy: What I'm saying, sir, exactly, is that the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador may not be funding, through their own dollars, their public institutions to the same extent, because they are having financial pressures. They are taking money from the social transfers, potentially, to support other programs. I'm exactly saying what I've just said now, and I'm standing by that statement, yes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: They're paying down their debt with their social transfers.

Mr. Serge Buy: I'm saying that they've made budget decisions to take money that would have funded other issues—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: They are using money from their social transfers. Well, listen, if you want to stand by that, that's great.

After you guys do the triage on the skills assessment, is it the college's role to offer advice and try to find seats for those who need the training? Do you provide those services?

Mr. Serge Buy: Absolutely.

• (1620)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Do you also help in trying to sort of manoeuvre and work with some of the government programs? Do you also do that? I mean the internship programs or whatever might be available to them out there.

Mr. Serge Buy: Some of our members do a fantastic job helping people find training, find jobs, and find internship positions. That's the great majority of our members.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: That would vary from member to member.

Mr. Serge Buy: Yes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I think you said that social workers have a very complex role to play, and I agree wholeheartedly. I think over the last 10 to 15 years, probably even more, as challenges to become full members of society and productive members of society become more complex, there is a greater burden on professional social workers in this country.

Help me through this, because I don't know. We don't have a great deal of immigration in my community. By and large, if there's a large group of new Canadians in a particular community, do provincial agencies go out and try to seek people from within that community? Would they advertise specifically in, for example, a Tamil community? Would they go out and actively recruit Tamil social workers from the community to work with that community? Is that very common?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Leblond: Yes, absolutely. I think it would be very helpful to have more social workers from the different communities. That would be an additional contribution. They could teach Canadian social workers about their communities and help them to better understand the social phenomena that people are confronted with when they come to Canada from abroad. We very much need to better understand certain things. In the case of the current Shafia trial, we need to understand what could have happened.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Leblond.

We'll move on to Mr. Butt for the final five minutes.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here.

I'm quite interested in the career college side of things.

I will often get people coming into my constituency office.... I represent a riding just outside of Toronto, in the city of Mississauga. It's a very multicultural riding, with many new Canadians. They'll come into my office and show me their certificate or their degree, or whatever, from their country of origin and then will complain that they can't get hired in Canada.

So from the career college side, you folks will meet with these people. You'll find out that they're 80% of the way there, we'll say, and that they need to take these three courses. You'll certify that they've taken the three courses. They'll take their degree from their country of origin and your certificate, put them together, and go to one of these regulatory bodies that will issue the licence for them to actually work in Canada, whichever province that happens to be. That's basically the role of your members, to do that and get them off to the races so that they can get hired in that profession in Canada?

Mr. Serge Buy: Absolutely. We do the assessment and we look at what is needed to bridge the gap. Then we try to provide them with the training, making sure they qualify in every possible way with the requirements of the professional body.

The huge difference is that we'll do it efficiently. We'll do it quickly, as well. Instead of waiting for three years, being in school, which most of these newcomers can't afford.... They have a family to feed; they cannot be three years in school. We'll provide this in a very compressed period of time, which by the way is not supported by the federal government because it doesn't meet the 60-week requirement for the Canada student grant program.

Mr. Brad Butt: That was going to be my next question. How is the tuition typically paid? You're saying that candidates like these are not eligible for the Canada student grant program. Are they paying for it mainly out of their own pockets? Is there other funding there?

One of the things we may want to look at as a committee and potentially make as a recommendation is what role we can play in providing some assistance to people so that they can take these courses to get their skills to a certain level whereby they're recognized in Canada, and they can work.

• (1625)

Mr. Serge Buy: That is a fantastic question, and we're really hoping you will act in terms of making some recommendations on that front.

Most of those people have to get loans. It's as simple as that. And the Canada student loan program somewhat supports that process.

What concerns me is that we're all here saying that we have a problem, that we have a shortage of skilled trades, and we actually have ways to get people to quickly practise their skills and use their training. But we're saying to them, please do not attend a career college, because that will get you there quickly. Make sure you go for a two-, three-, four-, or five-year degree somewhere else, where you will spend the next number of years doing this, because we will not support you with the Canada student grant program. In my mind, this is wrong. In the minds of most Canadians, when explained, it is wrong. Your government thinks it's wrong, as well. But I think it needs to be implemented.

Mr. Brad Butt: Do I still have some more time, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: If you wish to use it.

Mr. Brad Butt: Yes. I'll go fairly quickly here.

I think you had mentioned that nursing was one of the areas. What are some of the other general areas in which your various colleges are providing these programs? We often hear about the foreign-trained doctor who's driving a taxicab. You hear these anecdotal stories—the nurse who's working as a waitress and really shouldn't

be; she should be a nurse. So are there other areas? Is it all skilled trades? Is it professions? Is it both? In what kinds of areas are you helping out people?

Mr. Serge Buy: It's both, from the IT sector to the health care sector, from pharmacy assistants to pipefitters.

What you will not see in career colleges is a three-year degree in anthropology. I don't know how many anthropologists we need in Canada. I don't think we need too many. The Canadian government will support your going for training in anthropology, but they will not support a five-month degree that will get you to bridge the gap. And this is our concern.

You see us in IT, in personal support worker services, in some health care professions, in some sectors of social work as well, in a number of sectors. You see us in different sectors of the economy, of the social network. Absolutely.

Mr. Brad Butt: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up. We thank you for your insightful presentation.

We're going to suspend for a few moments for our next panel to come forward.

• (1625)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: All right, we will recommence.

We appreciate having with us today Christopher Smillie, from the building and construction trades, and Gary Friend, from the Canadian Home Builders' Association, along with Jack Mantyla.

We will get you to each present for five to seven minutes, and then there will be a round of questions of five minutes each.

With that, please go ahead.

Mr. Christopher Smillie (Senior Advisor, Government Relations and Public Affairs, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, Canadian Office): Good afternoon, Chair, members of the committee, and fellow hostages of the committee. Jack and Gary are good folks, and I'm happy to be on a deserted island with them today.

A little bit about us: we are the Canadian building trades and represent 14 international construction unions, which in turn represent more than 500,000 skilled trade workers in Canada and more than four million in the United States. We are fully integrated with our other North American partners.

The foreign credential recognition process is an integral part of our business planning in construction. We work with the same major construction contractors on both sides of the border, who in turn do business with the same energy companies in Texas, Alberta, Cape Breton, Newfoundland, New York, and everywhere in between.

This convergence in the energy sector is not going away. I submit that Canada needs to be ready to work with our American partners to fill the needs of construction employers. If you think about it, there really is no need to go anywhere else in the world for skilled workers. We do business with large and small industrial contractors in construction that do business in both free market economies.

The North American economy is essentially fully integrated in most aspects, except for labour market policies. We have harmonized regulations for jujubes, harmonized freight labeling regulations.... In most aspects, we are fully integrated with the economy of the United States generally, except for an easy way to facilitate the movement of skilled workers involved in construction.

Today, I'm not promoting the full integration of our two labour markets. What I will do is propose a couple of solutions to the FCR process that ought to assist meet labour market demands in Canada, which is expected to peak in the very near future.

The work involved or financial resources required in assessing the qualifications of our closest neighbours will pay dividends to our country in the future. By the way, it has been forecast by the construction sector council that by 2017 we will need 320,000 new skilled trade workers in Canada, due to retirements and new economic demands. If this isn't a call to action by the committee and beyond, I'm not sure what is.

Here are my four practical solutions for the FCR process—that's what I was asked to speak about today: first, we need leadership from the Government of Canada and leadership from opposition parties; second, "red seal" exams until the cows come home; third, more occupations and trades included in the "red seal" standard; fourth, value for money in labour market development agreements.

The key players regulating the skilled trades are the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship, the Red Seal Secretariat—which is HRSDC—and the provincial apprenticeship and licensing bodies.

We need leadership from the Government of Canada and leadership from the opposition parties. What we need in construction is a coordination of these groups working in conjunction with industry, employers, and labour providers. We need the CCDA to talk to us, both as a group of directors of apprenticeship and also as the individual provincial regulator. We need them to talk to employers and help us find people. For example, in the building trades we have access to a large pool of workers in the U.S.A. There is currently no special treatment for U.S. workers in the temporary foreign worker program, mainly because we don't seem to have the

resources to come up with a matrix to examine 50 or so apprenticeship systems south of the border.

It is unclear why each of the provinces, the CCDA, and the Red Seal Secretariat haven't looked at the training systems in the U.S. and made it easy for employers and labour providers to access this pool. If a plumber from New York is qualified to work on the Empire State Building, what in heck do we need to do to have that person come to Toronto to work?

Part of the practical solution is organizing this information in one place, a one-stop shop for construction employers to figure out who to hire and from where. Armed with this information, applying to get these folks into the country through the temporary foreign worker process would be a breeze. We would know what a steamfitter from Illinois would be qualified to do and where, all before that person arrives on the six daily flights from Chicago.

Second is the red seal exams until the cows come home. What we need in construction in FCR is the red seal exam to be administered overseas on an ongoing basis, including every other week in the United States. The building trade unions in the U.S. are teaching the program in Chicago, Washington, Oregon, Michigan, and the list goes on. Why can't these folks write the exam down there before they come here? Then we have a pre-qualified pool of workers already certified to work in Canada. We need consulates, missions, and embassies working for Canadian industry in this regard as well.

● (1640)

The infrastructure is already in place. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel with my suggestions; I'm trying to be practical. We offer up our infrastructure in the United States. We have 4,000 locals in the United States to administer the exam, and if we're ever called upon, we'll do our part for the industry in Canada.

Third is more occupations and trades included in the red seal standard. We need more red seal trades, more trade to go through this process, and if Canada decides what competencies are required where, the easier it will be to determine who else in the world has these qualifications. Canada is in competition with the rest of the world to attract investment. Without a workforce to build it, we will fall behind. Talk to large energy players in Calgary about what their number one concern is. You can bet your bottom dollar it's about labour supply and it's about the ability to actually build their project.

Fourth is value for money in the labour market agreements. Labour market development agreements are a huge opportunity for the federal government to show leadership in the FCR process. These deals give the provinces money. It's basically a fully devolved decision-making process with the provinces. So the federal government writes cheques. These LMDAs make the federal government the writers of cheques only. Why not use them to shape foreign credential recognition policy?

I'm not talking about socialism. I'm not talking about tied aid from the federal government. I'm talking about how to get value for money in these labour market development agreements. We're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars that already flow between the federal government and the provinces. Let's get value for money, in capital letters, and ensure the provincial regulators are planning for their labour markets of the future. Instead of giving provincial governments carte blanche to do yet another study or another web portal, which tells us what we already know, setting a path and showing leadership on LMDAs might be a good start.

In conclusion, I hope I have provided four practical solutions to the committee.

I also want to draw the committee's attention to a 2007 Construction Sector Council study called "Foreign Credential Recognition Construction Industry Strategy". We have the strategy. It's about four or five years old. I also direct you to internationally-trainedworkers.ca. There's some excellent product put together by the construction industry.

I brought with me another study, authored again by the Construction Sector Council, for the committee's review. It outlines the suitability of 15 countries and their apprenticeship systems. No surprises in this study: the U.S. ranks first in suitability in terms of meshing our apprentice systems. I thus table this report as well.

• (1645)

The Chair: Are you just about getting at your conclusion? You should wrap up and we will receive those reports.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: Hopefully, with leadership from this committee, we can get to the actual business of bringing folks into Canada to address labour market demands. Our employers will be better for it, our unions will be better for it, and purchasers of construction, such as big oil or big energy companies, would be better for it. I would argue that this kind of thing is essential in securing the next phase of Canada's economic action plan and our permanent economic recovery.

Thank you for inviting me. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now have Mr. Friend present.

Mr. Gary Friend (Past-President, Canadian Home Builders' Association): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting us here today. I'm Gary Friend, a past president of CHBA. I'm a new home builder in Surrey, British Columbia, where I've been building custom and multi-family homes for over 25 years. With me today is Jack Mantyla, the national coordinator of education and training with the Canadian Home Builders' Association.

I should mention that we've tabled a CHBA report for the committee, "CHBA Backgrounder on Federal Policies and Regulations Related to the Immigration of Skilled Labour".

Like many industry sectors, the residential construction industry will experience serious shortages of skilled tradespeople in the years ahead. We have been experiencing shortages of labour in markets across Canada for some time. Training programs such as provincial apprenticeship programs will not be able to supply enough skilled people to meet the demand looking forward.

The nature of the residential construction industry influences our views about immigration of skilled labour.

First, many skilled tradespeople in the residential construction industry are employed under contract, whether immigrant or Canadian-born.

Second, most of the companies in the residential construction industry are small businesses. They do not have the resources on their own to address what can be a very complex and lengthy process to find and hire a skilled immigrant worker.

Third, many of the skilled tradespeople working in the residential construction industry are not recognized by the red seal program and therefore do not receive the same level of recognition in other immigration programs, such as red seal trades.

The CHBA supports the recent direction of Canada's immigration policies, including more provincial involvement and responsibility; more flexibility in the range of occupations eligible for programs, such as the provincial nominee program and the temporary foreign worker program; more responsiveness to the employer requirements, with a shift to employer determination of occupations in need; and increased opportunities to immigrate for people who work within Canada. I'm speaking of the introduction of the Canadian experience class, and the mandatory language requirement, introduced in 2010.

The CHBA has expressed support for these and other recent measures in submissions to Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

There are two issues related to recognition of foreign credentials that are important for skilled trades: first, language requirements; and, second, recognition of provincially designated residential trades.

In relation to the first point, the language requirements of the federal skilled worker category of the economic immigrants program over-emphasizes the requirements for people working in the residential construction industry. The tiered approach to language proficiency used under the Canadian experience class would be more appropriate for skilled tradespeople.

In relation to the second point, many of the trades required by our industry are provincially designated but not recognized by the red seal program. Also, some do not have the unique national occupational classification codes used by immigration programs. These shortcomings seriously limit the ability of our industry to make use of immigration programs.

I should note that we have recently written to the Forum of Labour Market Ministers to ask them to put this issue of recognition of provincially designated residential construction trades on their agenda. The CHBA believes that broadening recognition of residential construction trades beyond red seal to include all provincially designated trades is one of the most effective means by which governments in Canada can reduce skilled trades shortages and increase labour mobility in the residential construction industry.

The allocation of points for education and experience used in the federal skilled worker category for skilled tradespeople gives relatively greater weight to education over practical experience.

Arranged employment is difficult for many companies. Current immigration programs lack flexibility to accommodate a worker being employed by two or more employers.

On behalf of the CHBA, we're making the following recommendations to the standing committee about the recognition of foreign credentials:

Apply the tiered approach to language proficiency requirements used in the Canadian experience class to other programs, particularly the federal skilled worker category of the economic immigrant program.

Incorporate the issue of recognition of provincially designed residential construction trades not covered by the red seal program into the pan-Canadian framework for the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials.

We'd like to make two other recommendations. Greater consideration must be given to the work experience of skilled tradespeople in the point system ratings of the federal skilled worker category. And in order to meet the arranged employment criterion, there must be more flexibility to accommodate working for two or more employers.

● (1650)

All of these recommendations are designed to address the growing and serious shortage of skilled tradespeople in our industry.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate those recommendations and suggestions.

We'll open it up to questions, and we will proceed with Mrs. Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Thank you very much for your intervention here today. It's greatly appreciated.

Have any of you been able to tap into the foreign credentials program?

Mr. Gary Friend: In the majority of the trades, residential construction doesn't qualify under that program.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Have you tried? Have you talked to the government about the fact that you can't have access to it, and what it would mean if you could have access to it? If the program were accessible to you—you are telling me it isn't accessible—what would that mean for you?

Mr. Gary Friend: In the program, only four of 29 occupations that are recognized for federal skilled worker applicants are construction-related trades. The trades aren't even on the list, so we're not able to take advantage of it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Chris.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: On the industrial side, the trades are on the list. If a steamfitter is coming from England or Germany, they are currently assessable under the foreign skilled worker program. The 15 industrial trades we are responsible for are currently moderately well represented in the program.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: There has been a difference in the witnesses who have come. Some have said that the job we've been doing has been helping to integrate new immigrants who come to the country for whatever reason, whether it's for family, or because they asked to move here. Others are saying there are just not people going into that field.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: Sorry, I don't want to jump in, but we are talking about two silos here: permanent immigration, and temporary immigration. When we talk about permanent immigration, there's an historical issue with people in the construction trades. Say you have a four-year apprentice program from Germany and you want to move to Canada on a permanent basis. It's not treated the same way as a bachelor's degree from Germany would be treated. There's a disconnect between the permanent and the temporary systems.

In the temporary system at the current time it's not an issue, because it's used for a shorter period. But if that person wants to move to Canada.... I have to give credit where credit is due. Citizenship and Immigration Canada is changing the regulations, wherein if someone has a four-year training program that has been assessed and is recognizable from another country, they will soon be able to use that as the equivalent to a bachelor's degree in the permanent silo. That's excellent.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I will let Jean ask a question, and if there's time I will ask another question.

Ms. Jean Crowder: There seem to be two different points of view on the red seal program. I wonder if we can clarify that. I heard Mr. Smillie say that he wants to see the red seal program expanded. But I understand Mr. Friend to say that he wants provincial designations recognized, which may not meet the red seal program. Is that correct?

• (1655)

Mr. Gary Friend: Currently, some of the residential construction trades are not covered by red seal, but they are provincially designated.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Right, so you're saying you want that situation to continue. I know we're talking about residential versus industrial, and that's where it gets confusing. Can we continue to treat them separately?

Mr. Smillie, you were advocating quite strongly for an expansion of the red seal program.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: Sure, or everything should be expanded into one bucket, so at least we know what we're looking for in this country. It may be red seal or provincial buckets, but let's do things once, not eleven—

Ms. Jean Crowder: In your view, that would include residential construction, whatever that system might look like—some agreement for both the industrial trades and the residential construction trades.

Mr. Gary Friend: Residential construction is facing a severe shortage of trades, so whatever process could help us get those qualified trades to the marketplace would be a great help. The provinces recognize this, and that's why they're designating residential trades for training that aren't under the red seal.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Shortages in the trades, both industrial and residential, are not new. We've known for 15 to 20 years that we were going to suffer severe shortages.

The Chair: Okay, we'll leave it at that comment and move on to Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming today and presenting.

I'll just underscore Ms. Crowder's comments. Having been in construction for 25 years myself in the residential area, we knew about this 20 years ago, easily. It has just worsened over time.

One of the issues back in my day was interprovincial barriers that got in the way of all trades. I'd like your views from both the industrial and residential sides here. How do you view those interprovincial barriers as barriers to immigrants to come here, or to people who want to come to Canada to work in the trades? How big are those barriers, in your opinion?

Mr. Gary Friend: Residential construction is both cyclical and seasonal, so labour mobility is very important for the workers as well as the industry. Whatever we can do to reduce any barriers would be most helpful.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: On barriers to newcomers, if there's some sort of equivalency and a system is set up to examine what they have and compare it to what Canada wants, there shouldn't be barriers. If you have your red seal, you're good to go anywhere in Canada.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I'll give you a prime example, and the Ottawa builders used to bring it to our board table all the time. An electrical contractor in Ottawa could not work in Quebec, because they were not allowed to go over there and bid on work or engage in any projects on the other side of the river. But the Quebec electrical contractor and companies on the other side of the river could come over and work on any project in Ontario. Does that still exist?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: It exists in small pockets; however, there's a mechanism to deal with that now. It's a unique situation between Ottawa and Hull. To be honest, it's generally the unions that get in the way of that. It's not necessarily anything other than that.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I know I'm getting a bit off track and delving into areas that were pet peeves during my time as OHBA president.

You mentioned, Mr. Smillie, a need for 320,000 skilled trades currently in your portion of the construction industry. Do any specific categories make up the bulk of those numbers?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: There's a list of occupations under pressure produced by HRSDC and CIC. There are 13 to 16. Generally, all the trades we represent are under pressure. The categories include everything from steamfitters to boilermakers to carpenters to cement.... The list is out there. It's a public list.

Mr. Phil McColeman: There isn't one particular one that jumps out in your mind?

How about you, Mr. Friend? In the home-building industry, are there any specific trades where there are critical shortages at this time?

• (1700)

Mr. Gary Friend: If I can give my own experience, when I look across the job sites there are a lot of workers with grey hair like me. It looks like we have shortages in most of the trades, in terms of those who are aging, and we can't bring skilled workers to the job.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Again you're relating back to my experience. We had a real shortage of bricklayers and masons in southern Ontario. It was to the point of being ridiculous, because the price of laying bricks went from \$200 for 100 bricks up to \$1,200 for 100 bricks. That ended up costing the consumer, in terms of the price of the house.

I'm sure you've seen cyclical things, so as a country shouldn't we be reaching out to where there is skilled labour—maybe it's the U.K., Italy, or any other country in the world—and encourage the trades in those areas to come here to help us?

Mr. Smillie, it's good to hear you say that some of the rules and regulations are moving in that direction to simplify things, from what you've seen in the last short while.

The Chair: Give a short response, if you could, please.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: It's a fair representation. Some of the things are changing. As you're aware, the "Beyond the Border" working group between us and the U.S. is continuing, and we're trying really hard to make sure that skilled labour, during periods of shortages in either country, is on the agenda.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move on to Mr. Patry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, I want to thank you as well for being here.

Mr. Friend, you tabled a document. I see that it talks about agreements with Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, but not with Quebec. Are agreements in place with Quebec?

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Friend: Well....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry: Perhaps I can rephrase my question.

In the document you tabled, it talks about an agreement with British Columbia in 2001. There were also agreements with Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia,

Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. However, there was no mention of Quebec.

Have you signed similar agreements with Quebec?

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Friend: The document before you relates to the membership of the Canadian Home Builders' Association. Quebec is not a member of our association. It was on the perspective of our membership.

I don't know, Jack, if you have any....

Mr. Jack Mantyla (National Co-ordinator, Education and Training, Canadian Home Builders' Association): Yes, that's right.

Mr. Gary Friend: Quebec is not a member, so we don't have the up-to-date information from them to put in the document.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry: I understand. I have a second question for you. I'd like to try and understand something.

A contractor in my region—he is from The Saguenay—brought in 100 foreign welders to work in his company. I'm not sure whether it was for a year or two or what kind of mandate was associated with the project.

Did he have to go through you or is there a specific agreement in place with respect to those 100 workers?

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher Smillie: No.

If this contractor is looking for welders from inside Canada, there's a procedure. If he's looking for welders from outside Canada, there's a procedure. No, he doesn't go through us. This contractor would go to the Government of Canada and say that he can't find workers in his local area, that either he wants to bring them in from country X or he could advertise throughout the rest of Canada to try to find those folks. But if he's looking outside, yes, there's a pretty strict process that he has to go through to bring those workers in from outside Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry: I would like to know whether it is still difficult to reach agreements between provinces. For example, is it still difficult for a plumber from Quebec who works in the natural gas industry to work in Alberta on a pipeline project? Are there still issues between the provinces or have they been resolved?

[English]

Mr. Christopher Smillie: If that individual has the red seal accreditation or a ticket from Quebec, it's recognized in every province in Canada. He may have trouble getting there. He may have mobility issues, because oftentimes that money is not covered. So if he has to get on the plane himself to get out there and his employer isn't paying for it, that's a barrier. Sometimes big companies are flying people back and forth from Mr. Cuzner's riding or close to it. Suncor, Syncrude, and these big companies are so desperate that they're spending tens of millions of dollars flying people back and forth. But if this person is on his own and he has to get out there, he might have the qualifications, but he might face a financial barrier to get out there.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Patry: When you bring in foreigners to do a specific kind of work in a place where there are unionized employees, do you reach a special agreement with the unions?

[English]

Mr. Christopher Smillie: We are the unions. But usually if people are bringing in temporary foreign workers onto a construction site, there is a process where they have to indicate that there is no current labour dispute on that construction site. And if it's a unionized site, they have to notify the collective bargaining people who are in charge of providing folks to that site. So there's a notification process, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Patry: Does my colleague have any other questions?

[English]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I just want briefly to ask if there is a better way. Obviously, if there is a shortage that means that... I know that in our first nations there is overpopulation. They are the fastest-growing demographic.

Is there something the government could be doing better to ensure that Canadians are trained in order to fill some of that shortage?

The Chair: Just a brief response, from anyone who wants to respond.

Mr. Friend.

Mr. Gary Friend: I can only make the comment that my experience in my own industry and my own business is that domestic training of skilled workers is not meeting the demand that I'm facing today, and I don't see it doing it in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I see Mr. Keddy's interest has been piqued by some of the testimony here, and he'd like to take a round of five minutes.

Mr. Keddy, go ahead.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witnesses.

I'm not usually a member of this committee, but the testimony I've heard here today is quite fascinating and it raises a number of challenges that cross provincial and territorial borders and is of fairly

significant interest to me. I have a point to make, and then I have a couple of questions.

My point is that somehow in the mix across this country of ours we have allowed our youth, our kids in their formative years, when they're being educated, to think that not all work is meaningful. I think that's a fundamental societal change that we really have to struggle with and come to grips with, because all work is meaningful, and it's as simple as that.

I understand the difference between the challenges in residential construction and industrial. But your suggestion, Mr. Smillie, was on points for education over experience, or was that Mr. Friend?

I think that's an excellent recommendation. It makes a world of sense. Our red seal program works well for skilled trades because it allows transferability of skills from one end of the country to the other. It does get caught up in a little bit of jurisdictional red tape every once in a while, and that needs to be worked out. But if we're looking at foreign credentials especially, would you elaborate a bit more on that?

Part of the problem for writing the red seal test is that, number one, you can't write it just anywhere in Canada, you have to go to where the test is given. With the ability to interface with electronics today, and with computers, it shouldn't matter where you are in the country. You should be able to write that exam online or face to face with someone who is going to grade it.

Do you want to comment on that? There are two different issues there.

• (1710)

Mr. Christopher Smillie: Sure, if we can come up with a way to give more people the opportunity to write the red seal program in different ways, let's do it. As long as we can ensure the integrity of the test and the integrity of the test-giving system, let's do it. There is a practical component, so that would need to be done under supervision. But I'm with you on that.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I want to pick up on the comment about points for education over experience. In Canada you can challenge for your red seal. As long as you've worked your number of hours, you can write the exam for your red seal. Why wouldn't we allow any skilled tradesperson from outside the country the same right to simply write the test, so whether you're a welder or a pipefitter or a carpenter or a steelworker, you can challenge for your red seal?

Mr. Gary Friend: That would make sense to me. Any chance to give access to verify the trade capabilities would certainly be a help.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: I agree. I want to make sure that it's not simply the ability to pass the test, but that the candidate or the person actually has the associated competencies that are being tested. So we need to make sure that the hours are verifiable with past employers; we want to make sure those hours are comparable to Canadian hours. I don't have any issue. I promote openly that we should be offering the red seal test in the U.S. weekly, and whenever else in missions across the world.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: So we'd put a regulatory system in place. You'd have clear criteria. I think it's 6,000 hours, isn't it? Maybe it varies in different trades. So if it's 6,000 hours or if it's 8,000 hours, or if it's 10,000 hours, you have verification that those hours are legitimate. It's probably, Mr. Smillie, as you said, easier to do in the U.S. than it is in other countries of the world. First of all, you don't have that language barrier.

But at the same time, we need skilled workers and we need them wherever we turn.

The other thing Mr. Patry mentioned was the fact that Quebec is not a member of the Canadian Home Builders' Association. Those are the types of barriers that prevent skilled labour from moving. Somehow or other, surely, in this day and age when everyone's crying for skilled workers, we can find a way through this.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: It's phenomenal we can't.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Keddy. We'll perhaps take that as a comment and move on to Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Thank you all for being here.

I read my *Cape Breton Post* this morning and I saw Cliff Murphy's picture front and centre before I had my coffee in me. They just signed a big deal with the construction industry in Nova Scotia.

How have things changed? I remember driving up Route 4 in my riding and there was a big sign along Route 4 saying "Foreigners stealing our jobs", "Rodger Cuzner is making us stay home here while foreigners are stealing our jobs", and it had the IBEW stamp on it and the whole nine yards. I recall getting e-mails and phone calls from Fort Mac, where foreign workers would be on site. That maybe had a little bit more to do with CLAC and some of the union stuff.

So here we are today and you're saying that we need these workers, that industry in Canada needs these workers. Could you square it around for me? Is that a change in the philosophy of the trade unions now? What has evolved over the last number of years so that we're on this side of the argument?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: What has evolved is the striking reality that we're under contractual obligations to provide labour to employers and to large energy clients, and if we can't supply, someone else will. So the temporary foreign worker program is a supplementary HR strategy. It's not a fix-all. It's a band-aid to not bringing in the right types of people for the right number of years, or training the right number of young people 10, 15, or 20 years ago.

So that program can bridge us, but it can't solve the problems. In the trades that I represent today, last year there were 5,000 temporary foreign workers admitted to Canada to fill shortages, so it really is a

small number when you're looking at the industrial trades. It's difficult in regions of the country where folks are unemployed and don't have access to get there. If the people in your riding have the training and are really willing to go to Alberta, there's work for them. I don't say that in a derogatory sense in any way. If the people are trained up and they really want to work, there's work.

•(1715)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: The frustration, I think, comes in usually with third-year apprentices. They're saying that those opportunities are out there, and it's just this gap between being in a position to be recognized as a red seal worker. And I think the unions have probably done a pretty good job in the last five to six years to take over some responsibility in training these guys up as well.

Is that your view as well?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: That's the reality we're living in, so we've had to do that, because this is a market economy and we have contracts that say we have to provide labour to these companies.

Look, I can't speak for every member in our organization—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Yes.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: —but what I can do is give you an overall sense, organizationally, of where we're moving. It's a reality that this is here and this is here to stay until in Canada we get it right, letting in the right numbers of folks with the right qualifications or training enough of our own young people.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Regarding the back and forth with the United States, you identified that you have a number of centres down there that are now doing red seal training but that they're not allowed to test; they're not allowed to offer the exam. Where is the barrier that says they aren't allowed to do the red seal testing?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: The testing for the red seal is determined by the Red Seal Secretariat. They determine who, where, when, and why, and it is administered by HRSDC. It's an opportunity.

I know the four gentlemen who run the Chicago building trades in the greater Chicago area. They represent close to 400,000 folks in that state alone. They're currently experiencing 30% unemployment. What an opportunity for Canada to be able to say "This is what we can do as a good neighbour. We can put you to work where our industry is almost completely tapped out."

This time next year, the industrial construction sector will be at 120% employment.

The Chair: Okay, we'll have perhaps three to four minutes of questioning, simply because we'd like to break and we have some budgetary items to look at.

Mr. Daniel, you can have a few questions. Go ahead.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Just following up on this temporary worker thing, are you actually managing to fill that gap with the temporary workers? Obviously 5,000 doesn't seem to be able to cut the mustard there, really.

Mr. Christopher Smillie: It's a "just in time" system, and we're almost out of time.

When you look at the energy sector, you're looking at four or five big projects going on in Alberta, which require 10,000 folks per project. You look at Newfoundland, which has offshore oil and gas. You look at Point Lepreau in New Brunswick, which has 6,000 or 8,000 people on the ground right now.

If you look at the convergence of those things and at Ontario, which might or might not ever build a nuclear reactor, there are jobs for 10,000 people for 10 years. So if you put those things together between now and 2017 and you also look at the demographic numbers in here, you have a bomb.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Do you apply the same sort of scrutiny to the temporary workers that are coming in?

Mr. Christopher Smillie: CIC and HRSDC make the decision on these folks based on who the contractor decides they want.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Do you have a comment on that?

• (1720)

Mr. Gary Friend: The temporary foreign worker program has its criteria and requirements, and the workers have to come in under those requirements. It has had some help, I've heard from my members, but they find the program very complex, and being successful under it is challenging.

Mr. Joe Daniel: I have one last question. It sounds as though the entire government process is very cumbersome in this thing. Do you have any thoughts on maybe a one-stop-shop type of approach or anything like that to improve the process?

Mr. Gary Friend: Anything that could be done to streamline the process and make it easier to work with for workers and businesses would be very helpful.

The Chair: Thank you.

Maybe we'll close there.

Thank you, gentlemen, for a very interesting presentation. It certainly has resolved a lot of questions. We'll suspend and give you an opportunity to leave, and then we'll go in camera to deal with some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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