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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): We'll start, ladies and gentlemen.

This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 32. We are here to study the main estimates under the Citizenship and Immigration Act.

We have before us a number of witnesses, including the Honourable Chris Alexander, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

Minister, I'd like to welcome you to the committee and thank you for coming. I think we know all your colleagues, but you may wish to introduce them to the committee as well.

You may proceed, sir, with your presentation to us.

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you so much.

I'm delighted to be here, Mr. Chair and colleagues, with my highly qualified and decorated colleagues, because they are the real experts in the business of this department. They are Tony Matson; Catrina Tapley; my deputy minister, Anita Biguzs; and Dawn Edlund, who is the number two person in operations as associate assistant deputy minister.

I'm pleased to be here with these officials to present the main estimates for fiscal year 2014-15. Citizenship and Immigration has planned spending for this fiscal year totalling about \$1.39 billion, an overall net decrease of \$270 million compared with last year's main estimate funding levels.

Before anyone draws any sweeping conclusions from that decrease, keep in mind that I will come to that. There's a very simple explanation for it.

In my opening remarks today, I will highlight several of the significant funding increases and decreases in our main estimates. The most significant investment of the year is \$45.5 million in funding to allow the department to address increased application volumes in the citizenship and temporary resident lines of business. You will recall that these were initiatives in previous iterations of Canada's economic action plan to meet a growing need, with more permanent residents than ever applying for citizenship and more people from around the world visiting Canada than ever before. A portion of the new funding will be used to add processing capacity to keep pace with growth in the temporary resident line of business,

particularly in key markets such as China, India, and Brazil, where most of the growth is anticipated.

On the citizenship side, which we've been discussing quite a lot lately, our government is committed to timely service even as we face record numbers of applications due to the highest sustained levels of immigration in Canadian history over the past eight years.

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister.

I wonder if you could slow down just a little bit. Translation needs to catch up to you. We want to hear every word you say, sir.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Chris Alexander: Of course, Mr. Chair.

I apologize for having been late and for having made life difficult for the interpreters.

[*English*]

We have admitted as immigrants an average of more than a quarter of a million newcomers to Canada each year since 2006, as the committee well knows.

We're taking action to further strengthen the pride that Canadians take in citizenship, the value of citizenship in this country, with the first comprehensive reforms to the act since 1977. We do this, in contrast to the previous Liberal record, by cracking down on fraud, demanding and promoting greater attachment to Canada, and speeding up processing for eligible applicants.

This new funding will result in improved processing times and overall service. Combined with the efficiency measures proposed in the strengthening Canadian citizenship act, we will see processing times for citizenship applications come down to one year or less by the end of 2015-16.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank committee members for all their hard work on Bill C-24—the pre-study, the clause-by-clause, etc. As you all know, it passed second reading last week and report stage this week. We're very close, one step away, at least in House of Commons terms, from turning this bill into law.

Another \$35.5 million in funding represents an increase to the grant for the Canada-Quebec Accord in 2014-15 and future years to meet our obligations under the accord.

[Translation]

As you know, the Canada-Quebec Accord gives the Government of Quebec exclusive responsibility for settlement and integration services in the province in return for financial compensation from the Government of Canada.

You may recall that the grant amount for 2013-2014 for Quebec for the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees was \$320 million. This includes the base amount of \$284.5 million, plus an increase of \$35.5 million based, in part, on the number of non-francophone immigrants settling in that province.

As a result, CIC's main estimates are now increasing by \$35.5 million on an ongoing basis, starting this fiscal year, to reflect the updated grant of \$320 million.

[English]

My department's main estimates for this year also include an increase of just over \$13 million to develop and implement the electronic travel authorization, or eTA, under the Canada-U.S. perimeter security and economic competitiveness action plan. This is a low-cost, quick, and easy-to-use online application process that will allow us to screen visitors from all countries who do not require a visa to enter Canada and who travel by air, with the exception of citizens of the United States.

When the eTA is implemented, in 2015, we'll be able to screen most visitors before they board a plane to verify whether they pose a risk to Canada, or to the health, safety, and security of Canadians. Resolving issues prior to a traveller's arrival at a port of entry will enhance security, improve border efficiencies, reduce the need for removals and returns, and facilitate the movement of legitimate travellers. We are closely working with our partners at CBSA, and with the airline sector, to ensure the smooth rollout of this initiative in 2015-16.

For the first time in the main estimates, you will also see a line item for the passport program revolving fund, which was transferred last year from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, along with allocations for International Experience Canada, which was also transferred.

• (1545)

[Translation]

In addition to the items I have already mentioned, funding increases in CIC's main estimates also include \$4.2 million to meet our commitments under the roadmap for Canada's official languages.

These include promotion and recruitment activities in Canada and abroad; language training and other settlement services for French-speaking newcomers; and immigration research and knowledge-sharing projects of interest to both francophone minority communities and English-speaking communities in Quebec.

[English]

Mr. Chair, these and other increases are offset by a number of funding decreases in the estimates. The previous Liberal government left an immigration system with serious shortcomings. That resulted in potential immigrants putting lives on hold, waiting for up to eight

years for an answer. This is something our government didn't accept, and we are endeavouring to do better.

That is why—

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister, could I interrupt for a minute? The bells are ringing.

We are close to the chamber. I wonder if I could have unanimous consent to let the minister finish his remarks.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Well, the bells are ringing. It's a 30-minute bell, and I'm asking for unanimous consent that we allow the minister to finish his introductory remarks.

Hon. John McCallum: Do you mean and to have questions?

The Chair: No, that's to finish his remarks, and then he'll come back.

Hon. John McCallum: He will come back.

The Chair: I will ask him to come back, and I know he will because he likes it here.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I promise.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay.

As long as he comes back, that's fine.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister, you may continue.

[Translation]

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to my colleagues as well.

[English]

Under Bill C-38, passed in 2012, our government included measures to transform the economic immigration programs that we have into a just-in-time system that will recruit people with the right skills to meet Canada's labour market needs today and into the future, fast-track their immigration, and get them working in a period of months, not years.

This is what's best for our economy. It's certainly what's best for newcomers, who will see their economic outcomes improve as a result. They already have improved, as we have reduced backlogs and made processing faster in preparation for this new system. Our government is committed to building a fast and flexible economic immigration system focusing on finding people who have the skills and experience required to meet Canada's economic needs. The federal skilled worker program backlog was an issue in the past, but because of our government's action, the backlog will be eliminated this year.

We put a pause on the program and are returning up to \$130 million in fees paid by certain federal skilled worker applicants who applied before February 27, 2008. The statutory funding decrease that you see in the main estimates this fiscal year relates to a longer than anticipated time horizon to return the fees paid by applicants to the FSW program, but they will be returned. My department has reallocated this funding to future fiscal years to address the anticipated refund requests in those years.

Eliminating this application backlog allows us to focus on new applicants with the skills and talents that our economy needs now. It also sets the stage for the launch this coming January of express entry, our government's next-generation approach to economic immigration, which will completely change the way we manage and process applications in our existing economic immigration programs.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, let me be clear: Canada's doors are open to high-skilled workers. They have a pathway to permanent residency in this country. Investors can come to Canada under the Canadian Experience Class, under the Federal Skilled Worker Program, and under the Provincial Nominee Program. And the process is even faster for these investors because they have these programs available to them, as well as those offered by Quebec.

And as of January 1, 2015, applicants under these programs will have their application processed in six months or less under express entry. Express entry will be a faster, more effective, more efficient and more proactive process that will select immigrants based on the skills and attributes that Canada needs, and based on criteria that anticipate immigrants' economic success once they arrive.

Once it is launched, we expect to see a number of improvements to Canada's economic immigration system that will benefit our economy, our prosperity and labour market. Which, as you know, is a top priority for our government.

For example, the skilled newcomers that our economy needs will arrive here in months, rather than years.

In addition, by requiring candidates to first receive an invitation to apply before submitting an immigration application, we will prevent crippling backlogs from accumulating, like the one that plagued the Federal Skilled Worker Program for years.

● (1550)

[English]

We're getting faster, Mr. Chair, and we are identifying immigrants whose skills match Canada's needs and the needs of employers more closely than ever before.

CIC's main estimates also contain a decrease of nearly \$30 million compared to the previous fiscal year for funding related to the implementation of biometric screening to reduce identity theft and fraud in our temporary resident visa program. Since biometric screening was successfully implemented at various missions over the last year, no additional investments are required this year. As this screening now forms part of our regular operations, ongoing funding is included in our operational budget.

All told, Mr. Chair, these and other items represent a net decrease of \$270 million, with the largest single item relating to the passport revolving fund, which is part of our estimates for the first time this year. There's been a reduction of \$270 million, though, across the board compared to the previous fiscal year, which brings my department's main estimates for 2014-15 to roughly \$1.39 billion. Keep in mind that the revolving fund is reduced in response to higher revenue in the previous period. We had that unbelievable interest spike in demand for the 10-year e-passport last year, which partly explains the reductions in our main estimates this year.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm happy to answer any questions that you or members of the committee may have now or when we return.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. Minister.

The bells are ringing, as we know. I'm going to suspend the meeting. If you could return after the meeting for some questions by members of the committee, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): The minister can come back, but he has to be finished by—

The Chair: Excuse me?

Mr. Costas Menegakis: The minister will come back, but he'll be finished by five o'clock. So we'll have half an hour for questions, roughly, when we get back, which is average. Okay?

The Chair: It's lovely having you again, sir.

We suspend.

● (1550)

————— (Pause) —————

● (1635)

The Chair: We'll reconvene, and I thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

We have Mr. Leung, who has the first round of questions in the first round.

Sir, you may have the floor.

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

Thank you, Minister, and staff for attending.

Immigration is probably one of the greatest hallmarks of Canada's history in our nation-building and how we've evolved and where we are today.

Minister, you spoke about Bill C-24, strengthening Canadian citizenship act. We know that the Liberals had 13 long comfortable years to reform the Citizenship Act, but they didn't do it. That's why our government set out to make the first comprehensive reform to the Citizenship Act in 35 years; that's since 1977.

•(1640)

The Chair: Mr. Leung, I know the minister may have opened the door when he started talking about Bill C-24, but we're here to talk about estimates as to expenditures, and Bill C-24 is not law, so unless you're using that as a preamble to something—

Mr. Chungsen Leung: I'm leading into how we strengthen and how these budgets relate to that.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Minister, can you tell this committee how strengthening Canadian citizenship will complement the investments the government has already made to the strengthening of citizenship so that those who deserve it get it, and those who lie and hide their heinous crimes and who do not deserve Canadian citizenship, do not get it? How do we back this up with money?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you so much, Mr. Leung, and thank you for your work on this committee, on its reports, and on Bill C-24.

The simple answer to your question is twofold. First, we are getting faster processing already, thanks to budgetary commitments and money in these estimates. We did have some years, last year and the previous years, when residency concerns were widespread, when residency questionnaires were distributed in relatively large numbers. That scrutiny was required, as you said, because there was abuse. But we've overcome many of those obstacles. We've put in place new resources to process more, and in the first five months of this year, over 100,000 permanent residents became citizens of Canada, which is a record number.

I hope that all members of this committee have had the opportunity to participate in a citizenship ceremony recently.

The bill will give us even more tools to press ahead with this faster processing. It simplifies the decision-making model and will allow us to use the resources you are voting on today in these main estimates, and which we are discussing today, to greater effect. It will literally help us make tens of thousands more permanent residents citizens this year than we would be able to do were the bill not passed, or passed much later.

In addition to faster processing, in addition to reinforcing the value of citizenship and lengthening the residency requirement slightly, we will have new tools to maintain program integrity and combat fraud, which should prevent us from having the kinds of doubts hanging over this program that we've had in the past.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: In the pre-1977 era when I came to Canada, the average dwelling time, the time you were required to spend in Canada, was five years for citizenship. Perhaps you can share with us how the new move to lengthen the dwelling time in Canada fits into the overall strengthening of Canadian citizenship.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for mentioning that.

The residency requirement was five years, until 1977. The five-year requirement was put in place back in 1914—one hundred years ago this month, actually—by another Conservative government, and it served us well over that long period.

My view is that the reduction to three years, and then this inattention to abuse, really did cheapen Canadian citizenship. It really did fail to fully express the value that it has, and that's why we're moving back to four years out of six to ensure that the attachment, that sense of belonging, that experience of Canada that only physical presence here can provide, is really there.

The other sad chapter, as you know, Mr. Leung, from the decades after 1977, was that there was little done under Liberal governments to deal with people who were present here only through a post office box, who literally dissimulated their residency in Canada. I'm not talking here about small numbers. We're talking about thousands of people confirmed to have done so, perhaps tens of thousands over the decades. That will no longer be possible and that's what Canadians expect, because across all our immigration and citizenship programs there is zero tolerance for abuse from Canadians or from any of us.

Mr. Chungsen Leung: Perhaps you can also clarify what this physical presence means versus, as you indicate, just a post office presence.

Hon. Chris Alexander: It means two things, and the first is having the intention to reside here. That's where we're going to confirm, through an expression of that declaration of intent, that those who are seeking to meet the requirements for citizenship actually intend to reside here. We didn't do that before. We're going to confirm to one and all that it is physical presence that is required, not virtual presence, not picking up mail every six months from a post office box, and not staying in touch by Skype. It is physical presence within the borders of this country that counts as residence.

In fact it always has been the requirement. We weren't able to enforce it, and under Liberal governments we failed to enforce it in rather dramatic fashion.

•(1645)

Mr. Chungsen Leung: In building the country, we need skilled workers and academicians. We need people from a wide range of backgrounds in the country in many ways. Perhaps you could also share with us how express entry facilitates bringing them in.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for that.

To finish on the previous subject, just to be explicit here, residence is not defined in the current Citizenship Act. It is vague. It doesn't say physical presence, and hence the scope for the abuse that we're now trying to overcome.

Express entry is also a major focus of investment in these main estimates. It's the top priority of our department. It's the new system for delivering all of our economic programs starting on January 1, 2015, building on the reduced backlogs and faster processing times that we already have.

But what will it allow us to do? Instead of just mechanically processing applications as they come in, we will have a much larger group of people, interested in Canada, who've submitted their profiles. We will sort and rank those profiles based on the criteria, the point systems for economic immigration that we already have, and we will invite the ones who are best qualified, who best meet the needs of the Canadian economy today, to come here. That means the skill levels, the educational attainment, the suitability for the job market here of immigrants will be better than ever.

So it's very exciting. The Australians and New Zealanders have shown us the way on this. They have been pioneers, and we are emulating and improving on their experience. We—

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank you for your presence here, Minister.

I will ask you a few questions, and will then pass the floor to my colleague.

Let us talk about the Interim Federal Health Program for refugees. Can you tell me how much money you have saved thanks to the reforms you've brought to the health program?

Hon. Chris Alexander: I cannot tell you exactly how much money we've saved solely with this program, but we estimate that Canadian taxpayers have saved upwards of \$600 million, both at the provincial and federal levels, thanks to reforms to the asylum system we have put in place. Indeed, we do not have the great burden of asylum seekers seeing their request denied because they come from safe countries.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: I thank you.

It is interesting that you also spoke of the costs for provinces, because there are studies that have been recently published on the matter. For example, the latest one I have read was published May 8, 2014, by the Public Library of Science. It is entitled:

[*English*]

“The Cost and Impact of the Interim Federal Health Program Cuts on Child Refugees in Canada”.

[*Translation*]

Could you explain how exactly you calculate these savings? A year after the reforms to the program, more and more studies are showing, for example, that parents are increasingly worried about the bills they will have to pay if they no longer have a right to free care. They thus delay their hospital visits more and more. As a consequence, more and more children, who are as you call them illegitimate refugees—though they aren't so necessarily—go to the emergency room or increase the costs for provinces and hospitals in another way.

You really do not use the same methodology to calculate these costs as the one used by these researchers and by the hospitals participating in the study or even that of the provinces who complain

that their costs are increasing, precisely because of the reform made to the Interim Federal Health Program.

I took note of the \$600 million number. I thank you for your reply.

As for the Express Entry program, you say that the applications will be processed in six months or less. Has that period of time been calculated starting from the moment the applicant has submitted their application and gets a positive answer and an invitation to come to Canada? Do you calculate the time during which a person must wait before receiving an invitation from a business or a province?

Hon. Chris Alexander: The six-month period starts when the completed application is submitted, and ends when that application is approved or rejected.

• (1650)

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: So, starting from the moment when the completed application is submitted to the pool. Is that correct?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Yes.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Will everyone get an answer within six months or less, even those who haven't received an invitation by a province or a business?

Hon. Chris Alexander: There will be two steps.

The application of the people in the pool will be evaluated in a hierarchical manner, according to the criteria and the point systems of the various economic immigration programs. We will only invite those people who meet the requisite criteria during a particular year. These people will receive an invitation and will begin filling out their application. The six-month period will start the day they submit their application. We promise to process at least 80%, if not more, within six months.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: All right.

From what I gather, however, there will nevertheless be a period during which people will wait for the six months to become officially calculated.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Exactly, but we will begin inviting people during the first months of 2015.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you.

Ms. Sitsabaiesan, the floor is yours.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Thank you, Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe.

[*English*]

Mr. Minister, you mentioned in your opening remarks that the previous Liberal government had left a broken immigration system, with people waiting over eight years.

I agree with you that it was a broken immigration system that needed to be fixed, sure, so my question to you is pretty simple. You also talked about Bill C-24 and thanked the committee. With respect to Bill C-24 making it harder for people to get citizenship in Canada, and with the previous Liberal government's backlogs, delays, and whatever—the broken immigration system, as you mentioned—why has it taken your government so long to actually do anything about it? It's been over three years now that this Parliament has been in session. Why has it taken you so long to actually do something about it?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We first mentioned this reform in a Speech from the Throne in 2010. It's very clear, from the opposition of both the NDP and the Liberals, that we wouldn't have had support for these measures in a minority government. We've studied it and worked on it very carefully in this majority government, so the time is now.

On the previous question of refugee health, it's \$100 million that we will save over five years, I am reminded. In our federal budget, we estimated \$600 million when you take all levels of government—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you, sir.

I'll go back to the decreasing funding in immigrant aid. You were talking about refugees and settlement, so I'll talk about that. In decreasing funding from immigrant aid, such as the settlement and resettlement assistance, how will these new measures actually affect the children of families separated by the new immigration regulations?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Here we have to be very careful.

You have cited today in this testimony refugee children as not being eligible for this assistance. That is absolutely false. There are also doctors, small groups of doctors in Toronto—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Sorry, Mr. Minister, but—

Hon. Chris Alexander: —and elsewhere who insist on calling failed refugee claimants “refugees”. They do not have refugee status.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: I apologize, Mr. Minister, I only have one minute. I don't like you mischaracterizing my question and saying that I've cited something and I haven't. I said that in decreasing funding from immigrant aid, such as settlement—

Hon. Chris Alexander: I was citing Madam Blanchette-Lamothe. You're speaking on the same subject.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: If we may come back to my question, in decreasing funding from immigrant aid, such as settlement and resettlement assistance, how will these new measures affect the children of families separated by these new immigration regulations?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We have actually increased settlement funding by a factor of three over our time in government. We have reduced backlogs and processing times in every category of immigration. Under express entry, it will be six months, so families will be less separated, and citizenship is getting easier to obtain—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: But—

The Chair: No. You know what? We're way over.

Go ahead.

Hon. Chris Alexander: —because the average residency of someone who applies is already four years. The waiting time now is

two to three years. When it goes down to one year, it will be only five years from the beginning of residency to receipt of citizenship. That's faster than now.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I think you were saying that if a person has to wait longer to obtain citizenship, such as three years rather than two, or four rather than three, that raises the value of the citizenship. Correct?

Hon. Chris Alexander: We think that those who have had a deeper experience of Canada, who've actually been physically present here for four years, will have a greater ability to participate fully in the civic life, political life, and economic life of Canada, which is what we expect from citizens.

• (1655)

Hon. John McCallum: The implication of that is that native-born Canadians have zero experience in Canada, so upon being born will have no appreciation of the value of Canadian citizenship. I don't understand the logic of that.

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm not sure I follow you. You were asking about the residency requirement for awards of citizenship. That is not relevant to native-born Canadians.

Hon. John McCallum: You're saying the longer the person waits, the more valuable the citizen. I'm saying people who are born here have citizenship automatically. They don't wait any time. It doesn't mean they're any less loyal as Canadians.

Hon. Chris Alexander: It was your colleagues in the House of Commons today who were making a distinction between naturalized and native-born Canadians with regard to one aspect of Bill C-24. We make no such distinction. We expect and celebrate the fact that Canadians, whatever their origin, love this country; participate fully in its civic, political, economic, cultural life; and are very strong and very numerous in supporting us in increasing the residency requirement by one year, because you cannot develop, if you haven't lived here before, that connection to Canada, that sense of belonging, that knowledge of Canada, experience of Canada, except by being physically present here.

Hon. John McCallum: I would like to ask you a question based on *The Globe and Mail* article, an editorial saying “don't banish them”, where it quotes the charter of rights, saying:

“Every citizen of Canada has the right to enter, remain in and leave Canada.” The principle is so fundamental that the Charter's notwithstanding clause cannot be used to override this section.

They then say:

Stripping a citizen of citizenship is characteristic of a totalitarian regime such as the Soviet Union, which banished dissidents, including the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1974. It's not a model for Canada to emulate.

I would like to ask you about that, but I have a bit of hesitation, because given your background, I don't believe that you believe your own answers. I believe that you would, as a normal person, agree with *The Globe*, and you would not agree with cutting basic health care to refugees. But I know in your current position you take a position that I don't believe you believe. I'm not sure it's worth asking, but I would ask one thing and that is whether the officials could provide the clerk with copies of the briefing binders that they and the minister have used today and if they could do that before the end of the month.

If there is time, minister, you may like to answer my question, but I'd like to ask that one first.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. McCallum, *The Globe and Mail* has failed to mention, and they often fail to provide relevant facts, that every country in NATO has these provisions. Many of them much stiffer than the ones we are proposing with regard to—

Hon. John McCallum: I don't believe that, sir.

Hon. Chris Alexander: You don't believe it. You would do well to be informed on these matters because they are relevant. We are allies and partners of all of these countries. We used to have these provisions under a Liberal government up until 1977—

Hon. John McCallum: My understanding is that the United States does not strip people of—

Hon. Chris Alexander: —when Pierre Trudeau threw those Liberal principles under the bus and decided that traitors, spies, and terrorists could retain their Canadian citizenship even when they're dual nationals.

We disagree. We disagree with *The Globe and Mail*. George Brown was a Liberal. It merged at one point with the *Mail and Empire*; that was a Conservative paper. We like the paper when that part of it speaks, but they were wrong in this as well.

Hon. John McCallum: My understanding is that the U.S. does not strip its citizens—

Hon. Chris Alexander: They are doing it, in the hundreds every year.

The Chair: I've stopped the clock. We're having a great time going back and forth between George Brown and other things, but he's dead.

My only request of both of you is that one of you speak and the other not speak. Don't both speak at the same time.

Mr. McCallum, you have the floor. You have about a minute left.

Hon. John McCallum: I thought I had finished.

The Chair: You have a minute. Maybe you can ask about how Mr. Brown is.

Hon. John McCallum: I would ask if I could have an answer to my question about the officials providing our clerk with—

Hon. Chris Alexander: I'm your witness at the moment, Mr. McCallum. The main estimates were tabled in the House and voted on yesterday. We won't be providing these binders.

Australia has a provision where citizens who are citizens of another country and become members of the armed force of a country while at war with Australia can be deprived of their

citizenship. In the United States citizens can be deprived of their citizenship for being in an armed force at war with the U.S. following a conviction for high treason. The United Kingdom may deprive an individual of their citizenship if it is conducive to the public good, which is much wider than our provisions. These are NATO allies.

It is absolutely misleading to say that only totalitarian states do this. Democracies do it. It is incompatible with allegiance to Canada to fight the Canadian Armed Forces or duly betray the secrets of our country.

• (1700)

Hon. John McCallum: Excuse me, but I only have 20 seconds and the chair told us not to talk at once. I'd like to ask you one other question. It is my understanding that on June 3 CIC erased the blacklist for employers abusing the temporary foreign workers program from their website. There were no employers on that and it was removed from the website. Can you tell us why?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. McCallum, there was one list put together in 2011. There was another list, with more teeth, put together in 2012. It exists. It has five companies on it. It binds both departments.

When a company is on that list—and you have seen the list. You mentioned it in the House of Commons today.

Hon. John McCallum: I have it.

Hon. Chris Alexander: You have it. Bravo.

The Chair: Okay—

Hon. Chris Alexander: I, as Minister of Immigration, and my colleagues are not able to issue a work permit to anyone who wants to come to Canada to work in any of those places. We are bound by that blacklist, and it's longer—

The Chair: I'd love for this to go on, but Mr. McCallum is way over, and I know you have another meeting, Mr. Minister.

We'll finish the first round with Mr. Shory.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will now be talking about your allocations because the opposition isn't doing the job on this issue.

Through the chair, Minister, I want to talk about the \$45.5 million in funding that you said the department will be using to address increased application volumes for citizenship, etc. I strongly and honestly believe that citizenship is a privilege, not an entitlement. That's my belief. Of course it comes with rights and responsibilities.

I also believe that citizenship should be earned. When we talk about the time requirement, the opposition thinks it is fair that those who have no connection to Canada or have spent very little time in Canada should have the right to be Canadian citizens. The impression I also got from the opposition during the debate was that they have shown that they believe it is also right to obtain citizenship by fraudulent means.

So my question to you is this. In order for someone to become a Canadian citizen, is it too much to ask them to spend a significant amount of time in Canada? How do you compare this with other peer countries?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you.

The U.K. and the United States have five-year requirements. Other countries in Europe have even longer requirements. Australia has a four-year requirement, which will be the same as ours if and when Bill C-24 becomes law. So we are absolutely in the right ballpark.

In my contact with Canadians, the strongest proponents of this four-year residency requirement are newcomers themselves. They see some of the abuse, and they saw it in recent decades. They want to have that sense of knowledge, that direct experience, and be well oriented in Canada as a society. That does take time. Four years is a reasonable amount of time. In fact 45% of those applying for citizenship already spent four years or more here before they applied.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Absolutely, Minister. Being an immigrant, I can tell you that when the day to qualify for citizenship was coming close, my family and I were so excited about that day. When I go to citizenship ceremonies, I can see the blush on new Canadians' faces. I can see their smiles and their pride when they carry the Canadian flag in their hands and swear allegiance to Her Majesty.

I actually want to talk about the \$4.2 million you mentioned with regard to meeting the commitments in terms of the road map for Canada's official languages. Perhaps you could elaborate on that.

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thank you.

It's absolutely important to us as a country. It's a special federal responsibility.

[Translation]

We want the francophone communities in northern and eastern Ontario, in Manitoba, in Yukon, in New Brunswick, in Moncton and everywhere in the country to benefit from increased francophone immigration.

[English]

We're going to make that happen through express entry. I'm very proud that the OECD, in its report on Canada today, has spoken in glowing terms about express entry and the prospects for it to meet the needs of our labour market better than ever before. They expect it to increase "the responsiveness of the immigration system to labour-market demand (notably by implementing the Express Entry system)".

This is a reform that hasn't even been fully implemented but is already being celebrated because it's been well planned.

•(1705)

[Translation]

We are going to use Express Entry to favour francophone immigration in all parts of this country because we acknowledge and support French language and culture everywhere in Canada.

[English]

Mr. Devinder Shory: Thank you.

Express entry has also been discussed before as well by my colleagues.

You mentioned that express entry will be a faster, more effective, more efficient, and more proactive process, which will select immigrants based on the skills and attributes that Canada needs.

More importantly for me was when you made the comment that new Canadians will have a better chance of economic success. You might want to elaborate on that a bit.

Hon. Chris Alexander: All of the studies we have done of our immigration and the different generations of immigrants that we have in this country, have shown that those who arrive with higher levels of education—educational attainment—do better. They have better economic outcomes and family outcomes. Those who come earlier in their careers are better able to adapt and flourish over the length of their careers in Canada. As well, language counts for a lot. Those with a good or excellent level of English or French tend to do better than those who don't, and they do a lot better.

That is why all of our economic immigration programs have been reformed to ensure that those criteria have more weight. It doesn't mean in the federal skilled trades program that we aren't open to taking those with relatively little French or English. We do want those skills. However, we are getting more and more immigrants who are younger, adapting quicker to the labour market, and who have their whole careers in front of them, which is ensuring that settlement, adaptation, and integration into Canadian society happens faster. We expect those trends to only continue under express entry, and that's why we have had a positive review from the OECD today.

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Quickly, Minister, I want to thank you once again for having my portion of Bill C-425 adopted into Bill C-24.

There was a question today on why we did not introduce this kind of bill before, and I want to remind everyone that it was the opposition who stalled the portion of this bill that I introduced last year. It's the government or individual members who have been trying to fix the broken system.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sitsabaiesan, you have the floor.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: It's Mr. Donnelly.

The Chair: Mr. Donnelly, sir.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thanks.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have five minutes.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Great.

I was hoping to talk about processing times and closing IRB offices, and if time permits, some departmental spending—

The Chair: The minister has to go. I made a mistake.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: On a point of order, I don't understand why Mr. Menegakis is deciding when the minister has to go, and I don't understand why the minister has seven more minutes for the Conservatives.

Can you explain that to me, please?

The Chair: Yes, I'll do my best.

I was advised by the Conservative staff that the minister has another appointment. He was originally scheduled to leave here at 4:30, and of course the bells stopped us from doing that.

I finished the first round. I thought it was fair to finish the first round. I made an error by starting with Mr. Donnelly, and I'm going to let him finish his question. Then the minister can go.

You'll have time. He'll be short.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask one question on the processing times, if I could, then.

Through these main estimates, the government is requesting \$45.5 million in additional funding relative to the previous year, due to the increased volume demands in the citizenship program and temporary residence program.

I'm wondering about wait times. Are average wait times increasing as a result of these increased volume demands, and how will the additional funding be utilized to address this increased volume demand?

• (1710)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Thanks for those questions.

On citizenship, wait times are not growing. They are, in our view, unacceptably high—two to three years—but they are starting to come down as we move through a much larger number of cases. Already this year we have gotten through 100,000 in the first five months, and with the measures in Bill C-24, we will get through them at a much faster rate in the second half of this year. This means that by early 2016, wait times for citizenship applications will be under one year once again.

For temporary resident visas, which we are issuing in record numbers around the world, in the first three months of this year, demand was up 30% in China, our biggest market, if you will. We issue well over a million every year.

We are put to the test to meet this demand, to stay within our 14-day service standard. I haven't checked the numbers this week, but as recently as early this month and late last month, we were within those service standards, and in many parts of the world, including China, we were well below them.

As you know, we announced CAN+, a service for Mexico and other countries whose visitor visas are processed in Mexico City by us. It will ensure that a large class of visitors from Mexico will have service in seven days or less.

We're also issuing, in some missions, a record number—as much as 90% or more—of multiple-entry visas, 10-year multiple-entry visas, which means that Chinese citizens, Indian citizens, and Mexican citizens, in unprecedented numbers, are coming and going

as they see fit to visit family members or to do business. That's a very positive and popular measure, but we've really accelerated it in this past fiscal year, and we plan to continue to do so as our trade relations, economic relations, and tourism with all of these countries continue to grow.

The Chair: Thank you.

Stop the clock. We have to—

Mr. Fin Donnelly: He didn't answer about the \$45 million.

The Chair: I'm sorry.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Is that okay?

Hon. Chris Alexander: The \$45 million has gone to both of these tasks, including citizenship processing, which means more people are doing it and supporting our citizenship judges. There have been more ceremonies—we've seen an unprecedented number this year—and better administration.

I mentioned that in the past two years we had residency questionnaires in large numbers because of suspected abuse in thousands of cases. We have focused investigations now on the really high-risk class of applications and have freed up the others for processing, which means they're moving forward faster. On temporary residency visas, we have actually deployed new people to the field and given ourselves new capacity across our global network to process these record numbers of visitor applications.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

We'll suspend for a minute.

• (1710)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: We'll reconvene.

Mr. Donnelly, you have a little over a minute left.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As part of the cost reduction measures set out in the budget 2012 spending review, the federal government decided to close the Ottawa hearings office of the Immigration and Refugee Board effective April 2014. As noted by the IRB:

...individuals residing in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec with a proceeding before the Board will be expected to travel to the IRB Regional Office in Montreal for their hearing instead.

As well, the IRB announced that it is closing its in-person hearing offices across the Prairies in favour of establishing video conference facilities in Edmonton and Winnipeg.

I'm just wondering what the effects of these closures are and what effect they've had on the tight hearing timelines for those who do not live in the major centres where the offices are now located.

•(1715)

Ms. Anita Biguzs (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, perhaps I can just begin my remarks by indicating that the Immigration and Refugee Board is responsible for undertaking its own measures. This was not an undertaking of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration in terms of actually looking at measures to achieve certain savings.

My understanding, if I can just comment on the IRB's decisions in terms of offices, is that they offer hearings in Montreal since they closed the Ottawa office, and that move was based on the number of hearings that take place. They basically are looking across their network and trying to rationalize, certainly from the point of view of where the numbers are, and they feel they can actually meet their requirements. It's not unusual in other locations that people have to travel a certain distance to attend hearings.

It would really be more appropriate for the Immigration and Refugee Board, which is not present today, to reply to that question.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Biguzs.

Mr. Opitz.

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

Through you, Chair, thank you, all, for being here today.

Citizenship and Immigration received the passport program last July, and as you know, our government is committed to fairness and respect for the hard-earned tax dollars of our citizens while ensuring, of course, the delivery of a quality service. The passport program does provide one of the highest levels of service, and the service standards in Canada are being respected in over 99% of the cases.

Would you be able to tell me how many passports were issued last year?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: In terms of the new 10-year passport, I can advise that since it came into effect, which was July 2013, some 2.4 million 10-year passports have been issued. In total in 2013-14 five million passports were issued.

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's great.

The e-passport is benefiting Canadians. How many of those have been issued?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, the number of e-passports, since they became available in July, is 2.4 million.

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's significant.

A majority of the main estimates is for grants and contributions. What do those entail?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The bulk of the funding in grants and contributions is for settlement programming. Some \$900 million in total is for settlement services that we provide through the settlement organizations across Canada. Those provide programming to facilitate the integration of newcomers to Canada. It includes language services and referral job-counselling services to try to match individuals with appropriate jobs, to accustom them to Canada and the experience of being in Canada, and to facilitate their successful integration into Canada.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Roughly what amount goes into that?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: In total it's about \$900 million nationally. Of that amount, \$300 million is allocated to Quebec, and the balance is to other provinces. The funding amounts, or the allocations, are really determined on the basis of the number of newcomers, the number of people settling. There is a formula for that based on the number of immigrants settling in different parts of the country.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you.

The electronic travel authorization is going to further protect the safety and security of Canadians overall, and it won't actually harm the tourist industry. Would you be able to tell the committee how the electronic travel authorization is going to work, and what those projected timelines are?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The electronic travel authorization is not a new phenomenon. Certainly the United States has already been operating with their electronic travel authorization, as has the Government of Australia, and I think a number of other jurisdictions.

It will require people who are coming by air to Canada from visa-exempt countries to apply for an electronic authorization before they travel here. At this point in time U.S. citizens will be exempt, so this will be a light touch. The intention is that it should be very quick and very easy, but it will actually allow us to screen most visitors before they board a plane, to verify whether or not they pose a risk. The intention as well is that it will be low cost, quick, and easy.

•(1720)

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's great. Thank you.

We did discuss the express entry with the minister, and I think it's a very exciting recruitment process that's going to ensure Canada's global competitiveness and our advantage overall when attracting skilled workers. As we know, Australia and New Zealand and others have had this program and it's been highly successful for them and I think it's definitely something that has been lacking for us. So I'm delighted to see that it's here.

Can you explain in detail how this will work and the timeline for its implementation?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, the intention is to have the express entry system, a new application management system, up and running as of January 2015. Further to what the minister indicated, it will provide an opportunity for people to apply online through a very facilitated process, identifying their skills, their education, their age, and why they think they would be suitable to come to Canada. It would be a two-step process so they would go into a pool and be ranked in terms of their application, based on a methodology that the department has developed to assess the skills they have. They would be ranked, and then based on their ranking, they would actually be invited to apply, and then they would make a formal application to come to Canada.

I may ask my colleague, Catrina Tapley, just to fill in a few more details about how that will work specifically.

The Chair: I think we'll have to move on.

Mr. Daniel.

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

Thank you, visitors, for being here.

As a committee, we studied biometrics last year and reported that it's an integral part of the safety and security of Canadians. I think you've mentioned some of the countries that have already implemented these biometric collections. What role do the visa application centres play in the collection of biometrics?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: The visa application centres, Mr. Chair, play a critical role. We've rolled out biometrics now. That was first deployed in May 2013 for individuals seeking temporary resident applications from 29 countries and one territory. The service has extended to over 180 points of service in over 90 countries.

Essentially, it's through our VAC network—our visa application centre network—that individuals can come forward and actually provide their biometric information, which is then put into our central electronic network. We are then able, as I say, to have that information and verify it when they come to Canada, in terms of verifying their identity. The VACs play a very critical role in terms of the number of points of service that are available to people who want to come to Canada to visit.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Thank you.

Turning to the subject of express entry, how does CIC work with businesses to ensure that this program will benefit them? How will businesses be able to access express entry?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, we think this will provide an excellent opportunity for employers to be able to access high-skilled workers who meet their labour market requirements. The intention of the program is to actually have an expedited process. From the time we receive a completed application, we expect a processing time of approximately six months.

We have been doing a lot of work with employers. We've been holding a series of round tables with employer groups across the country and also working very closely with our provincial-territorial counterparts, because they will also have a role, certainly, and an interest in drawing down high-skilled workers out of the express entry pool.

I'll ask my colleague Catrina Tapley, who has participated in many of these employer round tables, to perhaps give a little more information specifically in terms of how this will work with employers.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

As the deputy minister has just indicated, we've just finished another round of consultations in all provinces and two of the three territories, focused on employers. Employers will have an opportunity, through the revised Job Bank, to be able to search or look for candidates who are in the pool, who are after that first stage. Where they find a good match for skills, and where they have a labour market opinion in most cases, then what we see is that employers will be able to make a job offer.

Once employers have made that job offer, that's almost an automatic invitation to apply for those who are in the pool; that's significant to pull through.... When we talk about drawing candidates

from the pool or providing those invitations to apply, those who have job offers and those who have provincial nominee certificates are drawn first, so to speak. Then we go to our ranking list, which the deputy minister has described, on who we're pulling next for those high human capital models or those high characteristics on their ability to participate and succeed.

• (1725)

Mr. Joe Daniel: Thank you.

What programs actually will work under the express entry?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: There are three main programs that will be part of the express entry: the Canadian experience class, the federal skilled worker program, and the federal skilled trades program. As well, a portion of the provincial nominee program will also come through express entry. For the most part, provincial nominee programs will work as they have in the past, but there will be a top-up to provincial nominee programs. For that top-up portion, provinces will be required to come through the pool, to come through that express entry system.

Mr. Joe Daniel: How will CIC work with ESDC to ensure that job matching runs smoothly?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are working very closely with our colleagues at ESDC, particularly on a redesigned Job Bank. There are particular enhancements in the Job Bank for employers, making it easier for employers to use and giving employers greater surety around the candidates who are there. There will be a particular portion for a Job Bank set-aside for candidates in express entry.

Once a candidate comes through that first screen on express entry and is part of the pool, if they don't have a job offer or a provincial nominee certificate, then they are required to fill out that job-seeker profile. Once they fill out the job-seeker profile, then they're in a portion of the Job Bank where employers can go and find them. That job-seeker profile becomes really important and is something that we're working closely on with our colleagues in ESDC.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: I would just add that ESDC officials have actually participated in all of our consultations with employers. It's very clear that the system is very integrated when people apply for the express entry with the enhanced job bank. ESDC is very much at all of the consultations and the tables with employers in terms of how all of this will come together and will work.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Biguzs.

Ms. Blanchette-Lamothe, you have about two or three minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I do not have a great deal of time available to me, I will ask a general question.

The minister spoke to us of investments made within the context of various programs. In his conclusion, he said that there was a net reduction of \$270 million compared to the previous financial year.

Could you tell me exactly where and why the savings were made and exactly what they represent? Is this a staff cut or restructuring?

Much has been said about areas where money was invested, but it can also be seen that savings were made. I have the impression that these are the result of cuts.

Regardless, I will leave that for you to answer.

[*English*]

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, I would like to explain. I think the minister did comment on the fact that, largely, this reflects the fact that the Department of Citizenship and Immigration became responsible for the revolving fund of Passport Canada, so the decrease in main estimates is largely a reflection of the accounting treatment for the Passport Canada revolving fund.

The Passport Canada revolving fund is not appropriated. It is fully cost-recovered through revenues, but the way it's accounted for—and I'll turn to my chief financial officer, Tony Matson to explain—is more of a technical accounting reflection rather than a real reduction in any of our expenditures for the department.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: I will have to interrupt you because we don't have a great deal of time available to us and it seems that this is a technical explanation.

Are there programs or other items that were the target of reduced expenditures, aside from the passport program which you mentioned earlier?

[*English*]

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, there are, I think, a few areas of reductions in terms of the main estimates. I think, primarily, some of it reflects budget 2012 decisions in terms of some of the efficiency measures and modernization measures that the department has achieved because we've been able to gain efficiencies through using automation and being able to move work around the network.

There are also a number of reductions for areas in which we received one-time funding, for example, the biometrics initiative. We've actually completed the work we needed to do to implement biometrics and the same thing is true in a number of other areas where it's just been incorporated as part of our ongoing operating costs. These are funds that are just sunseting because we've completed all of the investments in IT and information management and that kind of thing.

● (1730)

The Chair: On behalf of the committee, I thank you, Ms. Biguzs, Ms. Edlund, Ms. Tapley, and Mr. Matson, for coming and assisting us with the estimates.

The meeting is adjourned.

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