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Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): I would like to call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the parliamentary committee on Canadian heritage is studying systemic racism and religious discrimination. In the first hour, from 3:30 to 4:30, we have three witnesses: the Armenian National Committee of Canada on video conference; Trinity Western University, Mr. Robert Kuhn, president; and Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, from Phoenix, Arizona, on video conference. Thank you.

All right, now we will begin. Here are the protocols. You have 10 minutes to present your position, and after that there will be a question and answer period. At eight minutes, I will give you a two-minute warning that you may have to wrap up.

We will begin with Shahen Mirakian, from the Armenian National Committee of Canada.

Mr. Shahen Mirakian (President, Armenian National Committee of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee for inviting the Armenian National Committee of Canada to provide evidence to you today.

My name is Shahen Mirakian, and I am president of the Armenian National Committee of Canada. I apologize for not being able to join you in person. The executive director of the Armenian National Committee of Canada, Mr. Sevag Belian, is based in Ottawa, and he is present in the committee room today.

I have had the opportunity to review the evidence from previous sessions, and I have followed the reports in the media as well. The committee has already had the opportunity to hear from many presenters on a variety of concerns having to do with today's topic, and particularly with reference to Islamophobia. Many presenters have made recommendations concerning how to better address these issues. However, we believe that one topic that has not been covered sufficiently is the role that advocacy organizations can play in advancing respect and understanding amongst Canadians.

Generally, advocacy groups such as the Armenian National Committee of Canada are seen as advancing a particular point of view to the exclusion of other points of view. They are regarded as having a narrow and parochial interest. We often hear about how government should not be captured by special interests, and

advocacy organizations are often portrayed as the ultimate special interest groups.

We believe that this view is misguided and ignores the important role that organizations like the Armenian National Committee of Canada play in advancing broader interests. I am going to begin with two examples, and then move from these specific cases to a more general thesis.

In December 1998, Soviet Armenia, as it was then, was struck by a devastating earthquake that killed tens of thousands, injured countless others, and left a significant portion of the population homeless and without the necessities of life. The Armenian Canadian community immediately launched into action to collect funds, medical supplies, and other essential items to aid the population. Armenian Canadian organizations approached Canadian elected officials and public servants to see how all levels of Canadian government could assist in the effort. Armenian Canadian organizations reached out to private enterprise to help with things like setting up phone lines to collect donations—this was before the Internet—and to assist with the logistics involved in transporting goods to the then-Soviet Union. Communication channels were opened with the embassy and local consular offices of the USSR and with Soviet and Armenian government officials.

This effort was obviously directed to a particular interest important to the Armenian Canadian community. However, it had a positive impact on all Canadians because it created the basic framework that could be used in other disasters worldwide. Governments, private enterprise, the media, and aid organizations learned important lessons about coordinating their efforts and how to improve relief efforts by involving Canadians with ties to the affected region. Armenian advocacy on these issues meant that, when other communities were affected by similar tragedies, Canada was prepared to respond more quickly and more effectively. The payoff from this experience continues to be felt even today.

More recently, the Armenian Canadian community was deeply involved in the effort to resettle refugees from the conflict in Syria. The Armenian Canadian community throughout Canada, working through a variety of community organizations, brought over 4,000 privately sponsored and blended-visa Syrian refugees to Canada. This massive effort required constant engagement with the Canadian government, provincial governments, municipalities, school boards, hospitals, settlement organizations, private sponsorship groups, and countless community organizations.

Much of this work began well before the Canadian government's push in mid-December 2015, so the Armenian Canadian community had a unique insight into how to do the enormous work that had to be done by other groups when the large waves of government-sponsored refugees began to arrive. Many of the government-sponsored refugees benefited immensely, because Armenian Canadian organizations had already identified the major issues involved in resettlement and worked with our partners to resolve them.

However, the Armenian Canadian community did not do this alone. If we were able to see further, it was because we stood on the shoulders of giants who paved the way before us, the Vietnamese Canadian community, the Hungarian Canadian community, the Jewish community, the Somali Canadian community, and others had already been through similar experiences, and their efforts had resulted in structures that were already in place, which assisted us in our efforts.

The advocacy and work of many Canadian faith communities, including the Catholic Church, the United Church, the Anglican Church, the Mennonites, Islamic groups, Sikh groups, and others with refugees also provided useful guidance on how to work.

We can already see how the Syrian experience is guiding efforts to resettle the Yazidis in Canada today.

These are but two examples. The work of Chinese Canadian groups on removing the discriminatory head tax against people of Asian descent, the work of Japanese Canadian and Ukrainian Canadian organizations in seeking redress for instances of internment during the Second and First World Wars, respectively, and the work of Jewish groups to track hate crimes and combat discrimination all have positive impacts measured well beyond the immediate subject of their advocacy or their own particular community.

• (1535)

The work of numerous community organizations helped to make the Canadian Museum of Human Rights a reality, for instance. Similarly, Islamic organizations and advocacy groups from various cultures that follow Islam are already playing a valuable role in combatting Islamophobia and, in turn, broader instances of systemic religious discrimination.

Obviously, advocacy groups are not the sole element in combatting systemic racism and religious discrimination, but they can and should play a role. When these groups campaign to open doors, those doors are opened for everyone. We all benefit from the efforts of organizations to address particular instances of systemic discrimination because we become better at identifying what laws, actions, or policies are discriminatory, and we learn how to work with the targeted groups to address these issues.

To assist in this effort, the Armenian National Committee of Canada would like to make two recommendations.

First, we call upon members of Parliament to act as a resource for advocacy groups.

One of the most positive things that can be done is to introduce various communities to one another and bring them together to discuss common goals. If a member of Parliament has been approached by two advocacy groups who are pursuing the same

objective, introducing these two groups to one another can create new connections that create wider ties between the communities they represent and create better integration. Open dialogue between communities can be fostered by members of Parliament, who are often best positioned to recognize areas of common interest. Additionally, members of Parliament can help organizations addressing issues of systemic racism and religious discrimination meet people from communities who have already done considerable work on addressing these issues, and learn the best way to affect positive change.

Second, we call upon the government to redirect some of its funding from promoting intercultural dialogue to, instead, work on community building among faith and cultural communities.

Grants that require co-operation among communities will almost always accrue to the best-organized communities that already have ties with other communities and are able to lever those connections. In this way, the better off continue to be better off. If some of the funding were directed at community organizations that were smaller and less well-established, these communities could develop the proper structures to be better engaged in intercultural dialogue and to participate more fully in Canadian society. Participation by more groups will create more opportunities to identify and address systemic racism and religious discrimination.

We understand fully that these recommendations will not entirely address Islamophobia or systemic racism and religious discrimination, but we believe that they are important initial steps in creating structures in Canada that can effectively tackle this issue.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's well under time.

Now we go to Mr. Kuhn from the Trinity Western University.

You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Kuhn (President, Trinity Western University): Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee, my name is Bob Kuhn. I'm privileged to serve as the president of Trinity Western University. I appreciate the invitation to address this committee. I've submitted a short written brief as well.

This is a very important issue, and it is important to Trinity Western, which is the largest faith-based university in Canada. It has a student population of 4,000 or more, and it represents 55 years of serving a very important function in the fabric of Canadian higher education.

Trinity Western offers a wide range of undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional schools in nursing, education, clinical psychology, human kinetics, business, and others. TWU also provide a unique program of leadership training at the Laurentian leadership centre in Ottawa. You may have interacted with TWU interns in the offices of MPs or elsewhere on Parliament Hill. As well, TWU, in partnership with well-known Chinese universities, offers an international master of business degree in Tianjin, Beijing, and Shanghai.

In terms of research, Trinity Western professionals hold three Canada research chairs, and numerous research grants from NSERC, CIHR, and SSHRC. The university also owns and maintains environmental study areas, with properties totalling approximately 150 acres.

Not to leave our athletes out, over the past 15 years, Trinity Western teams have won 11 national and 23 Canada-west championships, often against universities 10 times their size.

In terms of objective party evaluation, Trinity Western has scored among the very highest ratings in the country in student satisfaction, and they have achieved an A+ grade in quality of education for seven years running. No other Canadian university has done so.

Trinity Western University is not just an excellent academic institution with winning sports teams. It's a Christian university, a community that cares deeply about all its diverse students, who in turn care deeply about the needs of others. Approximately 65% of the student body participates each year in student leadership, international service trips, community service, or outreach, working with prison populations, sex trade workers, first nations groups, Habitat for Humanity, and others.

You would think a university with such a remarkable history, extraordinary nationally and internationally recognized faculty, and exceptional students with 24,000-plus alumni would not be subjected to exclusion and rejection because of its traditional biblical values, especially when Trinity is mandated by the Trinity Western University Act to provide a university education "with an underlying philosophy and viewpoint that is Christian."

Despite its success and despite the fact that it provides its education and community service without government subsidy, it has consistently been the subject of religious discrimination. In my brief I discuss several; let me discuss two here.

Some of you may be aware of the decisions made by three provincial law societies that rejected the ability of graduates from Trinity Western's proposed law school to enter the practice of law in those provinces. This was despite approval given by the national Federation of Law Societies and the minister of higher education in British Columbia, and it was despite the fact that it is universally acknowledged that TWU law school graduates would have been fully qualified.

The sole reason for their rejection is that Trinity Western University, as a Christian university and consistent with the views of most other world religions, subscribes to the traditional definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman. Of course, that position is referenced in the Civil Marriage Act of 2005, which says, "it is not against the public interest to hold and publicly express

diverse views on marriage". It appears that some government, quasi-government, and other organizations and corporate entities prefer to ignore the important statement of principle.

At the end of November, these issues before the courts will again be before the Supreme Court of Canada, despite the fact that this court, facing similar facts relating to the approval of Trinity's school of education, ruled in favour of Trinity in 2001. In that decision they made a number of judicial statements relevant to motion 103. The first statement reads as follows:

The diversity of Canadian society is partly reflected in the multiple religious organizations that mark the societal landscape and this diversity of views should be respected.

• (1540)

Here is another quote:

[TWU students'] freedom of religion is not accommodated if the consequence of its exercise is the denial of the right of full participation in society.

I have one final quote:

For better or for worse, tolerance of divergent beliefs is a hallmark of a democratic society.

Now if the powerful law societies can discriminate against students graduating from Trinity Western, then what is to stop other organizations from discriminating against its 24,000-plus alumni and 300-plus faculty members? In fact, this is exactly what has happened.

There are examples of them in the brief. Again, I will focus on one. In the last few months, a Trinity Western faculty member applied for a position at a public university. The public university faculty union executive advised their fellow faculty members to boycott the Trinity Western applicant's interview solely because the applicant was from Trinity. It is alarming that the well-established concept of accommodation is not referenced when authorities such as this or other organizations engage in rapid and reckless response to shifting social values. That is, governments, organizations, and individuals create and enforce a hierarchy of discrimination without a means of balancing potential conflicting interests. If the concept of accommodation is eliminated entirely, it is done in favour of an immutable, pre-established hierarchy. In essence, we are told that in the name of diversity, you are not welcome. In the name of tolerance, we will not tolerate your religious freedom. You must conform to society's secular moral judgments to participate at the table of pluralism.

This committee has asked for constructive suggestions for implementation by the federal government that would reduce or eliminate systemic racism and religious discrimination. Let me make three.

This is recommendation number one. Inevitably, if we are to retain the sought-after, balanced, multicultural, multireligious mosaic, religious discrimination must continue to be the subject of careful study, civil discourse, and creativity in resolution of conflict. It is my submission that the first step is to promote, encourage, and engage in meaningful opportunities to pursue dialogue, relationships, and educated understanding. The government can and should lead by example. I believe it would be prudent and positive to ensure consultation with religious organizations in order to understand the perspective of religious people in Canada. In this respect, the duty to consult would be appropriate. This would go some distance to bridging the increasing divide between the secular and religious communities. It is when people in positions of authority or power do not listen to, consult with, or show respect for those who hold strong religious views that religious discrimination arises.

The second recommendation is, when considering the impact of decisions on religious minorities, the concept of accommodation should be employed. If our country is to build a meaningful and genuine pluralism, its leadership must be committed to accommodation of religious differences, rather than simply adopting and enforcing secular majority opinions.

The third recommendation is that the appointment of an ombudsperson be considered. Assisting in the resolution of differences and disputes between governments, authorities, religious institutions, and individuals, it would provide an opportunity for greater understanding, dialogue, and mediation, and the advent of creative resolution alternatives.

In conclusion, Trinity Western and its staff, students, and faculty experience significant financial, emotional, and systemic discrimination. It is getting worse, and it should not be.

Honourable members of the committee, this is not the Canada that has historically opened its arms to welcome a great variety of people of faith. This is not the Canada that prides itself on being a nation of peace—a country where men and women of deep religious convictions are not forced to forgo their faith as a condition of full citizenship. We are the Canada that is offering safe harbour to families fleeing religious persecution—a compassionate country that does not dictate conformity but rather seeks community in our diversity.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now go to Dr. Zuhdi Jasser for 10 minutes, and I'll give you an eight-minute warning.

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser (President, American Islamic Forum for Democracy): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, for holding this important hearing and thank you for inviting me. I can't tell you enough how important this issue is to me. For those of us south of your border, America has been wrestling with many of these same issues, since 9/11, as your country has.

I'm founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy. As you mentioned, my name is Zuhdi Jasser. I'm also the son of Syrian immigrants. My family escaped the Baath regime

in Syria in the mid-sixties. I still have most of my family in Syria, so I'm greatly aware of the plight of refugees and our family.

What I'm going to reference today in the little time I have—we submitted my full comments for your record and I ask you to accept those—are the unintended consequences of M-103. It may be well intended to prevent bigotry against Muslims, but since it's couched in the term “Islamophobia”, since it really looks at Muslims as a model, I think it would cause more harm than good. I'm going to walk you through what I see as some of its harms and what I think would be a better approach to the issues that were intended to be raised in M-103.

As a devout Muslim and an American Muslim who loves my faith and loves my country, I must tell you that any emphasis on Islamophobia, as it's called, is profoundly flawed and will continue our nations down the slippery slope of catering to Islamist separatism. I'm here to tell you that simply even using that term Islamophobia, and getting the government into the business of monitoring any form of speech, will end up paradoxically tightening societal division. We must not coddle our Muslim community, which will only further separate Muslims out. We must treat them as any other minority, as any other grievance group and a group that needs protection of its civil rights, but trying to suppress what can be painful speech about Islam at society's fringes will actually paradoxically feed the unintended consequence of fomenting non-Muslim fears of Islam.

Citizens who cannot have their real fears heard and their speech exercised will be stifled from the public sector and pushed underground, resentment that will only foment and actually exacerbate the very problem and one of the claims we want to solve.

Let me tell you briefly about our organization. We were founded in the wake of 9/11 to separate mosque and state. We believe the only way to defeat the root cause of radical Islam is to defeat the ideology, non-violent ideology, of political Islam or Islamic state identity movements. We also helped found the Muslim reform movement that was founded in December of 2015 and we have members across the U.S., Canada, and Europe, including Raheel Raza who, I believe, has spoken to your committee before me.

We are reformists, and I want to emphasize this movement, because much of what we say on behalf of liberal rights, liberal ideas, women's rights, minority rights, within Muslims is often identified as blasphemy by Islamic regimes. It is identified as heretical by mosques in the west, and identified as “Islamophobic” by mosques and leaders in the west, including many allies of the author of M-103. I would tell you that Islamophobia is a weapon used by theocrats to prevent free speech and to prevent critical thinking and modernization of the very ideas that create the underbelly of radical Islam, if you will.

By having a resolution and having a sentiment put forth that focuses on Islamophobia rather than bigotry that surely exists against minorities—and I'm not telling you there isn't bigotry that exists against Muslims, against Jews, against other minorities in all of our society that we need to fight—but by calling it Islamophobia you're basically implying that Islam has rights.

Islam is an idea, like anything else. It does not have rights. It's not a race and it's not part of this systemic racism and discrimination that is being addressed by M-103. I would tell you that the way to approach it is just as you approach anti-Semitism. You don't approach Judeophobia. You approach anti-Semitism because it's the bigotry that exists against practitioners of the Jewish faith that needs to be defeated. Ultimately, bigotry exists against Muslims that needs to be defeated, but we don't do it by making people afraid to push the issues that need reform and need to be addressed, because the primary victims of, even in the west, our government's addressing Islamophobia and calling it that are going to be Muslim.

• (1550)

Where it asks you to address and quell an increasing climate of hate and fear, I believe it will make it worse, preventing the tough conversations we need to have.

Where it asks you to condemn Islamophobia and all forms of racism and religious discrimination and take note of e-411, I will tell you that the language of e-411 smacks of a lot of the language of theocracies from Iran to Saudi Arabia and others, and it will empower tribal leaders and Islamists within our community.

Next, M-103 asks you to undertake a study of how the government should develop a whole-of-government approach to reducing or eliminating systemic racism. Certainly the government should be in the business of protecting individual citizens from hate and racism, but it should not be in the business of studying negative and positive sentiments about a particular faith or idea.

Then it asks you to collect data about hate and crime reports. Again, that seems harmless enough, but the focus should not simply be Muslim, but all minorities and all people of faith because when you carve out Muslims, it feeds into separatism.

The harms of M-103 I believe include enabling and enshrining the term "Islamophobia" with the empowerment of all the Islamists domestically and abroad, which marginalizes we reformers who are dedicated to working with both liberals and conservatives in protecting the rights of women and protecting the rights of apostates and blasphemers and others to whom Islamists don't want to give freedom of speech.

M-103 will empower Islamists over Muslim reformers and call us "Islamophobes". I believe it infantilizes Muslims by disproportionately protecting them more than any other vulnerable minority or community in Canada. I think it will backfire and end up separating Muslims more and feeding into both extremes: those who are too ignorant of the realities within Muslim communities, and those who might be blaming all of Islam for the acts of radicals.

M-103 treats Muslims as a monolith, and I think that is not healthy. Most importantly, I think that this mantra, this language, will feed into harming the progress in the security apparatus.

One of my primary recommendations to you is that you recommend to your government that you shift from CVE, countering violent extremism, to countering violent Islamism because we Muslims can only help you counter the radical ideologies of Wahhabism, Salafi-Jihadism, and all these things that our governments have not wanted to dive into, and shift away from a whack-a-mole program in national security to working against the ideas that radicalize Muslims within our community, such as the horrendous misogyny, the anti-Semitism, and other things preached from the pulpits that radicalize and are the precursors to push Muslims down the pathway of radicalization.

These conversations will not be able to be had if M-103 is implemented, which talks about Islamophobia, because then they will see any discussion of Islamism or political Islam, which is theocratic Islam, which I think every American could understand, as our country was founded on fighting theocracy. I think the west understands this battle. It is just that Islam is a few hundred years behind, being only in our 15th century.

My recommendations to you are, first, to address any bigotry and racism equally across faith and racial communities, without a disproportionate focus on Muslims.

Second, do not use the term "Islamophobia", please do not use it.

Third, the best way to melt away any bigotry that exists against Muslims is to have us given platforms to counter Jihadism and Salafism so that Canadians can see us leading the battle and how much of an asset we are to countering the threat. That will do so much more to counter the so-called Islamophobia or bigotry to have Canadians see how vital we are.

Fourth is to have a whole-of-government approach—as it calls for—to change the language to "countering violent Islamism" rather than "countering violent extremism", and to include a broad spectrum when you talk about diversity in our community, to include reformists and those who push against the old mantras that have been fossilized in our thought processes.

• (1555)

My last two points, as my time ends here, are to stop engaging Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups, and to understand the elephant in the room, which is the OIC governments, the Islamic theocracies across the planet that don't want the people of your country to get into the criticism of theocratic Islam.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go into the second part of this hearing, which is to have a question and answer segment. This first round is a seven-minute round. The seven minutes include questions and answers, so I'm asking everybody to be as crisp and terse as you possibly can.

We begin with Mr. Breton for the Liberals.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton (Shefford, Lib.): Good afternoon everyone.

Thank you for being here today for the resumption of our study.

My first question is addressed to Mr. Mirakian.

If I understood correctly, you represent a community organization which defends the rights and represents the concerns of Armenian Canadians. Your organization promotes human rights with the public.

Since you are concerned with rights and freedoms, I'd like to ask you a question. How can the Government of Canada better protect the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

• (1600)

[*English*]

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Thank you. I'm going to respond in English, because I'm more familiar with English than French.

About four years ago, the Armenian National Committee of Canada had an opportunity to reconsider its mandate. We spent a long time thinking about it. Rather than being a group that just advocated for the issues of interest to Armenian Canadians, we actually changed our mandate to say we were a grassroots human rights organization that generally advocated for human rights for all people.

One of the reasons for doing that was that, in a country like Canada, we recognize it's very important that we stand up for all the people who are subject to various forms of discrimination, racism, or had their, as you said, charter rights denied.

Obviously, we have a government, we have courts, we have all kinds of functioning to stand up for charter rights. I may sound a little airy-fairy, or have my head in the clouds, but I certainly think that education and advocacy by individuals and groups is very important to make sure we all recognize our charter rights, and we're all ready to defend them as necessary.

Some of them are fairly clear. I don't think people are going to take away my right to a fair trial or due process without a great outcry, but others are less clear and require more education and more effort to preserve.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you.

Last April 3, the Armenian National Committee of Canada, the committee you chair, which also represents the Rwandan, Jewish and Ukrainian communities, published a statement in the context of the month of commemoration.

Why did the Armenian National Committee of Canada decide to make a statement last April?

[*English*]

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Absolutely. In April 2015, the House of Commons passed motion number 587, which recognized the month of April as Genocide Remembrance, Condemnation and Prevention Month. In April 2016, we were involved in efforts to have the various communities get together to recognize that month again. Unfortunately, by the time we were organized, it was a little late.

This year, luckily, we started very early, and all the communities worked together to commemorate that very important motion that passed the House of Commons in April of 2015, and to recognize that April, in Canada, is now designated as Genocide Remembrance, Condemnation and Prevention Month.

Each of the communities have specifically been the subject of genocidal acts against them that are recognized by the Canadian government: the Ukrainian Holodomor, the Jewish Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the Armenian genocide.

We all worked together, and that's one of the ways in which advocacy groups can work together to overcome divisions between communities. We share a common interest as Canadians, and as members of communities, we have these things recognized to prevent such systemic discrimination in the future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Thank you, Mr. Mirakian.

My next question will be for you, Mr. Kuhn. I am really not very familiar with Trinity Western University. If am I not mistaken, you said it had been the subject of religious discrimination. I did not understand what you meant by that in your statement, which you had to present in a very short period of time. Is that what you said?

• (1605)

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Kuhn: Yes. There are examples in my written material of graduates from Trinity Western who, because they were going to a Christian school, were targeted, so to speak. There's the matter that I referred to involving the professor who was duly qualified to apply for a job but was boycotted by the professors' union in the university to which that professor applied. The general, more well-known circumstance is when the law societies denied access to Trinity Western's proposed school of law graduates to practice law in those provinces. Those are the three examples I've provided.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds left, Monsieur Breton.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Breton: Fine. I'll go back to that topic later if I have time.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll go to David Anderson for the Conservatives.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Jasser, I'd like to start with you. Can you give us a little bit of information on how you deal with radical preaching and still leave freedom of speech intact? Do you have any recommendations for us? We've heard testimony here saying that we should be limiting freedom of speech, and then others are saying absolutely not. Do you have any comments on that?

I only have seven minutes, so I'll need a quick answer.

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser: I would tell you absolutely not. Do not limit it. Every Middle Eastern regime is testament to the fact that when they limit free speech, they push them underground. They will still preach what they want and they won't have the antiseptic of sunlight. Just as I don't want my speech prohibited by this false banner of Islamophobia or anyone's criticism of Islam, similarly the light of day can only be shed on the radicals and we can monitor them, if they have the freedom.

As long as they're not preaching imminent violence and violence against individuals, our Supreme Court has deemed that theirs is free speech, even for the KKK, and I think most societies have shown that when you limit that speech, you actually radicalize them more.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

President Kuhn, I'm wondering if you could tell me whether it's fair to force faith institutions to be defined by external sources. I think I know the answer to that question, but is it fair for religious institutions, religious faiths to be defined by external forces and sources?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: That's a very broad question, and I'm not sure that it can be answered in definitive terms without a specific example. In some respects, the organization must be defined by external, societal circumstances; in other respects, as I indicated, the duty to accommodate reflects a balancing between the interests of the external regulating entity, whatever that defining entity may be, and the religious community itself.

Mr. David Anderson: In 2016 the Ontario court said that the Law Society of Upper Canada's decision did in fact interfere with TWU's right to religious freedom, but that the infringement was not unreasonable. From your perspective, if the courts are going to go in that direction, then what are the limits of reasonableness? Where can they come in, to either a Christian, a Muslim, or a Hindu community, and say, "Here are the guidelines. You can't go past here with your faith issues"?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: There is a significant amount of jurisprudence on this with respect to the balancing of rights under section 1 of the charter. The other issue is that it comes back to accommodation.

There are legal avenues that would afford a balancing of the term "reasonable". Reasonable, as is the case with many other terms in the English language, can be much what you define it to be. What is reasonable to one person is not reasonable to another, but there are established principles, such as that of accommodation, that establish what reasonable means in given circumstances. Certainly, courts could to make the conclusion that you read from the Ontario decision as opposed to the one from the British Columbia Court of Appeal, where the issue of a liberalization of societal values generally impinges on the religious views of an organization or a community such as Trinity Western.

Mr. David Anderson: Is this religious discrimination that you are facing systemic, or do you think it is going to become systemic? Our motion talks about "systemic discrimination". I'm wondering, from your perspective, if this is systemic or not. If so, is it going in that direction?

• (1610)

Mr. Robert Kuhn: I'm of the view that it continues to gain strength and in a systemic way, because of the way in which multiple aspects of society have now taken up the terminology that is ill-defined, such as "inclusivity", which, if it doesn't include religious organizations, isn't itself inclusivity. Inclusivity is used in a language that is ill-defined and creates a potential for a hierarchy of rights and hierarchy of views.

Mr. David Anderson: We had testimony last week from one of our witnesses that basically came to the point of saying that if religious feelings are hurt, that is going too far. In terms of Islam, that would be Islamophobic. If someone feels they have been offended, then the person who has offended them is Islamophobic.

Do you believe we can take things that far? What is the difference between protecting religious freedom and then protecting religious sentiment? In other countries, there are laws protecting religious sentiment that end up in a bad place.

Do you have any thoughts about that? How do we protect religious freedoms at a time when people's feelings seem to be as important as any other factor?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: It's again a balancing act, but the law is quite definitive in terms of "going too far" being hate speech. However, freedom of speech, as we've heard one of the other witnesses testify, must be protected at a significant level. It's a balancing of those concerns.

My concern relates more to the systemic, where the balancing never takes place because the idea of religious freedom, of religious discrimination, is not taken into account in creating this hierarchy of moral values, be they societal or otherwise—a majoritarian opinion.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Warawa has a question.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): I have a quick question. Thank you, Chair and guests.

President Kuhn, you have some very powerful opposition to the law school you are proposing at Trinity Western. You have the three law societies. You even have CIBC, one of the biggest banks in Canada.

Do you believe that the diversity of Canada should include Trinity, and do you believe it's just Trinity that they are after, or is it basically religious freedom?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: It's my view that the balancing needs to occur not just at the government level where it's protected to some extent by laws in place.... I mean, legal alternatives are only one way in which society can deal with its conflicts between a religious organization or a religious view and societal standards.

However, there are many other people, including societies or organizations that govern the affairs of religious organizations indirectly or directly, for instance, a bank or other corporate institution, and have the potential to exclude them from the table of pluralism. They have the potential to eliminate their voice, to push to the margins those who have religious views that may be not in accordance with the majority as expressed through a variety of means, such as you mentioned.

We're very much in that direction.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kuhn.

We'll now go to Jenny Kwan, for the New Democrats.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the speakers on the panel today.

I'd like to first start by making a clarification. This comes up almost regularly at these committee meetings, that somehow, because the word "Islamophobia" is mentioned in this motion, all we are dealing with is the issue of Islamophobia. Of course, that is not true. The motion explicitly states "Islamophobia and all forms of...discrimination".

I want to put that on the record, so that we're clear on what we're talking about and what we're studying here.

I'd like to ask my question to Mr. Mirakian. I appreciated your comments, particularly when you indicated there is an expansion of your organization's work in dealing with issues around human rights for all the different groups. To that end, in this country, we used to have a national action plan with respect to dealing with the issue of racism. We don't have that anymore.

I wonder if you can comment on whether or not, for this study, at this point in our history, it is important for us to bring back such a national plan. If so, what are the components that you would say the government ought to focus on as priorities?

• (1615)

Mr. Shahan Mirakian: I'm not sure I'm necessarily the authority to speak on behalf of my organization on that specific matter of policy, but I will say that one of the most important ways in which we protect human rights and recognize human rights is when they become priorities for government. When something is not a priority of the government, it's very hard to scream into the void and make your voice heard if you're not getting any response or assistance from the government on these topics.

One of the most fundamental points is that our groups work to try to make things priorities of the government, not because we somehow think that this is important to us particularly, in that we'll somehow achieve a personal benefit from it, but because it benefits all Canadians when the government sets priorities that are important to all Canadians.

For instance, combatting racism, systemic religious discrimination, or any other violation of human rights across the board, these are important things that governments should demonstrate matter to them. Whether or not that involves the large spending of money on national action plans, I can't say, or certainly I can't take an organizational view on—I have my personal views on the topic—but I think that we need to make it a priority for the government, especially at the federal level, that these things matter.

For most Canadians, when something becomes a federal issue—and this is something that can be a federal issue, the charter certainly falls within the federal jurisdiction—it's something that people take as a priority among themselves as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

You indicate that it is important for the government to take it seriously, and I would agree with that as well. In terms of what kind of action the government should take, I ask this question, just to get a sense from people. How can the government indicate that they are taking this seriously? I would argue that moving forward on a national action plan would be one way, and that would be on both racism and also religious discrimination. In fact, I would argue it should be on all forms of discrimination.

We used to have a minister of multiculturalism in this country, but that is no longer the case. From that perspective, would that be a way for the government to indicate that this is a priority and to address the issue of discrimination that we're seeing today in our communities, by bringing back a ministry of multiculturalism?

Mr. Shahan Mirakian: It's important that all ministries and all government agencies recognize that Canada is diverse. We recognize, certainly, that we have diversity in gender and things of that sort because it is 2016, or whatever.

Similarly, I think it's important to recognize that Canada is a culturally diverse place that has, not only our founding peoples and the indigenous peoples—our first nations—but also groups that have arrived in Canada, often at the same time as the founding peoples, who have their own cultural backgrounds.

One of the things that I would recommend, and something I can speak to, is that we often hear about red tape reduction acts, where the government goes through a lot of legislation and tries to take out things that are outdated or regulations that are wrong. I think we need to have a multiculturalism or a systemic discrimination reduction act one day. We need to go through all of our legislation and remove those pieces that are leftovers of a different time, or that don't properly recognize cultural communities. I think this is a great first step, rather than waiting for dozens and dozens of charter challenges to try to fix things, or having advocacy organizations knocking on our door.

If we were to set up a committee that were to go through, carefully, some of the legislation and policies that we have in place—and some of the mandates of agencies—and try to address some of the roots of systemic discrimination, we would be proactive in getting ahead of the problem. I think that would make a real difference to people as well. It wouldn't be nearly as expensive.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think it is important to be sure to look at previous or past legislation through that lens. In fact, in B.C. we did that, or the opposition did that, particularly on the question of discrimination targeted at the Chinese Canadian community in advance of our making the apology. We actually came back with volumes of material indicating discriminatory policies and laws that were enacted in B.C. I would agree with that point.

To bring it further, should the government then be putting all future policy through that lens as well?

• (1620)

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

The Chair: We now go to Arif Virani, for the Liberals.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a few questions for various witnesses. I'll start with Mr. Mirakian.

Thank you very much for your testimony. As a person who previously worked with Minister McCallum on the refugee resettlement, thank you specifically to the Armenian-Canadian community for its extensive efforts in assisting with the refugee resettlement over the past couple of years.

In terms of community capacity building, I want to pick up a bit where Ms. Kwan was with you. We've heard a lot about this in the context of this committee's study. We heard about the fact that Canadian Heritage at one time in the past did actually fund community capacity building, community development, for individual communities unto themselves.

Can you flesh out a bit for the committee why you think this would be useful, specifically for the newer communities and newcomer communities that are less established right now in Canada?

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Sure. Again, I don't want to make it seem like funding is the solution to every problem, but certainly government has tools that it can offer to communities to create capacity for those communities to set themselves up and organize themselves as more than just organizations that are organized to preserve their own culture. That is to say, government has to be one of the drivers—whether it's through financial means, through mentorship, or through providing assistance—to create tools for these communities to advocate for their interests with the broader Canadian public and to involve themselves in Canadian society on a multiplicity of issues.

To be honest with you, the Armenian community has been established in Canada for over 100 years, and only recently have we moved on from being able to advocate solely for our own interests to being able to advocate for the interests of the broader Canadian public on a multiplicity of issues. That maturity did not come about

overnight. It came about through working on issues, for instance the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and things of that sort, where we were involved and obtained mentorship from other communities, working together with other groups.

I think government can jump-start that process by providing the capacity and the tools to do that. One example I would give is that having a permanent employee for a community—or even a part-time employee—can make all the difference sometimes, as opposed to its being just volunteer-based. That's something that a government grant, for instance, can make a huge change to, if a community is a newcomer community and people are struggling to integrate with Canadian society and don't necessarily have the funding. That's just one suggestion.

Mr. Arif Virani: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kuhn, I'd like to turn to you. Thank you for being here, and thank you for your testimony.

I'll say this from the perspective of a person who represents a riding in downtown Toronto, Parkdale—High Park. The concerns that get expressed to me about your institution are geared not so much toward religious discrimination as you perceive it, but rather specifically toward the covenant itself. Those concerns were expressed to me by United Church-goers in my riding, who say they are all in favour of Christianity being protected in the same way that any other religion should be protected, but it's the covenant itself and how it connects to the fact that you would be producing law graduates who would be entering the domain, passing the bar in constitutional law or human rights law, and receiving clients of different faiths, backgrounds, and sexual orientation, and how exactly that would work.

That being said, I just want to clarify a couple of things. In your recommendations, you said you believe that, in consultation with religious groups, there needs to be a better understanding of what religious groups are all about and how to accommodate them. Did I get that right?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: Yes.

Mr. Arif Virani: Would that apply to all religious groups?

Mr. Robert Kuhn: Yes.

Mr. Arif Virani: We also heard testimony during these committee hearings from different groups talking about the need for interfaith dialogue, particularly when we look at the rise of hate crimes against religious groups, specifically Jews and Muslims right now. Interfaith dialogue could be a way of building up dialogue and understanding among groups. Do you think that makes sense?

• (1625)

Mr. Robert Kuhn: Yes. I advocate for that in the brief that I submitted.

Mr. Arif Virani: Okay.

I have about three minutes and 40 seconds, maybe two minutes and 40 seconds, so I'll turn to Mr. Jasser.

Mr. Jasser, like Ms. Kwan, I just wanted to clarify a few things that relate to some of your submissions. Then if we can have a comment at the end, that would be terrific.

I'll again confess to you, as somebody who has sat here for the last eight weeks hearing from witnesses, that it strikes me as a little odd to indicate that this motion and the committee study we're now doing somehow prevents freedom of expression and free speech, when we are entertaining witnesses from all aspects of the spectrum who, themselves, are participating in a wide and robust dialogue here and challenging a lot of the notions we are presenting. From our perspective, the study is encouraging speech rather than chilling it.

You mentioned Ms. Raza as somebody who shares your view of the world, so to speak, in terms of somebody you've collaborated with. Ms. Raza is demonstrated to be somebody who continues to participate in certain social media forums and certain platforms, such as the TheRebel.media, an entity that has been eschewed by the leader of the official opposition, yet she maintains that as a platform. That platform has been identified by other witnesses in this committee as a divisive platform.

You said that you struggle with the idea of what is Islamophobic. I will say to you that I personally feel we spent a lot of time on this issue of the terminology as opposed to addressing the root cause of the problem. We've heard from a number of people—and I say this to you as a Muslim member of Parliament—that no one feels that we should be having a problem with questioning the tenets of a faith, the same way I could question the tenets of the Hindu faith. If people—

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): How much time is left, Madam Chair?

Mr. Arif Virani: There are 54 seconds left, Mr. Reid.

The Chair: Excuse me, I will be giving you the seconds. You have less than one minute left.

I was just about to tell you, but I was interrupted.

Mr. Arif Virani: In the same way that people have the ability to question the tenets of the Hindu faith, people have the ability to question the tenets of the Islamic faith, but when it descends into insults, threats, or even violence or a mosque shooting, that is what most people consider to be Islamophobic.

The point you raised about petition e-411 I found particularly offensive—I'll be candid with you—because 70,000 Canadians signed that petition, and you compared it to the theocratic gestures you found in other parts of the world. I think most Canadians would find that quite offensive, sir. The fact that the petition received unanimous consent to be tabled in Parliament means that I think most parliamentarians would find that offensive.

I would reiterate the fact that Ms. Kwan raised on what we are studying here. We are not targeting just one religion, although religions have been targeted in the past with previous motions, such as when we identified the Copts in need of particular protection, anti-Semitism in need of particular identification, and discrimination against the Yazidis.

What we were doing was also studying indigenous, anti-black, and anti-Jewish discrimination, which is, I think, an important part of this study.

The Chair: Mr. Virani, I think your time is up.

Thank you.

Mr. David Anderson: I have a point of order, Madam Chair. Mr. Virani has done this before. It's too bad he wasn't a witness for us, but we'd like to welcome, or ask the gentleman if he would be willing to respond with a written response so that we can use it in our report.

I'm a little concerned about the fact that... I don't know if Mr. Virani is deliberately doing this or not, but it almost amounts to bullying witnesses, using his time to lecture them, when they've come here at their time and effort. We've seen this before.

The Chair: If you would like to have a response from the witness, then we have about a minute. If we use it up debating with each other, we won't have that time.

Please go ahead, Dr. Jasser.

Mr. David Anderson: We have also let other witnesses know that they can send recommendations in. I would appreciate it if you let them know that, as well.

The Chair: Yes, you have a minute. I will give you a minute. Then if you have any recommendations that you want to send along in writing, please send them to the clerk of the committee.

Thank you.

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser: Thank you for this opportunity. I'll try to respond as well as I can.

First of all, while I appreciate the fact that the resolution is trying to approach all faiths, the bottom line is that it was authored by MP Iqra Khalid under the premise of e-411. There is nothing offensive about a Muslim telling you that in other countries that are not as free a democracy as Canada and the United States are, this same language is used to suppress any dissent from citizens in their country. They aren't being put in prison for criticizing the president or the king. They're being put in prison for criticizing Islam. That is why it's called Islamophobia.

By your impugning Raheel Raza's work by saying that she appeared on this and that media, rather than addressing the substance of what I've said, what she has said, I think proves the weakness of your argument. You simply want to do the guilt by association, which you as a Muslim claim is bigotry, when in fact you want to do guilt by association in our work, which actually, I think, any focus on these things avoids.

I think the test of democracy and your—

• (1630)

The Chair: Sir, I think your time is up.

Thank you very much.

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser: I'll just finish this sentence.

The Chair: Finish it quickly, please, if you don't mind, sir.

Dr. Zuhdi Jasser: The test of democracy is not the centre of what offends those who are kind and moderate. It's the periphery that is the most offensive that test true free speech and democracy.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses for being present here today.

We have now ended our first hour. We have another group of witnesses coming in, so before I call this session to a close, I would like to suggest that we all need to think about the way we address witnesses. I would ask members to please consider that witnesses are indeed our guests. I know this is a contentious issue, but we need to be very careful of our language, both with each other and to the witnesses. Thank you very much.

I now will suspend for the next hour's panel to arrive.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: We shall begin the second hour.

We have in our second hour Mr. Ahmed and Mr. Dahya from the Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society. Then we have Mr. Singh from the World Sikh Organization of Canada.

Mr. Singh, I hope everything is fine with you. We hear you had a car accident last week.

Mr. Balpreet Singh (Legal Counsel, World Sikh Organization of Canada): Indeed. I was waylaid on my way to the hearing, but this time I'm here and we should be good.

The Chair: You have no disabilities from or harm done to you in the accident. You're fine...?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Everything is fine.

The Chair: Good. Thank you.

Here are the protocols. You have 10 minutes as the Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society. You can divide your time, or one person alone can use the 10 minutes. The World Sikh Organization has 10 minutes as well. I'll give you an eight-minute notice so that you know when you have two minutes left and you can wrap up. Thank you.

We should begin with the Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society.

Mr. Ahmed.

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed (Director, Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society): Madam Chair and honourable members, we're greatly privileged to appear before the committee to make a submission on behalf of our organization, the Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society. We trust that this will assist the committee in its important study on the issue of systemic racism and religious discrimination.

Our presentation today will be in four parts. First, we will build some context around our organization to make the committee understand the perspective from which we submit the submission. Second, we will share our view on systemic causes of racism based on experiences working as a grassroots community organization. Third, we will recommend the one area we feel will have the biggest

impact on addressing this challenge. We will then finally wrap up with some additional observations and practical insights that we've gathered through our work with the community.

Mr. Azim Dahya (Chief Executive Officer, Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society): Food bank operation is but one part of our operating model, which has evolved over a period of almost eight years. The Muslim food bank grew out of the Surrey food bank to serve the needs of food bank clients who had special dietary needs, like halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan, etc. While our client-base demographic is predominantly Muslim from all ethnicities, we are non-denominational from a Muslim perspective and also try to serve families from other faiths and cultural communities.

While food bank operation is our core program, this has been supplemented over time with five other programs, i.e., the ASPIRE caseworker program, prison outreach, youth support, refugee support, and community capacity building. At the outset, it is important to stress that we make our submission from a grassroots perspective. It emerges, not from analysis of large amounts of statistical, national data, but rather from real-world, localized experiences, playing out in the lives of the thousands of Canadians our team has interacted with since our inception.

Throughout the development of our programs, we've always applied the principle of leveraging existing social services rather than creating new ones. We recognize that the capacity of social services is not always optimally employed. An accessibility gap often exists between service delivery centres and the communities in need. This gap is not so much one of physical space, but manifests itself more often in cultural, language, and other barriers. In addition to the plethora of trauma-induced mental health challenges, we've seen additional mental and emotional health challenges stemming from the racial and religious discrimination experienced by our clients.

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: The sad necessity of our work is that it connects us with many people who are victims of discrimination based on ethnicity and religious affiliations. Our teams in the caseworker and youth support programs regularly encounter stories spanning the spectrum of naked racist abuse to insidious silent discrimination. Allow us to share a couple of examples.

ASPIRE is our caseworker program, which is conceived as a mechanism to break the clients out of the cycle of ongoing dependency on food bank services. The goal is to move them to a point of being self-sufficient, dignified members of the Canadian society. Our food bank-trained caseworkers engage the client one on one, supporting and connecting them to available community and government resources. The focus is education, employment, and community integration. Our caseworkers often act as mentors and as the first level of social support when clients are experiencing incidents of racial discrimination. Our caseworkers are supported by a group of formally trained social workers.

Feedback from this group recounts many incidents of racial discrimination and harassment, especially with Muslim women in public spaces. Muslim women also experience employment discrimination, i.e., hijab-wearing women being told to “take that off” at interviews. Our case files include stories of discrimination, even in the process of seeking accommodation, where landlords appear overly interested in where the person is from, before even allowing them to view the advertised properties.

In our youth support programs, participants report an increased level of physical bullying, exclusion, and cyber-bullying of Muslim youth. It occurs mostly in the school setting. The stories tell us, not only about discrimination suffered at the hands of students, but even at the hands of teachers who put students on the spot and make unfair generalizations.

The Muslim youth we deal with contend both with Islamophobia and anti-immigrant discourse on a regular basis. This is indisputable data confirming that religious discrimination does indeed exist in our society.

● (1640)

The Muslim Food Bank Services serves the socially marginalized who are already burdened with the trauma of war, poverty, illness, incarceration, and so on. Our view is that this marginalization in fact primes our clients for discrimination. We reach this conclusion because the consistent theme in their stories is that the perpetrators invariably view them as “the other”. We deduce from this that racism thrives in settings where social barriers exist and where there is a lack of mutual knowing. Any attempt to systemically root out racism and discrimination, then, is inherently a project about connecting and reconnecting people.

A further insight derived from our work in the context of newcomers is that connecting people is a bilateral responsibility. While we are not advocating forced integration, the connecting process cannot work unless newcomers make some effort to appreciate the nuances of their new environment and acknowledge a need for some adaptation. This is not to say there's an unwillingness on the part of newcomers, but rather, that there exists an opportunity to better align the available support services to facilitate adaptation to the needs of a wide variety of newcomer communities, and indeed, to develop new services where there might be a need to do so.

A good example of that is the importance of offering refugee integration services in mother tongues, rather than the official Canadian languages. Canadian culture workshop curricula need constant review to include topics that might not have been

previously deemed important, topics such as parenting norms, western social etiquette, gender interaction, and so on.

The food bank's community capacity-building program recognizes the mental health component caused by racism within the marginalized communities and has intervened by facilitating various training symposiums on mental health in the Muslim community, bringing together health care, the community, and professional service providers.

In the interest of time, we've identified the one top priority item that we feel would make the biggest impact. Stated plainly, we believe government should direct funding flows more effectively towards community organizations. This would remove one of the key hurdles that prevent community organizations from scaling up the impact of their already worthy efforts. We have argued in the submission that community organizations occupy a uniquely advantageous position, as compared with government agencies or government-funded NGOs, to engage with victims and perpetrators of racial discrimination. This is because the discrimination invariably plays out at the inter-community or intra-community level.

Community organizations such as these exist throughout Canada and represent a vast, untapped but struggling component of society that can be instrumental in shaping and giving expression to the true Canadian identity. Although our operating model represents a response to the specific needs of a particular community, we believe the programs are entirely replicable in all communities. There's no reason that organizations such as ours shouldn't exist in various communities from coast to coast.

Community organizations have, however, been frustrated by the challenges of accessing the vast public funding pools that are already available. Remove these barriers and similar programs could very well spring up around Canada in all communities. Community organizations have a role to play in this as well, and we believe that a buddy system will help them with this.

● (1645)

We have some other recommendations.

Our work with refugees has taught us that the trauma that feeds marginalization starts with and subsequently flows through the mother. Programs targeting systemic remediation should focus on the mother or the primary caregiver.

The English-language curriculum for newcomers can be strengthened by applying a human rights lens to include topics such as what is discrimination and how to recognize it, and how to cope with Islamophobia in situations such as interviews, and so on.

Expand the curricula of social workers, teachers, public servants, and health professionals, moving beyond simple awareness to cultural competency programs on how to work with immigrants and refugees. The indigenous cultural safety program is a good model of the success of this type of education.

Our prison outreach program has also highlighted the need to align equity and funding in the appointment of prison chaplains with the demographics of the actual prison population so that there's relevant support and social integration of these programs in the prison systems.

In closing, although we are discussing a government-oriented motion, the underlying truth is that it takes coordinated action from all sectors and layers of society to beat back this creeping darkness of racism in Canada. Looking around the chamber, we are humbled that we've been granted the attention of such an esteemed gathering and will be happy to engage with committee members who wish to understand our model and experiences better.

We hope that our submission will contribute to realizing a Canada that continues to be a world beacon of diversity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ahmed.

Mr. Singh, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Thank you. Good afternoon.

I'm legal counsel of the World Sikh Organization of Canada. We're a non-profit human rights organization established in 1984 with a mandate to promote and protect the interests of Canadian Sikhs as well as to promote and advocate for the protection of human rights of all individuals, irrespective of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, and social and economic status.

At the outset I'll say that our organization supports motion 103 and believes that it's important to condemn Islamophobia, racism, and discrimination in all forms. Given the sharp rise in violence and discrimination against Muslims, we feel that it's appropriate to identify Islamophobia by name as an issue of concern.

In 2015, motion number 630 condemning the rise in anti-Semitism was adopted unanimously. We believe that there should be no issue with condemning the current rise in Islamophobia.

We have noted the opposition to this motion with concern and believe that, while Islamophobia should be clearly defined, reluctance to name and condemn anti-Muslim behaviour is unacceptable. A refusal to address the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment may lead to the further marginalization and victimization of Muslims in Canada.

We believe that the definition of Islamophobia proposed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission is valuable, and we'd encourage its adoption. It reads, "Racism, stereotypes, prejudice, fear or acts of hostility directed towards individual Muslims or followers of Islam in general."

Oddly enough, the Sikh community finds itself at the forefront when experiencing Islamophobia, as Sikhs are often the target of mistaken identity attacks. The vast majority of these encounters include name-calling and taunting, yet go unreported. Members of my organization and many others in the Sikh community, however,

refuse to address these incidents by declaring they are not Muslims, because hatred and discrimination, whether viewed as mistaken identity or not, have no place in Canada.

The Sikh community in Canada has come a long way. Many have observed that the arc of history from the Komagata Maru incident in 1915, where we stood excluded as a community, to where we are today is nothing less than remarkable. Even a generation ago, it seemed like a distant dream to see a Canada where practising Sikhs, wearing their articles of faith, would be welcomed and accepted.

Despite the fact that Sikhs enjoy a higher profile in Canada than ever before in our history, incidents of discrimination continue to be reported on a regular basis. Every day a major part of my work is addressing incidents of discrimination and racism directed against members of the Sikh community. In the recent past, we've seen incidents of vandalism of Sikh gurdwaras and schools. We've seen attacks on Sikh men who wear the turban. We've also seen repeated incidents of anti-Sikh postering and pamphlets in universities and neighbourhoods.

We also still see regular discrimination against Sikhs due to their articles of faith, particularly the turban and the kirpan. In the past couple of weeks, I've had to deal with a Sikh passenger being denied entry to a TTC bus because of his kirpan; Sikh truck drivers facing harassment and being told they won't be served unless they wear a helmet at ports, even though other employees are not wearing helmets; and even a young Sikh man being told by a drive test examiner that he wouldn't be given a driving test while wearing the kirpan. We're finding that young Sikhs, particularly international students, are disproportionately the victims of these kinds of incidents of discrimination. Steps are needed to ensure that international students know their rights and have the support to speak out when they face discrimination.

Sikhs in Quebec have faced some unique challenges when it comes to the Sikh physical identity. The French brand of secularism, *laïcité*, which would see the public sphere stripped of all religious identifiers, is not compatible with the wearing of Sikh articles of faith. Attempts to prohibit religious expression, including the wearing of religious symbols or clothing, such as the defunct charter of values or the recently passed Bill 62 in Québec, cause insecurity and have resulted in increased bias against visible religious minorities, including Sikhs.

Secularism is absolutely important in that no religious group is favoured and the equality of persons is guaranteed, but while our public sphere must remain religiously neutral, secularism does not require that religious expression be excluded. We must ensure that this equitable and open model of secularism is protected in Canada.

With respect to solutions and suggestions to address discrimination, we believe that numbers and statistics are critical tools. We'd heard anecdotally that six students in the Peel region faced challenges as a result of their Sikh identity, so in 2011 we undertook our first survey of over 300 Peel students, and we found that over 40% reported being bullied because of their Sikh identity. This data resulted in our working more closely with the Peel District School Board in addressing these issues.

In our 2016 survey of about the same number of students, the number of students reporting bullying fell to 27%. That's a significant drop. Without the help of numbers and statistics, the scope of the problem could not have been identified, and the work required would not have been as clear.

● (1650)

While in Canada we have statistics with respect to hate crimes, we would echo the suggestion made by CIJA that the government should establish uniform national guidelines and standards for the collection and handling of hate crime and hate incident data. The government should also have human rights-based data collected with respect to government bodies and services.

The more discrete form of discrimination that we need to address is the lack of representation of minorities in boardrooms and institutions. We need to see how minorities are represented and have the numbers to properly address the underlying problems.

Finally, we recommend that one of the best ways to combat prejudice and stereotypes is engagement. When we can engage and ask questions of our neighbours, we create relationships and combat intolerance.

In September, 2016 when "F—k Your Turban" posters were put up at the University of Alberta, Turban Eh! was an event that we came up with, along with our community partners, to which individuals curious about the turban could come and have one tied. The event was a huge success, and on Canada Day 2017 we held the event across Canada in centres including Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, and Abbotsford, with the support of the Community Foundations of Canada. These events were also very successful and generated incredible goodwill and positive relationships. They created a positive and safe space for us to engage with others and for conversations to take place.

Prejudice, discrimination, and racism thrive on ignorance. The solution is to remove ignorance through engagement. We would encourage the government to help create spaces and support events by means of which we can engage with our neighbours of various backgrounds, cultures, and faiths and ask questions in order to learn.

In conclusion, WSO supports all efforts aimed at combatting Islamophobia, discrimination, and racism. We believe that the tools suggested—namely statistics and data, as well as opportunities to engage with others—will make a significant difference.

Those are my submissions. I look forward to any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to the second part of this exercise, a question-and-answer segment.

There will be seven minutes for the questions and answers. Because we would like to try to get in two rounds of questioning, I think I'm going to be very sharp with my pen.

We begin with a question and answer for Ms. Anju Dhillon, for the Liberals.

Take seven minutes, please, Anju.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): I'd like to welcome all the witnesses and thank everybody for coming today.

My first question will be for the WSO.

Since 9/11, how many documented cases of attacks against Sikhs have you seen?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: That's a good question. We haven't collected the data for each and every incident, but I can tell you that the recent ones that have come to light publicly were the April 2016 attack on a Sikh man in Quebec City, and then on October 20, 2016, an attack on a Sikh man at Yonge-Dundas Square.

The fact is, you'll see things even reported on Facebook. As an example, a month ago we saw an incident of a man who had his turban ripped off in a Brampton Walmart parking lot. These aren't reported on a broad basis, but they do come to our attention.

● (1655)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: You collected data in 2011 and 2016 through the surveys in the Peel region. Would you be able to submit those to the committee?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Absolutely. You can find them on our website, but I'd be happy to forward them to the committee as well.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Please, yes; it would be better if you submitted the information.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: I will for sure.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: What has the WSO done to raise awareness when it comes to Sikhs being attacked and their religious symbols being ripped off?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Whenever these incidents have come to light we've been pretty prominent in the media, but within our own community we've been educating individuals on how to respond to these sorts of incidents.

After 9/11 we had regular incidents of people being called “Osama bin Laden”. Really the best way to do this is through engagement. That's really what we've found. If you can engage with someone and explain to them why you're wearing a turban and the fact that you're a Canadian.... Our community has been here for well over a hundred years. I was born and raised here, and my father came here more than 50 years ago. When people recognize that we are a part of the community and try to understand, that's really the best way to address these sorts of things.

Secondly, we've been very clear with our community, and our community has been very much in agreement, that we can't address these sorts of incidents by saying we're not Muslims. That's really not the right way of doing it, because whether we're Muslims or not, there is no justification for these sorts of attacks. It has really been a question, then, of educating our own community.

Then, these sorts of events like Turban Eh! create a positive space for people to ask questions. I've met people who have engaged with Sikhs for many years and haven't even asked the question, “Why are you wearing a turban? What is its significance?” Creating that space is really important.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: The port situation is a question of bread and butter, of employment. To be discriminated against if you're wearing a turban and not be allowed to come to the port or work at the port.... Has WSO done anything to fight against that? Are there any success stories in Canada?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: This has been an ongoing situation. I have been raising a Quebec decision against Sikh truck drivers with our elected officials. Last month I filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission, because it's a federal jurisdiction area. When an individual took photographs of others walking around the port without helmets, even the lady telling him he needed to wear a helmet was not wearing a helmet.

So that is going to go through that process, but I would encourage the government to help with the situation because this is a federal area.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: When it comes to employment—you mentioned the boardrooms and other high-level positions—have there been many complaints of people not getting jobs because of the way they look?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: The discrimination here is a little harder to pick out. If you're not hired because you're wearing a turban, no one's going to say that anymore. You will not be hired because you're not the right fit, or maybe your interview could have been a little better. Often, these are excuses. We feel that the representation of Sikhs and minorities in general has to be better on boards, and I think having the data in front of us will help us identify the problem and result in solutions.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Would you propose the government fight systemic discrimination based both on race and religion?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Once again, first, the two tools that I suggested were data and statistics. We need to have the numbers in front of us. Even uniform hate-crime statistics, as he suggested, are important. Numbers are the “in”. I couldn't have worked with the Peel District School Board for the past five years had I not had this

bullying report with numbers. We feel that numbers result in active steps to address the situation.

Second is encouraging and supporting community events where people can engage. Turban, Eh! was supported by the Community Foundations of Canada, which is federally supported. The goodwill generated was amazing.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: You mentioned that connecting people and organizations is very important. Do you work with any other religious organizations?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Yes. We're a part of several interfaith organizations, and we work with our community partners in various religious groups. I had the privilege of being the co-chair of the cabinet of Canadians, which was put on by Cardus. It involved religious groups from across Canada. We worked with the Canadian Interfaith Conversation, which is an interfaith group that's all across Canada.

● (1700)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

My next questions will be for the Muslim Food Bank gentlemen.

You mentioned that when immigrants come they feel isolated, they feel separate from everybody else. What does your organization do to help alleviate that a little?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: One of the programs we run is around cultural connectivity. We have workshops where we bring in local people of that cultural background to have almost a mixer—if you want to call it that—with the newcomers to welcome them into the society, and also to connect them to all the community organizations to help them along.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Do you have anything to add to that?

Mr. Azim Dahya: Yes. When the refugees come here we have a welcome basket for them, regardless of where they come from and what religion they are. This welcome basket will have some materials to help them connect with the organization. We also provide a social worker who will do an assessment for motherly needs for the babies, and in turn, we will provide baby items, toiletries, as the need requires.

By having these connections at the earliest stage, building relationships when they come to the country, because those are the long-lasting relationships, I think we have been able to manage to help them settle down faster in the community.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We've gone over time here.

I'm going to Scott Reid for the Conservatives.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Singh, could you spell Turban, Eh! for me?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Sure, it's “Turban”, and then “Eh”.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

I heard “aid”. I tried typing it in on my iPad while you were talking to the other witnesses, and I got a story from New Zealand about a Sikh who helps somebody who just suffered an injury by taking off his turban and creating a tourniquet out of it, thereby stopping their bleeding. Anybody else can do a Google search. They'll probably get the same thing. Thank you for that. I'll look that up instead, after I've asked you some other questions and I'm no longer chatting with you.

You mentioned this incident where nobody's wearing hard hats and this is used as an excuse to deny access to a Sikh. How do we deal with workplaces where a hard hat is a practical safety measure, along with reflective jackets and steel-toed boots? How is that normally handled?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: That's a fair question.

I think you'll find the Sikh community is really reasonable when it comes to these sorts of things. Where there's an actual risk of head injury—and particularly where a person isn't assuming the risk exclusively themselves, where they are responsible in a position where they could have an impact on others—a hard hat needs to be worn, or that person needs to be placed somewhere else if they're not willing to do that.

However, when you have a situation where someone is being specifically targeted for wearing a hard hat, even while the people around him aren't wearing them, it's kind of like picking on someone. That's discriminatory behaviour. We've seen it before. There has been a decision out of the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, called Loomba, where it has been clearly established that you can't pick on someone when no one else is really wearing it. We're talking about these weigh stations, where there's nothing above you that can fall on your head, and these individuals are being very reasonable saying that they can sit in their cabin and don't need to come out of the truck cabin.

I think it's really a situation of education, but it needs to be resolved.

Mr. Scott Reid: The Loomba decision to which you referred, does that essentially provide the guideline as to where one can act reasonably, not expecting safety regulations to be enforced, or is it purely on a bullying sort of issue?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: The Loomba decision was an interim decision and focused specifically on whether someone was being specifically picked on when others weren't wearing a helmet, and whether that's okay or not. That decision said it wasn't okay.

For example, in the U.K. there is a general exemption for Sikhs on work sites from wearing the helmet. I think it's something that needs to be looked at, but as I said, Sikhs are reasonable in that there are going to be situations where hard hats are necessary. But a lot of the time you're seeing a blanket requirement without the actual analysis.

● (1705)

Mr. Scott Reid: This is a really good, practical discussion. A few years ago, we had a similar discussion about the first Sikh to join the RCMP and a practical solution was to design a turban that is part of the uniform. That was really the end of a problem, which indicated that practical solutions are available to these kinds of problems

anywhere. It's simply a matter of thinking in a practical way. I appreciate that.

You mentioned Sikh-related hate incidents in the Peel region. A number of organizations collect this data nationwide. I'm assuming you do it nationally, not just in the Peel region.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: This was a bullying survey of students within the Peel District School Board.

Mr. Scott Reid: I see.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: We have done this as well in Surrey. We focused on these two major hubs where the community is really in large numbers. We were surprised by the fact that 40% of kids said they were bullied because of their Sikh identity, in 2011.

Mr. Scott Reid: Was it worse in Peel than in Surrey?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Initially it was. In our most recent survey in Surrey, it was 32% of Sikh kids in Surrey said they were bullied, and that's 27% now in Peel. But we've been working with Peel for the past five years on different initiatives.

Mr. Scott Reid: Directing us toward those pages is really helpful. I think the reason it was mentioned for you to direct us toward that is that's really how we have to work in order to get your information into evidence. If it's not included as part of our evidence through this kind of channel, it's harder for us to actually take it into account in our report, so I appreciate that.

One last thing is that you mentioned that you condemn any reluctance...or you reject any reluctance to condemn anti-Muslim activity. I should stress that although my party has concerns about the phrase “Islamophobia”, we are emphatic that there is nothing wrong—indeed, it is essential—to condemn anti-Muslim activity. We have concerns about the fact that the term “Islamophobia” is at present not defined, either in motion 103, nor indeed has this committee come to an agreement on a single definition, and that's the issue we face.

To be clear about this, anti-Muslim activity, anti-Sikh activity, and anti-Jewish activity is wrong. Certain kinds of it are criminal, as they should be, if they are violent, and they should be soundly condemned, and perhaps punished more severely than at present. I just wanted to get that editorial on the record.

Let me turn to our witnesses from the food bank. You mentioned something very quickly about a lack of prison chaplains who represent all people who need to be serviced. Is that a problem that exists in the federal system that, at this point, is simply not resolved? That's something that would be easy for us to put into our report.

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Yes. Our experience is that it is not resolved at the moment. When we look at it specifically from a Muslim lens, compared with the percentage of inmates that are self-declared as Muslim, we see that the number of Muslim chaplains federally is actually very small comparatively, and also the service that's being offered is not culturally sensitive. That's been our experience so far in the work that we've done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Now I go to Jenny Kwan for the New Democrats.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank all of our witnesses for being on the panel today. First, I'm going to go to our friends at the food bank for some questions and then I'm going to the video conference with Mr. Singh.

Mr. Ahmed, you mentioned through your experiences that you have seen incidents of women, particularly Muslim women, who have experienced discrimination. We have a hit and miss thing around the issue of collecting data right now. There's a lot of under-reporting, I would argue. Do you think the government should embark on a process whereby we utilize or engage and work collaboratively with organizations such as yours and other NGOs across the country to collect this data so that we have a better sense of the reality of what goes on?

• (1710)

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: The short answer is yes, but I would like to add that if we do that, and I think it's a good idea, there needs to be very clear parameters around what we define as “discrimination” or “Islamophobia”, for that matter, or in terms of what is reportable and what is not reportable. I think the idea of doing it at the community level is very important, because that's inevitably where the connections get made and where people feel comfortable.

I'm going to use an example of a Syrian case that we recently had where the individual, because of her cultural background, felt totally uncomfortable about opening up to a police person. Because in her culture back in Syria the police would not be seen as an ally, she felt totally uncomfortable about even reporting it because she felt it wasn't a thing to be heard. I think community organizations certainly have a part to play there, but as I said, with very clear guidelines to collect that, and that's across all communities.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to go to Mr. Singh.

On the issue around your survey, you were just talking about the survey that was done in the Surrey community and also in the Peel region. Most recently our leader, the NDP's leader Jagmeet Singh also experienced a situation of discrimination and hate towards him. The video went viral and many people have seen it, and he responded to that in a way we all very much admired in the face of such a situation.

To that end, in terms of trying to deal with situations like this, in terms of having to come up with a strategy across the nation, what kind of recommendation would you have for the government as we come out of this study? How should we deal with systemic discrimination, both on race and on religious grounds? How can we

educate the public? How can we deal with this in a more effective way than we're doing so far?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Once again, I'll go back to my two recommendations. First is statistics and numbers. I keep talking about the Peel District School Board, because I think they're doing a good job. What they've started to do is collect data on how many people of religious or ethnic backgrounds are at senior levels. How many are principals? How many are at other levels that are senior? Having that data [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Is there audio?

A voice: No, there's nothing.

• (1715)

The Chair: I think we may just have to go on and ask questions of the Muslim Food Bank Community Services Society.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I asked a question of Mr. Singh already, and I wonder if we could have the clerk's office reach out to him and have him submit something in writing back to us in response to that question?

Mr. Arif Virani: Maybe, Madam Chair, if there are others who have questions of the WSO, they could submit those in writing to the clerk as well.

The Chair: I'm sure we can do that. That's easily done.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair. That would be great because I did have a second question on the implications of discrimination on the economics of ethnic communities, so I'll follow up with a written question.

The Chair: May I ask that if you have questions for Mr. Singh you actually submit them. The clerk can send them to Mr. Singh, and then he can send us his responses. I know this all has to be in both languages if we're going to do this officially, but—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, we can do that.

The Chair: —we'll just do it in both languages and submit the questions to him.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go to our presenters here. On the larger question, in terms of a plan, a question I've been asking other witnesses is whether or not we should actually have a national action plan to deal with racial discrimination, as well as religious discrimination?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Yes. I think there should be one. There are definitely some very concrete things that can be done. Obviously, I think some of the other speakers have spoken about keeping proper records and also about understanding which areas or which communities might need more support than other communities. Maybe that could sort of be the basis of some of the funding, in terms where that leads, but I think a national approach is most definitely the best way to go.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Mr. Azim Dahya: Just one thought that I would like to share also for the national plan is that if there is a policy in place.... The statistics have come out from, I think, 2011 to 2016 showing that the not-for-profit boards are not diverse enough. In fact, there's very low diversity, so that's a place where, if we have more representation of the minorities on a national level, it will make a huge difference. Again, most of the boards are run.... If they're non-representational, then their programming and such is not culturally based.

The Chair: Welcome back, Mr. Singh.

We can go back to where Ms. Kwan left off. We've given you back that time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right.

Mr. Singh, sorry, we got cut off somehow. Could you continue?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Yes. Statistics are important—I was saying that—as is enabling community organizations to reach out and connect amongst each other, but also with the general public.

As I said, I have a lot of anecdotal stories in which people have said they have lived with a Sikh for so many years but have never actually asked, “Why do you wear a turban?” or “So what's with the beard?” because they were afraid of offending. The whole project that was Turban Eh!, which happened all across Canada, allowed people to ask those questions and experience what it's like to have a turban tied, if they wanted.

We've seen the government—and it was a past government—support through the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, an interfaith initiative that brought together faith leaders from across Canada. Bringing everyone from across Canada to one table and letting them communicate was definitely valuable. We were able to connect with people from across Canada, and those networks have continued even though that project ended several years ago. Just allowing communities to connect amongst themselves and with the general public is important.

• (1720)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This would be something for the government to facilitate and to engage with so that we would actually have a nationwide approach to it. It's great that there's some work being done in the Peel region, but really what needs to be done is for this to be duplicated across the country, engaging with all the different NGOs who are out there doing this important work.

I would actually like to turn the questioning—

Have I run out of time?

The Chair: You're out of time now. We went back to where you were, and now you've run out of time.

We will move to Julie Dzerowicz, for the Liberals, for seven minutes.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I'm going to start off with Mr. Singh, just in case you disappear again.

If you look at Canadian history, you'll see that as different cultural groups come into Canada, there seems to be racism and discrimina-

tion through time. That's why I'm so delighted that finally we have gotten to the point where we're ready to develop a whole-of-government approach.

As a way for me to think about what programs exist, I wanted to ask whether there's any program within your own organization that you use to combat religious discrimination towards other groups. Within all of our groups, we have to constantly be working on our own biases. I come from two different cultures. I can unequivocally tell you my Ukrainian side has biases with certain groups, and my Latin side has biases against other groups.

Are there any programs or any steps you take within your own group?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: It's a good question. We really advocate on behalf of religious freedoms for anyone. The niqab is an example. The Sikh faith forbids the wearing of face coverings, but since 2010 we've been very vocal in our support of Muslim women who want to wear the niqab. It's a clear right. We can agree with it or disagree with it, but based on freedom of religion, it's really not in dispute that women can wear it, barring any actual harm that can be established.

We spoke out against that, and as a result we were invited to the Quebec National Assembly in 2011 to make representations. It was actually our group that was excluded from the Quebec National Assembly because of our kirpans. It was really a natural progression that we saw in Quebec, which then ended up at the charter of values, where turbans were targeted, along with kippahs. It may start out at the margins, which is probably where the niqab lies, but it works itself in.

We've made ourselves available to all communities. We've done stuff on behalf of a Scottish kid who was told he couldn't wear a kilt to his grad. We'll be at the Supreme Court later this week, on Thursday, in a case involving the Jehovah's Witnesses community. It's just a part of our legal work to work with other communities and support them where there's a question of religious freedoms.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you, I appreciate that.

My other question is something I'm personally grappling with. As we're coming up with this whole-of-government approach, we've been talking a lot about a national strategy that we want to put in place, and we talk about priorities and education. One of the questions I'm struggling with, and you mentioned this at the beginning, is that of a definition.

You felt we needed to define “Islamophobia” moving forward. I'm not convinced that's true, so I wanted to ask why you felt that was the case. We have had Christian groups, and we've had Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, and aboriginal groups, so we've had a number of different religious groups and a number of different faiths represented here. I'm not quite sure whether I feel we need to define it. If you could address that, that would be great.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Concerns have been raised. I'll be honest. A lot of the opposition to motion 103 was based on anti-Muslim animus. It was not based on any sort of logical or principled reason. I also admit that the question of what Islamophobia is and how you define it has been used as a shield by some individuals. I'll admit that.

That still needs to be addressed, though. People have asked, "Is criticizing Islam, or criticizing some political interpretation of Islam, a part of Islamophobia?" It has to be clear that criticizing an ideology or a faith is not part of this. It's actual discrimination. It's actual stereotypes about Muslims. We can all agree that any sort of discrimination against individuals following a faith is wrong, so a definition would be helpful and would not take away from our end, which is combatting Islamophobia.

• (1725)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay, I appreciate that.

Then I will turn to our Muslim food bank group. Thank you so much for your wonderful presentation as well.

You advocated for more dollars to community and local groups. You felt that was something that was very important around the dialogue. I'm trying to get you to be a bit more specific. Governments are always asking, "What is the actual ask? We'll give money to do exactly what?" Then they'll ask, "What is it that we receive back?", because governments are always looking for a way to justify the expense. I want you to dig down a bit deeper into that.

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: One of the things that can be replicated across a number of different communities is some of the stuff we're doing around cultural awareness. For example, we have cultural competency courses that we run with local government, with local partners, explaining what the culture is and how people are expected to act, from both ends. It's bilateral, both from the newcomers and also from those people interacting with them.

If we could have more funding to have more formalized programs like that, I think it would go a long way towards helping systemic racism.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: What would success look like?

If I said we're giving you lots of money, and you said here's how you know this would be successful, what would that look like?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: For us, success would very much be like... Barring the national statistics of less hate crimes, etc., being reported, I think that the caseworkers who work with these individuals would definitely see a turnaround in people's mental health and being more ready to participate in Canadian life.

Mr. Azim Dahya: In the context of tax dollars, once you progress a community to becoming self-reliant and to again becoming a voluntary body, the number of hours they'll put in to help the community—

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: It just multiplies.

Mr. Azim Dahya: You can multiply that, and when they get employment or they get into business, they're producing. They're increasing GDP, increasing the tax revenue. They're giving back to the community.

With the kids who follow in the footsteps of the parents and the mentors, again if you talk about generations of stability and growth and progression of the country as a whole, there is a lot of impact that community organizations can give to the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Julie.

Given that we have this break, I was hoping we could have a three-minute round.

Why don't we move to having one member of each party ask a three-minute question? That will take us to 10 minutes.

I will ask David Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being with us today.

I want to talk a little about your food bank. I have an article from about a year ago. It said that you were open two days a month providing food, and that you were funded by the community. How has it grown in the last year?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Exponentially. What we have found for that, post-Syria... We always talk about pre-Syria and post-Syria in our world.

Pre-Syria, we obviously saw a lot of refugees coming in and a big need for the services. What we found post-Syria was that I would say almost 95% of all people who came through the government-assisted refugees—forget the refugee claimants—ended up having to use the food banks. At one point, we could be registering 200 new clients in one morning.

It has grown exponentially.

Mr. David Anderson: It was funded by the community.

We were talking about funding a bit earlier. Who funds it now?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Absolutely, it is still the community.

The organization as a whole is 100% community funded, except for certain programs where we have, for example, summer school or something like that. We get specific funding for that from places like the Red Cross, etc. The rest of our programs are 100% funded by the —

Mr. David Anderson: You're working on addiction and mental health. Is that dependent on grants as well, or is that people within your community providing services?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: No, it's our community.

Mr. David Anderson: Good, I'm happy to hear that.

Tell me a little about the addiction programming. You talked a bit about the mental health program, a symposium, but what have you done in those areas?

•(1730)

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: We've done a couple of things.

One of the big things that we did was around the symposiums that we've run. We bring together service providers, so people like Fraser Health, people from the community, practitioners in terms of counsellors. We give people the opportunity to look at mental health through a Muslim cultural lens.

It's very much about education. We get people from the community to speak up and to talk about their own experiences.

Mr. David Anderson: Tell me, have you been able to bring the diverse communities together?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Absolutely.

Mr. David Anderson: There are often some tensions within the Muslim community.

Mr. Azim Dahya: One very important program we did, and I think this can be replicated across the country, was for the imams. We created a seminar in partnership with Fraser Health to educate them in mental health challenges, so that the religious leaders have the capacity, when they deal with the members of the communities, to deal with those issues. This is very important.

Mr. David Anderson: What percentage of your members, then, would be, say, part of the folks who worship in mosques, and what percentage would be outside the mosques? When you're talking to imams, do they cover the majority of the community or—

The Chair: We're going over three minutes, David.

Mr. Azim Dahya: Ours is non-sectarian, so we go right across the board, whether Shias, Sunnis, Ahmadis, or Ismailis.

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Whether in mosque or out of mosque, it doesn't make a difference.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll go to Julie Dabrusin for three-ish minutes.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you to all of you.

I'd like to begin with Mr. Singh, please.

Because you talked about your involvement in legal cases on issues relating to people's rights, my question is this. What's the role of the court challenges program in all of this now that it's been brought back? Is that something that can help?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Yes. We're definitely supportive of the court challenges program. It was something that was used by a lot of community organizations to take forward cases that are really of great importance but often don't get the attention or the funding they need. Succinctly, yes, we would support the court challenges program. I don't think it's been something that we've accessed. It may be something that we do in the future.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: You guessed where I was going with my next question, so that's good.

The next piece I think both of you have mentioned was representation on boards and the need for data.

Again, I'll start with you, Mr. Singh, but I'd like to hear from both of you.

Bill C-25 requires a comply-and-explain structure as far as reporting on diversity, and a lot of discussion has been on reporting gender diversity for senior management and board members. Do you think that's one way we can collect better data on representation? Do you have any other suggestions as to how we can better collect data on representation on boards of directors and senior management?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: I think important work has been done with respect to gender equality. I think similar initiatives have to be directed towards racialized communities as well as people of faith. It's obviously self-reporting, so you can't force people to do it, but I think having the opportunity to report and then having that data available is really indispensable in terms of finding solutions.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Would you have any suggestions about any other or better means for collecting that data?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: I don't have anything I can tell you right now off the top of my head, but overall the data is very important.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I agree with you. If you have any ideas that you would like to submit, if something comes to mind after, I would really appreciate that.

I'll ask the two of you if you have any thoughts about that as well.

Mr. Azim Dahya: The charities directorate, for example, collects data on all the charities' and the boards' composition. If they can be motivated to analyze their data, or even communities themselves to provide who the board members are, the minority communities they belong to.... If we can get them to collect that data and be able to give that data to internal statistical numbers, that would be excellent.

Besides data collection, if there are policies that organizations like the CRA can recommend to the charities in terms of, if we want equity and justice, having a better representation of people as part of one of the policies that can be established in the system, then the impact is much more in there. Because we are now using charitable dollars, tax dollars in essence, the impact will be much more if they have better representation on the boards.

•(1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We move to Ms. Kwan for the New Democrats.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'd like to ask a question about the economic impact for the ethnic community.

Recently StatsCan came out with some information around that. It was revealed by the media that there was a study done of second-generation children of immigrants, and they were discriminated against in that, when they submitted their resumes, and it was identical to a person with a non-ethnic community name, more of those resumes attached to a non-ethnic community name were selected for interviews than those associated with an ethnic community name.

In this context, Mr. Singh—I don't know if you're familiar with that latest information—what can we do about that, and how do we address that?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: That's really the insidious part of discrimination. The discrimination we used to see before was blatant. You're wearing a turban, you have beard, this isn't going to work. What we are seeing now, like I said, is “You're not the right fit” or “Your interview didn't go as well as it should have”.

I've had anecdotal evidence of individuals who say they didn't get any success until they tied their beard, until they brought their beard together and looked a little bit more Western, as it were. We do hear these sorts of stories, but without data, it's very hard to get the whole extent of the problem. I think it's very clear that, for the Sikh community, anyway, whether you're first generation, second generation, or third, you're going to have the articles of faith if you're a practising Sikh. With time, your accent goes away, but you do look different and sometimes that's a problem.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd like to ask this question to both of you.

You mentioned we have victims. Women who wear the hijab actually had incidents of discrimination. Turning to the question around the victims and how to support the victims, do you have any recommendations for the government on that?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: Tax dollars on mental health, because mental health is a very big component of this issue. Newcomers, especially from refugee backgrounds, already have trauma in their lives. To then be exposed in Canada to even further trauma, they will experience a very long healing process. Culturally specific or culturally sensitive psychological assessments and support are going to be pretty core for us going forward.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have you anything to add, Mr. Dahya?

Mr. Azim Dahya: Yes. It's having policies of multiculturalism expanded and emphasized. Mental health treatments can be one of the solutions, and creating a safe social space. There should be more engagement in the community to allow communities to thrive, and that would help in the mental health area.

You could actually reverse the process of mental health by creating a safe space, a community environment or a social environment where people can progress.

The Chair: Before you leave, I have a question for Mr. Singh, Mr. Ahmed, Mr. Dahya.

Over and over we've been hearing at this committee the fact that the colour of your skin makes a difference, and that if you're a visible minority, you face greater discrimination because you can't hide. We have Sikhs being thought of as Muslims, etc.

There used to be a term called “visible minorities”, which has sort of disappeared a bit from the terminology. When we're asking questions of Statistics Canada, is it important to ask about visible minority status? If you're not a visible minority, you could, as they say, go into the closet. You could hide. You could pretend. You could change your name. You could pretend to be somebody else. Do you think it's important to distinguish between the two?

Mr. Muainudin Ahmed: In my view, yes. It is absolutely important to distinguish and to be very clear about what we consider to be a minority.

● (1740)

The Chair: Mr. Singh.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Terms like racialized community [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Singh, we can't hear you. I think I heard you say yes, though, so that's great.

I want to thank you all for being here.

Before adjourning, I want to remind you, Mr. Singh, that you were going to submit some answers that you didn't get to put on the record. Please send them to the clerk. Everything you submit should be sent to the clerk, and the clerk will distribute it.

Thank you very much. The meeting is adjourned.

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