



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 163 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, May 29, 2019

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Chair

Mr. Nick Whalen

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1635)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.)): I want to welcome everyone to the 163rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. We're pleased to be joined by Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

[*English*]

I'd like to welcome Mr. Kmiec today. I'd also like to congratulate normal standing member Michelle Rempel on her nuptials to Major Sergeant Jeff Garner. We wish her all the best and happiness. That explains her absence today.

Although we had originally been scheduled from 3:30 with the possibility of overflow to 6:30, I believe the consensus among members is to proceed for a full 51-minute round of questions with Mr. Hussen. After that, we'll dismiss the remainder of the witnesses and go into committee business on the usual motions.

Without further ado, I call upon the minister to present his opening remarks. Minister, you have nine minutes.

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

I'm pleased to be here to present my department's main estimates for fiscal year 2019-20. I'm accompanied today by the acting deputy minister and a number of our senior officials.

For Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's 2019-20 main estimates, we are seeking a proposed net increase of \$832 million over last year, which includes the items announced in budget 2019.

A substantial portion of this increase, \$324 million, addresses higher volumes of asylum claimants, and the need to provide practical support to provincial and municipal partners, particularly in the area of temporary housing.

As this committee knows well, the world is currently experiencing a record number of people fleeing violence and persecution. With unprecedented levels of people on the move around the world, our government has taken concrete steps to ensure that we address the challenges in a responsible manner, and that we provide support to vulnerable refugees, while ensuring that the health, safety and security of Canadians is paramount and protected.

Since 2017, our government has been implementing a comprehensive plan to manage irregular migration, while also improving the

productivity and management of the asylum system. As part of this plan, we have worked very closely and effectively with provincial partners, and even directly with municipal partners when provincial authorities have been unwilling to collaborate.

The funding in the main estimates builds on the \$150 million that has been previously announced. We have committed up to \$474 million for sharing interim housing costs incurred by the provinces and/or municipalities to respond to the increased need for housing solutions.

The main estimates also include separate votes for key initiatives announced in budget 2019, totalling \$339 million for IRCC in 2019-20. This includes funding to enhance the integrity of Canada's borders and increase the capacity of the asylum system, so that decisions on claims can be rendered faster; improve the services we offer to all our clients, including by hiring additional call centre agents; improve visa processing to ensure that Canada maximizes the benefits of business and tourist visitors who want to come to Canada, while ensuring strong screening procedures, so that the health, safety and security of Canadians is protected; and finally, overhaul the oversight of immigration consultants, including through more investigations and stiffer penalties, so that more vulnerable clients can be protected.

These main estimates, including proposals in budget 2019, allow us to continue to strengthen our immigration system and improve client service. We've made a lot of progress on our commitments. Our government introduced the most ambitious immigration levels in recent Canadian history. This represents a major investment in Canada's current and future prosperity by growing our immigration through a well-managed, multi-year immigration plan.

The plan provides for an increase in the number of immigrants, selected on the basis of their skills and education. This will help our economic growth and address our labour market shortages as well as bring much-needed skills to our country.

To ensure these benefits are felt right across the country, we have successfully piloted the Atlantic immigration program. We have introduced a new rural and northern immigration pilot program, and we have expanded the provincial nominee program numbers to help attract skilled immigrants to smaller communities across our country.

We've also seen a commitment to family reunification by expanding admissions through our parents and grandparents program, the spousal sponsorship program and the caregiver program.

We have also ensured that we have an innovative approach to further improve our processing capacities. I'm proud of the fact that we have reduced wait times and backlogs across almost every line of business in the immigration system. Legacy spousal sponsorship inventory went down from 75,000 cases to less than 2,000.

● (1640)

The live-in caregiver program backlog went down from 62,000 cases to only 1,700 cases. We are processing the federal skilled worker program's express entry system applications in about six months; processing new spousal sponsorship applications within 12 months, down from 26; and processing new caregiver program applications within 12 months.

In addition to this, the global skills strategy is another example of an innovative program that is meeting Canada's economic needs. It helps businesses grow and expand by attracting highly skilled temporary workers into our country. It processes their work permits and visas in only two weeks, down from seven months.

Building on the success of the global talent stream pilot, budget 2019 commits to making this pilot program a permanent program. We've also seen the success of the start-up visa pilot project. We've turned it into a regular program to drive innovation. This program has helped launch nearly 200 start-up companies in Canada in a wide range of industries.

Settlement services are also, of course, key to newcomers' success in Canada. In 2019-20 IRCC will invest more than ever before, with \$778 million to deliver the settlement program to newcomers outside of Quebec. IRCC funds over 500 organizations and provides services to over 460,000 clients, including assistance with learning a new language, finding a job and integrating into Canada.

Mr. Chair, immigration strengthens our country. It helps keep Canada globally competitive by promoting innovation and economic growth and by supporting diverse and inclusive communities. The actions I have noted today demonstrate our ongoing commitment as we continue to meet these goals.

[Translation]

The actions that I've noted today demonstrate our ongoing commitment to achieving these goals.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I would just remind everyone that the normal rules of this committee are those of the House. On matters of decorum, we usually allow some flexibility to speak directly with the minister, but

if things get a little bit heated, as they sometimes do in this committee, we'll address the normal points of order and we'll have the questions then directed through the chair.

Without further ado, I would ask Mr. Tabbara to begin the first seven-minute round.

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

Thank you to the officials and to the minister for being here.

Minister, thank you once again for coming to the committee and updating us on the great work that the department is doing and that you're doing.

To begin, is the \$24 million for the processing of temporary foreign resident visas going toward creating positions for application handling, or is it targeted for technology improvements like IT services?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's an important question. The global demand to visit Canada, to work in Canada or to study in Canada is growing exponentially. Each year we welcome millions of tourists, temporary foreign workers and international students. These visitors and students inject billions of dollars into our economy. We are proposing to invest, under budget 2019, \$79 million to help with processing, to enable us to process applications faster and to process more applications than ever before. We expect 3.9 million applications for temporary resident visas in 2019-20. We will also engage in file triaging, identity validation, eligibility and admissibility assessment, document review, decision-making and post-decision activities. We engage in quality control, quality assurance and risk management.

At the end of the day, it simply comes down to processing applications that have gone from around 1.9 million to the 3.9 million temporary resident applications that we expect. Obviously, we have to invest in more resources to be able to deal with this; of course, more full-time employees, but also leveraging more technology solutions to deal with a huge increase in volumes in some of the source countries.

● (1645)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You mentioned technology. I think that's a good segue into my next question.

In your testimony, you talked about the global skills program and how important that was. I want to also mention the rural pilot program, the Atlantic pilot program and the expansion of the current provincial nominee program, but specifically the global skills strategy and how all of these programs coming in together all at once are really benefiting our economy, benefiting Canada and bringing global talent from abroad.

What I want to end with here is that we have a start-up company in Kitchener that just published having a newcomer come in.... It was a sponsorship group, Talent Beyond Boundaries, that sponsored this young individual. He was able to work in a high-tech company. This was not through the global skills program, but through a sponsorship program that we've quadrupled, I believe, over the years.

How has that been a net benefit to Canada and a net benefit to employers here?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: One of the main reasons for the increase in immigration levels in every year of our government has been to listen to the concerns of business. Businesses have told us very clearly—small, medium and large enterprises across the country, not just in urban areas but in rural Canada—that they are facing a lot of pressure from not having workers to fill unfilled jobs. This impacts their ability to grow. In the process of growth, they also are able to create jobs for Canadians, especially when you're talking about skilled workers who are coming in to actually address particular skill shortages and who, when they're able to come through our immigration system, are able to unlock dozens and hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs for Canadians.

The second question is, investment follows talent. When particular investments are made in Canada, one of the main reasons and one of the key things they look at, the major investors, is the ability to be able to (a) find the talent in Canada and (b) bring in talent as needed in their growth trajectory.

A global skills strategy is certainly helping in that process. Bringing down the processing time from seven months to two weeks is really revolutionary when you think about it, and many employers have benefited from it. In addition to that, the express entry system allows Canada to continue to be a global leader in being able to use our immigration system to bring the best and the brightest from around the world.

In many industries across Canada, there is tremendous growth. They are taking up as much as is possible the local talent that is being produced in Canada through our wonderful educational institutions, but it's not enough, so the delta is being filled by foreign workers, who are coming in through various immigration streams to continue to power our economy and create jobs in the process.

I've seen this first-hand—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Minister.

We see that the lights are flashing. There has been a notice of motion for the production of papers. The vote will be in about 29 minutes. It's just a couple of floors above us, so I believe that we could probably get to the end of the first round and then resume our meeting after the vote, if we have unanimous consent.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Wonderful. We have about a minute and 15 seconds.

Minister, you were still answering the question.

• (1650)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I was saying that I've seen not just on a macro level but on a micro level situations in which an employer has brought in a highly skilled worker that they just couldn't find locally because all those skilled people had been employed locally. Through the injection of that highly skilled worker in the company, they were able to unlock 35 or 40 jobs for Canadians.

I've seen that in Sackville, Nova Scotia. I've seen that in northern Ontario. I've seen that in British Columbia and many parts of Canada. This is a way for immigration policy to equip our businesses—and our economy—to get the talent they need so that our businesses can grow and be able to fill unfilled jobs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, for seven minutes.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all I want to thank you, Minister, and the department officials for being flexible in meeting with us under the craziness that's going on in the House. I thank you for that.

I have a question, Minister, and it involves my riding. It involves parental sponsorship applications under the old system. There's a family living in my riding who have waited 12 years for the processing of a parental sponsorship application, which was initiated in July 2007. I appreciate you will have no knowledge of this, but we will give some papers to your officials and hopefully you could comment generally on this.

The department continues to promote family reunification, yet here we have a family in my riding that has continued to languish in the New Delhi visa office since May 2009. Seemingly, the department cannot figure out how to update the details all because the file has the misfortune of being initiated under the original system. I'm not going to reveal the names for privacy reasons, but I'll have my assistant give somebody up there a copy with more details. He's doing that now.

Notwithstanding that this is something that you're not aware of, I would like it if you could comment generally on how this is happening—a 12-year wait?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Our priority is family reunification. I am saddened to hear about the length of time it is taking for this family to reunite with their loved ones.

I'm, of course, not familiar with this particular case—

Mr. David Tilson: I'm sure you're not.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —but I will commit to you that my team will work with your team to see how we can help.

Mr. David Tilson: If someone could contact my office at a convenient time, I'd appreciate it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's not a problem. Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

I will share my time with my colleague.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Welcome, Minister.

I'm pressed for time because of the votes.

When will you close the loophole in the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The safe third country agreement, as you know, is a bilateral agreement, so it requires both the United States and Canada to agree to any modernization or adjustments.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: When will you close the loophole in the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's not something we can do unilaterally. I'm saying any changes or any modernization to that agreement has to be done on a bilateral basis.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Right, Minister, but the PBO has found and written that the illegal border crossings will be costing at least \$1.1 billion by 2021. They're saying that this is a continuous cost driver for your department.

Again, when will you close the loophole in the safe third country agreement? Do you have a timetable?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm happy to discuss costs. The Auditor General highlighted the costs of inaction, and the funding of the system—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Right, Minister—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —which is what—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Sorry to interrupt you because I'm pressed for time, the votes are coming up and I need to have an answer on this—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer your question.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I agree with you, though, that there are cost drivers to policy decisions the government has made. Do you have a timetable, then, on the expectations of when bilateral negotiations will be completed to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement with the United States?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The safe third country agreement, as you know, is a bilateral agreement between Canada and the United States. Any changes or any modernization of that agreement have to be agreed to by both countries. What the Auditor General pointed out in the report that was issued about the asylum system were the costs of inaction and the funding that occurred in the past. That's what we're dealing with now.

• (1655)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, I'm happy to reference the AG's report because in that same report he has shown that if we do nothing right now, there will be a steady increase in the wait times, which will be five years by 2024. If you don't address the loophole in the safe third

country agreement, everything will get worse. That's what the AG's report says. That's what the PBO's report says.

This morning there was a National Post article by the chair of the IRB saying that the backlog in asylum-claim hearings is going to reach 100,000 by 2021. All of those things are related to the loophole in the safe third country agreement. Again, Minister, do you have an answer, a timetable, a date before the election, after the election? Have the Americans given the government any indication on when negotiations might be completed?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm happy to talk about processing times. I'm happy to talk about funding.

A lot goes into wait times when it comes to the Immigration and Refugee Board. We are the government that launched an independent review of the whole asylum system. Our investments this year will result in the dropping of the processing times. It will result, for the first time—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: That's not what the IRB says.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: This will be the first time that the Immigration and Refugee Board will be funded for the volume that it actually receives.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: The chair of the IRB said—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The previous government did not fund the system.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, it's in the National Post. They're saying the backlog on asylum claim hearings is going to reach 100,000 by 2021.

I know you didn't—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's if nothing is done. That's the key point.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Right, and despite that, it's going to get worse.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer your point. If nothing is done, that's what will happen.

The point is that we are doing something. We are cleaning up the mess from the previous government. We are making the investments that are necessary for the system to actually operate as a system.

The previous government starved the Immigration and Refugee Board of the necessary resources.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: That's not true, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: They were funding the Immigration and Refugee Board for 10,000 claimants when they were receiving way more than that.

Secondly, the changes that were made in December 2012—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, there were tens of thousands more applications.

The Chair: The interpreters require that only one person speak at the same time. The normal rule in the House is that a question and answer should have about the same duration.

I think the minister has provided about the same length of a response as the question, so I'd turn the floor back to Mr. Kmiec for the next question.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: When will the government close the loophole in the safe third country agreement? You don't have to give me a specific date. You can give me a year, a timeline or any indication the Americans have given to you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Our responsibility is to engage in a bilateral process on a bilateral agreement. That's all I can tell you about that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We move now to Ms. Kwan.

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

Thank you to the minister and the officials.

I believe this will be the last opportunity for the committee to engage with them in this way before the election. I have a number of issues that I want to raise.

First, I brought to the minister's attention personally a number of cases regarding the TFWs and what I think is exploitation and abuse of the situation. These women are desperate to get their open work permits. As the month comes to an end they have to pay yet another round of rent, for which they have made no money and they have actually expended quite a lot of money to get here.

I understand that we can't get into all the details of it, but I ask if the minister can commit to having his staff engage with my staff, so that we can see—I hope—open work permits expedited for these workers. I know that the minister has staff looking at the files along with CBSA, public safety and Mr. Goodale's ministry.

I ask this because the women are just so anxious and desperate. Can I have that commitment, please?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

You already have raised this case with my team and I thank you for bringing it forward. It is unacceptable for workers to be exploited or taken advantage of by employers. I completely sympathize with these individuals. My office is already working with your team on this; I'm happy to make sure we help your office and these individuals in every way we can.

I will add that we have made sure there are adequate resources for increased investigations, inspections and open work permits for folks who are exactly in this position.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That would be fantastic.

I won't go into the details of the case of these women, but one of the urgent situations that they require is the ability to work. When the month of May ends, they will have to pay rent again and they have not made any money for the entire time they have been here. They've

had to go into debt to pay to get here, which they shouldn't have, but they had to for all the reasons that have been highlighted for you, Minister, in the letter.

My office is happy to work with you to get this going. I really hope that before the month ends the open work permit question could be answered. Otherwise these women are really going to be stuck.

I'll leave that and move on to another area.

On the issue around caregivers, the government has announced two new pilot projects. The officials were around this table last time. They weren't able to answer my questions, so I'm going to put the questions to you, Minister.

For how long will the open work permits for the spouses and dependants of the caregivers be valid? Would the dependants of the caregiver—children, if you will—who go to post-secondary education or who need the education system have to pay international fees? What is the policy with respect to their access to medical coverage?

On another issue related to medical exams, will they have to do multiple medical exams or could they do only one when they first get approved to come to Canada and that would suffice?

● (1700)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The whole point of the reforms to the caregiver program was to eliminate the possibility of family separation. That is why we've ensured under the new program—we'll provide all the details in the fall—that when these caregivers come to Canada, they can bring along their spouse, who will have an open work permit, and their children, who can go to school.

Beyond that, I will urge you to bear with us as we work out some of the additional details. The point was to signal to the community that the era of family separation is over.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate that, Minister, but people actually need to know what the program looks like. You might anticipate—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We will be informing them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —if the minister says, “Okay, you can bring your families here”, but it's under the condition that they pay international fees for their children to go to school, that this will create an affordability issue about whether or not they can actually feasibly do that. I hope the minister will take all of this into consideration and answer those questions. Those are absolutely pertinent with respect to that.

I'd like to ask the minister this other question, too, related to caregivers.

There were files rejected just prior to the introduction of the new threshold for medical inadmissibility under which caregivers' families were assessed. This would be the medically inadmissible category, right? I'd like to know—and perhaps his official can provide this information—how many files were rejected within 12 months of the new medically inadmissible threshold being brought in. If the new threshold were to be applied, how many of those cases would qualify? Can I get that information? You may not have it now but I would appreciate it if you could make the commitment to get it and provide it to us.

The Chair: There's just over a minute for the response.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): We will look for some data on that and get back to you with it. We'll table it to the committee.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

With respect to the Iranians, we've had long delays and we haven't been able to resolve this issue. I wonder if the minister can tell us what work is being done to reduce application processing times for Iranian nationals, and more specifically, for those whose applications have actually been received. Their medical, their security and their criminality checks have all gone through, but they are still stuck in the system. I wonder if I can also get the minister to commit to providing information to this committee, in writing, so that we can get to the bottom of this. Again, there are many Iranian nationals just stuck in the system—talent we want here in Canada—and they are ready to move forward.

The Chair: You have just 15 seconds.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Under the Conservatives, the Iranian nationals were waiting twice as long as other nationalities for processing—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I just need a yes or no, please. I only have 15 seconds—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —and we have cut that number by half.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —so if I can get a commitment to have that information—

The Chair: I believe we've received a commitment to get an answer.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. So my last question—

The Chair: Actually, there's no more time. It's 7:01, so we'll go to our last seven-minute round before we head upstairs for votes.

I will note, as we finish this round with Mr. Sarai, that immediately after the votes we'll come back here. I believe the minister has agreed to come back and do the final 23 minutes of questioning, so Ms. Kwan, you'll get your three minutes to follow up on that issue later.

Mr. Sarai.

• (1705)

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): First, I want to thank Mr. Hussen and the department for being here with us today, as well as for their commitment to the integrity of our borders, our asylum system and our overall immigration system.

As my riding of Surrey Centre has some of the highest levels of casework in Canada, we have seen the detrimental impact that unscrupulous immigration consultants can have on people. The main estimates for 2019-20 would provide IRCC with \$11 million and CBSA with \$1.5 million to protect the public from unscrupulous consultants.

Can you, Minister, explain how these funds will mitigate the risks associated with these dangerous consultants?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes. For the first time we are introducing new administrative monetary penalties to go after unauthorized consultants. We are doubling the maximum criminal fines that are available to law enforcement to go after unauthorized consultants.

In addition to that, budget 2019 provides more resources for CBSA to conduct much-needed investigations and enforcement against some of the most complex cases that target people.

Also, very important steps are being taken to revamp the oversight mechanism. There will be the establishment of the college of immigration and citizenship consultants. That will result in a much newer landscape that involves a public interest board of directors sitting on the board, a majority, and a new code of conduct developed by the Minister of Immigration.

In addition to that, the new college will have the power to enter into premises of immigration consultants where they suspect wrongdoing is occurring. In addition to that, they can compel members of the college to come and provide testimony to answer on complaints. There will be a compensation fund for those who have been wrongfully taken advantage of by immigration consultants.

There will be a requirement for the new members of the college to have liability insurance, and there will be a much more robust training, disciplinary and complaints process.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: How will it help immigrants or students or temporary foreign workers who are facing them? Does it protect them when they complain? Will whistle-blowers, in this case, be protected and assisted?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It will help in many ways. I have seen personally, in my previous life as an immigration lawyer, cases where people would come at the tail end—after being out of pocket for thousands and thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of dollars—and say, “This consultant didn't even file my application. They took money from me and they didn't even do what was supposed to be done.” Those days are over. Those folks will have access to a compensation fund.

The misinformation will be tackled head on. Some of the money that is allocated in budget 2019 will go toward more outreach officers in some of our key source countries for both permanent and temporary immigration, to proactively inform people about the proper way to apply and also which credible immigration consultants to use.

The new college will also have the power to go to court to get injunctions against unauthorized consultants, to prevent them from practising and preying on people.

Many, many times we see that people who are in violation of the immigration system are themselves victims of these unauthorized immigration consultants. We see international students who are taken advantage of, who are promised things that are simply not true. We see visitors and others, and they are not only disadvantaged by losing a lot of money; sometimes they are disadvantaged because their applications are not even filed.

These new measures will result in much stronger oversight, but also much stronger enforcement and investigations and an ability—when the worst happens, when these people are taken advantage of and lose a lot of money—for them to recoup some, if not all, of that money for the first time, by setting up a compensation fund that will help them out.

• (1710)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: The main estimates for 2019-20 would also provide IRCC with \$160 million to enhance the integrity of Canada's border and asylum system.

How will this funding impact the functionality of IRCC compared to previous governments?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, the new funding for the Immigration and Refugee Board will result in the hiring of 700 staff to be in place by the end of 2020-21. Already the investments we made under budget 2018 are having an impact. Average processing time at the Immigration and Refugee Board has dropped to 21 months from 24 months. Straightforward cases are being processed in six months. A number of efficiency measures are being put in place.

Make no mistake about it, one of the key things that was hampering the Immigration and Refugee Board was not filling vacancies, and we've done that as a government in addition to making sure that the Immigration and Refugee Board is funded for the actual volumes of asylum claims it is receiving. That is the first time this is happening. There are more resources for CBSA, RCMP and IRCC as well, because we want to treat the asylum system as a system as a whole and not just fund one part and ignore the rest. Security screening is important and further efficiencies within the IRB beyond money will make sure we have fast, fair and final decision-making for asylum claimants.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

As agreed with unanimous consent...those who are watching will see that the lights are flashing faster, which means we're getting closer to the vote. I believe we should all be able to be back here by 5:30 to commence the meeting promptly and then hopefully complete our work by 6 p.m.

The meeting is suspended for the next 15 or so minutes.

• (1710)

(Pause)

• (1730)

The Chair: I now call for the resumption of the meeting.

We have a five-minute round and a three-minute round remaining.

Again, I remind members that the time available for a response should be roughly that provided during the question, so we can keep things running smoothly. Short questions mean more questions.

Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome back, Minister, to the rest of this meeting. I hope there won't be any more votes to interrupt us.

I want to ask you, again, when will you close the loophole in the safe third country agreement? Your officials had 15 minutes during the votes. I'm hoping that one of them provided you an answer.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I didn't lack an answer last time, and I'm going to tell you the same thing I've told you, which is that the safe third country agreement is a bilateral agreement between Canada and the United States. As such, any changes or any efforts to modernize the agreement have to be done in a bilateral fashion. That engagement is ongoing. Minister Blair can talk a little bit more about that, because he is now leading that process.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm glad you mentioned Minister Blair, because I wanted to mention some of the work you've done on it. You met with the former United States secretary for the department of homeland security, Kirstjen Nielsen, on January 18, 2017. In an article, the National Observer reported on a briefing note that said, and I quote, that "the Safe Third Country Agreement 'is no longer working as intended.'"

Last year, on May 31, 2018, and again in those weeks you met with the U.S. Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. At any of the meetings or at any other meeting that you've had with the officials of the American government, have you asked them to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement, because it is driving immense cost in your department?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The safe third country agreement was signed in 2004. It's always good to look at an agreement that is that old to see if there are ways to modernize it. That's a position I've always taken. In addition to that, one of the ways it can be modernized, of course, is to utilize technology to enhance the agreement.

Again, to answer your question, when you have a bilateral agreement, you cannot change it unilaterally. Canada cannot just change that agreement by itself—neither can the United States. It has to be done together.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay, Minister. I'm going to ask you this. In what year would the Government of Canada like to have negotiations completed with the American government to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement, because of the cost drivers in your department? Perhaps I could just quote one number to you, so you could have it. In the PBO report, "Costing Irregular Migration across Canada's Southern Border", they estimated that the per-person cost of these illegal border crossers is \$16,666.

That's what I'm asking, again. Does the Government of Canada have a year, a harvest season, a month, a day, by which they would like to have the loophole closed in the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Since you again touched on the issue of costs, what drives up costs is a lengthy process for people whose lives are in limbo. It costs us more to do that. It also costs the provinces and territories more money to have asylum claimants who are waiting years for a hearing. That's the system we inherited. The system—

• (1735)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: When will you close the agreement, Minister? It's a factual question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The fact is that investing in the system to make sure that there is a fast, fair and final process for asylum claimants dramatically reduces the costs associated with processing asylum claimant cases.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm going to go back again to the same question I've been asking you repeatedly, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: And I'll give you the same answer.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's pretty simple. You're basically telling me that the Government of Canada has no timetable to complete these negotiations—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: No, I'm telling—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Pardon me, Minister. I'll let you speak uninterrupted after I'm done.

You're basically telling me there is no timetable for completing negotiations to close the loophole on the safe third country agreement.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think this is very redundant from what opposite members...questioning the minister, and the minister has mentioned that this is part of another ministry as well. I think Mr. Kmiec could direct his questions as well to another minister. I think it's out of his scope.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: On the point of order—

The Chair: Sorry, I think I can rule quickly. Because you did bring the PBO into the question, it brings it within the scope for discussion on the main estimates. But I do acknowledge that I think we've received the same answer to the same question many times, and I think everyone understands that this is in fact the answer.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Mr. Chair, on the point of order, sir—I'm glad Mr. Tabbara was doing the point of order so it doesn't take away from time—I haven't received an answer. I've received responses, and responses are not answers.

All I'm asking—

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, I've already ruled that your question is in order, and you are allowed to proceed now with the remainder of your time.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: This is a five-minute round. You have about 50 seconds.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to go back to what I was saying before the interruption.

You were telling me that the Government of Canada has no timetable to complete these negotiations. However, all the numbers I've mentioned so far by the PBO, the \$1.1 billion and up, by 2021; the AG's report with serious concerns... The comments by the chair of the IRB this morning, reported in the National Post, paint a picture that unless you close this loophole, these costs will continue to go up in your department.

I understand that you perhaps can't give me a fixed timeline as to when the Americans would like to have it completed.

I'm asking you, when would the Government of Canada like to have this loophole closed in the safe third country agreement? Is there a year? Is it after the election or before the election?

The Chair: Thank you. I think we'll have to wait until the next round of questions to get an answer to that.

I move now to Ms. Zahid.

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

Thanks a lot, Minister. Thanks to all the officials also for joining us in the committee today.

Minister, among the many mean-spirited cuts in the last Ontario budget by the Doug Ford government, one of them was to eliminate the legal aid funding for refugees and immigration law services. The Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers warns that these abrupt changes will have dire consequences for many.

For many of us, it was reminiscent of the Harper government's decision to slash health care coverage for refugee and asylum claimants.

Could you please assure us that, with the funding provided to the department in the main estimates, our government will continue to protect the rights of vulnerable immigrants and refugees?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The commitment that we have as a government to provide due process to those who are seeking protection is very important. It's a priority that we have. It's very unfortunate to see that the Ontario government has cut legal aid funding for immigrants and refugees. Historically, Ontario's contribution has covered approximately 65% of the province's immigration and refugee legal aid expenditures, so these are cuts that will have significant consequences.

Of course, in budget 2019, we are investing almost \$50 million over three years for immigrant and refugee legal aid. I am concerned about cuts that target people who are fleeing persecution and who would like to pursue an asylum claim in order to get Canada's protection. We must do what we can to make sure that these individuals have due process, and Ontario's cut to refugee and immigrant legal aid is a step in the wrong direction. It will hurt the most vulnerable.

I'm disappointed, but I'm not quite surprised. We have seen the track record of Conservatives, in all levels of government, targeting cuts precisely against community services that serve the most vulnerable in our society. The previous federal Conservatives, when they were in office, cut refugee health care, a practice that was deemed by the courts to be cruel and unusual treatment. This is in the same line, and it's really unfortunate that it has happened.

• (1740)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

My next question is on another important service on which many of the new immigrants rely, the settlement services. We have made significant investment in the settlement program this year, in line with the increase in immigration expected in the multi-year levels plan. We recently completed a study where we heard how important settlement services are and how they could be reformed.

How are you ensuring that settlement services meet the enduring needs of the newcomers to Canada?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very important question because we have a duty to each and every newcomer to Canada, not just refugees, but across all different streams of immigration. For those we invite to join our Canadian family, we have an equal obligation, at least to the extent that we can, to equip them with the tools they need to succeed in Canada.

That is not only the right thing to do and the humane thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do because the sooner they can succeed, the better it is for Canada, so funding for settlement and integration is key. It is why we're investing \$777 million to fund settlement and integration in 2019-20. That's a 1% increase over last year's numbers.

We have funded over 500 organizations across Canada to provide language training, help find jobs and offer orientation to newcomers. Preliminary data shows that 485,000 clients received these services last year, already surpassing the previous year's total.

One of the advancements that needs to be made in the settlement sector that we are pursuing is to make sure, since not every newcomer has the same needs, that there is tailoring of different settlement services for different kinds of immigrants to ensure maximum impact and success.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We now move to Mr. Tilson.

Before we start the clock, I just want to thank you, Mr. Tilson. I know that you served as chair of this committee in the 40th and 41st Parliaments and, seeing as this is very likely the last televised session of this committee, I'd just like to thank you for that service and for the excellent work you have done in this 42nd Parliament.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. David Tilson: You're very kind, Mr. Chairman. I guess that means I have to be nice to the minister. I'll try to be.

I have a question with respect to the visa issue of Mexico, and I realize there's a gray area between the three ministers, but you are in

charge of visas. The media is reporting that there may be hundreds of Mexican nationals in Canada with ties to drug cartels, particularly in Quebec. I appreciate that the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness challenged that, but there is no question, whether the media has the right figure or Minister Goodale has, that they're here.

This is the result of the government's visa lift in 2006, which I believe the minister's own officials recommended against. The result of that is we've been flooded with, really, thugs and criminals. My question for you as the Minister of Immigration is: what do you intend to do about this alarming situation, other than to pass it on to the Minister of Public Safety?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I would respond by saying that the security, safety and health of Canadians is of paramount importance to all the ministers in our government, and to suggest that is not the case is completely not true.

I will submit to you that our security screening—our independent visa officers and others who make these decisions on who enters Canada—is based on a first analysis of making sure that the health, safety and security of Canadians is protected.

Having said that, on Mexico, the decision has significantly benefited Canada. We have seen a huge expansion of trade, investment and tourism as well as business travellers and students coming to Canada.

Since we lifted the visa requirement for Mexico, we have welcomed over 860,000 travellers from Mexico.

• (1745)

Mr. David Tilson: I understand that, Minister, and good for you. Encouraging trade is a good thing. The problem is, unless the media is wrong—and I can't believe you're going to say the media is wrong—there are criminals who have come from Mexico under drug cartels, according to the media, who are here, and the government knows they are here. Minister Goodale didn't deny that. The only thing he denied was the numbers.

On the fact that they're here, what steps are you taking to deal with that issue to give confidence to the public that these types of people...? I'm sure they are not all bad people, but there are some who are bad. How can we create confidence in the government that this issue is going to be resolved?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, when you refer to the media, my understanding is that you're really referring to one report that has unsubstantiated numbers based on an unnamed source.

Mr. David Tilson: I've read three newspapers, Mr. Minister. I don't want to get into that. It's been alleged and the Minister of Public Safety has not denied it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Well, no. I have been in question period when he has responded to this question. The minister has responded, effectively, to the numbers that we have, based on the volumes that our government has dealt with. Out of all the Mexican nationals who have visited Canada since January 2018, inadmissibility reports have been prepared for 190 Mexican nationals.

Mr. David Tilson: Yes, but you're admitting that some of these people—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Could I just finish the answer?

Mr. David Tilson: I'm sorry, go ahead.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: This represents 0.04% of all Mexican travellers to Canada. Those folks have been dealt with by our security services. My understanding is that the system is working the way it is supposed to work.

The Chair: One final brief question, Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: We're not going to come to the same accord. I think there's generally a problem that the government has to resolve.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer predicts that the cost to taxpayers for illegal border crossing will be \$1.1 billion by March 2020, which is under a year from now.

Do you concur with the Parliamentary Budget Officer with respect to these border crossers? If you do not concur, what is the estimated amount?

The Chair: Perhaps we will get an answer to that question with the next member or perhaps the member will choose his own questions.

Mr. Arseneault.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Very briefly, Minister Hussen, can you continue to answer the previous question asked by Mr. Tilson?

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I would suggest to you that.... The fact is, based on the volumes that we've seen this year—from the beginning of this year until now—we've seen a 48% decrease compared to last year in the number of folks crossing our borders irregularly and then claiming asylum. That's the first point.

The second point is that both the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the Auditor General have shown the costs of underfunding the system and making sure that the system is starved for the resources it needs to deal with the volumes it was receiving over the last number of years. We have taken steps to ensure that's no longer the case by funding the asylum system for the numbers that it actually receives and by appointing, through a merit-based process, qualified individuals from diverse backgrounds to fill vacancies in the IRB. Budget 2019 numbers and 2018 investments will result in 700 new staff being hired at the IRB.

That will ensure that the processing time comes down and that they can deal with the volumes that are coming in. It will ensure that we are treating the asylum system as a system, as opposed to just focusing on one aspect of the asylum system and forgetting that it's an entire system that needs continuity and line of sight from reception to removal.

• (1750)

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Minister Hussen.

I have only about three minutes left.

I'd like to move away from the subject of refugees and asylum claimants.

I'm now the only one who can ask questions and who comes from Atlantic Canada, since the chair can't participate in the discussions.

As a member of Parliament, I attended the launch of the pilot project on immigration in the Atlantic provinces three years ago. It's no longer a pilot project. It's almost a successful project.

Three years later, can we measure the impact of the pilot project in Atlantic Canada?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

[English]

The Atlantic immigration program pilot project has been so successful that we've extended it by a further two years. It's now a five-year pilot program. Part of the reason for that success has been the great work that we've been able to accomplish with employers and provincial governments in that part of Canada.

It's a program that has really set the standard in terms of working towards retention of immigrants and not just their attraction to Atlantic Canada. It's the first employer-driven immigration program in Canadian history. The lessons we've learned from the Atlantic immigration program have been used to craft the rural and northern immigration pilot program.

It has had a huge impact. In my numerous engagements with employers and provincial officials in Atlantic Canada, I have seen how the Atlantic immigration pilot program has done exactly what it is meant to do, which is to address the unique demographic, labour market and skills challenges in Atlantic Canada, but also the retention piece, in making sure that the employers attract not just the skilled worker but also their family and put together a settlement plan to ensure retention. The retention rates are climbing. The population increase is a testament to the fact that the Atlantic immigration program has been a very big success.

In fact, as recently as two days ago, I met with one of the major employers from Atlantic Canada. They want us to double that program because it's been so good for them in terms of growth, filling unfilled jobs and bringing much needed skills to Atlantic Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

I have one minute left.

What overall goal should be achieved within five years?

The project will have run for five years after the two-year extension. Is there a specific goal, or a number of immigrants accompanied by their families?

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, the allocation for the Atlantic immigration pilot program for the whole region is 3,000 principal applicants plus their families. That is on top of the provincial nominee program that Atlantic Canada has access to, which we've increased by 33%, and also the federal skilled worker program. Also, for temporary foreign workers, for some of them, we have an obligation to provide pathways for permanent residency.

One of the great aspects of the immigration pilot program in Atlantic Canada is to offer a pathway for international students studying in Atlantic Canada to have access to permanent residency in Atlantic Canada through a program called “Study and Stay”.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Ms. Kwan, for the final three minutes.

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

I'd like to ask about the call centres. As you know, the Auditor General came up with a report basically indicating that 1.2 million people—70%—were prevented from reaching an agent. The minister, I know, has since responded, so I have some very specific questions.

Has there been a service standard established? If so, what is it?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have seen, since 2016 and 2017—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but I only have three minutes. I just want those questions answered, please.

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): In terms of the service standards, we in IRCC have around 78 services that we give, and we have 39 service centres for different purposes, but in terms of the call answer rate and what we need from the call service centre, that establishment of the standard has not been done, because of the fact that it is in consultation with the clients and based on the Treasury Board policy.

• (1755)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, of course it hasn't, because I can tell you that just yesterday my staff was on the phone for close to half an hour waiting to talk to a real person. This is the case on multiple occasions. That was actually fast. A half-hour turnaround was fast.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I'd like to respond to this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just want to be very clear that, as has been indicated by your official, Minister, there has been no service standard. This is a real problem. I know this from all of the folks around the table, all the MPs. When you phone or your constituency assistants help your constituents in phoning, you often just have to wait and wait and wait. If our offices are enduring that kind of situation, imagine what it is like for the constituent on the ground.

This information has been verified by the Auditor General's report. I would urge the minister to actually get on with the service standards for these call centres. It's not acceptable, the situation as it stands right now.

I want to ask a question with respect to—

The Chair: You have a little less than 50 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, I will ask a quick question.

The minister said, “I'm happy to use 'illegal' if—To answer your question quickly, I have used the word 'illegal' and I have used the word 'irregular' and I think both are accurate”.

The minister uses this interchangeably. I've asked the minister to retract that word “illegal” in describing asylum seekers. Will he do that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You're referring to one appearance I had in front of this committee. The fact is our government has doubled the number of resettled refugees—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I'm asking a specific question with respect to your term.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Kwan. The time to ask the question and the time to give the answer should be about the same.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Of course you wouldn't answer, hence you allow for this.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have more than quadrupled the number of privately sponsored refugees. We have had an increase in the number of people who are able to sponsor refugees privately. We're very proud of our refugee program to settle survivors of Daesh atrocities. I am very proud of our government's record when it comes to refugees and providing asylum to the most vulnerable.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That comes to the end of the testimony from the minister. I'd like to thank you and your officials for making yourselves available, especially in light of the very difficult voting and other interruptions.

We will now move to committee business in adopting the estimates, or not, with some routine motions.

Under the main estimates 2019-20, we have votes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 and 35 under Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and votes 1 and 5 under Immigration and Refugee Board.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$797,460,552

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$22,242,541

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$1,775,345,121

Vote 15—Enhancing the Integrity of Canada's Borders and Asylum System.....
\$160,430,000

Vote 20—Improving Immigration Client Service.....\$18,000,000

Vote 25—Helping Travellers Visit Canada.....\$24,384,000

Vote 30—Protecting People from Unscrupulous Immigration Consultants.....
\$11,250,000

Vote 35—Providing Health Care to Refugees and Asylum Seekers.....
\$125,120,000

(Votes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 and 35 agreed to on division)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$148,584,137

Vote 5—Enhancing the Integrity of Canada's Borders and Asylum System.....
\$56,850,000

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates 2019-20 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Thank you, all, for your co-operation today, especially unanimous consent to allow these meetings to proceed and end on time.

The meeting is adjourned.

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