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—
Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (1105)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP)): I declare the third meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration in order.

Dear colleagues,

[Translation]

Thank you very much for being here with us today.

Three groups of witnesses will appear before us today in our study of a Second Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on March 21, 2013 and other measures.

In our first group of witnesses, we will hear from the Hon. Chris Alexander, M.P. and Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. The minister will have 10 minutes to make his opening remarks. Following his remarks, we will proceed with a question period.

Thank you, Minister, for accepting our invitation. You have the floor.

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to my colleagues for inviting me here today to speak about two initiatives that are very important to my department. The first concerns citizenship, in particular passports, and the second concerns our immigration programs, of which we are all very proud.

I will make a few opening remarks about these two subjects. I am also open to answering your questions.

[English]

Before I begin, let me say what a pleasure it is to be in front of your committee for the first time. It contains so many friends and colleagues who I know are as committed as I am, and as we are in the department, to making a success of our citizenship and immigration programs. I look forward to all of the opportunities we'll have down the road to continue this discussion and deepen it.

[Translation]

The transformational change that we are undertaking, particularly in our immigration programs, is very much at the heart of what I have been invited to discuss with you today.

[English]

This is not just a side issue we're discussing today. It's something that goes to the heart of the reforms we have been bringing forward for several years now. We expect these reforms to culminate in a

major watershed for Canada's immigration programs—the launch of the expression of interest, or EOI, system at the beginning of 2015.

Bill C-4 is the legislative expression of our commitment to foster prosperity and opportunity for Canadians. This is also true of the portions of the bill that pertain to the immigration system.

There is a direct link, and I think we see that link more and more clearly as the days pass between our economic success and the success of our immigration system, a system we want to be free of fraud, but also to be fast, fair, and flexible. We want to target the best and the brightest around the world, many of whom we know are interested in coming to Canada.

The rest of the world, fortunately, is enjoying recovery at one pace or another. Canada in many ways continues to lead the field, but we still have a genuine opportunity to build on our ingenuity, our immense natural wealth, our values and stability, and to use the immigration system to leverage that potential even more.

Let's be clear. The demographic pressures, the skills deficit we see in a number of areas, mean that we are relying on immigration now more than ever just to meet the current needs of the Canadian economy, never mind the future needs. There was a time when it was 20% or 30% of our labour market needs that we were meeting with our annual immigration. Now some studies are saying it's already 65% and perhaps climbing to 75%. In other words, the job, the skills deficit, the inability to find the right skilled people to fill jobs across the country, in almost every region of the country, would be even more acute if it weren't for our economic immigration.

Now let me give you a little context before commenting on EOI directly. We continue to tackle backlogs. We realize that eliminating backlogs—and that is our goal—is a prerequisite for full implementation of EOI. If we hadn't taken the actions we've taken with regard to the federal skilled worker program, and other categories, our backlogs would have grown to over 1.7 million this year and to 2.3 million in 2015.

Instead, and I know we've had exchanges on this question before, the backlogs are down to 600,000 this year, and are projected to go down to 400,000 in 2015 at the current pace. There may be other measures we can take to eliminate backlogs even faster, and I look forward to discussing some of them with you.

In the FSW, or federal skilled worker, program, if we had followed the old path—let's be honest: the pre-2006 path—the backlog would be 1 million with 10-year wait times in that program alone, growing to 2.5 million in 2015 with a 15-year wait time. Instead, the backlog is under 100,000 this year, with only a one-year wait time on average, and is estimated to go down to 10,000 in 2015. We're driving towards a just-in-time system. We're driving towards a transformation that will link our immigration programs much more closely to the changing needs of the Canadian economy and labour market.

• (1110)

That is why this new recruitment model, highlighted and carried forward in important ways in the current BIA bill, is so important. It will select immigrants based on the skills Canadian employers need. It's called expression of interest. The name is not exactly catchy, we agree. It has been inherited from other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, which launched the thinking in this regard. I welcome the suggestions of the committee about how we relabel, reconsecrate, or rebrand this program in a way that expresses all the potential we see in it.

The intent of this system as a job market recruitment model is already clear, and its goal is vitally important. It's a new way of managing immigration applications that will create a pool of skilled workers to be matched with employers and fast-tracked through the system. Our goal is to have this system in place by New Year's Day 2015, just over a year from now.

[Translation]

The most important part of this is that only the top-ranking candidates in the pool, who are identified as possible candidates by provinces, territories, employers and the federal government, would receive invitations to apply for permanent residence. There are many people who will express their interest. However, only those who are needed by employers, territories, provinces, and the federal government will be invited to apply, and the resources made available to handle these applications will correspond to the number of invitations sent out each year.

[English]

Among the many benefits of this new system is that it's faster. We are aiming to see skilled newcomers arrive here in months rather than years.

It's more effective. As I said, we will invite only the most highly qualified candidates from the pool rather than simply those who apply first, and as the system becomes known, we expect the quality of people in the pool to go up. Not everyone around the world knows how the new point system for our federal skilled worker program works.

It is very competitive and very attractive, especially, I think, for English or French speakers around the world. EOI is going to help us publicize that opportunity to a larger audience than ever before. It's also going to be more responsive to the changing labour market needs of employers. Over time, they are likely to be more skilled applicants with valid job offers and a clearer shared understanding of how their credentials translate into a Canadian context.

[Translation]

Before my time runs out, I would like to make a few brief comments on Bill C-4 and the amendments related to the transfer in responsibility for Passport Canada to Citizenship and Immigration Canada. This transfer came into effect earlier this year, two weeks after I arrived at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

Among many benefits, this transfer makes the passport program more efficient and cost-effective. As you know, CIC is responsible for determining Canadian citizenship for all people subject to the Citizenship Act. Only Canadian citizens are eligible to apply for a Canadian passport, so integrating the passport program into Citizenship and Immigration Canada is a natural fit.

[English]

In fact, Chair, I would say that a Canadian passport is one of the most tangible and prominent symbols of Canadian citizenship. It's an internationally recognized symbol.

We have a new, secure, 10-year electronic passport—the e-passport—that has been more popular than any previous product, with a million of them issued in a question of months, which shows that Canadians are travelling, Canadians want secure documents, and Canadians want them for the longer term. It's also more cost-effective to buy a 10-year document.

• (1115)

So the measures contained in Bill C-4 are there to complete the transfer of the Passport Office to Citizenship and Immigration, to make sure that it is more responsive than ever to Canadians' needs, so that we can deliver passports by as many channels as possible—mail, Service Canada, passport offices, online applications. All of that success is reflected in the very strong statistics showing the growth in the demand for the Canadian passport, which I think in recent years has gone beyond anything we dared to expect 10 or 20 years ago.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Chair. I am ready to answer questions from members of the committee.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): I would like to thank the Hon. Chris Alexander for his presentation.

[English]

I will give the floor to Mr. Lauzon for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I will share my time with Mr. Leung.

I would like to welcome the minister to the committee.

[English]

Minister, in your opening remarks you mentioned that 65% to 75% of our labour market needs for workers is coming from immigration and it's going to go even higher. I guess what we're saying here is that it's really critical that we recruit the best and the brightest.

My question is, how is this new recruitment system going to help us recruit the best and the brightest economic class immigrants that Canada can possibly get? As we know, it's very competitive on the world scene. How are we going to get the advantage through this new system?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for the great question, Guy. It's always a bit intimidating to have the first question come from your caucus, Chair, so if I don't answer it correctly, I expect to be disciplined behind closed doors on Wednesday.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Chris Alexander: The advantages are potentially huge. Let me be clear: it's a dramatic change. It has required several phases of legislative change. There will be more policies and regulations, and perhaps even more legislation we need to change before we have the ground fully set for EOI, but the main advantage that I see is that it really allows employers to benefit from direct involvement in our flagship economic immigration programs.

When we had a backlog of six, seven, going on nine or ten years for the federal skilled worker program, it was basically irrelevant to the needs of Canadian employers. They could see someone abroad they needed, but they weren't going to turn to the federal skilled worker program because what employer is willing to wait five or ten years for someone to come through the program? Even now, with a one-year wait time, it's not ideal. Most employers aren't willing to wait that long.

Under the expression of interest system, which will govern the federal skilled worker program and other programs, the time will be down to six months, and we hope to be able to go even lower in due course. That means employers will be able to look not only to temporary foreign workers, not only to the provincial nominee program, which has actually been quite nimble and quite fast in some provinces on behalf of employers, but to our flagship economic programs.

Why would we not want employers, using their industry associations, using all the fora we have for exchanging information with them, to help us recruit not only the best and the brightest, but the people with the skills we need? It's an objective fact that there are not enough welders in Canada. We have all heard it. The welders associations of Canada are quite happy to help us recruit abroad because they know that even with their best efforts to train more young men and women in Canada, they won't have enough to meet the needs of the national shipbuilding program, the energy sector, the mining sector, and so forth.

These reforms to EOI, especially as they relate to the federal skilled worker program, will put these programs much more at their service, at the service of the Canadian economy, not only large employers but potentially medium and small ones as well.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Super. You don't have to worry about caucus tomorrow.

Mr. Leung.

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Minister, it's a pleasure to have you here.

I'll follow on the question posed by my colleague. Over the weekend, I visited a company in Willowdale. Willowdale is one of the ridings with 60% of residents born outside Canada, and probably 50% or more are visible minorities. The company I visited is a company invested in by Indonesian and Chinese immigrants, entrepreneurs, but they are having a very difficult time finding the level of PhD students to be in the semiconductor design business. Often engineers who do arrive express to us their frustration in having a mismatch between the length of time it takes to immigrate and the length of time it takes to find the right job.

Perhaps you can share with us, based on your consultation with various ethnic communities, how this new expression of interest recruitment program would bridge that gap faster. As you know, in the semiconductor business you really have a life cycle of only one year from invention to production. Speed is what is needed in our fast-moving hi-tech economy.

● (1120)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for the question. It's great to have such a strong team of parliamentary secretaries on this committee and in service of this portfolio. Thanks for all your work across the board.

We all hear from immigrants who are not able to work, for one reason or another, in their chosen fields, in their fields of qualification, who were often not told when they came to Canada in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s what would be required to qualify in their field.

So we're really focusing on two major changes, and they're not fully implemented, so these will be recurring subjects I think for us in this committee to resolve this issue.

First is foreign credentials recognition, and not just Canada's recognition of the credentials that other people have, but a clear signal to any candidate for immigration, as soon as they express interest in the system in coming to Canada, that this is what they will need to do to be able to work in their field in Canada. This is the organization that will qualify them. This is the course they will need to requalify, and it will be longer, shorter, depending on the profession.

We know we have challenges in Canada. The throne speech talks about not just recognition of credentials from outside of Canada, but recognition of credentials within Canada, where we all know it can be complicated to move from province to province or territory to territory.

Secondly, it is vitally important that we reduce the waiting time for applicants. In these technology industries where specialized needs are changing month by month, a six-month waiting time is much better than a year or two years or three years. It will allow us to recruit people whose skills are in demand around the world but who right now aren't necessarily attracted to coming as immigrants to Canada because our program is not as fast and flexible as we need it to be.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Leung. Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Now we turn to Mr. Cash for seven minutes.

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, Minister. I have a bunch of questions, so forgive me if I appear or seem to be.... I don't mean to be rude; I just want to get through the list.

On what date will the criteria for applications and invitations to the EOI stream be made public?

Hon. Chris Alexander: You've seen some of the criteria already reflected in legislation that has been before the House and in this current legislation. Keep in mind that EOI is not an immigration program; it is a framework for the program that we already have and potentially for programs that we will have.

The criteria for the federal skilled worker program, the point system, changed earlier this year. It came into effect in May. It's still too early to tell.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Minister, for the criteria for this stream, the EOI stream, do you have a date when they will be made public? I understand there are other streams and there are other programs, but for this stream.

Hon. Chris Alexander: The criteria are already clear from legislation in this year's BIA and from previous rounds of legislation, but keep in mind, EOI is not a stream; it's a framework for our economic immigration. There are streams within the programs that will be governed by EOI, but what does the EOI change? There will be two phases now to immigration under each of those programs. One is the invitation phase, where people express interest and then are ranked according to the criteria of the different programs.

If you want me to go through the criteria for the federal skilled worker program, the federal skilled trades program, the provincial nominee program, the investor business program, the start-up visa, I can do that, but it would take quite a while.

• (1125)

Mr. Andrew Cash: Will any existing or new immigration streams operate under EOI other than the ones already mentioned—Canadian experience class, federal skilled workers, and federal skilled trades? Will there be other, existing streams, and do you intend on creating new ones?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We have the ability as a government to create new streams; the start-up visa for entrepreneurs, which was brought into being only in April, is one. We haven't seen the first people come through it, but it is a recent initiative. The federal skilled trades program was only announced in January. We saw the first people come through it in August, and, yes, there is an ability to propose, agree, discuss with you new immigration programs that would be governed by EOI and that would benefit from the advantages that EOI brings.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Who will inform the minister's decision on who can apply and to whom an invitation will be extended? I'm thinking here about the provinces, about employers. You've referenced employers already, but who is informing these decisions?

Hon. Chris Alexander: The invitation to apply will come from the Government of Canada; it's our program, but we have partners, we have stakeholders that we want to be part of that decision and trigger that invitation. That is why, as we have moved toward the EOI, we've had long and very substantive consultations with all the provinces and territories. They're all interested, they're all willing to try EOI, to be part of EOI, and I think many of them see it in as positive a light as we do.

As you've probably seen from the reports online and from discussions in this committee, we had intensive consultations with employers, but we have more of those to do to come to an agreement as to how we interface with them in the case of EOI. There are privacy considerations. We don't want to violate our obligations. We've included the Privacy Commissioner in our discussions at every stage to ensure we protect the information that is part of the expression of interest system. But at the same time, we want companies to be able to give us the labour market signals that are absolutely crucial for this to be able to work. Even the provinces will not play much of a role in the EOI without input from employers.

So getting that interface right with employers is absolutely crucial. We know it will be there. As you've seen from our reports, we have the general shape of how it's going to happen, but we have a lot of work to do in 2014 to articulate the details of how that interface will work.

Mr. Andrew Cash: What checks will be in place in this new system to ensure that Canadian residents will have the first opportunity at jobs in the Canadian market?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Everything we've done this year with regard to reforms to the labour market opinion system, continuing reforms both in my department and in the Department of Employment and Social Development, and reforms to the employment insurance system has been focused on ensuring that Canadians who are looking for a job are aware of the available jobs and that they absolutely have first crack at every job. Any employer who is looking to a foreign labour market without looking to the Canadian labour market is making a very serious mistake.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Thank you.

Will the EOI program interact with the existing point system, and if so, how?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes, because each immigration program has a point system associated with it, and we will carry many of these programs into 2015. You've seen the skilled workers one change.

Mr. Andrew Cash: So workers coming in through the EOI will be subject to the same point criteria.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Exactly. Someone expresses interest, they are ranked in the pool of possible candidates according to the point system of the different programs, and then on the basis of government and private sector needs we identify in Canada, the right number is invited to apply. They will be the ones who have the most points under each program.

Mr. Andrew Cash: Will the EOI system interact with the temporary foreign worker program?

• (1130)

Hon. Chris Alexander: It will interact to the extent that temporary foreign workers and students in Canada are already a major source of immigration to Canada. People apply, not just from the live-in caregiver program, but from other temporary foreign worker streams to be skilled tradespeople, skilled workers, especially to enter Canada under the provincial nominee program.

So yes, there is a very direct connection, but these are different programs. The temporary foreign worker program is not in itself an immigration program, but it can bring people to Canada who then choose to apply to immigrate.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Cash.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. McCallum, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, Minister.

I noticed in your opening comments that you talked about declining backlogs, and you mentioned again about the average waiting time being a year, which is also what you said in the House two weeks ago. But if you go to the home page of your own departmental website and click on “processing times”, it gives you all the waiting times for each category as of now. There you will find that for parents and grandparents, for entrepreneur class, and for investor class the waiting times are in excess of five years. For live-in caregivers, it's in excess of three years. For every category, it's in excess of one year. So how, when your own website on the home page says all that, you can possibly say it's one year is beyond me.

Related to that, in the House at that time, a couple of weeks ago, you said my facts were wrong when I said that the waiting time for family class increased from an average of 13 months in 2007, when the Conservatives were in power, to 34 months in 2012—almost a tripling when the Conservatives were in power. The waiting times for the Chinese, for example, went from 7 months to 39 months over those same five Conservative years. You talk about declining backlogs and you talk about one year, but the facts of the matter, from your own website, are totally contrary to that, with huge increases in waiting times over the last five years and with very long waiting times, which cause great pain to new Canadians as of this moment.

That's just to correct the record. That's not my question.

My question is about your EOI system and the fact that you're not going to allow for any consultation on this. It was confirmed by your

officials that the ministerial instructions will be released for public comment before they become official. I would argue that the devil is in the details, and there is some advantage to be had in a period of public consultation. I would mention the Canadian experience program. Again, that was sprung on people with no consultation. It left thousands of foreign students and temporary foreign workers in the lurch who thought they had a chance to stay here. Now they don't. There was no consultation.

My question is, why do you spring this on people without affording commentators, third parties, the opportunity to make their comments, which might lead to an improvement in the program?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We have absolutely no intention of ending consultation, of doing anything other than reinforcing consultation with regard to the expression of interest system. That's why we're here today to discuss this legislation.

Hon. John McCallum: But that's not my question. Why are you releasing the ministerial instructions without a prior opportunity for experts to see them in advance and to offer opinions? It's not to come here and talk to us before we know what they are, but rather to release them in advance so that experts can make comments, possibly leading to improvements.

Hon. Chris Alexander: It's because the ministerial instructions are based on legislation that you enact, which this committee and our Parliament of Canada enacts. The whole EOI system, which, yes, will need to be implemented on the basis of ministerial instruction, and various immigration programs adjusted on the basis of ministerial instruction, is subject to very elaborate public consultation.

I've only been the minister for four months, but we have been discussing EOI in round tables, in public, in consultations, in speeches across the country, and we look forward to doing it in the media. We look forward to doing that on a continuous basis. Officials have been having very detailed consultations with the provinces and territories. We continue to be in touch with employers. All of you are welcome to be part of those consultations when they happen, but—

• (1135)

Hon. John McCallum: That still doesn't answer my question.

Hon. Chris Alexander: On the question of backlogs, if I can just give you 30 seconds of reply, it is a one-year waiting time for the federal skilled worker program—I've said it in the House, I will repeat it here—and it's close to that on our website. It will go even lower as we implement EOI.

With regard to parents and grandparents, I have never pretended that it was one year. It is several years for parents and grandparents, but it has come down under this government—

Hon. John McCallum: It has not.

Hon. Chris Alexander: —from an extremely high level, and it disturbs me to hear Liberal members, including you, continue to deny these basic facts. It was a much larger backlog when we took office. It is smaller now, and we are allowing a huge number of parents and grandparents, a record number, to enter.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

Hon. John McCallum: Can I add one question?

The Bloc is presenting a bill to take Quebec out of multiculturalism. Will you support that?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, both of you.

Mr. Wallace, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): I do find it a little bit rich that our Liberal colleague here talks about how the devil's in the details. He's supportive, in principle, of EOI, but the devil's in the details. His leader goes out and criticizes the program without knowing any of the details. He should look in his own backyard to express those concerns he seems to have today. We will be hearing from stakeholders at these meetings, even in the next hour.

I have two questions, though, before I share my time with Mr. Weston.

We're not the first in the world to implement this program. I believe Australia and New Zealand have it. What are we doing that differentiates ourselves from them? They're competitors. Have we learned anything from their experience?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Those are excellent questions.

We are learning from their experience. We are increasing the scale of this initiative beyond the smaller scale of those two countries. By definition, our EOI will be different because we have different immigration programs. As I say, it's a framework for our existing programs. Our programs will change, but they're not going to change dramatically as we approach January 1, 2015. Our immigration will remain different from theirs.

What is the competitive advantage? We are going to be faster. And I hope that, with time, more of our immigration—which is already rising—will be driven by online applications, by electronic processing. We'll have to do that if we're going to meet the sixth-month timeline. That's the main competitive advantage that Australia and a few others have had over us—the processing times. We've had backlogs and they haven't.

The other advantage we have is the strength of our economy. EOI will only work and economic immigration will only continue to be successful if there are jobs and if we have the strong and in many ways unique position that Canada has in the world today, with its potential recognized, with its financial system highly rated for

stability, and with whole sectors developing on a scale that few other countries can boast.

But this brings us back to the issue of what the Liberals are really saying on immigration. I think it is disturbing, because we've heard it from their leader and we've heard it from their critic. They express concern that we are focusing so much on economic immigration. Since when has Canada ever had a period in its immigration when we didn't want the people coming here—our ancestors, our friends and colleagues, our neighbours—to work when they got here? That is what immigrants themselves want. That is why they come, to contribute to our economy. Yes, they come to bring their culture and benefit from great cities and great communities, but they want to work. They want to support their families, they want to contribute, and they want to practise their professions. That has already been the story of Canadian immigration, and we want it to continue to be that.

It's disturbing when anyone around this table or in the House says there is the Canadian economy here and its needs on one hand, but we want immigration to be something separate from that. The logic of that just doesn't add up, I think, in the eyes of most Canadians.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): You have one minute, Mr. Weston.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I have done a lot of research, and I would have a suggestion for you. I would like to suggest a name for this program, so that we can distinguish our program from other programs. It would be as follows:

[*English*]

“Canada: finding the right job in the right place.”

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

Over the last few years, a lot of money has been invested in the Foreign Credential Recognition Program. We know that there are maybe 43 employment categories in each province, each with its own office, which means that there are roughly 430 offices for the entire country. How will this new program help solve this problem? How will it help prevent tragic situations where immigrants arrive and look for subsistence jobs and not rewarding jobs?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Minister, a very brief response, please.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you for your question, Mr. Weston.

I can see from your mastery of the French language that francophone immigration is alive and well in British Columbia.

How will we proceed? We will make the system more responsive. We will immediately identify the expertise that Canada needs and we will invite people to come in less than six months. We will work with Jason Kenney and his Department of Employment and Social Development to make sure that the skill sets we use in Canada are relevant to our modern economy. The categories from the 1970s and the 1980s are not necessarily relevant to the needs of our high-tech companies in 2013. We need to modernize everything.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): I would like to thank the minister and his team for appearing before us today to speak to the bill that we are studying.

I would now like to ask our next guests to be seated at the table. We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

- _____ (Pause) _____
- _____

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): The committee hearing has now resumed. We have a full agenda and it is important that we not waste any time so that we can fully benefit from the witnesses who have accepted to appear before us today.

We have until 12:20 p.m. to hear from our second group of witnesses, which includes a representative of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright, Director of Skills Policy, and a representative from Engineers Canada, Mr. Gordon Griffith, Director, Education. Thanks to both of you.

We would like to have a full round of questions so that each member of the committee can ask their questions.

As you have been informed, you have six minutes to make your opening remarks. Ms. Anson-Cartwright, you have the floor.

- (1145)

[English]

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright (Director, Skills Policy, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): Hello. Thank you for this invitation to appear on behalf of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. I am Sarah Anson-Cartwright, director of skills policy. I am pleased to provide the Canadian chamber's comments on the expression of interest system, which is the subject matter of clauses 290-293 of Bill C-4.

The Canadian chamber supports these amendments and welcomes the new expression of interest, or EOI, system. We believe it will improve Canada's selection of skilled immigrants to meet our labour market needs, and it will improve immigrants' economic and employment opportunities in Canada. There will be both efficiencies and a competitive advantage to Canada by introducing an EOI system. The research is clear that immigrants who arrive in Canada with a job offer in hand fare better economically, and in terms of employment, than those who do not.

In a 2012 report for the Maytree Foundation, authors Naomi Alboim and Karen Cohl write:

There are clear advantages to involving employers up front especially if it results in a good job that matches the immigrant's skills and expertise. An evaluation of the Federal Skilled Worker Program shows that those who arrived with validated offers of employment were the most successful immigrants within that program. Similarly, an evaluation of Provincial Nominee Programs shows that provincial

nominees achieve positive and immediate economic advantages because most already have employment or employment offers.

By introducing an EOI system to programs in the economic stream, the advantage of employer nomination and other criteria for longer-term goals can be realized.

This year the Canadian Chamber passed a policy resolution on the EOI system. The resolution mentioned several key benefits to employers with the system, but it also recognizes the broader context for considering permanent residence by noting that "A demand-driven process will still require attention to other aspects of economic immigration".

For example, the location of employment should still be combined with availability of settlement services for immigrants wherever possible. In addition, it's important that candidates are aware of the state of the local economy where they may work, including availability of housing and the cost of living relative to wages.

The resolution recommends:

That the federal government, working in concert with provincial and territorial governments, ensure that the new Expression of Interest system for immigration:

1. Be expedient, responsive, and efficient in identifying regional labour needs and in processing applications from both employers and potential workers to meet those needs.
2. Be open to third parties including, but not limited to, international recruitment firms, immigration lawyers and industry groups, which are acknowledged by the Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultants and/or provincial regulatory boards.
3. Encourage regional distribution based on skills and population needs.

The EOI system will apply to programs for permanent residency. The government will set the standards and the program criteria, not the employers. The government will be vigilant in preventing fraud in the system. There will be an opportunity for eligible employers to review candidates and to track the best prospects to Canada with job offers. These immigrants will help Canada meet its skills needs. These immigrants will benefit from better economic success by arriving with an employment offer.

Overall, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce believes the EOI system will be a valuable tool to Canada to be more efficient and effective in the competition for the foreign talent we need.

Thank you, and I welcome your comments or questions.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you very much.

Mr. Griffith, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Gordon Griffith (Director, Education, Engineers Canada): Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Gordon Griffith and I am the director of education with Engineers Canada.

Engineers Canada is the national body that represents the 12 provincial and territorial regulators of the engineering profession.

[Translation]

These regulators are responsible for licensing over 260,000 engineers in all fields across Canada.

• (1150)

[English]

The regulators help keep Canadians safe by making sure that licensed engineers are held to the highest standards of engineering education, professional qualifications, and professional practice. I will focus my remarks on clauses 290 to 293 of Bill C-4 regarding changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act with respect to the proposed expression of interest system.

More than 20% of professional engineers in Canada have been trained internationally. Our constituent associations process about 5,500 applications annually from immigrants. This is among the highest number for regulated professions. Obviously the question of how to efficiently assess and license engineers educated overseas has been top of mind for our members. As a result, the engineering profession has shown leadership in foreign credential recognition and continues to innovate in the areas of assessing credentials and undertaking the core activities required for licensing.

Alongside the interest of internationally educated engineers coming to Canada to practise, our sector, like so many others, is facing a looming skills shortage and a skills mismatch. A high number of retirements are expected in the period of 2011-2020. Some estimates indicate that approximately 95,000 engineers could fully or partially retire. Today, there are approximately 60,000 undergraduate students in accredited engineering programs across Canada. These graduates will somewhat help to address the shortage. Our 2012 labour market study reveals that in most jurisdictions there will be shortages of engineers with five to ten years of experience or specialized skills, while new graduates from engineering programs may have difficulty finding jobs. There will be an estimated 16,000 new engineering jobs. Recruiting into the profession will require focused attention by regulators, employers, academia, and governments.

The expression of interest system will, in our view, help bridge the gap for those employers looking for experienced engineers with specialized skills. The one concern we have with the expression of interest system is protecting the ability of regulated professions to keep Canadians safe. The high standards for entry into the engineering profession are in place to protect the public interest. Engineering is integral to so much of what makes Canada a desirable place to live: safe and clean water, reliable infrastructure and transportation networks, and research and development in everything from biomechanics to environmental engineering. Our high standards should remain intact.

In order to help support the work the federal government is undertaking toward the expression of interest system, the engineering profession is looking at how best to assess international engineering graduates prior to their arrival in Canada. We want to do what we can to help individuals with the right qualifications to be as license-ready as they possibly can be before arriving. This includes leading the way toward best practices for engineering regulators; developing a competency-based assessment process for assessing work experience; and developing a Canadian framework

for licensure, a dynamic model of regulation that will enhance their ability to regulate the practice of professional engineering to better serve and protect the public interest.

Engineers Canada believes there is value for the economy and value for the engineering profession in better engaging employers in the immigration process and in making sure that those with the skills needed most are moved through the immigration process efficiently. We have been pleased to be part of the consultations on foreign credential recognition, the federal skilled worker program, and the round tables held around the expression of interest system, and we look forward to continuing to lend our expertise. A modern responsive immigration system will better integrate immigrants into our economy and society.

[Translation]

By working with the federal government, we can avoid delays for candidates, for regulators, for the government, and for potential employers.

[English]

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I will be happy to answer any questions.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Griffith.

Now we'll go to our questions round. Mr. Menegakis, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and for your presentations.

My first question will be to you, Ms. Anson-Cartwright. In a previous meeting, this committee heard from Department of Citizenship and Immigration officials who stated that the key objectives of the new EOI system, this recruiting system, is to improve application management and reduce processing backlogs, to increase the labour market responsiveness of the immigration system, and to strengthen the provincial, territorial, and employer role.

Would you expand on how this new recruitment model will change the employer role?

• (1155)

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Menegakis.

It's absolutely critical that we keep in mind two aspects of this. On the one hand, there's the timeliness and efficiency of processing immigrants to come, and on the other hand, it's the fact that we're talking about permanent residency and there are certain obligations and expectations that we need to keep in mind.

From an employer point of view, when one does identify a candidate, a foreign-trained individual overseas that you'd like to recruit into a job, obviously there's a timeliness and an efficiency consideration. We're very much encouraged that we would be looking at, potentially, six months, but ideally less than six months, as other systems in Australia and New Zealand have achieved—shorter timeframes for that processing once an individual has been offered a position. The timeliness is absolutely critical, because we're not achieving that. As mentioned previously by the minister and others, the federal skilled worker program, for example, is not perhaps as useful a recruitment program to employers when they're seeking foreign-trained individuals, once they cannot find Canadians or others in the domestic labour market.

On the other aspect of recognizing that this is permanent residency we're talking about, there are concerns from our members that everything needed to be done in terms of due diligence around the employer is at the back end of that system. We're very mindful that there are obligations, and those have to be fully adhered to.

I think there's huge scope in allowing employers to have an opportunity to look at candidates who have expressed interest in coming to Canada, who have passed the first round of criteria that are required, and make that assessment as to whether in fact they would meet their needs.

Thank you.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much.

Mr. Griffith, Diana MacKay, from the Conference Board of Canada, recently said this about the EOI system:

The introduction of the Expression of Interest system represents an important opportunity for employers needing people with advanced skills and for communities seeking to attract new citizens to access—quickly and at low cost—the full pool of 250,000 newcomers to Canada each year. If employers take up the opportunity, the new system will dramatically improve Canada's competitiveness.

That's what she said.

Since the engineering sector is an incredibly highly skilled sector that has a need for employees, let me digress a little bit by saying that this past summer I attended a round table discussion in Edmonton with the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce. We heard a lot about acute labour needs in that region of the country. There was one company there that said that if they could find them they would hire 1,500 engineers the next day. They simply could not find them.

Can you comment on how this program will specifically benefit the engineering sector in Canada?

Mr. Gordon Griffith: Absolutely. Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, our intent is to push as much as we can in the licensing process overseas, so they will have met certain of the criteria for licensure at the same time as meeting the criteria for immigration. That will reduce the amount of time that people would actually need to take to be recognized and get their licences when they do come to Canada. It involves ensuring that their academic qualifications are assessed and accepted, and with our proposed competency assessment model, their work experience would be assessed in a different manner to how it's done today,

where it's more time-based—four years of experience meeting certain criteria.

So I think there's great value in ensuring that those individuals who have the specialized skills and have met those criteria will have also been able to have part of the criteria for licensure completed as well and be able to get into the workforce that much faster.

• (1200)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

My question is for Ms. Anson-Cartwright. In its publication “Canada's Labour Market Puts in a Strong Performance in 2012”, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce stated that more than half—53.1%—of recent immigrants had university degrees compared to a quarter of the Canadian-born population, but still the unemployment rate for recent immigrants with a university degree was five times higher than that of someone born in Canada.

Can you elaborate on how this recruitment model will improve these rates and ensure that educated immigrants have jobs when they arrive here?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): There's time for a 20-second answer.

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the research is very clear in the evaluations of the federal skilled worker program and the provincial nominee program. If immigrants come with a job offer waiting for them upon their arrival, their economic and employment outcomes are far better. Those immigrants who come and then have to seek employment have a different experience and outcome, and it has not been as good a record in terms of their outcomes over the course of their time in Canada. They do eventually catch up, but—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you very much. I have to stop you here.

[Translation]

Ms. Ayala, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): I would like to thank the witnesses for being here with us today.

We are talking here about a more responsive and efficient system that truly meets the economic needs of the country. Employers will be able to indicate which candidates will best meet their needs.

At what point do you feel you should be included in the system? You will make an expression of interest, but will you play a role in the selection of the best immigrants? In other words, will you have an influence on whether or not immigrants are accepted as permanent residents? Is my question clear?

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: Yes. Thank you very much, Ms. Ayala.

[English]

If I could answer in English, with your indulgence, I think there are a couple of things to bear in mind. There will be a first round of criteria that applicants will have to meet before they will be made available for review by an employer. I'm not absolutely certain what those criteria will cover, beyond what we've seen, but let's assume they are these various human capital criteria. Those are important indicators. The employer then will be looking at those individuals vis-à-vis their qualifications under whichever program they are looking to come through.

There is a set of criteria and there's a ranking, I assume, that will be applied. So it's not only the employer who will be looking at and assessing individuals. There will be a number of other assessments that will be made by virtue of the government's role through the programs and the system itself.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala: Yes, but how will the employers and their future employees get in touch with one another? Will this only be done through paper documents, or will you interview these people? This could be done using Skype, which is a different way of proceeding.

[English]

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: Yes, absolutely.

As I understand it, when an employer who is eligible to look at the pool of candidates who meet the first round of criteria sees somebody they are interested in, they could then pursue the usual job interview recruitment process. At the point that the employer makes a job offer and it's accepted by that candidate, that would then potentially trigger the government inviting that individual to apply for permanent residency. The second stage of the system would be triggered on the acceptance of a job offer.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala: I am concerned about something. In Australia, there appears to be a kind of sponsorship happening. As soon as an employer offers a job, they also take responsibility for the new employee. I don't know how things will unfold here in Canada. You said that someone may be recruited to work in the Far North. However, if they have children, there is no school for them there. Who will meet the needs of that individual so that their settlement goes smoothly? The arrangement should not only be advantageous for the employer. The newcomers have to be able to settle with their families and adapt to their new situation.

My other concern is about working conditions. Everyone is familiar with working conditions in Canada. It's a public matter. However, do the working conditions suffer when the relationship is between the employer and an individual who is elsewhere? What happens if the individual gets here and realizes that their colleagues are earning more than they are? What happens? I am also concerned about that.

I worry that people will be hired at a lower salary because they are coming from outside the country. But once they get here, they may realize that others have better working conditions. Can you assure us

that those individuals will have the same working conditions as individuals from here, in Canada?

[English]

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: If I understood, I think we perhaps have two questions within what you asked.

One was with respect to the quality of the employment offer. Again, I think that is the due diligence the government will do in concert with the employer saying they have made a job offer. I assume the legitimacy of the job offer would be under the same review, or something similar, to the arranged employment offers that are currently reviewed under the federal skilled worker program. So there is a responsibility.

We are very mindful that employers are members. We are the largest business association. Our members are very concerned about legitimacy. It doesn't serve any of us if employers abuse or are not acting appropriately under the laws and regulations as expected.

With regard to working conditions, again, these are permanent residents, and there should be every understanding that they will have every opportunity, every recourse, if they feel there is something unacceptable or inappropriate with their working conditions. They are subject to provincial regulations. They are subject to various laws. These are all within the ambit of what the employer must abide by. It's absolutely critical that the new immigrant be well versed, and I think there's a lot of attention paid to that.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala: My question is to you both. Have you undertaken any evaluation of the economic improvements that this new system will provide? In other words, will this new system improve the economy? Have you undertaken any forecasts?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): A short answer, please.

Mr. Gordon Griffith: The engineering profession hasn't had any forecast, but if an individual is more licence-ready when they come to Canada, they'll be able to become part of the labour market a lot sooner and be an active member. I think the time that is saved by ensuring that they are licence-ready when they do come will assist them.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): I am sorry Ms. Ayala, but your time is up.

Mr. McCallum, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

Welcome to the witnesses.

First of all, Ms. Anson-Cartwright, our concern is not so much the fact of the new proposal as it is the apparent lack of consultation in developing the details of it. When new government regulations come into effect, before they are in effect there is a period of consultation and input from various experts, whereas in this case the ministerial instructions will be issued without prior consultation.

I think we saw problems here with the Canadian experience class when the rules were changed abruptly and many people were left in the lurch. There is always the possibility of improvement.

My question to you is this. Would it not be better for there to be some sort of draft of these ministerial instructions so that input could be provided by your members and others, rather than their just being announced all at once?

● (1210)

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

We're very interested in details, absolutely. But I have to say that I think any organization, be it the Canadian Chamber of Commerce or any company that takes an interest in these types of changes in our immigration system, has found a completely open door at the department or in the minister's office to inquire and explore. Whether or not it's formal and public, there certainly has been consultation, and I think it continues. It will have to continue because we're looking at just over a year from now for the program to actually be launched and available.

So there is a great deal of work still to do and a great deal of consultation that I would expect would have to take place to make sure that the stakeholders involved and interested in this system will in fact see a system that works for everyone.

Hon. John McCallum: Well, yes, there is consultation, and the minister said today that he is consulting with us. That's one form of consultation. But my question is whether it would not be a good idea for you and your members to have the opportunity to examine those ministerial instructions in draft form and perhaps provide input prior to their becoming the law of the land.

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: We always appreciate those opportunities to see anything in draft form. It's...

Hon. John McCallum: But my point is that you're not going to see it in draft form, and my question is whether it would not be better if you did.

Ms. Sarah Anson-Cartwright: Well, I think what's at issue is whether we will have as good an understanding of how this system will work with programs, in the interests of employers and others who are interested in it. The amount of detail that can be shared in discussions in various meetings and so forth is important to inform our organization and our members so that we have as good an understanding of what might then be reflected in the ministerial instructions.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Griffith, I had a meeting with a couple of members of your organization, and I very much admire the proactive way in which you're seeking to improve the information flow and the workings of the credential system. As you know, for many years this has been a huge issue for newcomers. They come here as the proverbial stereotype of a Ph.D. driving a taxi, or an engineer driving a taxi.

As you know, the federal government doesn't control this issue; it's in provincial hands. How do you think new immigrants would be appraised of the system and know what they have to do prior to arriving in Canada?

Mr. Gordon Griffith: We have had a number of projects funded by the federal government over the years. The first one was the From Consideration to Integration project, which was initiated in 2002. It brought together the stakeholders from academia, employers, and immigrant-serving agencies to make changes that would help to ensure the timely licensure of international engineering graduates.

From that initiative, there have been a number of additional spinoff projects. Some are specific for use by our provincial regulators in the licensing process—for example, an international institutions and degrees database that helps the assessment agents review the academic qualifications of new immigrants. We also have our labour market study, as I mentioned previously.

As well, in January of this year we launched our international engineering graduate roadmap website, which we call a one-stop shop that provides information to people thinking of coming to Canada and working in the engineering profession.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Griffith. The time is up.

Now we're turning to Mr. Goldring for approximately five minutes.

● (1215)

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much.

Mr. Griffith, I'm rather new to this committee, but to lead from a comment made earlier, I find it rather notable that there's such a need for engineers. Coming from Edmonton myself, to hear that 1,500 engineers could be hired tomorrow strikes me as being rather dramatic. I would think of your earlier comment that there are some 60,000 engineering students in school at present. Have there been efforts made to ramp this up to let people in Canada know?

I'm thinking of my own children, who took a B.A. in history and couldn't get a job. Many other people are taking poli-sci courses, and where are they? In other words, if there's such a requirement for engineers, I would think that would be information that my children and other people's families and children would want to know about as a priority to look towards if they have an interest in getting employment after they finish university. That's one part to it.

The other part to it would be more in regard to the question of entertaining international credentials. Are you able to accept them at face value, or is there such a thing as degrees of acceptability of foreign credentials? The little I know about the engineering field is that many engineers have to certify plans, projects, and whatever, so you would certainly want somebody who has the full acceptability of credentials. So when you're looking at engineers...understandably, many engineering firms have minor areas of employment. It used to be that they would be the draftsman on the table or whatever. Yes, they have an engineering degree, but they're not given the high-priority job or the job with a high level of expertise.

Are you entertaining them on degrees of acceptability or at face value on the certification from the foreign institution itself?

Mr. Gordon Griffith: I'll respond to the first part about the perceived shortage. The term "engineer" is a broad term, as you may well be aware. I think we have about 21 different recognized disciplines of engineering, so there are different types of engineers.

As our labour market study shows, it's very regional and very discipline-specific in regard to the types of engineers for which there will be shortages. So on the fact that in one location, in Edmonton or Alberta, they could hire 1,500 engineers, what types of engineers are they referring to? There are a lot of details there that we'd need in order to respond appropriately to those types of questions.

Our labour market study forecasts out until 2020. It highlights where the deficiencies or the shortages will be regionally in Canada, as well as in what disciplines. That would be a good guide for new students in choosing which program they would study in university.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So there's an effort to ramp up this need, and obviously if you're seeking outside of the country, you have a need in this country.

Mr. Gordon Griffith: That's correct.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So it's to ramp up the knowledge of that or advertise for more people to seek these types of engineering degrees.

Mr. Gordon Griffith: On your second question about the recognition of foreign credentials, there are various levels of acceptance that we currently have, and it's spawned from international agreements, as the top, I would say. There's an agreement that recognizes accreditation systems. The accreditation system that Canada has is equivalent to the accreditation systems in 14 other countries around the world, so graduates from those accredited programs in those other 14 countries would be accepted at almost face value to what a Canadian education would provide.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Griffith. I'm sorry, but the time has expired.

We now need to welcome our next group of witnesses, but once again, Mr. Griffith and Madam Anson-Cartwright, thank you very much for accepting our invitation today.

The meeting will be suspended for a minute to welcome our next witnesses.

Thank you.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•
• (1220)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): We will resume the committee's meeting with our third group of witnesses.

I would like to begin by welcoming Mr. Richard Kurland, policy analyst and lawyer, appearing as an individual. We also have with us [*English*]

Merit Nova Scotia, Michael Kydd, president.

[*Translation*]

Thank you both for having accepted our invitation.

As agreed, you will each have six minutes for your opening statements. We will then move on to questions.

Mr. Kurland, you have the floor.

Mr. Richard Kurland (Policy Analyst and Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

It's always an honour and a pleasure to be here. Knowing time is short, I trust I won't use my entire six minutes.

This system is exciting in terms of potential. The creation of pools of applicants was a dream 10 to 15 years ago. Some improvements can be made at this stage, and I'll get to them, but in principle, an employer-driven, flexible selection system will work for Canada strategically in the long run. It may well be a model for other countries to adopt.

There are some technical issues that we should be aware of. First, I think we should seriously contemplate an upgrade within Canada. We need an explicit, regulatory umbilical cord to HRSDC to make this work properly.

The current information-sharing agreements between HRSDC and CIC are inadequate for the expression of interest program. An explicit statement allowing information sharing between HRSDC and CIC will facilitate implementation.

Along the same line, a limited information-sharing exchange with the Canada Revenue Agency is needed. Why burden Canadian employers with paperwork regarding their financial capability to hire someone when we already have a corporate tax return that can illustrate the health of the business?

Financial statements will require highly experienced, expensive public servants to make this determination. Do we really have to go there?

The last information exchange upgrade would be international. We ought to seriously contemplate an explicit regulatory information-sharing arrangement with our sister countries, such as New Zealand and Australia. Why not build a global pool of talent?

If Canada has a supply of skills, we have learned on the free trade side that free trade builds economies. The same principle applies equally to the free trade of skills internationally.

I will end my opening remarks.

In my view, there is a fundamental weakness in the design of the expression of interest system. I have an issue in that I'm challenged by the preamble of our Constitution that reflects fundamental Canadian values. The preamble of the charter makes reference to the rule of law.

The traditional Canadian oversight of our immigration system has taken a back seat to the expression of interest system, because, let's face it, we are creating a "wizard's curtain" around the selection of immigrants. People unseen, and frankly unaccountable, will make the selection of one out of every five immigrants coming to this country. It is a step back in time, decades, where discretion that's not supervised will select immigrants to this country. It is a marked step backwards from the 1976 objective point system where you knew in advance whether you were in or out, based on your skills.

Having said that, I'm okay with moving forward with an expression of interest system as long as we have our traditional Canadian safeguards and do it cost-effectively.

• (1225)

I would recommend independent oversight by a kind of data ombudsperson who would by regulation be allowed to access every facet of the expression of interest system, including real-time access to management reports. This would ensure that selection rules are applied fairly and consistently. Reporting on proposed systemic modifications to the standing committee should be done semi-annually. This might well address the criticisms directed at the expression of interest system by others who may appear before you. It's something that would protect the Canadian public and counter-balance the power of public servants.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you very much, Mr. Kurland.

Mr. Kydd, you have the floor.

Mr. Michael Kydd (President, Merit Nova Scotia): Thank you.

Good afternoon, committee members. I bring greetings from the beautiful province of Nova Scotia as well as from Merit Canada's national president, Terrance Oakey.

Merit Canada was established in 2008 as a united national voice for eight provincial open-shop construction associations. Its 3,500 member companies directly employ over 60,000 Canadians, and its member organizations administer the largest multi-employer benefit program in Canada's construction industry.

Over the next decade, Canada's construction industry will have to attract at least 320,000 workers or face serious shortages in the labour supply. While the industry is dedicated to training and recruiting Canadians for the construction industry, it has become clear that this strategy itself will not suffice.

It will be necessary to augment the human resources of the construction industry by having immigrants with the required skills and experiences. However, current immigration regulations disproportionately favour immigrants with academic qualifications and give insufficient weight to professional skills and achievements. As a result, less than 0.2% of immigrants admitted each year into Canada are skilled construction workers or construction industry professionals, even though the construction industry employs more than 8% of Canada's labour force.

When I first heard Minister Kenney publicly comment on the expression of interest model adopted by Australia and New Zealand,

I knew our industry was about to change for the better. While Merit supports more unemployed skilled Canadians filling jobs in high-demand sectors across the country, we recognize the importance of a more efficient and productive system that will better screen, process, and mobilize foreign workers who possess the skills Canadian companies require.

The fact is that jobs are available and employers cannot find skilled workers to fill these jobs. It is estimated that Alberta will need 115,000 additional workers in skilled trades over the next 10 years. In Nova Scotia—and while this may seem elementary compared with the aggregate data—we will need to fill 7,000 construction jobs over the next decade. In a declining population of fewer than one million people, you can imagine the Herculean effort it will take to fill this need, especially when we start building Canada's next fleet of naval ships.

Nova Scotia must accomplish this with the highest percentage of seniors in the country, 16.8%, and a net international migration of only 122 immigrants as of July 2013. Interprovincial net migration of people is also a concern. For 11 of the last 15 years, when net interprovincial migration has been negative, it has been negative for 14 years for the 15 to 19 age group, and it has always been negative for the 20 to 29 age group. We need to get younger, stronger, and better trained. The expression of interest model will help in that process.

For this reason, Merit Canada supports the expression of interest model. We believe the program will improve the quality of skilled workers through its pre-application stage followed by an application by invitation to the best candidates. These candidates will provide vital information about their skills and experience, and they will be ranked, sorted, searched, and processed in an expedited manner.

We know that the current criteria for assessing economic-class immigrants are heavily weighted towards managerial, professional, or entrepreneurial skills and education, as opposed to technical or trade-related skills and education that might be in greater demand. For example, to gain the maximum 25 points in the educational component of the point system requires a Ph.D. or master's degree and at least 17 years of full-time study. In comparison, an applicant with apprenticeship training and at least 12 years of full-time study would be awarded only 12 points.

We know applicants to the skilled trades program will not have to meet the criteria of the point system used for the rest of the federal skilled worker category. It is expected that the new program will instead give weight to applicants who have a job offer in Canada, can prove they recently worked in the trade, and can show that their occupation falls within the federal trade classification system.

The EOI model will do a much better job of involving employers in selecting the immigrants we need as permanent residents so they can come here with jobs prearranged.

We know that some prospective immigrants still living abroad might be intimidated by the idea of finding employment in Canada. The EOI model helps to take this element out of the equation, letting Canadian employers do the work of contacting candidates directly. This is an opportunity for employers and provinces to harness the skills and human resources they need to meet labour demands in all industries.

• (1230)

I have long been a strong advocate of encouraging employers in the private sector to be part of the solution. They must see this as an opportunity to work closely with their provincial partners to better access and employ the skilled workers in the pool. Working with the new expression of interest division will be paramount to the program's success. It is imperative we address these needs now. As Minister Kenney has said, this is the future as opposed to the past.

Of course, employers and provinces will have questions about how the program is deployed. They will ask how will an employer access the pool? What are the priority criteria for each respective province that has existing nominee programs in place? These are all great questions, and hopefully in the coming weeks and months they will be answered through the final rounds of consultation being prepared by government.

Members of the committee, again I thank you for taking the time to listen to my presentation. I proudly represent our association, and I'm happy to answer any of your questions.

• (1235)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Kydd. I guess the translator had a hard time, but you just made your six minutes. Thank you very much.

Now we go to our questions.

Mr. Weston, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Kurland, I am going to focus on your testimony for four reasons. This is not only because you come from the beautiful city of Vancouver, as I do, and because you are a lawyer, as I am, and that on your website

[*English*]

there is a very strong statement of integrity that I am going to read. This is a lawyer who makes his money from clients, he says on his website: "For individuals and families seeking to immigrate to Canada: We believe most applicants may not require legal assistance

when there is no apparent medical, criminal, or security issue...." Then he tells people to go to the Immigration Canada website.

As a member of your profession, I thank you for that strong statement.

The fourth reason I want to focus, though, is because you've said some really interesting things. So did you, Mr. Kydd, but others will focus on you.

You have demonstrated a real enthusiasm about the program, both in print and today. You said it was a dream; it's employer-driven. In print in past months you've mentioned that persons now have a wider range than ever of categories within which to apply. You've even said those who will receive refunds and have their application sent back can still select from this broad selection of categories.

But what's really interesting for me are your comments about the rule of law. It seems to me that under the rule of law, discretion is limited by criteria. The criteria that have been introduced here are clear, shining examples of criteria that are in the interest of Canada and all Canadians. Surely there's no curtailment of the rule of law when the discretion that is to be applied is going to be applied based on these criteria that Canadians, employers, family members, and overseas immigrants have all pointed to as leading to an improved system, which you call a dream.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Kurland: I would just like to point out that obviously the people of Vancouver are not solely anglophones.

[*English*]

Mr. John Weston: Bravo.

Mr. Richard Kurland: The key here is that the rules are rolled out in the form of ministerial instruction. It's not regulation. It's not statute. After a dinner party, the ministerial instruction may be changed, and 12 hours later changed again. It's that absence of parliamentary protection that serves as my concern.

The institution protects the public. The protection of the institution is absent when the rules can be changed daily at the whim of a minister. However, in my view, it is perhaps reasonable and justifiable in a free and democratic society, as long as there's a counterbalance safeguard to ensure that our ministerial instruction system is not politicized. We have the right to know that one industry over another is not unduly favoured, one business over another, one family over another.

It's that absence of oversight, that causes me some concern that can be alleviated by an ombudsperson.

Mr. John Weston: Okay, but just to pursue this, clearly the advantage of the system is its nimbleness, its flexibility, and its adaptability to Canada's economic needs at a time when the economy and job creation are clearly one of the key priorities, if not the number one priority, for most Canadians.

We've seen, regardless of what may be brought up in criticism of any government in this world, that this government has done a magnificent job in promoting job creation and the economy. We're number one in that.

We all know that ministerial discretion can't be exercised in an arbitrary or capricious way or it would be subject to mandamus and other Federal Court kinds of limitations. So I'm glad you think it's a dream.

I'm wondering if you have any other thoughts about this recruitment model and how we can make it the best program in the world, given that we're competing against others.

● (1240)

Mr. Richard Kurland: We have the best program in the world. This is an improvement on that. One can improve it depending on who we want in—that's a key question—and when.

For example, if in the construction industry we feel a need for a particular trade, we can act smartly by sending, proactively, information notices to the educational institution of the trade. Grab the young people. Or, for example, as we're already doing now in the construction industry, we can be sending notices under the young workers or the working holiday visa program in Germany, alerting the training institutes for certain trades that they can come to Canada for a year and function in their trade or occupation. It's that type of nimbleness that is worthwhile.

To conclude, the reason I am not dead set against the expression of interest system and I'm willing to defer, respectfully, to our public servants and their oversight masters is the track record of the improvements to this immigration program over the past half-decade and longer. I would never have done that years earlier. But having resolved backlogs, having taken other areas of the program, such as the refugee determination system, and made it into a functioning system—benefit of the doubt, from a jaded old fellow, for the new expression of interest system.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you, Mr. Weston. Your time is over.

Madam Sitsabaiesan, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses.

I want to continue, if I may, Mr. Kurland, on the line of questioning Mr. Weston started. You spoke about the potential of unaccountability when it's somebody sitting behind a wizard's curtain, I think you said, picking one of five immigrants who will be allowed into this country based on this EOI system. But you also said that you remain open to this.

Can you explain, if it's further than what you've already explained, what you meant by accountability there? Could you also expand on

your cost-effective oversight idea of ombudsman? Do you have any other ideas for oversight other than an ombudsman?

Mr. Richard Kurland: This “behind the wizard's curtain” aspect is the outcome of almost 25 years of internal CIC strategic planning. The terms were “streams” and “pools”, and it was Minister Robillard's public officials who came up with them. At this date, in 2013, we're finally delivering the end of that strategic plan.

The problem was one of political philosophy: we are government; we know what we are doing; trust us. And on the other hand: you are government; we don't trust you; show us what you're doing. It can't be resolved.

Case-specific oversight is too cumbersome and surely too expensive. What I had in mind is a safety valve. The mere presence of an ombudsperson may provide the required deterrence.

What I have in mind is not another Nortel disaster. Our immigration system overly focused on information technology people to the exclusion of many others. How did that decision get taken? We'll never know officially.

In terms of the ombudsperson, which is where I'm headed here, the mere presence of an individual who can access real-time management reports and every facet of this expression of interest system will provide a bureaucratic chill and keep things on the up and up—honest. Otherwise we will have an unguarded, politicized immigration selection system.

We don't want to go back there. It produces disasters.

● (1245)

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

In your technical issues, you said that regulatory upgrade is needed to the information sharing between HRSDC and CIC. HRSDC is now called ESDC, I think. In what ways is the information sharing between ESDC and CIC inadequate?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Well, even this morning, I concluded my Ottawa rounds unofficially between the off-record senior officials and their take. I've seen turf wars blossom within 48 hours. HRSDC closely guards its turf. Unless there's an explicit permission to share information with CIC, they're not going to do it. So nip this one in the bud, please.

It's the same with CRA. That may be more touchy. There's a longer history, but at a minimum, instead of financial statements, how about a simple T2?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

Can you expand on your second point regarding your concerns about having bureaucrats assessing information that is already available from employers?

Mr. Richard Kurland: How they already...?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Your second point was about having concerns about bureaucrats assessing information that's already available from employers. Can you expand on that a little bit?

Mr. Richard Kurland: There are layers of redundancy presently built into the selection system. Employers have to file virtually identical information at a minimum of two government departments. Why? A common platform on intake and information sharing would resolve that.

It seems to be common sense, but our information technology systems are silo-designed. There's one for an LMO, one for a CIC purpose, with identical information in each. So you're doubling up the time and effort, which is a burden to the Canadian economy and to those businesses. If HRSDC and CIC were allowed to formally, officially, strategically share client information, that would go a long way. Just as it's the same tax dollar, it's the same client.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: So you're saying the redundancies that are built into this silo-style design of the information system management are actually not creating a more robust system. Redundancies are usually built into information management systems to make them more robust, but here it's not making the system more robust; it's actually slowing it down.

Mr. Richard Kurland: This is waste. This is absolute waste.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Right.

Mr. Richard Kurland: It harkens back to the departmental design. In the good old days, Immigration and HRSDC were one and the same shop. What they've done is they've pulled out the baby and left the umbilical cord attached to the mother. Well, if that's the situation, you have to, by regulation, ensure that it's one package in order for everything to work properly.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you. I have one more minute, so I'm going to try to get one more in.

You were answering Mr. Weston's question about being concerned about picking one family or another, giving priority to one industry over another. Other than this ombudsman, is there any other way that you can suggest to identify, first of all, if this is happening, and then how can we prevent it?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): A short answer.

Mr. Richard Kurland: A very short answer: be transparent. Don't do it in private. Have open consultation with the provinces and the stakeholders, an open, almost e-based system, on the CIC website that inputs all people's needs. That way everyone can see the political choice being made by the immigration public servants on who gets a visa and why.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Kurland. Thank you, Madame Sitsabaiesan.

Mr. McCallum, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

Mr. Kydd, I don't have time to ask you a question, but I just wanted to say I agree with your sentiments. I have nothing against Ph.D.s—I'm a Ph.D.—but I've found it very frustrating over the years that we have this stereotype of Ph.D.s driving taxis and we have a huge demand for the skilled trades. So I do agree there's a case for revamping our point system, as you described.

But I have to go to Mr. Kurland on this issue of wizards behind the curtain. I think in one small sense what you're saying is in line with what I was saying, that rather than have ministerial instructions given on a day without any prior consultation, one could give some advance notice, as one does with regulations, to get input. That way it would be less likely to be decided at a dinner party and issued at two in the morning.

• (1250)

Mr. Richard Kurland: Yes. I had contemplated a 30-day notice period or a 60-day notice period of an incoming ministerial instruction, which would stimulate consultation—desired or otherwise.

Hon. John McCallum: I do agree that running things increasingly on ministerial instructions without proper notice is an issue, and I do agree with you that it contrasts with the point system announced in the 1970s.

I guess my next question is to ask whether perhaps you were being polite when you talked about arbitrary power in the hands of public servants as opposed to politicians. It may be that those public servants were doing the bidding of politicians, so indirectly it is politicians.

I am not accusing this government of anything, but I would think, in theory—don't think Conservative-Liberal—that if everything is done by ministerial instructions issued on the spur of the moment, there's a chance that the system could be biased in favour of particular regions or ethnic groups, or whatever, that might suit the party in power.

When you say we're moving to a less transparent and honest system, is that what you had in the back of your mind?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Historically, I've seen it happen, and my concern is that outside the light of day, bad things grow.

To fully illuminate the political choices, we require a transparent selection system. Indeed, who could resist the political candy—any government—to curry favour with a desired region, industry, cluster of families, in a marginal swing constituency?

Hon. John McCallum: Exactly.

I think you're agreeing with me that this system, while it might be technically good for the reasons you have given, does have the potential for political, electoral, abuse. And the more the system goes towards one directed by ministerial directives as opposed to regulations, the more that is a risk.

I think we're in agreement on that and—

Mr. Richard Kurland: I think we're almost in agreement. That might be a little heavy.

Overall, it's how to counterbalance. I focus on the glass being half full, so to counterbalance we have to put in place someone who will keep the CIC public servants honest.

Hon. John McCallum: What about a government that is accountable to Parliament. Would that help?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Government is accountable to Parliament.

Hon. John McCallum: That takes that accountability in a serious way and informs Parliament better, and it gives Parliament more opportunities—

Mr. Richard Kurland: I would point this out. For the first time in Canadian immigration history, discrimination is no longer part of the overseas selection process. The rules that came in within the last half decade created a first come, first served process. Prior to that, it was first come, first served based on where you came from.

With that kind of track record, I'm willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the current group.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay.

You still, I believe, agree, whatever we might think of history, that this current system does raise potential political risk.

Mr. Richard Kurland: Yes, and I'm very concerned about that potential. There's no monitoring. There's no control. There's no practical oversight.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Mr. Menegakis, you have approximately three minutes.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses for being here.

Mr. Kydd, my question is for you. You mentioned that the construction industry needs skilled and experienced workers, and the industry hasn't been that successful in penetrating the immigrant worker market, if you will.

In your opinion, how will the EOI system be able to facilitate immigrant construction workers specifically?

•(1255)

Mr. Michael Kydd: I thank the honourable member for his question.

We understand that this system is being replicated from a very successful model out of New Zealand and Australia. The numbers seem to indicate that over the past couple of years we've seen a rise in permanent long-term immigrants, from about 8,000 to about 20,000, just in New Zealand alone. Those are people who are entering the skilled trades because the demand is there and there's a process in place that's allowing them to fill those demands.

With New Zealand, for example, the request for construction workers is basically coming from two major populations: India and China, with China being the number one country. Since 1999, the Chinese have had 20% growth in the construction industry, year over year. They have approximately 24.1 million people working in the construction industry alone.

What we've seen is that countries who have adopted this model are recognizing those niche markets. They are able to pull those workers in and offer them employment and stability within their

respective regions and within the respective supply and demand force.

I think the EOI model allows that system to flourish by being able to work together.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much.

Mr. Wallace, I pass the question over to you, sir.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thank you very much.

To Mr. Kurland, very quickly, it's on a completely different topic, in a sense. I agree with you on information sharing, particularly from CRA.

You're an immigration worker, is that correct?

Mr. Richard Kurland: Yes, sir.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Based on your support of information sharing, to be able to make decisions and not force employers to repeat things.... We have another ministry whose responsibility is to find those who come to this country, who have applied for landed immigrant status, have now been denied it and are on the lam, let's say, or they're here illegally. That organization, the public safety ministry, does not have access, for example, to CRA records to see if those people are paying taxes and where they're living, so we can find them and send them on their way.

Are you in favour of CRA being able to release that information to that organization?

Mr. Richard Kurland: No.

For practical reasons, the CRA senior people have advised me year after year that it may interfere with the integrity of their revenue collection potential. People need to know, even if they're doing bad things, that CRA will not share information with law enforcement.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe): Thank you very much. Time has expired.

Mr. Kurland, once again, thank you very much for appearing before this committee.

[*Translation*]

Before wrapping up our meeting, I would like to give you one last message.

At our next meeting, committee members will have an opportunity to recommend amendments to the Standing Committee on Finance. You will make our job much easier if you send your amendments to the clerk 24 hours in advance. If you don't, please bring copies of your amendments in both official languages so that they can be circulated to the members of the committee. Once again, the purpose is to make this committee's job easier.

Thank you very much, colleagues, for your cooperation.

The meeting is adjourned.

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