



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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CIMM • NUMBER 144 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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EVIDENCE

**Wednesday, February 20, 2019**

—  
**Chair**

**Mr. Robert Oliphant**



## Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Wednesday, February 20, 2019

• (1545)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)):** I'm calling the meeting to order.

As we are preparing the meeting, we will be waiting for the ministers. My apologies, there has been some confusion with respect to voting and I didn't want the committee waiting here if we were being called for a vote. However, the ministers are both on their way, so we'll just take a moment. If there was any other business people wanted to bring forward, I'd be happy to do that, or I can suspend for a moment.

I'll suspend.

• (1545)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1550)

**The Chair:** I'm going to call this meeting to order.

This is the 144th meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for the consideration of supplementary estimates (B) for the fiscal year 2018-19. We're specifically dealing with votes 1b, 10b and 15b under the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

We thank the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship for joining us, as well as the Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction. Thank you for joining us.

We're waiting to see how much time we'll have, but we're going to get in as much as we can. You're invited to give opening remarks and then we'll turn to members of the committee who may have some questions for you on the supplementary estimates.

We'll begin with Minister Hussen.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship):** Thank you.

[Translation]

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and colleagues.

[English]

I'm pleased to be back at this committee, this time to discuss my department's supplementary estimates (B) for the fiscal year 2018-19. Mr. Blair and I are accompanied by Marta Morgan, the deputy minister of IRCC, as well as a number of other senior officials. I thank them for being here today.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's supplementary estimates (B), we're seeking approval for a proposed net increase of \$192 million in resources.

[English]

Part of this increase, \$114.7 million, is to support high volumes of asylum seekers. In a moment, Minister Blair will expand on the government's actions in this matter.

These estimates also include an additional \$69.2 million in funding to Quebec to support resettlement, settlement and integration services in line with the Canada-Quebec accord on immigration. Under this accord, we continue to share responsibility and collaboration with Quebec on immigration and settlement issues.

Also included in the estimates is \$4.6 million in funding to expand biometrics. This is not new funding, but rather a re-profiling of funding from the previous year to better match planned expenditures under this initiative. Biometric screening has proven to be very effective in protecting the safety and security of Canadians. By expanding our biometrics program, we are facilitating entry into Canada and further protecting the integrity of our immigration system by quickly and accurately being able, through biometrics, to establish a traveller's identity.

These estimates also include \$3.2 million to fund the 2018 to 2020 immigration levels plan. This is also not new funding, but a re-profiling of existing funding to better reflect the level of effort within 2018-19. The multi-year immigration levels plan for 2019 to 2021 responsibly and gradually grows the number of permanent residents that Canada welcomes annually.

We have heard from economists, employers, businesses, leaders and Canadians in areas both urban and rural that Canada needs immigration to address its labour market challenges, support economic growth and create more middle-class jobs. That is why we've developed immigration programs that are tailored to meet the needs of Canadian communities and the Canadian economy. For example, the start-up visa program enables foreign entrepreneurs who start innovative businesses to come to Canada and scale up as permanent residents. The global skills strategy gets highly skilled temporary workers into our country faster. Almost 30,000 vacancies that are critical to Canadian businesses in their growth and in addressing their skills shortages have already been filled through this program.

The lessons we've learned from the success in the Atlantic immigration program as well as the provincial nominee program have informed our newly launched rural and northern immigration pilot program, a program that is meant to address the needs of smaller communities across Canada, to fill their specific labour gaps and to enable them to benefit more from immigration.

In terms of processing, we have done a lot as a government to reduce wait times and eliminate backlogs. For example, in the spousal program in 2016, spouses were waiting as long as 26 months on average to have their applications processed faster. Now the wait times for spousal applicants have decreased to an average of only 12 months. A few years ago, the backlog in the caregiver program was 62,000. It is now down 90%. Families under the caregiver program were waiting between five to seven years to reunite. It now takes 12 months to process their applications. We've reunited many families as a result of that.

While the parents and grandparents program continues to be very popular with very high volumes, the wait times again for this program have come down from seven years to a little less than two years.

• (1555)

Canadians also want to know whether we have a plan to integrate these newcomers, which is why we are also placing a major focus on settlement and integration programs. Recent research suggests that this is paying off.

Statistics Canada's labour force survey for December 2018 shows that the unemployment rate for working-age immigrants aged 25 to 54 was only 5.7%. This is the lowest unemployment rate for this group of newcomers since the survey began looking into this in 2006.

[Translation]

Our government believes that our immigration system continues to benefit both newcomers and all of Canada. I'm sure that the initiatives that I've noted today demonstrate our commitment to achieving these goals.

[English]

Thank you for this time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Minister Blair.

**Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As my colleague Minister Hussen has indicated, included in these estimates before you today is a total of \$114.7 million, which is provided to ensure continued security at our border and fast, efficient, thorough processing of asylum claims.

The \$114.7 million is comprised of \$100 million for the assistance provided by the Government of Canada to be made available to provincial governments during this fiscal year, and an additional \$14.7 million for other initiatives that I will also outline, shortly.

With this funding, the government continues to implement its plan to continue effectively managing and addressing the issue of

irregular migration. As part of this plan, we remain committed to working collaboratively with provincial and municipal partners on the delivery of services to asylum claimants and irregular migrants, including on temporary housing.

I am proud to tell you that we continue to assess all claimants in a respectful and humane way. We provide them with needed services while their claims are being decided—Canadian law is being upheld and applied in an appropriate way. This includes interim federal health care and the early provision of work permits so they may live independently while they are undergoing the process of determining their eligibility as asylum claimants.

When it comes to processing work permits, we are continuing to beat and exceed our 30-day service standard on issuing work permits to asylum claimants. IRCC continues to work closely with all involved parties to ensure our contingency plans are continually updated and ready to respond to any future fluctuations.

We'll also continue to monitor conditions and developments in other countries to inform our planning, and, where we see trends emerging, to adjust our plans.

Budget 2018 has invested, as my colleague has said, over \$174 million towards managing irregular migration by ensuring security at our border and by facilitating faster processing of asylum claims, and we are already beginning to see results from this work. In 2018, the number of irregular asylum claims decided by the Immigration and Refugee Board has increased by 95%, compared to 2017.

In addition, we are proactively engaging other countries to deter irregular migration. This includes direct and ongoing communication with the United States government and other governments around the world.

Let me assure the honourable members of this committee that we are working hard to maintain the integrity and the security of our border.

Everyone who crosses our border irregularly is intercepted, detained and subject to a thorough security screening including biometrics. Both photographs and fingerprints are taken at the border. Eligible asylum claims are then referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board for an independent assessment. All individuals who are found not to be in need of Canada's protection are subject to removal.

The actions we have taken are consistent with the balance we are seeking to achieve, a balance of ensuring that Canada is a place for those who genuinely need protection, but also safeguarding the integrity of our immigration system, and the safety and security of our citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1600)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Just a note that there is a debate going on in the House and we expect the bells to ring, but I think we will be able to continue through, and if we have unanimous consent, we can continue through and be able to get the full time with the ministers.

[Translation]

Mr. Ayoub, you have the floor.

**Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the ministers and the representatives of the two departments for joining us.

Immigration is both a major challenge and an important response to our labour shortage. Ms. Hussen, as you said, the results speak for themselves in terms of immigrant integration. The unemployment rate among newcomers seems very low. However, we're facing a labour shortage, particularly in Quebec. I want you to elaborate on processing times.

How can we reduce the processing times from seven to two years, either to reunite families or accept new immigrants?

The processing times are crucial when it comes to bringing new immigrants into the country, integrating them as quickly as possible—either through the labour market or through family reunification—and ensuring that they make a significant contribution to Canada.

Can you elaborate on this ?

[English]

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** Absolutely. It's a very important question.

When families are kept apart unnecessarily, it's not fair to them, and we should do whatever we can to reunite them. The spousal program is an example.

You asked me how we were able to do it. We were able to dedicate more resources and the department focused on this. I want to really give credit where credit is due, to the officials who worked tirelessly to reduce the processing time from an average of 26 months down to 12 months. It's working. It's holding at 12 months or fewer. As a result of that, many couples have been reunited. In addition to that, those who were in the backlog that we inherited are now reunited. That's important. Not just that, but in the caregiver category, the backlog is down by more than 90%. In the parent and grandparent category, it's the same thing. We're dealing with people who were separated and kept apart unnecessarily. We know that we could have done better, and we have done better by making the necessary investments.

It's not just that. It's also introducing new programs to address the needs of employers who have told us it takes too long to get talent to Canada. The global skills strategy has shortened the time to process highly skilled, temporary workers coming into Canada from a high of seven months to two weeks. That's a huge cultural shift and change that employers across the country are very happy with. We need to continue to be that aggressive when it comes to bringing talent into Canada, because investment follows talent.

[Translation]

**Mr. Ramez Ayoub:** You're here today to discuss votes. I want to know whether the previous backlog of cases was the result of political or economic will. I see the efforts that you're asking your departments to make, and I realize that you're giving credit to all these people, which they deserve. That said, I want to know whether there were political or economic reasons, at the time, for leaving

applications pending for years. Given the lack of money, was the decision made to not invest in the processing of cases?

What specific changes have you made to the way that you achieve these results?

● (1605)

[English]

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** I think it was both. You're absolutely right. It took both. It took leadership and ambitious goals, but it also took investments. It took the necessary investments to make sure that we could process people faster and reunite more families, but also to introduce new programs that were suggested to us by the business community.

A lot of the good things that we have done in the immigration system have come directly from Canadians, and that is because we've spoken to them and got their feedback. I criss-crossed the country and held town halls and round table meetings. I listened to employers, listened to settlement service delivery organizations, municipal leaders and ordinary Canadians to make sure that we doubled down on what's going right. We listened to them on what more they would like us to do to improve the system.

[Translation]

**Mr. Ramez Ayoub:** I'll ask Minister Blair questions that are essentially along the same lines.

With regard to border security, has the same principle been applied politically and economically? Has there been any need to request funds to reinvest in security as a result of cuts and the streamlining of costs that led to the results we've seen recently?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** What I can tell you is that, first of all, we will never compromise the safety and security of our citizens, and there is an exceptional amount of good work being done all across our border.

We have made significant investments to ensure that we have adequate resources of RCMP, CBSA and IRCC at the border to process everyone who comes into this country. It has required a redeployment of resources and some additional resources to be dedicated to manage this effectively. Everyone who comes to the border in any fashion—over 95 million people were processed last year by CBSA—is screened to ensure that there is no risk of criminality or national security.

Anyone who crosses the border irregularly is subjected to a significantly enhanced screening process. They are detained by the RCMP. They are subject to significant and rigorous background checks and interviews. Biometrics are taken. Every step necessary is taken to ensure that anyone entering the country irregularly is subject to rigorous screening to prevent someone coming in who represents either a threat of criminality or security.

Frankly, our commitment to doing that is a commitment to be able to reassure Canadians that this situation is being managed safely. I often hear questions and concerns raised that this is a safety issue, and it's important to be able to reassure Canadians that every effort is being made to ensure that Canadian law is upheld and that the security and safety of our citizens is always our first priority.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to be a bit tight on time today to try to keep us going.

Ms. Rempel.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC):** Thank you.

Ministers, based on statements that both you and the Prime Minister have made, it's my understanding that it's the opinion of your government that the safe third country agreement still applies. Is that correct?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Yes, it does.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** Thank you.

We're here today to examine the supplementary estimates. That's where you come to us to ask for the committee to vote in favour of the big line item in here, which is \$114 million to pay for housing and social services for people who have illegally entered the country from upstate New York and have subsequently claimed asylum in Canada.

You're asking us today to vote in favour of that expenditure.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** We're asking for the money that is required for those individuals who have claimed asylum in Canada. They are entitled under Canadian law to due process and while that process is taking place, we would provide them with temporary shelter.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** What we and many Canadians are confused about is that on one hand you say that the safe third country agreement—or the agreement that we have with the United States that essentially says that you can't claim asylum in one country if you do it in the other—applies, but on the other hand you're coming to us in a very large deficit situation, while you're increasing taxes on Canadians with things like the carbon tax, to vote in favour of spending \$114 million on hotels and social welfare payments to people who, if they had entered the country legally, would not be able to claim asylum.

Basically, you're asking us to vote in favour of spending \$114 million on hotels and social welfare payments for people who have reached upstate New York. Is that correct?

•(1610)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** No, it's not.

What we are asking—

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** You don't want us to vote in favour of \$114 million for illegal border crossers or you do?

What are you here to do? We're all confused.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I would like to provide an answer to your question, if I may.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** First of all, I think you've caused a lot of confusion for Canadians with this.

I'm going to try a different approach. You have this request in front of us, and Canadians are watching. Do you think it is fair to spend \$114 million when you've had the Prime Minister go to Edmonton and tell a veteran that he's been asking for more than he can give, while you're increasing taxes for Canadians, or while there's a backlog of 70,000-plus cases for people who are being privately sponsored as refugees from places like northern Iraq?

Do you think that it is fair, in either of your estimations, to even come to committee to ask us to spend that money? Is it fair? Is this something that you want Canadians to think is a fair thing?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** I would tell Canadians that when people come to this country seeking asylum, they are entitled under Canadian law and by an international agreement to which we are a signatory—

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** You don't get to have it both ways—

**Hon. Bill Blair:** They are entitled to due process and during that process....

They're families, Michelle. They're people out on the street. We're not going to leave them out on the street or in the snow. We're going to accommodate them with reasonable accommodations—

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** They have reached upstate New York—

**The Chair:** I would just interrupt for one moment, please.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** No, this is my time.

**The Chair:** I know, and I'm the chair. You may be chair one day, but right now I am the chair.

I'm going to request that you do not speak over the witness when the witness is speaking. That is out of respect for the interpreters who cannot interpret, and we have a country which respects both official languages. If we are going to maintain decorum in this committee, and respect for both official languages, I will interrupt anyone who is speaking over someone when they're speaking.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** Frankly, Chair, I think a lot of Canadians can't interpret what's being said here. On one hand they're saying that the safe third country agreement applies, that the United States is a safe country, that people have reached a safe country. On the other hand, they're asking us to spend \$114 million on hotels and social welfare payments for illegal border crossers. That is a circle we can't square.

The reality is you keep spending this money. You keep coming to us, unbudgeted, more and more. Don't you think you're just asking Canadians to pay for your mistake, and your Prime Minister's failure to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement, your #WelcomeToCanada mistake? Why are you asking Canadians to vote in favour of supporting your mistake?

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** Mr. Chair, the preposterous idea that refugees leave their homes because of a tweet is an insult to those who seek protection.

We have a system in Canada that determines who's a refugee and who isn't, and that's the system that we have, and—

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** Thank you.

I would like the floor, Chair.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussien:** It's an independent system, and to suggest that the Conservatives actually care about refugees is laughable.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** This is my time. I would like the floor, Chair.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** I would like to remind all committee members that the time that is here belongs to the committee; the members have time to ask questions and the witnesses have time to answer the questions. That is the way committees work.

If the member would like to continue, she may continue but I ask that she allow the witnesses to answer.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** I appreciate that the Liberals have been preventing strong women from speaking lately, but I will continue to speak.

Thank you, Chair.

Do you think it is fair that Canadians accept your coming over and over to this committee and asking for hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for hotels, with no definite end? There's no end in sight. There are more people coming. On the one hand, you say the safe third country agreement applies, but on the other hand, you say the United States is not a safe third country so we need to pay for all of this.

Why are you doing this? Make a decision one way or another. Don't just come to Canadians and say that somebody in upstate New York is going to get priority access over veterans...increasing in... carbon tax.... That's what you're asking us to do here. Why should Canadians look at you and say that anybody on this committee should support paying \$114 million for the hotels for illegal border crossers?

• (1615)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** The families who are here, who have made an asylum claim, under Canadian law are entitled to due process. While that due process is taking place, we do provide, working with the municipalities and the provinces, temporary shelter so that they may have a roof over their heads. Most of the people coming are, in fact, families with children.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** The reality is that the briefing you gave us yesterday—

**The Chair:** I don't gavel very often. I will gavel today.

I ask the member again to respect the witness. You've asked a question. Give the witnesses a chance to answer and do not speak over them. When they have finished, it is your time.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** You know what, Mr. Chair? I'm tired of being shut down by Liberals. I am.

**The Chair:** That is also time.

We now move to Ms. Kwan.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I still had time left and you are shutting me down. Why are you shutting down another woman from speaking and asking questions? That's exactly what's happening here.

I challenge your ruling to move on to the next person and I'd like a recorded vote.

**The Chair:** We now have a challenge to the chair.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** Yes.

**The Chair:** I will tell you that I warned the committee a few months ago, and members were all in the room at the time, that if I felt decorum was going, I would take the time, that I would run the clock. The clock is over seven minutes.

I have now been challenged on my ruling, which would be to go —

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** I would like a recorded vote.

**The Chair:** I am now being challenged on my ruling which says that we have reached the end of Ms. Rempel's time and that we now go to Ms. Kwan.

There is a request for a recorded vote on whether or not you uphold my ruling.

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 6; nays 3)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We continue now with Ms. Kwan for seven minutes.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'd just like to point out that you shut down a woman asking questions about money being spent by this government.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** I would remind the committee that I shut down a member whose time had elapsed, regardless of gender.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP):** May I start my time now, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Yes, you will get your full time.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you so much. As a woman, I like to ask these questions.

My question is for the Minister of Immigration.

Back in June, you announced initial funding of \$50 million for Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba to deal with the influx of inland asylum seekers crossing irregularly into Canada, yet British Columbia, the province with the second-highest number of claims, did not receive any money from the government to manage that situation. Why is that?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Ms. Kwan, I appreciate that you asked the question of my colleague, but if I may, the money that we have placed in the estimates, \$100 million, is to support all of the provinces for the extraordinary costs they have incurred. We are having ongoing discussions with all of the provinces, including British Columbia. Those discussions will continue.

We understand that, historically, responsibility for providing support to people who come to this country seeking refuge and asylum has been shared between municipalities, provinces and the federal government. We know that some have experienced an extraordinary cost. We're working very hard to make sure that we support them.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** British Columbia also experienced extraordinary costs as well. In fact, NGOs on the ground, which have been trying to do this work on their own without federal dollars, met with the Minister of Immigration, Minister Hussen, and asked for money and that was refused.

This ongoing pressure continues to exist in our community today.

Perhaps, Minister Blair, you could provide confirmation that British Columbia will get resources, recognizing that British Columbia is the province with the second-highest number of inland refugee claims with irregular crossers.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** What I can confirm is that the B.C. minister has written to me. Our senior officials have connected. Discussions are ongoing. We are absolutely committed to working with all of the provinces to make sure that where they have experienced extraordinary costs, the federal government is there to support them. That is why we placed this money in the estimates. It's to allow us to provide that support.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'll look forward to seeing the numbers and dollars diverted to British Columbia, because the need is real and NGOs are struggling.

There was one NGO, in fact, that could not sustain this to the point where the staff were so stressed about having to turn people away to shelters and so on, they invited them to their homes. Can you imagine front-line staff and workers having refugees go to their homes to prevent homelessness? That is the reality we're dealing with. We don't make the headlines because we don't scream and shout. We try to do this cordially.

I ask both ministers to ensure that dollars are diverted to British Columbia accordingly. I will certainly look forward to that in the 2019 budget.

I'm going to move away from that for a minute.

One of the issues that has been raised at committee by witnesses who have come forward is a better investment in managing the situation, particularly with respect to housing. Their suggestion is that instead of putting the money into hotels, which is currently what's happening, invest that into a long-term plan. In fact, we had witnesses come to our committee, Journey Home, and suggest that we actually build housing, permanent housing, that could be utilized over and over again without having to pay a hotel bill. That proposal has been tabled with the committee. It will be going to the minister, and I believe that there are meetings with the ministers with respect to that from the organizations themselves.

Is that something the government will entertain?

• (1620)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** What I can tell you is that we work very closely with municipalities and the provinces that actually provide these services. The determination on how and where people will be sheltered on a temporary basis while they undergo these processes is the responsibility of the municipalities. We have been working to support them for the extraordinary cost that they have experienced. We don't place a requirement on how they will provide that temporary shelter, so there have been discussions with a number of jurisdictions that are exploring a number of different alternatives for

providing that housing, and we are providing assistance to support that.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** The proposal is in need of major infrastructure dollars so that you can build that housing, which, by the way, the Province of British Columbia, BC Housing, is in support of. A number of other NGOs in the community support this as well. If the minister hasn't seen the proposal, I'd be happy to hand that over to him in the House at a later date so he can take a look at it.

I do think that there can be a long-term strategy. Instead of investing dollars in hotels, you can actually build permanent housing that can be used over and over again whenever there's an influx. As the minister acknowledged, these are irregular crossers and they're coming to Canada according to Canadian law and in accordance with international obligations to which Canada is a signatory.

I'm going to leave that.

On the question of processing time, one of the issues is with the IRB. The IRB did receive two years of funding with \$74 million for 2018-19, but with the rate in which the number of cases is increasing, which is up to 2,500 per month, that means the backlog is to the tune of 30,000 per year. This is significant in terms of the backlog. In order to get ahead of this, the government just tried to deal with legacy cases. We're actually creating legacy 2.0 right now, unless there are additional dollars provided to the IRB to clear this influx of backlog, because right now the claims are sitting there and it's taking at least two years to process them.

Will there be additional dollars provided to the IRB so that we don't create legacy 2.0?

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** First of all, I'm happy to update you that the legacy task force—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry, but I don't need an update. I'm just asking a specific question about whether there would be additional dollars.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** I can go straight to the IRB, no problem. The investments have resulted in the hiring of 248 new staff and 64 decision-makers. That should add to the processing of 17,000 asylum claims. In addition to that—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry to interrupt and I don't mean to be rude, but my time is limited.

I just need to know whether or not, for budget 2019, the minister has requested additional dollars for the IRB so that we don't end up with a situation of legacy 2.0. It's just a yes or no answer.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** It's not a yes or no answer because it's not just a question of money. It's also a question of what the IRB itself has done to speed up the process, the reforms.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry, my question is about resources. Have you requested additional resources?

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** We have provided resources in budget 2018 of \$74 million, and 248 new staff, and 64 new judges. That will make a big difference, plus the reforms—

**The Chair:** I'm afraid I need to end it there. We're over time now.

Ms. Zahid.



•(1625)

**Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

My first question is for Minister Blair.

Minister, could you please let us know here at the committee what our obligations are under the Canadian law for the people who cross the border? Especially for the asylum seekers, what are our obligations?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Very succinctly, under obligations by international convention and Canadian law, anyone who enters the country, regardless of how they enter, including whether they do it at a regular point of entry or irregularly across any part of our 9,000-kilometre border with the United States, and makes a claim for asylum....

First of all, it is unlawful to enter at anything other than a point of entry, so they immediately are detained by the RCMP at that point. If they make a claim for asylum, we then determine whether or not there is any aspect of criminality or national security threat, or whether they are for any other reason ineligible to make that claim. That determination is made by the RCMP, CBSA and IRCC right at the border. If they make that claim, they are entitled under our law to due process, to a hearing. There are a number of other provisions in that law for other reviews and appeals as well. Due process in the law is provided in our legislation, and they are entitled to do that.

Additionally, we have other provisions in our law that, for example, give them eligibility for health services while they are going through that due process. It was something we added back, quite frankly, because it had been removed and our courts had determined that to be unlawful. In fact, I think they called it cruel and unusual punishment, and was something that needed to be fixed. Once those hearings are completed, and if the person is determined to be eligible for asylum, they are then settled as asylum refugees. If we determine that they are not in need of Canada's protection, they are then subject to removal.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Thank you. My next question is also for you.

As a Toronto area MP, I've heard both from my constituents as well as from the mayor of Toronto about the impact asylum seekers have had on the availability of affordable housing and shelter space especially in Toronto. Could you please discuss how your department is working directly with the city to help address those concerns? As well, what collaborative role, if any, is the provincial government playing to coordinate the response with the federal government and the municipal government?

**The Chair:** Before you begin, I do need unanimous consent for us to continue. I wouldn't want to interrupt a strong or weak man or woman. If you would like to continue, we need unanimous consent.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC):** Until what time, Mr. Chairman?

**The Chair:** Let's just see how long we have unanimous consent for.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Okay.

**The Chair:** We'll make sure you get to the House in time to vote.

Mr. Blair.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thank you. I'll try to be brief.

First of all, let me say we recognize that we've seen an increase in people who are seeking asylum both through regular points of entry and irregularly, which has put pressures on municipalities and provinces right across the country. We have been working very hard to make sure that we support those provinces. It is my strong preference to provide that support through provincial governments, and we've had, I would say, various experiences.

It has been somewhat challenging, but we are in ongoing discussions with the Province of Ontario. I'm very pleased that Ontario has recently accepted the establishment of a working group of senior officials so that we can better understand the pressures that the province is experiencing.

We have also been working very directly with the City of Toronto, which has experienced the largest impact of people entering into the country seeking asylum both through regular points of entry and through irregular entry. We have been providing services and support in the city of Toronto and with the City of Toronto. Let me say as well that they have been an excellent partner to us. We have provided \$26 million to address the immediate temporary housing shortages for asylum claimants in the city of Toronto.

We're also working very closely with the City of Ottawa and other municipalities, and the important work continues. As I indicated in an earlier response, all three orders of government have historically shared the responsibility to ensure that those who are in our country seeking asylum are given the due process to which, under our law, they are entitled. We have always worked very collaboratively among the municipalities, the provinces and the federal government, and we endeavour to continue to do so.

•(1630)

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Thank you.

Before I ask my next question, I would like to say something, Mr. Chair.

As a person, I think I should always be judged based on my work, not on my gender.

**The Chair:** And you are.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** My next question is for Minister Hussen.

Can you please speak to the government's progress in facilitating the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada? Specifically, could you update the committee on the program to provide some extra support to visible minority women? I hear a lot from them in my riding.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** Settlement and integration is a key priority for our government. That is why, since 2015, we've increased investments in settlement and integration programs by 30%. We believe that giving the right tools to newcomers to succeed faster in Canada is in Canada's best interest.

In terms of the program that you referred to, it was in budget 2018. It was an investment made to enable visible minority newcomer women who were lagging behind newcomer men to be able to access the workforce faster and enable them to be able to find employment and succeed in Canada.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** Recently the government introduced the rural immigration pilot. Could you please speak to the purpose of introducing that pilot project? How will immigration help address the specific needs of rural communities throughout Canada?

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** Rural Canada contributes almost 30% to our GDP, yet 78% of all newcomers go into the main cities and not to the smaller communities. Therefore, we felt that there was a need to address the request made by many employers, municipal leaders and community leaders in rural Canada and northern Canada for more workers, more talent and more skills to come in through our immigration system. They felt that the best way to do that is to replicate some aspects of the Atlantic immigration program and have a rural focus. We launched the rural and northern immigration pilot program so that rural Canada can benefit from the benefits of immigration.

**The Chair:** That's the end of our time. I just want to confirm that we still have unanimous consent to continue.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** We may get cut off quickly, and Ms. Kwan has a comment, so I'm going to take it now.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I know that we're going to be interrupted by the bells for votes, and we have yet to have the opportunity to ask questions of the officials. I would like to request that the officials be scheduled for another time so that we would have that opportunity to undertake that work, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** I think there's agreement that we would bring the officials back at some point. They may have to be back on the subject matter of the estimates as opposed to the estimates themselves. We don't know exactly when we have to report on the estimates, but it may be after the reporting date due to our scheduling. We have a number of meetings scheduled, but if they would agree to come back, I think the committee is all agreed with that.

Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Hussen and Minister Blair, first, I'm very happy that you've made two statements before the committee.

Minister Blair, you confirmed that it's illegal to cross our border between the official ports of entry.

The 2018-19 supplementary estimates (B) contain a request for \$114 million to support the increase in the number of asylum seekers. The opposition's statements have been true for a long time.

Mr. Blair, in your opening remarks, you mentioned security checks, and so did Minister Hussen. We know that just over

2,500 people haven't been subject to any security checks. You were already asked about this during question period. You didn't know then, but you know now. Do you think that it's acceptable?

[*English*]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Actually, when asked that question, I sought and later that day got information, which was provided to the media, about those who were not at the border but were in fact undergoing the process of determining their security background checks. A second security background check takes place in those processes. The CBSA added more resources of approximately \$6 million in the summer immediately after that ATIP was responded to, and the entire backlog has been cleared.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** You're saying that there isn't any backlog and that everyone has been checked at this point. Are you confirming this?

[*English*]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Yes, that's correct. As I said, the entire backlog has been cleared.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** Good.

Currently, 540 CBSA officers are no longer doing their regular jobs in order to cover the ports of entry. Quebec has many ports of entry, of course. However, there are also ports of entry in all the provinces. Certain border crossings are an issue. The government has also spent \$6.6 million to have the RCMP monitor Roxham Road.

Given that Canada has other rural crime and firearms trafficking issues, do you think this is a good way to spend the taxpayers' money?

[*English*]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** It is the responsibility of both the RCMP and CBSA to maintain the integrity and security of our borders, and they have deployed their resources quite appropriately to the places where it is required. According to my understanding and my discussions with the leadership of CBSA, they have redeployed resources in order to respond to irregular crossings at our border, and this has had no negative impact on their operational capabilities.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** You've been saying for a year that the Conservatives made budget cuts, which is why you're having issues. You're telling us today that the 540 officers deployed to deal with the border can continue the work. Is the rest of the CBSA officers' work still being done?

[English]

**Hon. Bill Blair:** We've added more resources to both CBSA and the RCMP, and they have been effective in redeploying these resources to where they are needed. That's sort of the nature of deploying those resources. There was the impact of significant reductions in their funding. About \$390 million, as I understand it, was cut from the CBSA, and a little over \$500 million was cut from the RCMP. A total of \$1.2 billion was cut for security services generally during the previous government. We've been working hard to restore that capacity.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** I want to remind the committee members that, on May 10, 2018, Mr. Ossowski, President of the CBSA, stated as follows:

One quick example to explain any drop in the estimates might be that there was project funding provided for several large projects ... Those projects have come to completion ... the overall budget of the agency drops.

It wasn't budget cuts. Investments were made, and things went back to normal.

The parliamentary budget officer said that it will cost over \$1.5 billion to resolve the illegal border crossing issue. You know that the thousands of illegal immigrants are creating chaos in the immigration system. The most worrying thing for us is that a public servant in Cornwall said that this has become the norm, that the current approach is normal and that it needs to be a normal process.

Don't you think that the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement should be amended? Do you think that it's normal for people to arrive this way, as the public servant in Cornwall said?

[English]

**The Chair:** Very briefly.

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Thanks you.

I'm pleased to advise this committee that I have reached out to the Secretary of Homeland Security in the United States. There are ongoing discussions between the United States and me and my officials on the ways in which we may be able to modernize the safe third country agreement to the mutual benefit of both countries.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the ministers and department officials for being here.

We're talking about funds being allocated to the border, and about a \$192-million increase in resources. I'm going to read from a CTV story: "The union representing Canada's customs agents and border guards says cuts at the Canada Border Services Agency threaten public safety...." CBSA has been told to cut \$143 million, according to this article. It put 1,100 CBSA employees' jobs on the line.

Minister Blair, you just mentioned an even larger number of cuts. If we're slashing funding, what does this do to our resources that we allocate to the professionals securing our borders?

● (1640)

**Hon. Bill Blair:** In my discussions with our senior officials at CBSA and the RCMP, I remain confident that they have adequately deployed sufficient resources to maintain the safety and security and integrity of our borders. There will also be an opportunity at the upcoming SECU meeting where the budgets and allocations for CBSA and other departments will be discussed, perhaps more fulsomely.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** You mentioned in answer to one of the questions from the opposition that the situation is being managed safely. As soon as an individual comes to our borders and claims asylum, what type of resources are CBSA...? What procedures are they going through to ensure that those who are claiming asylum are who they say they are?

**Hon. Bill Blair:** Again briefly, I've gone to Lacolle and stood at the end of Roxham Road and I've watched our officers and officials deal with individuals coming across. In every case, the individual is detained as they cross. There is a determination of why they have come across. They are arrested and detained. If they make a claim of asylum, at that point investigations and security background checks are begun by both the RCMP and the CBSA. A number of international, national and local police databases are checked as well as their documents.

If they are coming from the United States and have in their possession other travel documents, visas or other means by which they've come into the United States, inquiries and information are also available to our officers with respect to the background screening they took to enter the United States. Inquiries and investigations are made of those individuals to determine the veracity of their identity, and to ensure there is no risk of criminality or national security threats. Biometrics are taken. The individuals are fingerprinted and photographed at the border so we may have reliable, permanent and usable records to identify those individuals. That background check is done and it's quite thorough and I think quite appropriate to ensure that there is no risk to Canadian public safety as these people enter the process of determining their eligibility to stay.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** Thank you.

Minister Hussen, the previous immigration minister visited the K-W region early in 2016 and met with a lot of stakeholders in the high-tech sector. The number one challenge they mentioned to the minister at the time was to fill these high-tech sector jobs. We get a lot of individuals graduating from the University of Waterloo. We employ locally, but they were still not matching the job vacancies.

Can you speak a little to the global skills strategy? You mention in your notes that it's filled 30,000 vacancies across Canada.

**Hon. Ahmed Hussen:** The global skills strategy was a successful attempt by our government to streamline the attraction of highly skilled, talented temporary workers to Canada because businesses were saying seven months was too long. Now it's down to two weeks. As a result of the global skills strategy, many businesses have been able to get that talent and investment for all those talents. It's a plan for that highly mobile global talent to come to Canada, and as a result of listening to business and introducing the global skills strategy and making other changes to the express entry system, which I can go into detail about if there is time, we are leading the world in talent attraction, and one of the main reasons they point to is our immigration system.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We could carry on, but I'm getting concerned about time.

Do I have unanimous consent to continue?

**Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.):** I think we need to call it now.

**The Chair:** Okay. Just before we go, I want to do three things.

First, we mentioned the University of Waterloo. I want to mention Wilfrid Laurier University, since as I understand, we have some students here from Wilfrid Laurier.

Welcome and thank you for joining us. We're always happy to meet with students.

Second, I want to thank the ministers and officials. The officials will be called back, but I'm not exactly sure when. Thank you to both ministers for joining us today.

The last thing I want to note is with regard to our meetings next week. We will have three meetings next week to meet our agenda. We're going to have meetings on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday of next week. Those meetings will complete the migration study, with one meeting on Latin America, one meeting on labour demand and one meeting on temporary foreign workers and labour supply. That meeting is Thursday, from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

The meeting is adjourned.

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