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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): I'd like to call the meeting to order. Pursuant to the order of reference received from the House of Commons on Wednesday, November 2, 2016, the committee will begin its study on motion 39, immigration to Atlantic Canada.

From the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, we have with us today Ms. Corinne Prince, director general, integration and foreign credentials referral office; Ms. Laurie Hunter, director, economic immigration policy and programs; and, Mr. Ümit Kiziltan, director general, research and evaluation.

Welcome. The floor is yours.

Please proceed, Ms. Hunter.

Ms. Laurie Hunter (Director, Economic Immigration Policy and Programs, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to speak to the committee today.

As noted, my name is Laurie Hunter, and I'm the director of the economic policy and programs division at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. With me today are Corinne Prince and Ümit Kiziltan.

Atlantic Canada faces a number of demographic challenges shaped by declining fertility rates and a long-standing trend of young residents leaving the region to settle and work elsewhere. Recently released census data indicates that the population of Atlantic Canada is declining in the 15-to-64 age range and increasing in the number of senior citizens. Atlantic Canadian provinces also face a number of challenges in attracting and retaining immigrants, who could help to mitigate these demographic challenges.

In 2014, 6.7% of the Canadian population lived in Atlantic Canada, but the region welcomed only 3.1% of new immigrants.

[Translation]

Given demographic and statistical realities in the region, your committee's study on this issue is timely.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, recognizes that immigration is important in supporting economic growth, and there is a desire to see more immigrants settle and stay there.

That is why, in partnership with the Atlantic provinces and as part of the Atlantic growth strategy, IRCC recently launched the Atlantic immigration pilot.

[English]

It provides a pathway to permanent immigration under three different programs: the Atlantic intermediate-skilled program, the Atlantic high-skilled program, and the Atlantic international graduate program. The pilot offers priority processing for permanent residence applications and does not require participating employers to get a labour market impact assessment for jobs offered to skilled workers or international graduates under these new pilot programs. It draws on enhanced coordination to identify regional labour market needs and to endorse candidates who meet these needs.

Under the pilot, every principal applicant will arrive in Atlantic Canada with a job offer and an individual settlement plan both for themselves and for their accompanying family members, which will connect them to services known to support successful integration. Importantly, the pilot will test forward-looking approaches to settlement service delivery, together with a commitment from employers to foster welcoming workplaces and support settlement needs of newcomer employees and their families.

On March 6, we opened application intake, with a commitment to process up to 2,000 applications for principal applicants and accompanying family members in 2017. To date, more than 250 employers in the region have been designated to take part in the pilot.

IRCC has other programs that also benefit Atlantic Canada. For instance, under the provincial nominee program, or PNP, participating provinces and territories develop economic immigration streams tailored to their labour market needs and nominate candidates on the basis of their ability to contribute to their regional economies. It has contributed to higher numbers of immigrants arriving in Atlantic Canada in recent years. For example, in 2005, only 1.5% of new immigrants to Canada were destined for any of the Atlantic provinces. By 2014, that percentage had more than doubled to 3.1%.

The express entry program is Canada's flagship application management system for key economic immigration programs that attract high-skilled foreign workers who want to live in Canada. I would like to highlight some recent changes to express entry that will be of interest to your committee because of their relevance to Atlantic Canada.

As of November 19, 2016, candidates working in Canada temporarily who are exempt from meeting a labour market impact assessment, LMIA, for their jobs will be able to carry over that exemption in express entry. This will help smooth the transition from temporary to permanent residence for many high-skilled candidates.

Also as of November 2016, additional points are awarded to candidates if they have completed education in Canada above the high school level. This is important given the number of high-quality post-secondary institutions in Atlantic Canada. International graduates are a key source of candidates in express entry because of their age, education, skills, experience with life in Canada, and established social networks.

[Translation]

As well, IRCC recently launched a new LMIA exemption stream of the international mobility program called *Mobilité francophone*.

The high-skilled workers in this new stream will be able to acquire valuable Canadian work experience, and then may benefit from the exemption from needing an LMIA for their permanent job offer to get additional points in Express Entry.

Also, starting on June 6, 2017, Express Entry candidates with strong French language skills, with or without English language skills, will be awarded additional points.

These important changes can help grow francophone minority communities across Canada, including Atlantic Canada.

• (1535)

The provincial nominee program is also a potential avenue to permanent residency for French-speaking newcomers to the region, which has a large number of francophone minority communities.

[English]

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, I would like to reiterate that IRCC is acutely aware of the need for and interest in improving immigration to Atlantic Canada. IRCC welcomes your study and looks forward to reading your final report.

We can now take questions from the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Anandasangaree, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for joining us and for your presentation.

With respect to the issue of retention, this is about recruitment of newcomers to Atlantic Canada. Do you have any statistics on

retention levels of new immigrants, for example, five years after being in Atlantic Canada?

Ms. Laurie Hunter: We do have some of those numbers and they vary by program. I don't know if my colleague, Ümit, would like to speak to that.

Mr. Ümit Kiziltan (Director General, Research and Evaluation, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): As you would anticipate, immigrants in different programs will behave differently. Overall, if you take all newcomers—methodologies differ from study to study—we look at five-year arrivals and we take the intended destination as a starting point. When we look at that overall, in terms of the four provinces, we have a range starting from about 30% for P.E.I. all the way to 75% for Nova Scotia. Newfoundland and Labrador will be 65%. Other provinces will definitely have higher retention rates when we look at the full program.

In other programs such as the Canadian experience class there are much higher retention rates for the Atlantic. I know the numbers are small but retention is very high. Family class will have a much higher retention rate ranging between 85% and 74%. That is the family class, and you might also anticipate why the rootedness and whatnot are a factor.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: The reason I asked that is when I practised law, a number of professionals who had initially been to the east coast ended up moving to Ontario once they were fully trained. Part of the challenge is how to increase the retention rates, apart from those who are coming in. To me, 30%, 40%, 50% seems a little on the low side, and for the amount of investment it takes for us to bring someone in, it probably is better. We have them there for a longer period of time.

I don't know if you have any ideas on that.

Ms. Laurie Hunter: One the key gaps this program is looking to fill was the recognition that a number of programs are already serving the Atlantic region. This one was meant to experiment with innovative ways to try to focus on retention, and that's one of the reasons it's testing an employer-driven model. Employers, before they can even become designated to recruit employees under the program, have to make a firm commitment in writing that they will partner with a settlement agency and undertake to link people to those settlement supports, etc., and then look at how they are creating the most welcoming workplace possible to try to get at that retention element.

I don't know if you want any more detail on that or not.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: No, we can follow up on it afterwards.

I want to highlight two specific incidents in Atlantic Canada. One is the 1985 arrival of Tamil refugees by boat off St. John's and then the 1987 arrival off Shelburne of about 160 Sikhs. In retrospect, that was seen as an opportunity lost for people to be able to resettle there because our initial response was to ship them out to Montreal and Toronto.

Do you have any sense as to how refugees are now being welcomed in Atlantic Canada and what kinds of services are available and what kinds of numbers we are seeing for refugee claimants, apart from the government-assisted refugees, GARs, and so on?

• (1540)

Ms. Corinne Prince (Director General, Integration and Foreign Credentials Referral Office, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): If I may, Mr. Chair, just to reply to the question generally, Operation Syria was a game-changer for Canada both in terms of government-assisted refugees as well as those privately sponsored.

I know the four Atlantic provinces want to take as many as IRCC can provide to them, and so our settlement agencies in the Atlantic have been very creative in dealing with the volumes of refugees who arrived during Operation Syria. They are now very well positioned to continue to welcome newcomers. In 2017 the context is quite different from 1985 and 1987, as you explained.

I would look to my colleague Ümit to see if he has the data on the number of refugees who have arrived in the Atlantic. That's another branch in our department. We could maybe provide that afterward, but he may have it with him.

Mr. Ümit Kiziltan: I do not have the data for all the provinces together. We can definitely provide these. I'll just give you an example. In New Brunswick, in 2016, we had 1,680 resettled refugees. These are rounded numbers. You also asked about the asylum claimants. In terms of refugee protected persons in Canada—those who landed and became permanent residents from asylum claimants—there were five. We have all this data available.

Just to connect the two questions, if I may, I'll add that the retention rates of privately sponsored refugees are much higher. Again, that's pointing in the direction of family involvement and the welcoming nature of the community, if you will. They all contribute towards the retention rates.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to refugees, what more can be done to ensure that people who want to come to Canada look at Atlantic Canada as an option? I know that oftentimes it's seen as central or western Canada. How do we make sure that people go to Atlantic Canada? I know they're very welcoming there.

The Chair: Please respond very briefly.

Ms. Corinne Prince: The answer is employment. We know that if refugees or newcomers to the Atlantic region, or to any region of Canada, can find employment, that will not only attract them, but also keep them there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): It's interesting that in your statement you said that “recently released census data indicates that the population of Atlantic Canada is declining in the 15-to-64 age range, and increasing in the number of senior citizens.” I had the honour of attending the University of New Brunswick—a long time ago, it seems—and it was the same way then. There really is no change. You're talking about the programs that you're putting forward, pilot and otherwise. They're clearly not working—at least if these stats are accurate, and I assume they are. There hasn't been much change from when I was at university.

I guess the question is, why would immigrants come to the maritime provinces if there are no jobs? The young people are not staying there. They never have. They've taken off. When the oil business was booming out west, that's where they all went. They go where there are jobs, and there are no jobs in the Maritimes.

Do you have any other ideas as to programs that would encourage not just immigrants, but the young people to stay?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Tilson, it would be presumptuous of me to reply, given that ministers from both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are about to meet you after we leave this committee, and they would be much better positioned to explain to you the economic situation in those two provinces.

I can tell you, though, that the seasonal nature of the work in the Atlantic has not been a plus for the Atlantic provinces. The resource pull to western Canada has not helped, but you would be pleased to hear that in terms of the high-tech sector, the tourism sector, the food-processing sectors, and the food sector in particular, there is some very exciting news coming out of Atlantic Canada these days. I would leave it to the ministers and their team who are here today.

• (1545)

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, I conclude my questions so I can give my time to Mrs. Stubbs.

The Chair: Mrs. Stubbs, you have four and a half minutes.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At this time, I'd like to move that pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2), the committee invite the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship to appear to testify before committee and explain the discrepancy between government claims that closing the Vegreville immigration case processing centre was done for budgetary reasons, and the new information showing it was not. I'd like to thank the committee for allowing me to be here today to advocate for the employees of the case processing centre in Vegreville—76% of whom happen to be women—for their families, their community members, and for the town itself.

In December, I had the opportunity to address this committee, and I'm here once again to present new facts and new information that Liberal members of Parliament, Liberal ministers, Liberal political staff, and senior departmental officials have refused to acknowledge or share with Canadians. I also hope this isn't the last opportunity that opposition MPs will have to raise issues from constituents and on behalf of all Canadians directly in committee without a time limit.

So why is this motion important, and why should it be supported by every member of this committee? The reason is that the Liberals have been dishonest with Canadians about the costs, and the minister needs to set the record straight. Last week *Global News* revealed startling information that's in direct contradiction to what senior Liberals have been saying all along, and that's the decision to rip 280 jobs out of Vegreville, Alberta, would save money and would be better for taxpayers, but now all Canadians know that's not the case.

Let's go back to October 27, 2016, if we could, almost seven months to the day when employees, again 76% of whom are women and whom the Prime Minister has pledged to support, were told that the office of exemplary, hard-working, efficient employees was being closed and moved to Edmonton by December 31, 2018. For seven months, hard-working employees were told reason after reason for this closure. Excuses were made up as we went along. The reasons changed. The most alarming claims were about efficiency and performance problems, but the most consistent claim all the way along from multiple ministers, members of Parliament, and senior officials was that the decision would be cost-effective, that it would incur cost savings, and that it would be about the responsible management of taxpayers' dollars.

Employees, town officials, business owners, and community members were confused, of course, because this edict came as a complete shock to every one of them since they weren't consulted, they weren't asked to provide costing or upgrade options in the current facility.

I wrote a letter to the former Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship the day after this reckless and unjustifiable decision was announced. I asked him to reconsider, to look at all the facts that had so blatantly and obviously been overlooked. Here was his response:

Canadians expect their government to make responsible decisions on spending that will address current challenges, account for future situations, and ensure tax dollars are spent on quality services to meet expectations of clients and provide program excellence. The relocation will also save money as the new office space will be located within the Government of Canada's existing property inventory.

He wasn't the only one to talk about costing, of course. The MP for Edmonton Centre, where the jobs will be moving, wrote the following to a resident from Vegreville. He said:

Thank you for writing to me about the Vegreville CPC closure. It is always a pleasure to speak with constituents—open dialogue is a vital part of my job. I understand your and your community's concerns.

Canadians expect their Government to make responsible decisions on government spending that will address current challenges, account for future situations, and that will ensure middle class tax dollars are spent on quality services to meet expectations of clients and provide program excellence.

Most residents were confused and left wondering, quite obviously, how can it be that rent, operating costs, construction costs, renovation costs, relocation costs, and buyouts would be cheaper than operating in Vegreville. Of course, now we know what the

internal government department documents have shown all along, now we know the facts; it's not. Those internal documents detail how much more it will be to operate in Edmonton.

In an email dated April 19, 2016, two senior department officials realized the cost discrepancy and were crafting statements, obviously for themselves and for politicians to use.

• (1550)

The first one said this:

Public Services and Procurement Canada conducted an Investment Analysis Report based on the 280 FTEs in Vegreville and 312 FTEs in Edmonton over a 5 year period. The cost to the Crown if Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada remains in Vegreville would be approximately \$7 million with the majority of this for rent and no additional fit-up would be required. The cost to the Crown if Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada move to Edmonton and increased its capacity to 312 FTEs—

—only 32 new positions, by the way—

—over a five year period, would be 22.6 million. The move to Edmonton would result in higher costs due to an increase in capacity (from 280 FTE's to 312 FTE's), the fit-up and rent costs for the additional capacity as well as an actual increase in the rental rate per square meter associated with occupying space in downtown Edmonton

—something that the common sense of the residents around Vegreville or any rural community in Canada, could probably have guessed.

It goes on to say:

It is important to note that as part of PSPC's overall analysis of available options, that over a 25 year life cycle for space, the overall cost to the Crown to relocate to Edmonton would be 46.6M...versus a cost of 35.8M to remain in our current location in Vegreville....

This information clearly confirms that the move will cost taxpayers more, both in the short term and in the long term. As a reminder, over a five-year period, the cost to the crown to operate in Edmonton will be over \$22 million. To remain in Vegreville would cost \$7 million, detailing a difference of almost \$16 million in just five years.

Startlingly, the estimated fit up in Vegreville for the same timeline is—and it's going to sound crazy because it's so far apart—\$25,144 versus a cost of \$4.9 million in Edmonton. This is a stark difference, especially when you're talking about closing down an office in Vegreville that, according to the latest statistics, and as the department itself confirms, exceeded departmental standard targets of 80% by 93% and by 97%, respectively, for applications and extensions for applications.

John McCallum and the MP for Edmonton Centre weren't the only ones to be dishonest with Canadians. On November 29, 2016, the former parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship participated in a late show debate with me. I raised specific concerns with him regarding the lack of business case, the lack of consultation, the lack of an economic impact assessment, and the lack of answers from the minister. I'll read his response, in full:

Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague across the aisle for her important advocacy on this issue on behalf of her constituents in Vegreville. To respond to the increased demand in various business lines and to expand the operations of the IRCC, the department has made the difficult but necessary decision to relocate the Vegreville case processing centre to Edmonton. Canadians expect any government, including this government, to make responsible decisions on government spending that will ensure that taxpayers' dollars are spent on quality services that address current challenges and future needs.

He said:

The member opposite has raised the issue of whether there is a business case. My comments are indeed directed at addressing that very concern. In fact, the Minister of Immigration has stated that the department intends to expand its operations in Alberta in the coming years, creating in aggregate more jobs for Albertans. That's my first point.

With 42% of the current staff of Vegreville reaching retirement age in the next five years, the move to Edmonton will make it easier to recruit and retain qualified bilingual employees to meet the growing current and future needs. To date the recruitment efforts to replace staff have been unsuccessful.

None of these claims are true, by the way, but anyway....

This was the case even under the former government. Needless to say, the inability to recruit new staff, combined with the reduction in the workforce due to retirement, is a serious challenge. With fewer employees, service to clients will certainly be impacted.

I guess the service of consistently exceeding the departmental targets is not sufficient. He said:

That, again, buttresses the business case.

Between October 2015 and September 2016, 17% of the staff in Vegreville left the workforce.

He said to me:

As the member opposite well knows, the letter she received from the Minister of Immigration on November 17 stipulated that there were ongoing tenant issues at the current location in Vegreville, with almost 200 service calls made since 2013 to fix the heating, cooling, plumbing, sanitary, and plumbing issues, again during the tenure of the previous government.

By the way, the landlord had completed all of those concerns.

Once again, he said:

These are issues that the previous government was unable to resolve. This move will save taxpayers money because the new office will be located on premises owned by the Government of Canada.

He claimed that:

Although the move from Vegreville to Edmonton makes business sense based on current and future needs, the member needs to understand that it was not a decision made without great consideration of the impact it would have on employees, as well as to her constituents in the community of Vegreville. Employees were advised well in advance of this relocation, and efforts are underway to ensure that the impacts on staff are minimized.

• (1555)

He said:

I have great concern for the issues the member has outlined with respect to families. We are concerned and sensitive to the needs and problems that families are facing with the challenges they are undergoing in every facet of our economy,

particularly in Vegreville, in the member's constituency. The management of IRCC will continue to work closely with staff throughout this transition period.

The positions in the relocated office will have the same work descriptions they have now, and so the current indeterminate employees will be able to retain their jobs.

This, of course, doesn't make any sense if one of the rationales is that the performance is bad, so, therefore, the office needs to be shut down. Right? It doesn't make any sense because it's all false.

Business will continue as usual throughout the transition.

He said:

As I have said, Canadians expect their government to manage taxpayer dollars well, even if that means making difficult decisions, and this is the decision that we had to take.

A case, of course, the government has not made.

He said:

I would also note that the Minister of Immigration has reached out to the member for Lakeland to meet with respect to Vegreville and to address her concerns and questions. The minister's office has yet to hear from the member.

We will continue to show leadership and continue to deliver for Albertans.

His second rebuttal included the same information about costing, which is what we're here to discuss today. He said:

Madam Speaker, we appreciate the efforts and advocacy by the member opposite. However, fiscal prudence and sound management of Canadian public finances is something that the party of the member opposite stands for. It is something that this government is working towards and is trying to implement with this decision. We are expected to make responsible decisions on government spending involving taxpayer dollars and to ensure that those taxpayer dollars are spent on quality services that address current challenges and future needs.

Let me summarize, just to be clear. Just like the former minister, John McCallum, the former parliamentary secretary, still our colleague, said point-blank that this move will save taxpayers money.

That's false. It's completely untrue.

He also said:

We are expected to make responsible decisions on government spending involving taxpayer dollars and to ensure that those taxpayer dollars are spent on quality services that address current challenges and future needs.

But it's clear and as plain as day to everybody that this decision simply was not responsible and it flies in the face of everything the Liberals say they are all about.

There was no consultation, and early on, in a direct response to the union, senior department officials when they were asked straight out whether or not there was a cost analysis said no, there was no economic impact assessment. So, of course, there could be no supposed business case.

I'm not sure what dictionary the Liberals are using, but their definition of "responsible" doesn't seem to make any sense.

On October 27, during that announcement to employees and to town officials, who were not initially invited to the announcement and found out through text messages from employees at CPC Vegreville, senior IRCC official Robert Orr was asked by an employee if a business case or an economic impact assessment was completed. The response was no.

For months my office, the town of Vegreville, the union representative, and the NDP MLA for the area have asked the minister's office and the department for any information to substantiate the claims the officials have made publicly and the claims Liberal MPs and ministers have made publicly. I don't know why this is making you smile. We asked for information including costing, studies, consultations, and building maintenance.

Through ATIPs and order paper questions the Liberals provided cherry-picked information, redacted documents, and information that didn't even make sense.

As recently as May 9, 2017, the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, an MP in Edmonton, claimed:

There is an impact on that community, and we don't deny that, but there's also a compelling business case.

How can there be a compelling business case without a cost analysis? That's an obvious question that all of us were asking, but now we know, of course, there actually was a cost analysis. There was an internal government cost analysis and it proves, now that we all have seen the documents, that everything the Liberals have said publicly about this decision being required to save taxpayers money and being cost effective is not true. It's completely false.

We'll talk a little bit about the messaging. The messaging, which internal documents reveal was sent to the minister's office for approval, includes the specific talking points that, "The relocation will also save money" and "Canadians expect their Government to make responsible decisions on government spending".

This has been said time and time again by the former minister, the former parliamentary secretary, the Minister of Infrastructure who is the member of Parliament from Edmonton Centre, and even the current Minister of Immigration and Refugees and Citizenship, for whom I have a great deal respect.

• (1600)

On February 14 of this year, the minister responded to me in question period saying, "our government has a responsibility to make decisions on government spending of the hard-earned middle-class tax dollars." This is not responsible, and the answers—until Canadians could all see the internal documents—have not been honest. These talking points prepared by both senior departmental staff and Liberal political staff prepared Liberal politicians and put them out in public to be dishonest with Canadians about this so-called responsible spending of their tax dollars in the closure of this office.

Where is the transparency about the costing? Where is the transparency this government promised? The Liberals have publicly claimed honesty and transparency are key pillars of their mandate. Here is another phrase from the former minister's mandate letter: "... our platform offered a new, ambitious plan for a strong and growing middle class." Of course, a strong and growing middle class in Vegreville will be harmed with the closure of the CPC. Here is another: "We made a commitment to invest in growing our economy, strengthening the middle class, and helping those working hard to join it." I guess that only counts if you're in an economy in a major city centre. And there's this: "If we are to tackle the real challenges

we face as a country...Canadians need to have faith in their government's honesty and willingness to listen."

It's quite clear there's been no honesty and no listening on this decision to close the Vegreville case processing centre.

The Prime Minister said:

As Minister... This will include: close collaboration with your colleagues; meaningful engagement with Opposition Members of Parliament—

By the way, it was said publicly a number of times by the minister and others that they had spoken to me and met with me, when they hadn't.

—Parliamentary Committees and the public service; constructive dialogue with Canadians, civil society, and stakeholders, including business, organized labour, the broader public sector, and the not-for-profit and charitable sectors; and identifying ways to find solutions and avoid escalating conflicts unnecessarily.

Of course, we know that no constructive dialogue with the employees or the stakeholders in Vegreville happened, and not-for-profit sectors, charitable sectors, public servants, businesses, and citizens will all be harmed in Vegreville and the region because of the closure of this office.

This is just another example—and obviously one that hits home very deeply and strongly for me—of the Liberals saying one thing and then doing the complete opposite. I'm appealing to my colleagues to hold your government to its own promises.

Also, the answers to my questions, the multiple questions from our interim leader, Rona Ambrose, and the questions of 12 of my Conservative colleagues—12 of them—in the House of Commons, in the Senate, in committees, have all failed to share the facts. They've all obscured the fact that we now know that this closure will cost Canadians tens of millions of taxpayer dollars more.

Also, the responses to those questions included this complete bold-faced lie that this decision would save taxpayers money. It will cost Canadians more. We know that now.

It will cost a loss of up to 420 people from the community of Vegreville.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office, and it will remove 9% of the town's labour force.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office, and it will cost the town \$15.9 million of GDP.

It will cost Canadians more, and it will cost the town \$14.5 million of labour income.

It will cost Canadians more and result in a loss of \$1.2 million in municipal revenue to the town of Vegreville annually.

It will cost Canadians more and cost employees...specifically, the 76% of employees who are women, forcing them to choose between families, their community, their volunteer commitments, and a career.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office, and it will impact over 250 spouses' jobs in Vegreville.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office, and it will impact the three local small businesses owned by employee families.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office and cause businesses to close their doors.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office and impact 350 school-aged children in Vegreville.

It will cost Canadians more and cost employees thousands in moving costs and relocation expenses.

It will cost Canadians more to close this office, and it will force double the number of houses to go on the market in Vegreville.

Here's a letter from from a constituent who outlines the supposed business case:

The devastating news delivered today by Mr. Robert Orr at a town hall meeting for the staff of the Case Processing Centre in Vegreville has sent shock waves throughout our community.

Mr. Orr said it was a 'business' decision to relocate the centre to Edmonton, address unknown—

and we know now...in Edmonton Centre,

—and announced after an hour of telling us how wonderful our work was, how much they appreciated the way we pitch in to whenever we are asked and how great our contribution to the...campaign was.

● (1605)

Then, Mr. Orr made his announcement and promptly pointed the finger of blame at Public Services and Procurement for the decision. Nobody from that department was there to take responsibility or re-direct it to you. Considering the Phoenix fiasco, it's not a surprise.

Mr. Orr and Mr. Armstrong reminded us that behind every application is a real person. Well, Minister McCallum, behind every position number on the Vegreville org chart is a real person who has directly contributed to your touted success. We are tax-paying public servants. We are the people who make you look good. What about us?

Client service is of the utmost importance, they said. That's more fantasy than fact. Ask the spousal applicants if it looks like we think client service is important when their wait times for first-stage decisions increased three-fold when those applications were moved from Vegreville to Mississauga.

By the way, all of those backed-up applications earlier this year, I think around February, were sent back to Vegreville to be caught up because they got backlogged in Mississauga. Yes, they announced they're shutting down the office in October, but they sent files back to catch up in February. It's brutal.

Ask the hundreds of foreign nationals whose applications are processed incorrectly by the ongoing cycles of casual staff at OSC, who don't even make it through the learning curve before their jobs are over, if it looks like we think client service is a priority.

Why does it have to be an all-or-none approach on your relocation idea? From what Mr. Orr said, there is and will continue to be lots of work. Leaving the permanent residence lines of business (including all the spousal applications) at the CPC in Vegreville and shifting some of the temporary residence lines of business to Edmonton makes the most sense. Mr. Orr's argument on the cost of leasing space in Edmonton vs Vegreville was not credible.

You can see how the common-sense rural constituents saw this right away, right? It didn't make any sense.

Our local mayor and councillors who rushed to attend the meeting were shocked as well, not having been approached by anyone from PSPC to inquire about lease agreements. Also not credible was his point on the numbers of CPC Vegreville employees who will be seeking retirement soon. With so many unemployed oil patch workers in our province, the spouses are now the main breadwinners in many cases and staying in the workforce longer.

The scope of this motion is to discuss costing and the inaccurate information that the Liberals have been providing Canadians. The reality is that so many other justifications for this decision are also false. If they are being dishonest about this one extremely important fact about whether or not, simply, clear as day, this decision would save taxpayers dollars, which we now know it won't, how can Canadians possibly trust anything—anything—that is said about this decision?

I hope that concerns every single Liberal member at this committee, and I hope you'll ask hard questions about it.

I'd like to share a letter from the landlord of the case processing centre in Vegreville discussing the discrepancy in costs between the two locations. It reads as follows:

We are commenting on Minister McCallum's letter dated November 30, 2016 to Ms Robyn Benson, Public Service Alliance, Ottawa, paragraphs 2 and 3...as follows:

Canadians expect their government to make responsible decisions on spending that will address current challenges, account for future situations, and ensure tax dollars are spent on quality services to meet expectations of clients and provide program excellence. The relocation will also save money, as the new office space will be located within the Government of Canada's existing property inventory.

There are millions of dollars that will be wasted in relocation costs, abandoning existing infrastructure and tenant improvements, new equipment and tenant improvements, cost of training new staff, and doubling of rent; totaling approximately \$45 million dollars over 25 years. The relocations space is within Government of Canada's existing property inventory due to Public Works and Government Service vacating its tenancy at Canada Place and relocating in ATB Plaza North some of the most expensive office space in Edmonton thus leaving space empty for years. Is that ensuring tax dollars are spent wisely? It would have made sense to have PWGSC moved back to the premises in Canada Place. Apparently there was a decision by PWGSC to keep [a] tenant [at] Canada Place that had business in general with the public.

This is an important fact that this resident made, and I want to make sure you all know this:

CPC Vegreville is a Case Processing Center that has no personal contact with the public.

It's not a walk-in, front-line, client-facing service office.

Public Works occupied Canada Place prior to their move for years and could have returned to save money.

PSAC, the union that represents 280 employees at CPC Vegreville, and CEIU, a component of PSAC, released the following news release in response to the facts about the costing finally coming to light.

● (1610)

They said, and I quote:

With recent revelations that moving the Vegreville Case Processing Centre...to Edmonton will cost taxpayers millions extra, the union representing workers at the Vegreville Case Processing Centre is reaffirming the call to reverse the closure, and to invest in rural Canadian communities.

"We have repeatedly asked the Immigration Minister to back up his claims with the numbers related to costs and savings, but all we received were redacted documents," said Eddy Bourque, National President of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union...the component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada...that represents the majority of...workers at the [Case Processing Centre in Vegreville]. "Now, we know what he knew all along. This move is entirely political."

Global News Chief Political Correspondent David Akin first broke the news on Wednesday, referencing an internal costing analysis from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.... The documents show Ottawa will spend \$46.6 million on renovations and leasing in Edmonton, compared to \$35.8 million to upgrade the existing facility in Vegreville.

Marianne Hladun, regional executive vice-president for the PSAC prairie region said, "It never made sense to take a long-standing, high-functioning office out of a small, rural community and move it to a major metropolitan city. Alleged savings aside..."

—which now we know there are none—

"...the loss of qualified, capable workers and the combined years of experience would be devastating to the services that Canadians rely on."

This is still within the PSAC press release. It reads:

Yesterday, MP Ralph Goodale answered questions in the House of Commons, defending the relocation with claims of a 20% vacancy rate in Vegreville.

"We are 100% confident that if IRCC offered indeterminate employment instead of precarious term employment, they could easily fill any vacancies—including bilingual," said Hladun. "This is just another example of face-saving from the Liberal government."

It continues:

The department plans to shutter the CPC in Vegreville and move the centre to Edmonton—over 100 kilometres away, forcing employees to relocate, commute over three hours each day, or quit the jobs they love. With 280 workers—about five percent of the town's population—it has been one of the largest employers in Vegreville for over 20 years.

Union officials, town officials, community members, employees and municipal, provincial, and federal representatives from all parties have all questioned the Liberals on this unfounded, unjustifiable removal of sustainable, well-paying jobs, the exact kind of federal public service jobs that are sustainable in rural communities because they're administrative and in processing. They question this attack on rural Canada. To claim this is a responsible use of taxpayer dollars is a slap in the face to the employees, to community members, to Albertans, and to all Canadians who have trusted this government to make honest and transparent decisions on their behalf.

I think often of the people in Vegreville and area who actually voted Liberal because on January 26, 2013, the Prime Minister visited Vegreville on a leg of his Alberta campaign tour. It might have been one of the only stops he made in the entire region, but at the Vegreville train station he looked people in the face in my riding and said, "This country is not about picking and choosing the areas that you think you might be popular in. It's about connecting and building a broad sense of where this country needs to go."

This government, as we've all seen by now, may have a hard time keeping track of its promises to Canadians, but the people of Vegreville will not forget this.

The woman who posted that event with the Prime Minister stood up in December at a town hall in Vegreville and cried and said she regretted hosting that event, and felt this responsibility and guilt towards her community members for having enabled him to look them in their faces and say that, and now just stand by while this current minister continues to allow this unjustified and unfounded decision that's been lied about for seven months to go ahead.

The Prime Minister also said, "...there is something big happening in politics again, [and] maybe there's room for each of us to get involved."

This decision to remove 280 rural jobs, and lying to Canadians about the millions more of their tax dollars that will go into moving the centre, is a clear example of the Prime Minister telling people one thing, and doing something else.

Again, given that this motion is to ask the Liberals to be responsible for the gap between what they've said about the cost justifying this decision and the fact that we all know, which is that it will cost millions more, once again I just want to put into perspective, on behalf of the people I represent, what these job losses mean.

● (1615)

This would be the equivalent of the job losses if you were to remove this size of office from other centres. From Charlottetown it would be the same as losing 3,158 jobs. From Saint John, it would be the same as losing 6,257 jobs. From St. John's, it would be the same as losing 9,647 jobs. From Regina, it would be the same as losing 10,312 jobs. From Halifax, it would be the same as cutting 19,117 jobs.

My grandmother was the first female mayor of Dartmouth, and while we probably differ ideologically, she would be proud of me today, I think.

Cutting these 280 jobs from Vegreville would be like removing 35,754 jobs from Winnipeg. It would be like removing 56,807 jobs from Edmonton. It would be like cutting 59,499 jobs from Calgary. It would be like cutting 60,551 jobs from Ottawa. It would be like cutting 113,299 jobs from Vancouver. It would be like cutting 187,298 jobs from Montreal. It would be like cutting 273,440 jobs from Toronto, with no consultation and apparently with no cost analysis. However, we now know that there was one the entire time, which said that this move would cost taxpayers more, unlike what the Liberals have been saying for seven months.

With no economic impact analysis, closing an office that has consistently exceeded departmental targets, over and over... I hope that this concerns all members of this committee.

Thank you to the NDP for also advocating on behalf of the employees in Vegreville, on behalf of the town, and on behalf of the region.

As you know, the members of all of the political parties in the provincial legislature in Alberta are united on this. They're all calling for the reversal of this closure, and so are municipal representatives right across Canada. Of course, my Conservative colleagues have supported the town of Vegreville, and been champions and advocates for the people there, both in the Senate and in the House of Commons, at the highest levels of our party, enabling me to do things like this to advocate on behalf of our constituents.

I hope that you will support the motion to achieve accountability and transparency, and to question why there has been such a discrepancy between the claims that have been made about this closure and the facts that we now know. This will cost Canadian taxpayers millions of dollars more. It won't save money, and it's not responsible. It is unjust.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Stubbs.

Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I move now that the debate be adjourned, so that we can hear from our witnesses who have been patiently waiting.

The Chair: We have a motion before us to adjourn.

Mr. David Tilson: A recorded vote, please.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: The debate is adjourned.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes.

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

I'm going to spend a couple of my minutes to speak to the Vegreville situation. I think this is a critical issue. We were just talking about jobs and retention and economic activities in Atlantic Canada. Just imagine for one minute what that would mean if those kinds of implications and impacts were to happen in the Atlantic provinces in any of those cities. I would suspect that all the provincial ministers and all MPs from those regions would not support it. Here we are in a situation where people are being devastated.

The Vegreville processing centre does exemplary work. If we do this, the potential loss they bring to the table in helping the government get the cases processed would be over 2,000 years of experience. That is significant in the context of the huge backlogs we're dealing with. By the way, there have been cases when there was a backlog in Mississauga, Ontario, when they sent boxes of files to Vegreville to get them processed. That is the stuff we're trying to push through with regard to processing spousal applications, and where there have been enormous delays. The Vegreville people are helping push this stuff through.

The government wants to reduce the wait times for spousal applications to a one-year processing time limit. You better think twice about this. You will lose thousands upon thousands of years of experience in that work, and that would only hamper the government's efforts in achieving its goals. I have written to the minister about this, and I've received a stock answer about why they have to proceed. You don't have to proceed. This is a non-partisan issue. It is about our economy, the immigration system, and about getting the work done while using the best talents to get that work done. Let's rethink it.

I think I'm going to blow all my seven minutes. I haven't had a chance to get into this debate a whole lot because of the time limitations for the NDP in questions and so on, but this is a critical issue for Vegreville. More than that, it's a critical issue for the

immigration system and processing times. Think about it for one minute.

I would think nobody, government members as well as the officials, would say this is okay if we were to do this in the Atlantic provinces. Why would we want to do this to Vegreville, a community that is strong, proud, and that is contributing in every sense of the word to all of us in the work we need to do and to the overall economy of our country?

I support this motion. Because it was non-debatable around adjourning, I didn't get to speak to it, but I just wanted to spend a few minutes on that.

While we're on this track, I'm going to spend a couple of minutes on another motion, Mr. Chair. I'm going to move the following:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), that the Committee immediately undertake a study of land arrivals at Canada's southern border, including: the impact of current realities at the border on safety and security of both refugees and Canadian society; the effective management of refugee claims at the border, within the context of Canada's international human rights obligations; and how to ensure an efficient and effective refugee determination process. That this study should be comprised of no less than five meetings; that IRCC department officials be in attendance for at least one of the meetings; that CBSA officials be in attendance for at least one of the meetings; and that RCMP officials be in attendance for at least one of the meetings; that the study be concluded and that the Committee report its findings to the House prior to June 9, 2017; and that Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the government table a comprehensive response thereto.

Mr. Chair, you'll remember this is a motion that I had moved and has been adjourned I believe three times, if not four. I'm going to move that we resume debate on this. I would like to get an answer from the government members so we can schedule the study and get on with it to get this important work done. To that end, I'm going to move resuming debate with respect to that motion, Mr. Chair.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

As you're aware, it's a dilatory motion so it's not debatable. We will move to a vote.

• (1625)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A recorded vote, please.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote.

(Motion negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to ask a quick question, if I may.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We've just heard about the situation in Vegreville. If such a processing centre were closed in the Atlantic provinces, we have heard, the impact on Charlottetown would be the loss of 3,158 jobs. It would be equivalent to that. For Saint John, it would be 6,257. For St. John's, it would be 9,647.

We're talking about economic activities and the critical aspect of this. Would you agree that it's not something you would want to see with regard to the Atlantic provinces, to have such an implication with policies from government impacting the economic viability of the towns, the cities, and the Atlantic provinces?

Ms. Laurie Hunter: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. That would be a topic that we would think would be a government opinion or decision to weigh in on.

The Chair: Thank you for your response.

Please proceed.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, of course it would, and I would say that if the minister would actually agree to come to this committee and answer questions from the opposition on these budgetary items, we maybe would be able to get an answer. I was hoping that maybe the officials would be able to say to us that if the government were forced to think about this kind of thing, it would be something they would not do to any one community. That said, I understand your position. You're not able to answer that question.

Let me then turn to this question.

We have the government's Atlantic growth strategy. In fact, they have established a leadership committee that comprises the premiers of the four Atlantic provinces, as well as five members of the federal cabinet. The federal cabinet members are the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development and Minister responsible for Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. It does not include the Minister of Immigration, and we're talking about immigration policy that would impact this.

Why is that? Can anybody answer that question? Or is that too much of a political question that only the minister can answer, which, if he chose to show up, he would be able to do?

Ms. Laurie Hunter: I can respond to the fact that the Minister of Immigration is on the list of ministers who will be invited to some of the leadership committee meetings, but again, the actual composition of the leadership committee would be a government decision. The Minister of Immigration and other ministers are invited to some of the meetings.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Right. Well, it seems strange to me. We are dealing with a study for this committee with respect to the growth of the Atlantic provinces vis-à-vis immigration growth, yet that leadership is not on that committee, not as an invited guest to come and offer some comments, but as part of it as a member—

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —to drive the initiative to make sure we yield the results that we want. It makes this study somewhat disingenuous, frankly, when the government itself has a strategy going and the ministers and the Prime Minister deliberately choose not to put the immigration minister at that table.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes. I understand that you'll be splitting your time with Mr. Samson.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to our witnesses.

First, are there any elements of the Atlantic immigration pilot that, if successful, could be applied to focus on rural communities that are

facing some of these same demographic challenges as Atlantic Canada?

Ms. Laurie Hunter: Yes, certainly. I think we'll be looking at different elements of the pilot as it rolls out, and we definitely need to evaluate the results as we go. Looking at the unique settlement component and the components focused on retention, as well as the fact that there are the rural areas that have different needs than urban areas do, that certainly is a possibility.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Next, although the immigration levels to Atlantic Canada have been traditionally low, they welcomed 11.5% of the Syrian refugees who arrived between November 2015 and September 30, 2016. Do we have any sense of how many have stayed in the region? Also, can we build on that capacity for other refugee resettlement initiatives?

• (1630)

Ms. Laurie Hunter: Mr. Chair, I think we certainly can draw on the lessons learned from the settlement of refugees in the Atlantic region. I would turn to my colleague Ümit to see if there are any statistics readily available or if we would need to undertake to bring that back.

Mr. Ümit Kiziltan: Yes, as you know, we do follow and monitor different immigrant groups in terms of their retention rates, but in terms of the tools we use, it's too early for us to understand how many are staying or will stay. The initial studies and the research that we are getting from the region, from the academics, indicate that in fact there are three research projects taking place in the region by using the SSHRC-IRCC joint special Syrian rapid impact research that was established. They are basically monitoring in terms of their settlement services.

Currently in the region, GARs and privately sponsored refugees, the ones who have been established there from the beginning, are accessing settlement services—that we know—but as for two or three years from now and how many will stay, it's very hard to tell. We will have the tools and means to monitor and report on those rates.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, and I will pass it on to my colleague Mr. Samson.

[Translation]

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Good afternoon, and thank you for your presentation.

I would like to ask you a question about francophones in Canada, especially those in the Atlantic region. The objective of your department in the last 10 years has been to increase the rate of francophone immigration by 4%. But the increase has only been 1.4%. So it has been a failure.

How can you assure us that this pilot project is going to result in an increase of francophone immigrants, which is needed in order to continue the development of the francophone communities in the Atlantic region and in other francophone minority communities in Canada?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for the question.

The department is not only aware of the objective that was set, but also of all the efforts that have been made up to now. We are increasing our efforts to achieve the objective in the established timeframe, perhaps even sooner. As you perhaps know, we have Destination Canada, an initiative designed to welcome francophones to the country from around the world. The event takes place each fall. As well, in Canada, we have established a process to work with employers in francophone communities outside Quebec.

As I said earlier, the best way to attract and retain immigrants is to provide them with jobs. We are working collaboratively with our network all over Canada to find jobs in communities. We are also working with service providers in order to establish the “by and for” kind of assistance, so that immigrants arriving in Canada are able to find settlement and integration services in French.

Currently, we are active on a number of fronts with service providers, with our partners in the provinces and territories. Last March 30, for the first time, ministers of immigration and francophone affairs met in Moncton to address the issue of francophone immigration, and to work together to find ways of increasing the number of francophones in Canada. The goal is not only to increase the number of immigrants, but also to retain them.

Some provinces have much higher objectives than 4.4%, like New Brunswick and Manitoba. We are working closely with the ministries in those provinces to achieve those objectives.

•(1635)

[English]

The Chair: I'd like to thank the department officials for appearing before our committee as we launch into our study on immigration in Atlantic Canada.

We will now suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to assemble.

Thank you.

•(1635)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1635)

The Chair: We will now resume our study on M-39, immigration to Atlantic Canada.

I'd like to welcome before the committee, from the Government of New Brunswick, Mr. Donald Arseneault, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; and Mr. Charles Ayles, assistant deputy minister, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, population growth division.

From the Government of Prince Edward Island, we have Mr. Sonny Gallant, the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning; Mr. Neil Stewart, deputy minister, Workforce and Advanced Learning; and Ms. Abbey MacPherson, director and senior operations manager.

Welcome to you all.

I assume it's Mr. Arseneault who will be speaking on behalf of the Government of New Brunswick.

The floor is yours for seven minutes, please.

•(1640)

Hon. Donald Arseneault (Minister of Post-Secondary Education Training and Labour, Government of New Brunswick):
Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour and a privilege to be here in front of your committee. A special shout-out to my own MP, MP Arseneault, as well as our New Brunswick MP, Alaina Lockhart, and also to my colleague from P.E.I., Minister Gallant.

Our government is working on some very important immigration initiatives, and I'm looking forward to speaking about them today. As a government, we are focused on creating the right conditions for New Brunswickers to thrive and for the private sector to create jobs and grow the economy.

[Translation]

New Brunswick is a small province and we have an aging population. This is amplified by significant youth outmigration and a decrease in natural population growth, with deaths now surpassing births in the province. The 2016 census highlighted our declining population, with New Brunswick being the only province or territory to record a population drop from 2011 to 2016. Recent research suggests that low or negative population growth is expected across most areas of the province except Moncton, Saint John and Fredericton.

[English]

People leaving New Brunswick for other provinces continues to be a primary reason for low or negative population growth rates, especially in rural areas. This is closely tied to unemployment in New Brunswick while boosting the economies of other provinces.

Going forward, immigration will continue to be a strong driver for offsetting these negative population growth trends. We need more people to build our workforce and create a better future in New Brunswick.

NBjobs regularly has 3,500 to 4,000 job postings for skilled labour throughout the province. According to recent LMI projections, over 9,000 jobs may need to be filled through immigration over the next five years, 2017 to 2021.

That is why our government is committed to increasing the number of immigrants to our province. Historically, immigration to New Brunswick has been concentrated through our provincial nominee program, the PNP. Through the PNP, we're able to attract skilled workers and business immigrants who intend to settle, work, and raise a family in New Brunswick.

[Translation]

It is also very important to welcome new French-speaking arrivals in order to maintain our linguistic balance. For that reason, we are sparing no effort to attract and retain francophone immigrants who want to settle and work in New Brunswick. For example, we are the first province in the country to sign an immigration agreement with the Trudeau government and, under the terms of that agreement, we are the first province outside Quebec to establish a francophone core. It is a first in the country.

In 2016, we exceeded our francophone immigration objective, reaching 24% of the total number of francophone immigrants, thanks to the New Brunswick Provincial Nominee Program. Our long-term objective is 33%.

In March 2017, New Brunswick hosted the very first Forum sur l'immigration francophone. During this historic event, the ministers responsible for immigration and the francophonie in Canada came together to discuss possible areas of cooperation with a view to encouraging francophone immigration outside Quebec.

We are currently preparing to launch a renewed entrepreneur immigration stream that will focus on increased business immigration to the province. To further our business immigration efforts, the province will continue to support our innovative business immigrant mentorship program and la Ruche, the Hive, a centre that provides business immigrants with the tools necessary to establish a business and successfully settle in the province.

[English]

In conjunction with our business immigrant mentorship programs, the province is piloting a succession connect program in Fredericton that will connect business immigrants with businesses for sale in New Brunswick.

Our government believes it is essential to support settlement initiatives that assist with the integration and retention of newcomers in communities throughout New Brunswick. We currently have 13 service provider organizations across New Brunswick. This ensures that newcomers have access to settlement services in communities throughout the province.

It is important to encourage newcomer participation in our provincial labour force and to show all New Brunswickers the value and benefits of a diverse and multicultural society. We believe in inclusive communities, support for all New Brunswick families, and investing in culture.

Recent public opinion research produced by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada shows that residents of Atlantic Canada express more positive views on immigration and refugees compared to other regions of Canada. New Brunswick is proud to have supported the federal government's Syrian refugee initiative last year, welcoming over 1,500 Syrians to the province, the most per capita in the country. New Brunswick resettled more Syrian refugees per capita than any other province in Canada.

It is important to maintain this momentum moving forward to continue to create welcoming communities for all newcomers, and to increase the number of new immigrants coming to New Brunswick.

● (1645)

[Translation]

As a part of this push for more immigration, New Brunswick played a key role in establishing the Atlantic growth strategy and negotiating the Atlantic immigration pilot, advocating for an Atlantic-wide strategy on immigration early on. Through the new Atlantic immigration pilot, the province will leverage growth opportunities to increase immigration and retain newcomers in New Brunswick.

With the program, we have the potential to double the number of economic immigrants coming to New Brunswick. The province is expected to welcome an additional 646 families. The province has increased its focus on employer engagement and retention. Employers in New Brunswick have shown great interest in using immigration as a tool to meet their labour market needs. Now more than ever, we are working with employers in the province in key sectors to recruit skilled workers that meet their labour market needs.

[English]

To this end, 200 employers have shown interest in the pilot in New Brunswick with over 140 employers submitting designation applications resulting in over 1,400 job opportunities. Our current retention rate is 72%, and we are looking to increase this to 80% with concentrated integration and retention efforts.

To support these efforts, our government allocated an additional \$2.5 million for pilot project related activities including increased employer engagement and support for settlement services. We have also launched a public awareness campaign, "We are all NB", to educate all New Brunswickers on our current demographic and skilled labour challenges, and on the benefits of immigration and creating welcoming communities to alleviate this situation.

New Brunswick is looking forward to the many opportunities that this new pilot presents including those offered by the pilot's international graduate stream, which will help our post-secondary education institutions attract and retain more international students to the province.

Our government's increased focus on international students has led to several new initiatives including enhanced engagement with universities and colleges to discuss immigration opportunities, a new language training service in Moncton specific to the needs of international students, and the new international student entrepreneur stream under the provincial nominee program that will encourage students to settle and start a business in the province.

[Translation]

Although there is no simple solution to address the demographic challenges facing our province, we believe we have made significant progress and want to continue to encourage immigration growth to New Brunswick.

Particularly, we are reassured by our recent growth in immigration allocations and wish to continue to see allocation increases in future that will meet the labour market demands of New Brunswick employers. It is important that, with these allocation increases, we as a province continue to focus on the important aspects of settlement and retention.

Going forward, by encouraging newcomers to settle in New Brunswick, we will accomplish our goal of creating jobs, growing the economy and making New Brunswick the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

To see our progress first-hand, we welcome you all to come to New Brunswick to learn more about our immigration efforts.

[English]

We thank you for your time.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

[English]

Mr. Gallant, for seven minutes, please.

Hon. Sonny Gallant (Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning, Government of Prince Edward Island): Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation.

We are pleased to be here to represent Prince Edward Island.

[English]

Thank you very much for this opportunity to present Prince Edward Island's views on this important matter.

We have two departments that have mandates related to population. My colleague Minister MacDonald sends his regrets for not being able to attend today. His Department of Economic Development and Tourism includes the P.E.I. Office of Immigration. As the workforce and advanced learning minister, my mandate is to grow our population and workforce.

Just last week, Premier MacLauchlan announced a new population action plan for P.E.I., focusing on recruitment, retention, repatriation, and rural economic development.

In recent years, the story of P.E.I.'s population has been positive. Since 2007, driven by strong international immigration, P.E.I. has led the Atlantic provinces in population growth. This influx of new Islanders has contributed to our province in many ways: socially, culturally, and economically. We are seeing this success. Our GDP grew by almost 2% in 2016, which was ahead of the national average by 1%. Manufacturing sales saw the highest growth among all provinces and outpaced the national average of 1%. Over the past six months, we have seen employment growth of 2.8%, the strongest in the country. Over the past five years, the total income from wages and salaries has grown steadily.

We are on the right track, but we are also facing challenges. We must act now to slow and reverse two concerning trends: out-migration and an aging population. Our action plan lays out a path to do this, but we can't do it alone. It is a call to action to Islanders, businesses, communities, and the federal government to help us reach our ambitious target of growing our population to 160,000 by the end of 2022. This is over 10,000 more Islanders in five years.

Today, we have several slides, as we respond to the areas outlined in motion 39.

Canada experienced a 5% population growth in 2016. P.E.I. led Atlantic Canada in population growth, but we know that Atlantic Canada still lagged behind the rest of Canada. We are concerned about the widening of this gap. Atlantic Canada had 10% of the nation's population 50 years ago, and today it has only 6.6%. As in all provinces, the aging of the population is concerning for P.E.I. In Atlantic Canada, one out of every five residents is above the age of 65.

We are the smallest province; however, we are nimble, connected, and innovative, so we use our small size to our advantage. Last year, our immigration growth was the highest in the country. As mentioned, we have an ambitious plan to ensure continued population growth, but we are facing low birth rates and out-migration of young people. We see population growth in our capital region, while rural areas have declining populations. This is concerning.

Our working-age population experienced trends similar to the national average, with a decrease of 2%. This is concerning, particularly for our primary industries: fishing, farming, and tourism. To address this, the population action plan seeks to recruit new Islanders, retain Islanders so they stay over the long term, repatriate Islanders who have moved away, and ensure that our rural areas are growing.

We are pleased to see the increase in immigration levels across Canada, with 40% of immigrants going to western Canada, 37% to Ontario, and 18% to Quebec; this is 95% of the total. While our Atlantic population is about 6.6% of the national, our immigration rate was 4.6% in 2016.

The urban/rural pattern is important to note. When we talk about immigrant retention, we need to look at the challenges that smaller areas like P.E.I. face with the pull to the big urban centres.

In P.E.I., we are working hard on recruitment and, as mentioned, we are seeing success. The majority of arrivals come through our provincial nominee program, followed by an increased refugee resettlement. We are proud of our contribution to the Syrian resettlement plan, as an example of both population growth and humanitarian support. With the start of the Atlantic pilot, we have increased employer engagement and identified new immigration opportunities.

Our post-secondary institutions continue to see growth in international students, at about 1,200. Over 60% have expressed an interest to stay in P.E.I. for the long term. Connecting graduates to work and increasing youth retention are key to the work of my department and our population action plan.

•(1650)

We are also looking at international and domestic models to boost rural development. We need a settlement plan that focuses on proactive engagement and expanding growth in rural P.E.I, as well as a coordinated approach with the federal government.

We are also working closely with our francophone organizations to grow our francophone community. We believe these efforts, along with community engagement, will lead to improved retention rates.

Our last slide notes some of the recommendations. We recommend a national strategy that focuses on rural development. We see this as a direct benefit to Atlantic Canada.

We need a coordinated settlement strategy. We can no longer afford to have the federal government and the provincial government funding both settlement and integration initiatives without a coordinated framework. We would be pleased to pilot an integrated model in P.E.I.

Finally, when the former federal government made the decision to close 19 regional immigration offices, P.E.I. lost its face-to-face services. This negatively impacted our province and our clients. Today, when immigrants land they must report to a landing office in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We continue to be the only province in Canada without an IRCC presence. This reduced service delivery creates an additional barrier to our success. We do appreciate modernization, but in this case, face-to-face services are incredibly important.

We support your recommendation number 24 and encourage the committee to look at all impacts in addition to a cost-benefit analysis.

It has been a pleasure for us to appear here today, and we are looking forward to any dialogue.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gallant.

We'll begin our rounds of questions with Mr. Whalen.

I believe you'll be splitting your time with Ms. Lockhart. Mr. Whalen, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm very interested in the Atlantic growth strategy. Since I am an MP from Newfoundland and Labrador, obviously my

province is experiencing exactly the same challenges that you've described in P.E.I. and New Brunswick. With the rising and falling commodity prices, certainly right now we're suffering from an additional factor.

I have some questions around the pilot itself. For the 2,000 families who are invited to Atlantic Canada under the growth strategy, who, from your perspective, is responsible for designating employers to take advantage of the plan? Is this a shared federal-provincial responsibility? Are you each doing it provincially yourselves? How has each of your provinces designated employers to take advantage of the pilot project? We'll start with New Brunswick.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I think it's a collective effort; everybody has a role to play. I think this is what is going to make this pilot project work, and we're going to see some success. I know we in New Brunswick work tremendously hard to engage employers. We heard it throughout part of the conversation you had in the past hour. These people are looking for jobs. So we are engaging the employers in the process and getting them to come out on various trade missions around the world to talk to these potential new Canadians. Before they come over, they'll have landed a job, and that, I believe, is going to go a long way to making sure we can retain them in a province like ours or in Atlantic Canada. I think that is the major difference that's going to drive success, but it's a collective effort. The government is working very hard. As I said in my slide, we've added \$2.5 million just for this pilot project to increase our resources so we can help by going to talk to employers and get them more engaged and so forth. Because of that, we have over 200 employers who have stepped up to the plate just in New Brunswick, committing over 1,400 jobs already. In the short term, it's been a success, and we really haven't gotten rolling as of yet.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: We in P.E.I. work with employers to try to get them their settlement programs and keep our immigrants on P.E. I.

Mr. Nick Whalen: In terms of the 2,000, in New Brunswick you mentioned that you've identified 646 to come. If another province doesn't pick up its share of the 2,000 do you feel that New Brunswick would be able to take advantage of that opportunity and take an additional share of worker class immigrants into your province along with their families?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: As my ADM has just said, there is an agreement within the four provinces that if such a case happens, we can switch some of those numbers up so we can go and attract those people. I wish all of my colleagues the greatest success in reaching their numbers. It can happen.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Mr. Gallant, do you think you're going to hit your targets this year?

Hon. Sonny Gallant: We will.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Thank you.

Alaina.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart (Fundy Royal, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you to the committee for allowing me to be here today. I appreciate it.

I have some questions, since we have Mr. Ayles along with you here, about some of the specifics of the program and what we're doing. Feel free to answer. How has New Brunswick identified the gaps in our workforce? I ask this question because I think it's important from a communication standpoint when we do have an unemployment rate. That's one of the questions we hear a lot. How are we identifying those gaps?

Mr. Charles Ayles (Assistant Deputy Minister, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Population Growth Division, Government of New Brunswick): There are a number of ways, but the main way is that we have an employer outreach unit that is going out and talking to individual businesses. That's how we're identifying the positions that my minister spoke about, the 1,400 jobs. There are a number of ways to do it, through Stokes reports or economic forecasting that can tell you shortfalls in the short, medium and long term, but we're doing it differently. We're going face to face in communities meeting people and asking what their employment needs are, and that's how we're tracking those jobs. It's more of an on-the-ground effort than an economic-based model effort.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Okay. And what are the jobs that have been identified? Are there classes of...?

• (1700)

Mr. Charles Ayles: I'm glad you asked.

We have them identified in basically every region of the province and we have a breakdown by sector, by region. We have a number of IT and we have business service centres, contact centres, transportation, aquaculture, seafood processing, agriculture, forestry, food manufacturing, manufacturing, home care, hospitality and food services, administration, finance, and of course, the always fun category, "other".

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Right. Are the NOC codes related to the pilot?

Mr. Charles Ayles: They are. When my predecessor from IRCC talked about the medium and skilled, there are different NOC codes for the different parts of the pilot. So, yes, and as I went through that list, some are NOC 0, some are A, some are B, some are C. So there's a mix.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Have you found that to be a challenge so far?

Mr. Charles Ayles: Not so far because the pilot has been built to allow us to fill that in. It's given great flexibility.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Okay, great.

I'm not sure how much time I have, but I'll keep going.

How do you find the businesses that are engaging in the recruitment? You had mentioned doing some travel, but what other ways, tools, are they using for recruitment?

Mr. Charles Ayles: For recruitment tools, even in the pilot, they still have to prove that there is a need because the goal is still Canadians first. Once they prove to us that need, then the other pieces of it take place. There's a direct recruitment, and right now we have teams overseas. They have employers with them right now and are identifying people on the spot to bring back to New Brunswick. That is working well. We found so far that because we've done more direct contact with the employers, the pickup is much higher. They see that service being right there, and we're able to, not hold their hand through the process, but assist them in different ways. Immigration is still complex and it is still complicated. We're trying to make it as simplistic as possible. There are still elements of it that when you move from one side of the world to the other, there are questions that have to be answered and there are forms that have to be filled out. We're assisting with that; there is still a lot of that documentation that needs to be done, which just takes time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, and I understand you'll be sharing your time with Mr. Tilson.

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

I'm just wondering if each of you can take a very brief amount of time and explain how the downturn in the energy sector, specifically with some of the punitive policies around destabilizing or adding uncertainty to the regulatory process for natural resource projects, has affected each of your provinces. In my understanding, and from what I hear anecdotally, I certainly know that Alberta had a lot of workers from your provinces employed in Alberta in the energy sector and that has increasingly not become the case. Since we're talking about migration and unemployment, I'd be very curious to hear that from you.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I don't think I want to...maybe you can elaborate more on what punitive policies you're talking about.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm happy to, but go ahead.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I would say that one thing we've seen in New Brunswick over the last several years is that they put all their eggs in one basket. I believe that New Brunswick has much more to offer and when you put all your eggs in one basket, you forget some other sectors are just as important. The forestry sector, the poultry sector, agricultural sector, transportation sector.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So are you saying—

Hon. Donald Arseneault: When we talk about—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to interrupt, are you saying we put all our eggs in one basket so for the workers who are out of work because of the downturn in the energy sector it is somehow their fault that they're unemployed right now?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I did not say that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay, so would you like to clarify, we have all of our eggs—

Hon. Donald Arseneault: What I'm saying is that when we—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry, are you saying that these people who are out of work right now in their chosen field somehow should go and be employed in the dairy sector? Was that the implication of your comment?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: What I'm saying is that over a number of years now the business community in New Brunswick is saying their number one challenge is the lack of a skilled workforce. And that's why we've talked about how we have to look at immigration as one those areas that can help New Brunswick.

My ADM just talked about all the various sectors—and they touch many parts of the province—where there's a need for workers. I'd be more than happy to...and we had campaigns throughout the country, including Alberta, to encourage New Brunswickers to come back home and work in other opportunities as well. And that doesn't mean that the energy sector is not an important sector in the province of New Brunswick.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to clarify, because I know that New Brunswick has a lot of natural resources, are you saying that people who are skilled in working in energy fields such as oil and gas fracking should not come to work in your province in that field?

• (1705)

Hon. Donald Arseneault: No, I think you're saying that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You are in fact advocating for workers to work in a field such as fracking in your province.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Currently you cannot work in fracking in New Brunswick.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So people who are out of work in Alberta

Hon. Donald Arseneault: There is a moratorium that was approved by the majority of New Brunswickers.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So with regard to people who are out of work in Alberta and are from New Brunswick, you're trying to attract them back to New Brunswick, but there is no industry there.

They would have to go work in a different field. Is that correct?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Well, look, I would not go to the statement you make that there's no industry in New Brunswick, just like the comment in the previous panel saying there are no jobs in New Brunswick.

I think we've made it very clear. If you go on NBjobs, you'll have over 3,500 jobs on any given day.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm missing the logic here.

You're trying to attract people, immigration to your province. There are a lot of people who are out of work who have these skills, yet your province doesn't allow this type of work to happen. It could conceivably add a lot of jobs and economic growth to your province.

How does a government develop an immigration program to attract workers to a field it has banned?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Again, you make it seem like there are no opportunities for employment in New Brunswick.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Where should people who are out of work in the energy sector from your province go?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: When you look at New Brunswick, we do have a strong energy sector as well. We have a nuclear power plant. We have Coleson Cove, in the Saint John area.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But nuclear isn't oil and gas production, correct?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: There's also a plant in northern New Brunswick, in Belledune. There's our Mactaquac dam.

I think if anything, New Brunswick, although we're small, has a very diverse energy sector in the province that provides many opportunities. Actually, we just said we're going to move forward on the refurbishment of the Mactaquac dam.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: For the committee, if we were going to speak to people who are out of work in the Alberta energy sector, the correct recommendation would be don't go to New Brunswick, correct?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: There's a reason why you didn't win a seat in Atlantic Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Well, I would argue that a lot of people who are—

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Just show a little more respect for our province.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You show some respect for energy workers and people who have skills in that labour. That is one of the most arrogant comments that I have heard. I hope that people who are out of work in this skill set hear the arrogance in that comment. To say that somehow this is about seeking power, or winning or losing, is one of the most ridiculous things I've heard.

I think that you need to respect these workers.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: There's a famous person who said that Atlantic Canada was defeatist.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Was that you?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: That was your former boss.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Well what about these workers?

The Chair: I think we should return to the topic at hand.

Mr. Tilson, you have a minute and 20 seconds.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Arseneault, you may have heard that I graduated from the University of New Brunswick. It's a great university. However, I do recall that a number of graduates couldn't find jobs, so they left. They moved to, as you call it, Upper Canada. At least back then it was called Upper Canada.

I have a young lady who works in my office who is a recent graduate from the University of New Brunswick. She couldn't get a job there, so she moved to Ontario and has a job in my office. She's very good, I might tell you.

My question is, if there are no jobs—

The Chair: Thirty seconds.

Mr. David Tilson: If there are no jobs, where are we going to put new immigrants? How are you working to retain graduates from your post-secondary institutions?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I would say there are jobs, but do I have a job for—?

Mr. David Tilson: There are no jobs, sir. I'm telling you—

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Let's be realistic, if you have a Ph.D. in math, chances are there are not a thousand jobs available in New Brunswick.

Mr. David Tilson: I'm talking about Bachelor of Arts. I'm talking about business administration, about engineering.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, seven minutes, please.

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

I thank all the witnesses for taking time to present to us and some of the recommendations you've suggested. That was very helpful.

I'd like to explore a couple of things. One, of course, is the immigration levels numbers. I think I heard that the provinces are on track with respect to the numbers that you're hoping to achieve.

I'm wondering whether those numbers are sufficient. In other words, could those numbers be increased, and would that be useful and helpful in terms of the goals you're trying to achieve?

I will go to both provinces for a comment.

• (1710)

Mr. Charles Ayles: That's a good question because levels planning is something that all of the provinces do from an FPT perspective with IRCC. It's a complicated process in the sense that you are trying to forecast long term. We in New Brunswick use the Stokes forecast model to do this long-term planning.

The pilot gave us the numbers that we would need to fill our job market needs for the next couple of years, the next three years. The hope is that this will stimulate the economy and grow to having more jobs. We'll need more spots, but we need to evaluate it, and that's why the pilot is for three years. We can evaluate to see if we push the limit to get those 2,000, and we get there, then we know we need more. We've negotiated with IRCC so that, if we need more, there is a willingness to give us more in order to help us meet those job market needs.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Neil Stewart (Deputy Minister, Workforce and Advanced Learning, Government of Prince Edward Island): I will echo those comments to a certain degree. The pilot is for the region, but there is a chance for allocation to move from one province to the other if one province doesn't use its full allocation. I would say that Prince Edward Island is in the same boat of having our allocation level currently.... If we can retain all those immigrants to P.E.I.... Our economy is growing well now, but we want to see our retention levels before we seek higher levels.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: One of the issues that we all face across the country is the aging population happening everywhere and most particularly in the Atlantic provinces. You are impacted in a significant way and are a little bit ahead of the curve in that way.

I constantly think about the immigration levels numbers and whether or not we should be increasing them because we need to fill that gap, and that's the reality. We don't want to wait until we are in a dire situation before we say we should increase the immigration levels numbers.

Interestingly, the former minister's expert panel recommended immigration levels numbers go up to 450,000, but we're still at 300,000. I actually think we should increase that number. I'd love to hear from you. If you need those numbers increased, let us know because we do need to look at that as well.

Sustainable jobs are really one of the key issues in terms of retention, not only for immigrants to stay in your provinces but also for young people as well. By the way, my former constituency assistant in Vancouver when I was the MLA there came from the Atlantic provinces, and you'll be very happy to know she moved back, to my loss.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Did she get a job?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: She got a job.

With that, it's not to say all young people will escape, because they do go back and they want to go back, and there are opportunities there.

To that end, what can the federal government do in terms of economic development opportunities to help you create the job opportunities that are there and to help retain the young people there and also the immigrant population?

I'll go to both provinces for quick answers to those. Just give me one or two quick things that you can say the government should do x, y, and z, that would be great.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: One way would be to continue to support the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, ACOA, for future initiatives.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Continue to support the pilot project on immigration. This is something that we've been talking about for many years. I used to be the minister of this portfolio back in 2009. On the aging demographics in New Brunswick, this is not the first time we've talked about this. We've talked about it for many years, and we wanted the government to help us be a partner with Atlantic Canada, especially New Brunswick, and now we finally have that. It will make a difference, and I hope we can come back in three years at the end of this pilot and say it was successful, and hopefully we can continue to build on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do we need to take action also with respect to job opportunities? Some of the temporary foreign workers program people come in temporarily and then they go. They don't stay. With respect to that, how could that be addressed in terms of the long term? Maybe they shouldn't be temporary foreign workers to begin with; maybe they should be immigrants right off the top, and therefore be here to stay, and they could move their families here to stay.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: That's a very pertinent question, and it's a tough one, too, because temporary foreign workers do fill a very important gap in various economic sectors, especially the tourism, fishery, and agriculture sectors, which are more seasonal work. We have to recognize that, and I can give credit to the government that it recognizes that. It is an important component.

However, there is no doubt that we want these people to stay even longer. We've been working hard trying to find ways, like maybe going from one industry to another in that region. It's not that easy, but we're working on that.

On the other issues such as the pilot project here, yes, we want to focus on long-term growth, and there are sectors that are thriving in New Brunswick, but we lack the skilled workforce, and that's why this is so important.

• (1715)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It has been suggested by some in the temporary workforce that in that instance, we should allow people to move from industry to industry and not be tied to one employer.

You would support that kind of approach, not just for your region but across the country?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: Yes, although I would support it, it's not my decision to make.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I was trying to get your opinion; that's all.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: It's not our decision but we'd certainly support it. If these temporary foreign workers could stay, they could be permanent residents; they could work year-round.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To build on that—

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A lot of the temporary foreign workers are the same people who come year after year. Shouldn't they be permanent residents?

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Arseneault, you have seven minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ayles, Mr. Arseneault, Mr. Gallant, Mr. Stewart and Ms. MacPherson, thank you for being here.

I do not agree with our colleagues Mr. Tilson and Ms. Rempel. I come from New Brunswick, from a constituency in the north where we have a critical shortage of labour. Unlike what those from urban areas may think, we have areas where the employability rate is 100% and the unemployment rate is 0%. Companies want to expand but they do not have the workforce to do so.

It would be too simplistic to say that, when I was studying at the University of New Brunswick, or wherever, there were no jobs and now, 30 years later, there are still no jobs. That is pretty simplistic. But I do not want to get into the demography of the Atlantic provinces and the whole sociopolitical question that makes that Atlantic demography look the way it does today.

My constituency of Madawaska—Restigouche is the one with the oldest population in Canada. As for jobs, you could bring 500 people into the constituency and they could all be working tomorrow morning. We have to be able to make a connection between jobs, the type of jobs, and the training.

I was fortunate to sit on another committee where we dealt with matters of immigration. We said that we need first to attract immigrants, but once that battle has been won, and we have attracted immigrants to work, we have to keep them. Retention seems to be the biggest problem.

New Brunswick is doing quite well in terms of immigration, but there is still a lot of work to do. We can use the pilot project, but the problem is still retention.

This week, I was holding consultations in a small village of less than 1,000 people. They brought in 14 people from Belgium to work in a factory. They need some training, it is a specialized area. I bring that up because of the retention problem. As I understand it, the immigrants want to meet up as quickly as possible with people close to their culture, their ways and their language. Once they have work, they can get work elsewhere. If we are talking about a Belgian community, for example, they could go to Montreal to settle, because there are more Belgians there and they can all drink beer, and eat mussels and fries together.

As in Prince Edward Island, or wherever, what is the strategy in New Brunswick, for trying to achieve that retention in rural areas? Most of the Atlantic region is rural, as we know.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: That is a very good question. We are trying to match the right immigrants to specific regions.

Over the years, we have noticed one thing. We tried to recruit immigrants from all over. However, like it or not, New Brunswick is a rural province with a very small population, especially in comparison to major centres like Montreal, Vancouver or Toronto. When immigrants arrive in predominantly rural areas of New Brunswick, they are sometimes alone. The fact that they are not surrounded by family or friends affects them. It is easier for them to move to other parts of the country.

We have to start focusing on a certain number of countries. We have to do it for fewer countries but in a better way, if we want to attract people to our province. We are successful with some countries. I feel that if we can develop communities—where you can eat fries, donuts or anything you like—we will have more success in retaining people in our region.

In the constituency of Madawaska—Restigouche, the Groupe Westco has put expansion plans on hold several times because of a shortage of qualified staff in the region. New Brunswick needs those jobs. It is regrettable that we are not seeing those expansion plans. It is happening elsewhere, in other regions of the country. I feel that if we were to choose new Canadians better, we would be more successful than we are today.

• (1720)

Mr. René Arseneault: Do you think that the pilot project poses any problems in terms of classifying the profession or in terms of training?

[English]

Mr. Charles Ayles: The pilot offers us enough flexibility and leeway so we can address all the NOC codes that are needed. Previously, we had smaller numbers for that, so with the pilot and with the ability to fast-track the permanent residency, that NOC code issue shouldn't be a problem. We're also addressing the FQR issues. There are still challenges around that, but those challenges are diminishing as we make greater inroads with professional associations to make sure that we bring down those barriers.

Mr. René Arseneault: As you are aware, there is a lot of forest industry in the northern part of New Brunswick. This is a complaint I hear once in a while concerning the classification D, as they call it there.

Mr. Charles Ayles: Yeah, NOC code D.

Mr. René Arseneault: Anything related to the forestry industry or the transformation of wood seems to be excluded. Am I correct? Is my interpretation good?

Mr. Charles Ayles: No.

NOC Ds tend to be more difficult, although we can use them through the provincial nominee program. On the forestry-specific issues right now, we're working closely with the industry. We've identified a number of places in eastern Europe that have similar forest practices to ours, and we're working right now with those companies to go overseas to find those big operators, skidder operators, and all those other pieces that are needed.

However, the NOC Ds are a bit of a different issue. They tend not to be full-time jobs. The seasonal nature of it sometimes gets confused with the NOC code. They have to be full-time jobs, permanent, full-time positions. That's sometimes what some of the forestry industry can't offer, so we can't use immigration to fill some of those labour market needs.

Mr. René Arseneault: Are you saying that one of the criteria for this pilot project is that you need a full-time job? I thought it was 10 months to full time.

Mr. Charles Ayles: No, it has to be a full-time job.

Mr. René Arseneault: In the forestry industry, it's usually a full-time job, except during the freezing and thawing of the forest roads.

Mr. Charles Ayles: Yes.

The Chair: You have twenty seconds.

Mr. Charles Ayles: We've had discussions on how many hours constitute a full-time year. If you could get 10 months per year with—I don't know what the hours are—1,000 hours, would that constitute a full-time job? We're still working on that definition to see if we can change it. So far, we're still in discussion mode.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes please.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

Mr. Arseneault, you said in your opening statement:

People leaving New Brunswick for other provinces continues to be a primary reason for low or negative population growth rates, especially in rural areas. This is closely tied to unemployment in New Brunswick while boosting the economies of other provinces.

My question is to you and perhaps Mr. Gallant as well. Are you looking to the federal government for financial assistance when it comes to programs to increase both immigration levels to Atlantic Canada as well as the retention of immigrants when they arrive there, and—and I don't want to get into a debate with you, but I'm going to say it anyway and you'll challenge me—to address the unemployment that exists, particularly in New Brunswick and perhaps in Prince Edward Island as well?

Mr. Arseneault, and then Mr. Gallant.

Hon. Donald Arseneault: On your initial question, there's no money tied to the Atlantic immigration pilot. That's why our government put forward \$2.5 million in the last budget to assist the work that we're doing on this pilot.

What we're looking for from the federal government is to look and understand, and to work as a partner with Atlantic Canada, more specifically with New Brunswick.

As I said earlier, this is something that we've talked about for many years. Unfortunately, nothing was done about this. Now, the government has understood the challenge that we have, the aging demographics, and we can have 2,000 new Canadians per year for the next three years, over and above the allocation of the provincial nominee program. In New Brunswick, it's 1,050 per year.

• (1725)

Mr. David Tilson: Are you looking for financial assistance or some financial plan?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: No.

Mr. David Tilson: Minister Gallant?

Hon. Sonny Gallant: Rather than financial assistance, we would be looking at a more coordinated effort between the federal and provincial governments, which is part of our recommendations.

Mr. David Tilson: Returning to the issue of unemployment, if you increase the immigration levels or asylum claimant levels, will that displace jobs? Will that displace people looking for jobs in Prince Edward Island or New Brunswick?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I don't believe it will. We're not forgetting New Brunswickers. If anything, we're investing more today than we've ever done.

In terms of investing in New Brunswickers, we understand that we need to provide them with opportunities. We have pilot projects all across our province with social assistance clients, identifying those who we feel have the ability, if given the opportunity and the proper training, to enter the workforce. We do have those kinds of programs. Last year we initiated free tuition at public universities and colleges for families with incomes of \$60,000 or less. That gives opportunity to people who weren't even thinking of pursuing a post-secondary education and entering into a career. That's a huge program, the first in the country as well. We furthered those programs this year.

We're not forgetting New Brunswickers. We feel that in some instances they need more training, and as a government we're trying to offer that to them.

Mr. David Tilson: Can you tell us the unemployment rate in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island?

Hon. Donald Arseneault: It's 9%, give or take.

Mr. David Tilson: Minister Gallant.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: It's 10.1%. And in answer to your question on the displacement effect, our economy is growing, our unemployment rate has dropped by 1%, and we have created about 1,500 jobs.

Mr. David Tilson: It's still higher in both provinces than in the rest of Canada.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: It's because that's trendy and that's our seasonality curve.

Mr. David Tilson: It's not trendy, it's a fact.

Hon. Sonny Gallant: Well, it's a fact, but it's due to our—

Mr. David Tilson: We have to talk about your employment if we're going to talk about encouraging immigrants and asylum seekers to come to your provinces. We have to talk about your economy. So far, to be quite frank, you're not convincing me that your economy is that hot.

Mr. Arseneault, you like to fight me. Can you comment on that?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Donald Arseneault: I've talked a lot. I figure....

Mr. Neil Stewart: Is it okay if I make some comments?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Stewart. You have 10 seconds, please.

Mr. Neil Stewart: If you go back and look at the economic results for the province of Prince Edward Island over the last two years, the growth rates for GDP and manufacturing exports have generally been in the top one, two, or three positions in Canada. Our economy is growing well right now, and we need a workforce to sustain that growth.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Stewart.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Casey, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It will come as no surprise, my being a Prince Edward Island member of Parliament, that I will focus my questions on the Prince

Edward Islanders here, with the greatest of respect to Minister Arseneault.

I want to start with the very last bullet in your very last slide, Mr. Gallant, and when you talked in your opening remarks about the decision of the Conservative government to make Prince Edward Island the only province in Canada that does not have face-to-face service for immigrants. We see in the briefing note from the Library of Parliament that the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council also talks about lengthy processing times.

I want to ask this question a couple of ways. First of all, what's in your slide is a recommendation from a parliamentary committee that talks about regional immigration offices. I'm not sure that this would solve the problem that only in Prince Edward Island can an immigrant not get face-to-face service from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Can you talk about the impact this decision has had over the four or five years since face-to-face service in our province was terminated?

• (1730)

Hon. Sonny Gallant: We may not have mentioned the exact date, but the immigration office in P.E.I. closed in 2012. With no office there, it makes it very difficult for immigrants to get services. They're less likely to stay if they can't get the services when they need them. They have to leave the province.

Mr. Sean Casey: Minister, just this week Premier McLaughlin issued the population strategy for Prince Edward Island. I expect you saw the local newspaper today, where there was a critique of that population strategy. Part of their critique is that this is something we heard about during the provincial election and this is something we heard about in the throne speech; there's not a lot new in it.

Now, you probably were not interviewed in advance of that article being published, so this is your chance to tell your side of it. What can you tell us about the population strategy that was released this week in terms of the progress that has been made along the population strategy in recent years?

Hon. Sonny Gallant: This population action plan was initiated by our premier. It had three high points: recruit new Islanders, retain our youth and immigrants to P.E.I., and repatriate the thousands of Islanders residing elsewhere. Work with partners, employers, municipalities, and post-secondary institutions to help us create more employees and immigrants. Rural areas will be given special focus in the report in this regard.

The biggest thing is that most of our rural areas are losing their population to the urban areas, so that's a big part of the action plan.

Mr. Sean Casey: Now, Minister, I'm happy to have you answer this question, but if you want to delegate it to Ms. MacPherson, we've met on this subject before. Her technical grounding on this subject is extensive. I'll leave it up to you.

I wonder if you could give a bit of an explanation for the immigration pilot process within the Atlantic growth strategy. You use a bunch of terms: designations issued, endorsement applications received, endorsement issued. Can you walk us through the steps and tell us just exactly where we stand in Prince Edward Island in terms of getting to that 120-family target?

Hon. Sonny Gallant: Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Neil Stewart: Since the pilot was started in earnest, I guess in March, we have held sessions across Prince Edward Island to inform employers of the requirements for them to participate in the pilot. That's where we talk of designating an employer to be an eligible employer under the pilot. Through those sessions the employers learned that they were going to be required to provide enhanced settlement services if they wished to participate in the pilot.

We have designated 62 employers. We have 21 applications from immigrants to immigrate under the pilot. We've endorsed 14 of those immigrants so far to come through the pilot.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank our panellists for coming to Ottawa from Atlantic Canada to provide insights on the challenges they face.

With that we'll suspend for a couple of minutes to allow the next panel to assemble.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1735)

The Chair: The meeting will resume.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on October 4, 2016 and April 3, 2017, the committee will resume its study on immigration consultants.

From the department, we have before us Mr. Michael MacDonald, director general, immigration program guidance; Mr. David Cashaback, director, immigration branch; and Mr. Chris Meyers, director general, finance.

Welcome, gentlemen. There will be no opening statements. We'll move immediately to questions.

Ms. Zahid, I believe you're splitting your time with Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair. Thanks to the officials for coming out. I know it has been delayed a few times.

As we conclude our study on immigration consultants, we have heard a lot of testimony and a lot of recommendations.

Should the Government of Canada abandon the current self-regulation model for immigration consultants and replace it with an independent government regulator, empowered, mandated, and resourced to investigate complaints against immigration consultants and to refer complaints to law enforcement forces when appropriate?

What is your view on this?

Mr. David Cashaback (Director, Immigration Branch, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thanks for the

question, Mr. Chair, and for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Were the government to go in a different direction, to regulate this directly rather than the current arm's-length relationship we have now, I think the first step from our perspective is there's definitely a bit of policy tension that has to be explored about whether and how to address the tension between the department's primary function, which is assessing and making decisions on clients' applications, and that of regulating and setting the conditions for consultants whose function would be to assist applicants to put that best case forward.

Once that is set out, I think we're in a world to assess the steps to get to that outcome. Definitely from our perspective that's consultations with provinces and territories, but there's also a lot of work to design what would be core elements of the program.

Mr. MacDonald.

• (1740)

Mr. Michael MacDonald (Director General, Immigration Program Guidance, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

Chair, part of the response to this is trying to look at the options around what such an organization or entity would be doing. Exactly what is it you would want to work on with consultants and what type of activity?

Part of the answer to that question will clearly rub up against other departments' current mandates so there will be some machinery of issue changes I would think that would have to be contemplated and advice given on that.

You would also have to look at any scope in the nexus with the territories and provinces around what power would such an organization have: for example, powers to enter premises, to undertake certain types of investigations, to subpoena documents, and to compel individuals.

Operationally, some key questions would have to be looked at around how and what the government of the day would want this organization to be doing on the ground and working with consultants.

Then of course there's the age-old problem we've talked about, which in any organization is how do you get at the ghost consultants, those who are unreachable many times, be they overseas or what have you?

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Do you think the ICCRC model should be finished?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: I think at this stage it's fair to say the department is 100% committed to working with the current construct of the ICCRC, and we have shown that. I just met with them two weeks ago, for example. We talked in a very open and frank way about how we can make the ICCRC even better, what more it could do, and how the department could help in that regard. Are there more types of sharing we can do around trends and patterns? Are there more conversations we could have with the board of governors, still respecting the legislative framework that establishes the ICCRC?

We feel, and I think so does the ICCRC, that a lot of space can be done there to help improvement, as any organization needs to be improved.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: One more recommendation is that the regulatory body should establish qualifications for registration as immigration consultants and develop a tiered system as to the category of services individual consultants are permitted to provide.

Most consultants would be able to provide basic information and perform transactional work such as completing and submitting applications while a few qualified consultants should be permitted to appear before the IRB.

What's your input on this recommendation?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Again, I think that needs to be looked at in terms of the purpose of having a tiered model. I'm not sure, David, if you have anything more. I think it's worth assessing and seeing the value of a tiered model, and what more it gives you that perhaps doesn't exist today. What does it give to prospective and current clients?

The Chair: Ms. Dzerowicz, you have two minutes and 40 seconds.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thanks so much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks again for coming back.

We heard testimony that settlement agencies and NGOs are not able to provide immigration support as they fear they are barred from doing so under current section 91. They are particularly worried about the word "consideration".

Was this the intention of the current section 91?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Section 91 was designed to help get at the problem—as the committee I'm sure is aware—of people who are operating in the fashion of ghost consultants. Getting at that was the objective of the day, and it was around making a framework that was the best way to get at it.

I want to point out that there is also subsection 91(4), which allows IRCC to enter into agreements with organizations so that they don't run afoul of subsection 91(1). We do that in the oversees refugee selection process, for example with the IOM and the UNHCR.

We have a framework, but we also have explicit abilities to allow for those that really help the immigration system in a certain way—and we did it on Syria, for example, with the UNHCR.

• (1745)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Again, we've tried to give as clear guidance as possible on our website around the dos and don'ts of section 91. We've tried to explain to NGOs and service provider organizations what it means to assist a client; to translate something for a client; to help the client navigate the Internet, our webs, our forms.

We're finding that more education and more clarity is the best way to work with the organizations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you're splitting your time with Mr. Saroya?

Mr. David Tilson: I am.

Mr. Chairman, the internal governance of the ICCRC, from the evidence that we've had so far at this committee, is a disaster. It's really not working well. I'm normally a supporter of self-governance, and this is a form of self-governance. I don't know whether Ms. Kwan is winning me over—maybe she is—but I'm concerned that this impacts their ability to be an effective regulator.

How informed is the department on the daily running of the affairs of the ICCRC? Do you know what they're doing?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: The question of "how informed" comes down to not only the relationship that we've struck, but also, as I mentioned earlier, the fact that we're pushing the boundaries on how much we can work with, share with, and try to help the ICCRC and have new ways of looking at things.

We have regular exchanges with the ICCRC management structure. I've met with some of the board members. I met with some of the senior management and executives within the organization two weeks ago. We had a very frank and open conversation around issues, but then we talked about ways to move forward and where we could help, where the ICCRC could help, the organization.

The exchange is robust, and we are in collaborative communication. We still respect the boundaries of how they need to operate, though.

Mr. David Tilson: I guess the question is what we do now. Do we get rid of them? Does the department take it over?

Maybe I'm alone, but my observation listening to the testimony is that it's not working.

In fact, maybe you could elaborate on this. What concerns does the department have with respect to the ICCRC and its tenure as a regulator over the last six years? You must have thoughts on whether it should continue, whether it can be fixed, and whether we should have something else.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Chair, that really comes down to three common areas where we've fostered the relationship and tried to move it forward.

The first area is around the complaints process. We have been having conversations with the ICCRC around the length of time it takes to resolve complaints, respecting the fact that things don't always have a perfect start and end date. That's understandable. But we feel there's more that can be done, and it needs to be done faster, and that's the message we've delivered.

The second area is around education. I think they can do a better job, and we're trying to help them do a better job, in ensuring that the consultants who are registered do have the best basis in understanding of the systems, including our forms and everything that's out there.

The third, which are the conversations we entered into not long ago, is really around the stability of the organization. Again, if there are areas where they need help ensuring the stability of the organization—the board or the organization itself—we are open to dialogue and to actively helping and sharing lessons learned and so on.

• (1750)

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Saroya, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for coming.

Mr. MacDonald, have you seen this CBC article?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: No, I have not.

Mr. Bob Saroya: As you know, we need immigrants and vice versa. We need them, and we want them to come. For the past six years—I could even go back 31 years—the system hasn't worked. We all know this. According to the CBC investigation:

The council that oversees thousands of immigration consultants in Canada is in the midst of what many describe as a crisis, beset by resignations, infighting and harsh criticism from lawmakers and lawyers.

This is how Jennifer Bourque replied to CBC:

The department is following this issue carefully. We remain confident that the ICCRC will resolve any internal issues. The department is in regular contact with the ICCRC and there are reporting requirements that the ICCRC must follow. The department will continue to monitor and will provide support as necessary.

What is the department doing? What department is going to bring them back into line?

I also understand that five of the 15 directors quit in the last six months. It's like you're trying to run a company but 33% of the management quits.

With respect, how would you fix it?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Again, I'll go back to my previous response around what we have been doing, and what we've committed to do going into the future with the ICCRC and being very open about that. Again, it comes down to them creating an environment of stability on the board and within the organization itself. I think the recent appointment of the new CEO to the board of directors is a very good sign of that. He should bring a certain level of stability as well as knowledge, having been working for many years in the profit area as well as the not-for-profit area.

Again, it comes down to the quality of their services out to their membership. That's my comment around the educational aspect. We have offered to assist them with those types of packages. We have offered, in addition, to represent ourselves more at their events. I've appeared at several of their events, their national training forums.

Again, to go back to the complaints process, I think public confidence is enhanced if you have a robust, active, and quick complaints process for the—

The Chair: Twenty seconds, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: If I can follow up, the public trust is the main thing. The public trust isn't there so far. I know that you are doing your level best, but it hasn't worked for the last number of years. Mr. Tilson asked if you—the government, the body—should take over, redo the whole thing, and let this ICCRC go and—

The Chair: A quick yes-or-no answer is all we have time for.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: I'm not in a position to answer yes or no, sir, unfortunately.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you to the officials for coming back.

Let me start my questions with this. How much is the government providing to the ICCRC for them to do their work? What's their annual budget in all the various different contracts that you sign with them to carry out their work? How much is it?

Mr. Christopher Meyers (Director General, Finance, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): The government is not currently providing any funding to the ICCRC.

When it was created in March of 2011, there was a contribution agreement that was signed between the department and the organization to help fund start-up expenditures that the organization was incurring. That was in the amount of \$1 million. That was paid over three fiscal years. The contribution was a repayable contribution, so after a period of time, ICCRC was to—and is—repaying the government the amount of that assistance.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You're saying that your department provides zero dollars to ICCRC to carry out their work and that your department has not entered into any contracts with them.

Mr. Christopher Meyers: In March 2011, there was a contribution agreement that was signed to help fund the start-up of the organization. It was a million dollars payable over three fiscal years. That was paid and, since that time, the organization has been repaying the amount of that contribution. By the time the final payment is received, that amount—the million dollars—will have been fully recovered.

• (1755)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Are there any other departments from the government that have contracted ICCRC to carry out their work?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: I don't have a definitive answer. I think you would need to ask them. We are not aware of any other government department that has contracted with the ICCRC for their services. I leave it to ICCRC to answer that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe we can get that information from the analyst or the library or somebody, because that seems to contradict some other information that was presented to the committee at different times.

At this committee, we've heard from witness upon witness about the disastrous situation with ICCRC, on so many levels. I won't rehash all the issues that were brought to our attention. I think it's fair to say that committee members walked away thinking that the days of self-regulation by that industry are done, and that we need to go to a different model, perhaps a governance model to be regulated by the government.

One of the issues people have raised and brought to our attention is that complainants are afraid to even come forward, because they fear they will be penalized. One suggestion would be to find a mechanism to ensure that those complainants are protected in that process. Is that something the department can look into and see how we can actually materialize that option to protect the complainants if they were to come forward with a complaint?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: There are two parts to this. One is that we agree that if something is not working, you work to make it better. If that is looking at wholesale policy advice to the government of the day around different models—and I think those are key words—we are and always have been committed to having those types of analyses and exercises—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm just going to interject for a minute here.

This model, the ICCRC, is the second iteration, by the way. The other self-regulatory model was also a colossal disaster, and we're back at it again, so we've been trying for some time now. My view is that the days of self-regulation have come and gone, and that the industry must earn back the privilege to self-regulate. I think we have now moved in a different direction. I certainly will be calling for the committee to move a recommendation forward to the government that there be a government-regulated model with respect to this industry.

I'm running out of time, so let me go to the specific question of the complainants and how best to protect them.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: In keeping with the spirit of my first response, Mr. Chair, any analysis that would be undertaken, and we are willing to do that—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I'll just get you to move to the complainant question. I don't want to talk about the spirit of the first response. We already had that for several rounds, so let's just get to how best to protect the complainants.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: We feel that the best way to protect complainants in the current structure is through pushing out as much education and awareness as possible. In our last appearance, we talked about anti-fraud, about working with the ICCRC, about how our department undertakes level 1 investigations around complaints, and about finding unique ways of reaching applicants and clients through social media and other venues.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, education is certainly one component. When a complainant comes forward and there has been misrepresentation in their application by the representative, unbeknownst to the applicant, can there be a provision that those complainants be

protected and be given the opportunity to make the corrections in their application and still have the application processed? Just a simple yes or no—is that a possibility that you could look at as an option?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: That is a possibility.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Great, thank you.

I'm going to move on to the next issue that has been brought to our committee's attention, and that is a graduated licensing process. That is to say that not all consultants are equal. They have to go through various training at different levels to be able to do different kinds of work. Is that an option that can be adopted—not under the current model but under any model? Can that be adopted as a practice for a graduated licensing process?

• (1800)

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Graduated licensing could be adopted, and in fact it exists today in terms of student advisers at universities.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct, so this is entirely feasible. Thank you.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll turn to protection for non-profits, because there's a big issue around non-profits doing this work. Can we look at increasing the funding for non-profits to do this work, as well as ensuring they could be protected in that process? A lot of times they are not actually paid, as consultants or lawyers are. Please give a quick yes or no answer.

Mr. Michael MacDonald: I think an analysis can certainly include that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to follow up on Ms. Kwan's question. We've talked about a graduated licensing process in this committee at various times. In your response to her question, you talked about how currently university students have an advisory system. Can you elaborate on what you meant in response to her question?

Mr. David Cashback: In December 2014, the ICCRC adopted a bylaw that granted limited licensure to international student advisers. It was a conversation that took place within the independent body—we participated, of course—in order to find a way for these student advisers to be able to offer some degree of assistance to students, but it's not full membership in the organization.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Was that started in 2014?

Mr. David Cashback: It was December 2, 2014.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Do you have any information on some of the success that came out of it or some of the responses from students?

Mr. David Cashback: I don't have any from the student perspective. In the spirit of the conversation we're having today, Mr. Chair, this was an example of a situation where it was not clear what kinds of services these student advisers were providing, whether they were falling within or without the legislative and regulatory framework. This was a positive step at the time to address a need. Our understanding is that it has worked acceptably for students. It gives them a service where otherwise there would be a grey zone.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: If there were a complaint, what group at the department is responsible for reviewing the ICCRC's report and for ensuring that the public is protected?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Any complaints that come in to the department go into the operations area, and we look at that actually in several parts of our department, including those in our integrity and risk area, who do what's called the level 1 investigation. They're also the group who decides if a complaint is warranted to go up to a level 2, and that's when we make a decision and pass it over to the Canada Border Services Agency.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm going to move on to another question.

We have heard about "lowercase illegality", when it comes to consultants; it is often not dealt with by the CBSA. We know that ICCRC is not legally mandated to go after non-registered consultants.

What measures do you suggest to tackle this grey area, and are you in favour of establishing a blacklist for people who have constantly been involved in fraud?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Currently, the department, IRCC, has worked with overseas missions and overseas governments, for example—we just had conversations in the Latin American region—trying to push out an understanding of any pockets of activities by ghost consultants that we or others have picked up, or that clients have informed us about, quite frankly. We found that engaging the foreign governments is actually one of the better ways to try to get them to understand and help us in addressing the ghost consultants. As you no doubt have heard, and we talked about last time, it's that extraterritorial behaviour that is the hardest thing for us to get at. It would be the hardest for any organization to get at.

The question of blacklist again goes back to our very first question, where we talked about a model and what it is you want the model to do. Is it an AMPs and ban regime; is it some type of public display of anyone who has been subject to an AMPs and ban, as we do in other programs across the government? Would that be appropriate? That would be part of an analysis of some of the better ways.

The key, as always, which your question really gets to, is how to make prospective clients and current clients aware. The best way, as we talked about, was through the social media and the public notifications, some of which we already do right now and some of which we heighten during fraud awareness week.

•(1805)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: We talked about education, but what measures would you suggest, in addition to the current ones, to educate all of the potential applicants and refugee claimants about

their rights and about the regulations and requirements for consultants?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: What additional measures could be taken? I think there's a host of additional measures. It's not one single measure that will make the best impact. It's going to be a very broad and holistic approach. That's why we keep talking about whether the anti-fraud awareness campaigns going on could be better. Yes, they can. We're trying to find ways, and we are finding ways, to make those better.

Our program changes. Every time we change a program, every time we change a kit, a guide, or a form, we have to get better at it. What we are getting better at is educating people about what that means, including the very consultants who fill out those forms. Again, improving the complaints and discipline process sends a pretty strong message. I think it does enhance public trust when swift action is taken on individuals.

We also are trying to find better ways to encourage clients. For those people who we find out have been negatively impacted—and this is in the domestic as well as the overseas context—we are trying to find better ways of reaching out to them and making sure that they know they have avenues of redress they can take and that they will not be punished, because that is a concern of a lot of the clients.

Also, it's sharing the gaps and the awareness of trends. There are certain pockets of the world where we see different behaviours with the problems of ghost consultants, and, quite frankly, even how applicants are understanding our forms, our kits, and our guides, so we try to respond to those trends.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You're seeing a rare moment of unanimity in this committee. I echo the sentiments most of my colleagues have made. The issues that were broadly touched upon in the testimony that we heard were significant issues within the IRCC governance and the board, issues with regulated consultants themselves, the ability to, as Mr. Tabbara was saying, go after ghost consultants, and also a lot of questions on why consultants are in high demand right now, linking back to some of the recommendations that came up with client modernization. The fact that there is a lack of transparency or perceived lack of transparency and ease in the application process basically creates an industry.

I've been giving some thought to this. We're essentially asking, how do we regulate a body like the Canadian Dental Association or another regulatory body? The reality is, this is a group of people who provide services to navigate a governmental process, so it's a little bit different from other professional services organizations. In that, where I'd like to echo some of the comments that my colleagues have made, I think we're in agreement that the current system is severely broken.

I'd like to get your feedback on this. To me there's a significant lack of direct accountability and reporting mechanisms. They're just not clear, right? As parliamentarians, it's very difficult for us to understand why and how certain review mechanisms aren't happening. I think we're kind of at the spot where we believe that the government and the department has to take a more direct role, and the ICCRC in its current format is not particularly functional and perhaps can never be particularly functional.

I think we're at the point where we completely dismantle this organization—that's our recommendation—because of the abysmal testimony that we've heard in the last several meetings, or we significant tighten and clarify legislation that provides the department with more accountability and responsibility in oversight of some of these gaps.

I guess what we're asking you is what's easier, but, more importantly, what's more effective? I was talking to some of my Liberal colleagues. I think this is the third or the fourth study that's happened on this. You have to realize that, as members of Parliament, we're the front line. Our offices are the front lines on these issues.

I don't want to be sitting here in two years looking at this again. As a department, you have your one minute now to say what is more effective, not what's easier for departmental officials, but what's better for the people who are being defrauded and affected by this. Is it having direct accountability with oversight within the department, where the department can look at things like perhaps more transparency or more mechanisms to make the application process easier, or is it a significantly tightened up regulatory framework with a heightened departmental oversight over some sort of existing model? What's more effective? You can speak to cost as well, but I think that's where this committee is at in terms of recommendations right now. It cannot continue unabated.

• (1810)

Mr. Michael MacDonald: I think at this point in time, Chair, there is a model that exists, which is enshrined in legislation and regulation. We do feel that there is more movement and progress that can be made in the current model. That's what exists today.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What does that mean?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: That is where we're operating. The ICCRC exists under the not-for-profits. Any changes, as Mr. Cashaback noted—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So what are those specific improvement points?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: The specific improvements points could be, for example—and I had conversations with them on this two weeks ago—having direct accountability, addressing whether there are options for more robust accounting from the organization

out to the public, out to their members. We feel that there is a lot more space for improvement in terms of their complaints and discipline process.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm not trying to be combative here, but my concern is that what we've established here, even with that, is that they're acting as a dysfunctional middleman.

If we do go down that route, is the department going to spend a lot of time and resources babysitting a dysfunctional group that's not actually going to deliver?

The Chair: You have ten seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you really think there's any way—and, if so, what is it?—that the ICCRC can be saved? I think a lot of us around this table have a feeling that the answer is no.

The Chair: Could we have a brief response, please?

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Mr. Chair, in the current legislative framework, we are 100% committed to making the organization the best it can be, and we'll continue to do that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McDonald, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): I defer to Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

I will continue on from Ms. Rempel's questioning. Should there be a recommendation from us to replace ICCRC with a government-regulated body? What would be the minimum timing needed for transition? What would be the logistical and practical considerations to consider in making the recommendation?

Mr. David Cashaback: In a way, it's a bit premature for us to give the committee a sense of the timing. Going back to some of Mr. MacDonald's answers, it would depend on the scope of what it is that you and the government decide this organization would do, whether it's setting standards for entry, setting specific rules, or giving a new body specific enforcement and/or investigative powers, and what kind of machinery changes those things would require.

In any event, with changes in this area, there would very likely be legislative and regulatory changes. With regard to the time frame, it's hard to say how long those steps would take to complete.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Mr. Cashaback, I think what we're basically saying is, if we decide that we're going to recommend that ICCRC be replaced with a government-regulated body, once we make that recommendation and start moving forward, we want to also be very thoughtful about what other recommendations we might need to make, in terms of timing, and in terms of making sure that what needs to continue to exist does, while we're actually considering what those regulations should be, and what the new framework should be, and we're trying to make sure that we put something proper in place. I think you get a very strong feeling that we don't feel that what has been proposed has worked. There have been a number of different iterations on this for a number of years.

We're trying to be as thorough as possible in our own recommendations. While we're not expecting you to say, "Here are all the regulations that need to change", we'd love a little bit of feedback, because typically we need a one-year period to be able to come up with a new framework or some sort of transition. What we're kind of looking for at this point is, "Here are some other elements you might need to think about in your recommendations in terms of replacing what currently exists with a government-regulated body."

If anybody can respond to that, I would be grateful.

• (1815)

Mr. Michael MacDonald: Chair, to partly respond to that, we can look at a model that exists already in Australia. For example, I think a great starting point is to look at how it has approached it such that the body seems to have more of an ability to influence how that sector behaves and what the regulators do, for example, by a strict code of conduct. One could look at having stricter parameters about what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. Registration and education requirements would have to be a part of that as well.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Can I just stop you for one minute, Mr. MacDonald?

To my mind, if we went out with a recommendation that says we'd like to replace ICCRC with a government-regulated body, what we don't want to do is to cause confusion in the industry. That's what we're trying to do, to ask what else we need to do. Should we also say that what exists right now will exist for the next two years until we contemplate what might be a good body? That's kind of what I'm looking for—some elements we need to consider in making that recommendation.

Mr. David Cashaback: In the model as it currently stands, there is a regulatory authority we introduced in 2011; the minister's authority to designate the institution. In any transition, were the government to change its path, at the very least there would need to be a decision to change that regulatory framework, and in that case a decision to de-designate the current regulated body. From a transitional perspective we have an instrument that would stay in effect.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Stay in place until we make the change. Okay. I don't have any other questions unless my colleagues do. Anybody else?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: I would like to thank the department's officials for coming before the committee once again.

With that we will suspend for a minute, and we'll ask the room to clear so we can go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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