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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to the order of reference received from the House on Wednesday, November 2, 2016, the committee will resume its study of M-39 on immigration to Atlantic Canada.

On our first panel today, we have Mrs. Alaina Lockhart, the member of Parliament for Fundy Royal. Welcome.

From Acadia University, by video conference, we have Ray Ivany, president and vice-chancellor. Welcome, Mr. Ivany.

Mr. Ray Ivany (President and Vice-Chancellor, Acadia University): Thank you.

The Chair: From the TD Bank Group, we have the Honourable Frank McKenna, deputy chair.

Welcome to everyone.

Mrs. Lockhart, you can begin, with seven minutes.

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

Thank you to the members of this committee for studying this issue and for hearing the full testimony of expert witnesses who are travelling great distances to make a difference for Atlantic Canada.

I also want to thank each and every member of the House of Commons who voted in favour of this motion last November. The very fact that the House of Commons was unanimous in its support of this issue proves to every Atlantic Canadian that the region and its culture, language, history, and society are important to all Canadians.

I am often asked why I chose to focus on immigration as the topic of my private member's motion. It's a valid question, as I do not hear from constituents each day looking for more immigration. However, what I do hear about is their daily concerns about the sustainability and growth of our communities and the local economy.

Constituents tell me they are concerned about their rural schools, the corner stores in their communities closing because of a lack of volume, and the dwindling memberships in organizations, just to name a few. At the same time, business owners in the trucking, tourism, home care, and manufacturing sectors are talking to me about the challenges they face when hiring, and how it is limiting their potential for growth.

As a former human resources professional and a business owner, I have experienced the effects of a shrinking and aging population. These challenges are symptoms of a larger problem, one that includes lagging immigration numbers in Atlantic Canada relative to the rest of Canada.

As you heard in Ms. Hunter's limited testimony last week, "In 2014, 6.7% of the Canadian population lived in Atlantic Canada, but the region welcomed only 3.1% of new immigrants."

We have passed the point where we can repopulate the region without intervention. We will not naturally become a younger society again. Our workforce will not naturally expand. Investments will not come easily to our region if we stay the course.

Is immigration the magic bullet? No, but it is an important part of a larger strategy to revitalize Atlantic Canada and ensure sustainability for the future.

In addition to the immigration pilot program, the Atlantic growth strategy focuses on four other areas of action: innovation, clean growth and climate change, trade and investment, and infrastructure. Together, the federal and provincial governments are playing the long game for sustainable prosperity in Atlantic Canada for generations to come.

I would like to think that my motion, as well as the work of all 32 MPs from Atlantic Canada, is reflected in the government's consistent support and action to enhance Atlantic Canada's economic performance.

Considering the announcement of the Atlantic growth strategy, after I had tabled my motion but before the House could debate it, I called for an amendment that would focus a committee's work on examining retention and settlement, with a view to bringing forward recommendations and best practices.

The amendments to the motion broadened the scope of the study. They did not significantly narrow the scope of the motion as debated. By concurrently studying the factors affecting retention, the committee would be not only studying retention flowing from the pilot initiatives, but also contributing to the success of the pilot and to improving retention in other provinces and territories.

This government has taken steps to increase immigration, but that is only the first step. We need immigrants to stay, and we need them to prosper.

The committee is now undertaking a study that I hope will identify problems with the process, including barriers within our bureaucracy and best practices for successful recruitment. Attention should be paid to the successful integration of new immigrants and ways to ensure that success by engaging businesses and offering settlement and integration support.

By studying the factors that increase the retention rates of newcomers, the committee would not only contribute to the success of the government's pilot, but also provide a point of reference for best practices. The practices can then be shared across Canada. We know that national demographic projections show that all regions of Canada will be impacted by an aging population. Atlantic Canada is facing that impact first.

Strong and effective retention measures will help ensure that Atlantic Canada remains a region of choice, and are likely the key to maximizing the social, cultural, economic, and community benefits of immigration.

This is a critical call to action, as Atlantic Canadians look for ways to achieve a more prosperous future, a future that allows for the repatriation of our youth, economic growth, and the sustainability of communities throughout the region.

I'll end with this, Mr. Chair. When Atlantic Canada does better, all of Canada does better.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lockhart.

Mr. Ivany, the floor is yours for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ray Ivany: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My perspective on this is shaped by my experience as chair of a commission in Nova Scotia that began in 2012, and reported in February 2014. We were asked by the provincial government to take an in-depth look at the Nova Scotia economy and our prospects for the future. We were also asked to engage Nova Scotians in that process.

We had two rounds of province-wide consultations. When we began that work we looked at the data sets surrounding both the economy and demography, and of course just like every other part of Canada, our economic history has always had those two things combined. I hail from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and during the years of the development of the steel mills and the coal mines there were waves of immigration, so those two things have always been linked.

The issue became more pointed, however, when we extrapolated from a baseline year of 2009 and looked at a projection, assuming that the same patterns would prevail in terms of net interprovincial migration, immigration levels, etc., and we pushed that out 25 years. It really painted a very stark reality, which I'll share with you.

The projection was that Nova Scotia's overall population would decline somewhere in the order of 4%. Unfortunately, the 18-64-year-old cohort, which is the labour market, would decline over that same period by between 15% and 20%. Moreover, we looked across the world, frankly, at sub-national jurisdictions—at provinces—that had experienced even a fraction of that kind of labour market

compression, and there was no productivity or innovation compensatory economic lift that could accommodate that kind of a contraction in the labour market.

Demography in this case is not simply a tracking of age. It is a fundamental change to our province's and the region's ability to be successful on a long-term basis. The Canadian demographer David Foot has often reminded us not to be surprised that people get one year older a year at a time. But when you reach the point, as Ms. Lockhart indicated, of a demographic pattern in Atlantic Canada that is a bit of a precursor to what will happen in other areas of Canada, that kind of age weighting will fundamentally change everything.

In our economic commission report, we set 19 goals and it was no accident that the number one recommendation was for a tripling of immigration numbers in Nova Scotia. While that may seem a bit of a stretch goal, especially given where we were at the time in 2014, I'd remind the committee members that the number corresponded to Nova Scotia's per capita share of the immigrant landings at that time in Canada.

There needs to be a focus on immigration. Obviously the economic linkages are equally important, but I think the committee is aware that the track record of immigrants in Canada, generally, and in Nova Scotia specifically, is very positive with respect to their employment levels, to their having higher educational attainment levels than the Canadian population, and to their starting their own businesses and succeeding with them over time.

Our belief is that there does need to be a concerted focus on immigration, particularly with the dynamics in Atlantic Canada, and that it should act in concert with the kinds of elements of an innovation agenda and the start-up success that we've seen, particularly in the Halifax area. But, frankly, this is a circumstance, and I believe now what I believed in 2014, that without significantly enhanced immigration capacity it will be an exceedingly challenging economic future for Atlantic Canada.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ivany.

Mr. McKenna, the floor is yours.

Hon. Frank McKenna (Deputy Chair, Corporate Office, TD Bank Group): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I am delighted to be here.

[*English*]

I'm delighted to be among you here today and flattered to be asked to be here as a witness, especially with my good friend Alaina Lockhart, whom I give full credit for inspiring this effort, and Ray Ivany, the subject matter expert who is well respected in our region.

They've said exactly what I wanted to say, so I'm going to go further and be much more provocative in what I say. I don't have the expertise, but I am motivated by living in the region, having eyes in our region, and a lifelong passion for the place of my birth. I can only be helpful, I think, if I get right through to what I think are the facts.

We can't do justice to the issue of immigration in Atlantic Canada without dealing with the issue of temporary foreign workers and employment insurance. They're all inextricably linked, so let's frame the problem.

It's not overly apocalyptic to say that if demography is destiny, Atlantic Canada is in a slow-moving death spiral. The facts should not be in dispute: 10% of Canadians lived in Atlantic Canada in 1966; now it's 6.6%. The 2015 Stats Canada numbers showed that New Brunswick had sustained more deaths than births for the first time since statistics were tracked. The region as a whole had the second-lowest fertility rate in Canada. We've lost over 40,000 people in the last 30 years. The population isn't just leaving; it's getting older. The Atlantic region has aged twice as fast as Alberta since 1971. The average age now is eight years older than in Alberta.

Just this week, Stats Canada had even more alarming numbers. The slowest growing part of Canada is Atlantic Canada. New Brunswick was the worst in the country, and the only province that had a negative growth rate; Nova Scotia was right behind it. Saint John, New Brunswick, was the only city in Canada that lost population over the last five years.

We're seeing the consequences play out in this never-ending death spiral. Aging populations cost more, the declining population base results in less equalization, fewer transfers for health and education, less money from income tax, less money raised from consumption tax, and then we have to care for an aging population, which is exponentially more expensive.

The results are starkly visible: universities are struggling for students, our high schools are sometimes half full and, of course, everybody is fighting to keep their school full and we have bed-blockers in all our hospitals.

That vicious cycle is self-perpetuating. Provincial deficits are soaring, and in a desperate effort to staunch the bleeding, provincial governments have compounded the problem by increasing consumption taxes and marginal tax rates to the point where taxation is at capacity in virtually all our provinces. Even worse, skilled workers commuting to the west may conclude at some point that it makes more sense to move there and enjoy lower tax rates than continuing to live at home.

To compound the problem for the provinces, all the levers are held by the federal government: employment insurance, immigration, temporary foreign workers.

Let's start with immigration. Atlantic Canada in particular and much of rural Canada in general have trouble attracting immigrants because we don't have a base of immigrants. Immigrants go where immigrants are; they want to be part of a community. We don't have those communities in large measure. That's why 70% of immigrants in Canada go to Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto; 65% of all immigrants end up in Toronto. Toronto is booming, with cranes on every corner. That's a good thing for Toronto, but we don't have that jet fuel in our economy.

Public policy supports those centres that have critical mass. When was the last time you saw an immigration minister from Atlantic Canada? Facts are facts; Atlantic Canada only receives about 2.5% of immigrants. We're not getting our fair share, and without a larger

base we can't get the critical mass to attract more immigrants. It's a constantly reinforcing negative cycle.

Increasing immigration to Atlantic Canada, I want to say clearly, is not without controversy. Even the citizens of Atlantic Canada are less than enthusiastic about increased immigration. They often ask me why I want to keep bringing people in; they don't have jobs for the people who are here.

A glimmer of hope has emerged in the recent Syrian refugee crisis. Atlantic Canadians welcomed a disproportionate number. A lot of that was for humanitarian reasons, but a lot of it was also blatant recognition that we have a big population problem.

What does all this mean? It means that Atlantic Canada not only has an aging and declining workforce, but also a dramatic shortage of skilled workers, a chronic shortage of willing workers to fill the jobs available. When we fix the problem, we have to fix the hemorrhaging, which brings us to the temporary foreign worker program. That program is desperately needed for everyone, from machine operators to production workers, hospitality workers, whatever you might think. Thousands of jobs are at risk of going unfilled and much production of being shipped out of the region because of a lack of employees. This is not an idle threat. Changes made to the program a couple of years ago resulted in a crisis in our communities, with hundreds of jobs being shifted out of the region.

• (1545)

The provinces and employers are caught in a cruel bind: even though on paper unemployment is high, they have no control over the employment insurance system, and they can't find enough workers to satisfy the labour force requirements. A suspension of the temporary foreign workers program would put at jeopardy at least a billion dollars in the seafood industry alone.

That brings us to the third piece of the conundrum. With unemployment across the region close to double digits, how could we possibly have a shortage of workers? Well, here's the dirty little secret. For many, employment insurance has gone from being a trampoline to being a trap. A percentage of chronic recipients have become so addicted to the opiate of unemployment insurance that they eschew full-time work.

The seasonal nature of part of the Atlantic economy exacerbates the problem. Employment insurance de facto has become a guaranteed annual income program for seasonal industries. It's a fact. In spite of well-meaning efforts from successive federal governments, the problem is getting worse, not better. Decades of chronic dependency have atrophied the skills of this work force and destroyed their resolve to work. The drug of unemployment insurance has sapped the strength of many in our economy, allowing them to avoid tough mobility decisions, and it has promoted poor work practices by employers and employees alike.

We haven't seen the political will at the federal level to do anything about this. In New Brunswick alone, about \$800 million is paid each year in employment insurance payments.

• (1550)

The Chair: Wind up in 20 seconds, please.

Hon. Frank McKenna: Decades of EI have left these workers without skills and motivation. You can't blame the victims: they've taken what's on offer.

I suggest that we need a three-pronged approach: deal with employment insurance; try to create case plans for new entrants to work them into programs of learning, education, etc.; continue with temporary foreign workers in order to fill the current gap.

Also, deal with the problem of the immigration program. We need a larger share of the pie than we're getting at present. I'd be glad to give some suggestions on that as we get to questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. McKenna.

Mr. Harvey, take seven minutes, please.

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank you, Mr. McKenna, for being here with us today. I think you offer a unique perspective as somebody who has been a strong advocate for Atlantic Canada as a public servant, and somebody who has worked in the private sector. It gives you a more well-rounded view of the picture in Atlantic Canada.

As somebody who has worked in private industry my entire life before running for public office, I've accessed the temporary foreign worker program in Atlantic Canada and have used it in a processing industry. I've long said that I don't believe there's a direct correlation between the unemployment area in a specific geographic region and the need in that region for temporary foreign workers or an immigration stream to fill the roles that are required by industry. I think much of that relates to what you spoke to—the lack of skills development because of decades of declining population and lack of industry.

I'm wondering, therefore, how you see the federal government's role in working with the provinces and the private sector to push this agenda of immigration in Atlantic Canada. Where can we be most effective in recruitment and retention of those workers in Atlantic Canada once they're there?

Hon. Frank McKenna: I'd say retention is part of our own problem. Communities, the province, and associations have to work harder at retention. We have to lay down a base.

I would say as well that many things are starting to work now. The Atlantic growth strategy is part of the solution to the problem. This new Atlantic immigration pilot is a big step in the right direction. We need much more along the lines of the pilot project.

We need more entrepreneurs coming; we need people to come who don't have a job but will create a job and create hundreds of other jobs, the way you see all over the rest of Canada. We need people like that.

We need a path from our universities. I'd say 20% or more—Ray would know—of our university graduates are international students.

We need to allow them to stay in our region for some years after they graduate and put together business plans and create new industries. We need all of that.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: And do you think—?

Hon. Frank McKenna: And we need a path, by the way, for temporary foreign workers. Somebody who's been in our community working for four or five years knows the community, likes the community, and is probably the best bet to be retained in the community.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Absolutely. I know from a transportation perspective that we certainly see in Atlantic Canada many transportation drivers who are coming in here and are working and auto-enrolling in the immigration stream with the full intent of immigrating here over the long term. I completely agree with you that it becomes a more long-term strategy for immigration.

Do you think we need a more holistic approach to addressing some of the issues we have in Atlantic Canada through the Atlantic growth strategy, along with immigration? This would address some of the other symptoms affecting economic growth and innovation. Do you think that is the proper path? Do you feel that the Atlantic growth strategy targets the areas we need to get to?

Hon. Frank McKenna: Yes. Look, I think it's all going in the right direction, but it is a chicken-and-egg thing. A lot of people would say let's not bring in immigrants until we have jobs. But in many cases, immigrants are the people who create the jobs. They enrich our communities and enrich our populations and our workforce. We must have all of these things firing at the same time.

Last week, I announced 600 jobs in Moncton. I know that we cannot fill all of those locally. We're going to have to bring people from across Canada or people from other countries in order to fill them. We need all of these efforts working together, in my view, in order to succeed.

• (1555)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you.

Before I'm out of time, Mr. Ivany, from your work studying this issue, what specific streams of employment do you think immigration can help us address in Atlantic Canada, and what specific skills do new immigrants or newcomers coming to Atlantic Canada possess that we might not have in our regular workforce there? How can they complement the workforce that already exists?

Mr. Ray Ivany: I think it's virtually across the board, so you're going to get some immigration that is triggered by the need for very rare and specific skill sets. I agree also with Mr. McKenna. I think we've long seen an entrepreneurial drive in immigrants, so it won't necessarily be skill-set related, except that the skill set is to actually create a business that will create employment for Atlantic Canadians.

I think what we've seen is better matchmaking, and this is an area in which, frankly, the provincial government and the federal government need to work hand in glove. I know that our immigration unit here in Nova Scotia has been very, very aggressive and has met or exceeded all of its targets.

Often it's about the point that you raised, Mr. Harvey. It is the matchmaking between an individual company looking for a specific skill and an immigrant. And remember that their requirements are to determine that they can't find a Canadian for that job, and then the immigration department helps match them up with someone coming through one of the streams.

We heard criticism—I'll be candid with you—during our work that oftentimes the federal government presence or effort in this matchmaking amounted to a 1-800 number. Frankly, that's not good enough. There needs to be a federal immigration office presence, I think, in all of the Atlantic Canadian provinces that can, again, work very closely with the provincial departments to get this elegant fit and match between opportunity and an individual immigrant.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you, Mr. Ivany.

Before I run out of time, I want to just ask something.

Mrs. Lockhart, you spoke in your opening comments about the unanimous support received last fall for the motion in the House. What type of signal do you think that sends to Atlantic Canadians, and to New Brunswickers at the same time, that we were able to pass that in the House? What kind of message do you think that sends to Atlantic Canada?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Thank you, Mr. Harvey.

I think it was a very strong signal to send to Atlantic Canadians that the whole House of Commons recognizes there's an issue. I was very pleased to see cross-party support for looking at this and making sure that we do have a concerted effort. I think it was a very strong signal of how important it is to Atlantic Canada and that the prosperity of Atlantic Canada will impact the prosperity of all of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lockhart.

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

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

Mrs. Lockhart, we've heard a lot of testimony to date about the need to ensure a strong economy in the Atlantic provinces to have a sustainable driver for immigration over time and certainly to see retention. Would you agree with that characterization?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Absolutely. I mentioned in my opening statement that this needs to be part of a bigger plan. Immigration on

its own will not solve the problems of Atlantic Canada, but when you have businesses telling you that it's a barrier to growth, then we really need to look at it. I think, as you said, we've heard a lot of testimony today, as well as earlier, that this is in fact the case.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Were you aware of a Conference Board of Canada report commissioned to look at the economic analysis of the Energy East pipeline project? That report stated that more than 3,771 jobs would be created by this project for New Brunswick specifically, and, it looks like, close to a billion dollars in tax revenues created for New Brunswick. Were you aware of that report?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I was not aware of that report specifically, but I'm aware of the potential impact of Energy East.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Excellent. In February of last year, there was a motion before the House that read:

given this time of economic uncertainty, the House: (a) recognize the importance of the energy sector to the Canadian economy and support its development in an environmentally sustainable way; (b) agree that pipelines are the safest way to transport oil; (c) acknowledge the desire for the Energy East pipeline expressed by the provincial governments of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and New Brunswick; and (d) express its support for the Energy East pipeline currently under consideration.

How did you vote on that motion?

● (1600)

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I did not vote for that motion. As you are aware right now, the Energy East project is being reviewed by the NEB. We've been very clear that our government supports getting our resources to tidewater, but we need to do it in a responsible way, and there was a process in place.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If the NEB rules in favour of that project, will you support it?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How do you feel about other pipeline projects such as the gateway project that was approved by the NEB yet politically overturned by the government?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I think the government needs to make decisions on an individual basis in line with individual circumstances. Clearly, the Energy East project is one that potentially has more impact for Atlantic Canada, so that's the one I've focused on, but yes—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So it's okay for the Energy East pipeline to be approved and go forward, but not the gateway project that was overturned by the government.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: That's not what I said. What I said—or what I intended to say if I didn't make it clear—was that there is a process, and we respect the process. I respect the process. If that process deems that Energy East is a good project, and the recommendation is to go forward with it, then I would support the government in their decision to do so.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Would you support the government if they decided to overturn the project as they did with gateway?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I think you've seen in the past that my colleagues and I, all 32 of us, would have an opportunity to talk with the government about the potential impacts you mentioned, and depending on the circumstances at that time, the government will make that decision.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So the Atlantic Liberal caucus would support Energy East in spite of a cabinet decision to overturn it—

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I can't speak for what will happen in the future. What I'm telling you is that I support the process that's under way now.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's a definite “I don't know” on 3,700 jobs.

I'll move on to a different report. Four of your colleagues wrote a report called the “Report of the Atlantic Growth Strategy Subcommittee on Innovation”, and in it they said:

Four to five months can be a lifetime for a business, especially for a startup. Following the approval of an application

—and this is in regard to ACOA—

finalizing the related contribution agreement may take anywhere from two to 12 months, further impeding a business' opportunity to execute successfully.

In your opinion, is an ACOA minister from Mississauga the best way to overcome this particular impediment to economic growth in Atlantic Canada?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: With all due respect, Ms. Rempel, we are talking today about immigration. That is the area that I'm focused on, and I think we have seen disruption of this committee and the way the time for testimony has been used. I'd really like to focus on immigration today.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I realize that you might be testy over this, but you did point out at the front end of your comments that you acknowledged there is a linkage between the retention of immigrants and economic growth. ACOA is a vehicle, supposedly, to see economic growth in Atlantic Canada. If your community and your colleagues are stating that the approvals process for ACOA grants is an impediment to economic growth, would you characterize the fact that the ACOA minister is now from Mississauga as an impediment to economic growth, and ergo, immigration retention?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: No, I wouldn't say that at all. Actually, I would like to clarify. I believe what the report said was that that was one of the pieces of feedback my colleagues heard during that report.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Actually, it's a determinative statement that I just quoted.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I don't believe it is.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: It actually says:

Four to five months can be a lifetime for a business, especially for a startup. Following the approval of an application, finalizing the related contribution

agreement may take anywhere from two to 12 months, further impeding a business' opportunity to execute successfully.

Would you like to clarify your statement?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: No, actually, what I would like to clarify is that ACOA has always been a vehicle for economic growth in Atlantic Canada, and I think it will remain very important in the future. As I mentioned in my—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you support having an ACOA minister Mississauga, Ontario, and the delays that have been created as a result?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Actually, I'm not going to qualify that question because it's putting all kinds of words in my mouth.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you. I turn it over to Mr. Tilson.

The Chair: Mr. Tilson, you have one minute.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. McKenna, New Brunswick used to have a program for post-secondary students that offered a tuition rebate for graduates who remained in the province for a certain period of time following graduation. The current government cancelled that program as a cost-cutting measure. I don't know whether you're aware of it, but as a result of that, it appears that graduates have even less of an incentive to remain in New Brunswick. Can you comment on that?

Hon. Frank McKenna: It has been a long time since I was premier.

Mr. David Tilson: I'm sure you keep in touch.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, please.

Hon. Frank McKenna: I keep in touch. I also keep in touch on the Energy East project, by the way, since I was one of the architects of it.

• (1605)

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. McKenna, don't veer off—

Hon. Frank McKenna: I can veer wherever I want—

Mr. David Tilson: No, you can't. Actually, you can't.

Hon. Frank McKenna: —in answering your question.

The answer is this. My understanding is that, as part of a program of reducing tuition across the board, the Government of New Brunswick made a change in that direction.

I want to amplify what I said, and what Ray Ivany and I both believe. The university community, however it is structured, needs to be part of the solution here. They have a huge reservoir of international students, many of whom like our communities and would like to stay in our communities.

None of us are satisfied with the status quo at present. All of us want to see some improvement. We are recommending some modest ideas as to how we could retain some of those people in our communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKenna.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

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

I thank all the witnesses for their presentations.

I have a number of issues I want to touch on, but let me begin with this. We've heard from previous panels about the importance of immigration and what immigration can do to strengthen the economy of communities. Of course, we've also heard that there are limitations with respect to that, as well.

I am a firm believer that immigration can help build a nation. In fact, immigration did build our nation, and I am very proud of that, given that this is our 150th anniversary. To that end, with respect to the Atlantic provinces, there are some measures in place.

My first question for the witnesses is this. Would you agree that we should open up immigration even more? As it stands right now, we have a limit on our levels plan of 300,000. The government's own expert panel, which they consulted, was recommending 450,000. I'm wondering whether you would agree that we should open that up beyond 300,000. Perhaps I could just get a quick answer from the witnesses.

I will start with you, Mrs. Lockhart.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We are fortunate in Atlantic Canada to have had the opportunity, through the pilot program, to invite 2,000 additional applications. Those applications will allow families to come with any newcomers to the Atlantic provinces.

We have a mechanism right now. I think it's a good way to test whether that works and what the economic impact will be. If you consider 2,000 people—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, could I cut in there? Do you agree that our levels plan should be increased beyond 300,000?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: I think there needs to be a balanced approach.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that a yes or a no? Sorry, I'm confused. Could you clarify that for me?

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Sure.

I think it needs to be done properly. If it is done properly, there may be an opportunity to increase those levels.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. McKenna, go ahead.

Hon. Frank McKenna: I've looked at your previous testimony, and I am appreciative of your support for our particular plight in Atlantic Canada. I am supportive of your statement, as well. I don't have the same strictures as elected members do on this, but I think that increased immigration would be good for our country.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

We now come to Mr. Ivany, by video conference.

Mr. Ray Ivany: Thank you.

My only proviso on that is what we need a robust analysis of our receptor capacity. It clearly does us no good if we increase the level and don't have the capacity to settle those individuals.

With that caveat, my view is similar to Mr. McKenna's.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'll move on to another quick question.

We have the Atlantic growth strategy. On that committee or that body, the leadership committee, we have the premiers of the four provinces and five members of the federal cabinet.

Mr. McKenna, you raised the issue around immigration, as well as temporary foreign workers, as a key piece. Yet, none of those cabinet ministers are at that table. It just strikes me as odd and strange. Do you think there should be an amendment in terms of that representation?

These are key questions. If they're not at that table driving the issue.... I've been in cabinet before. You have to drive the issues in order to make a thing happen. Otherwise, it isn't going to happen.

In relation to temporary foreign workers, shouldn't we move beyond temporary foreign workers? As you said, Mr. McKenna, those people returning year after year are not temporary. Let's be real. Let's just call them what they are—permanent residents. Should we not create a pathway immediately with respect to that?

Hon. Frank McKenna: Yes. On your last point, I agree that we should be creating a pathway. People who have spent years working in our communities are probably the low-hanging fruit among those we can attract and retain.

On your first point, I'm not sure if I completely understand it. We had four cabinet ministers as part of the Atlantic growth strategy. They're all at the federal cabinet table, and as a result of their work, they were able to get this Atlantic pilot initiative, which gives us 2,000 more immigrants than we had a year ago.

● (1610)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I guess my point about that is that the immigration minister is not at that table and neither is the minister responsible for the temporary foreign workers program, which seem to me pretty key components to—

Hon. Frank McKenna: You mean to be part of the Atlantic growth table?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct. From that leadership committee.

Hon. Frank McKenna: Yes, it's an interesting point.

I just know because I've been a part of it. The Minister of Immigration in previous iterations has been at the meetings of the Atlantic premiers and Atlantic ministers on a regular basis. They believe, I believe, we all believe that the cornerstone of our progress is going to be on that immigration file.

Whether or not they're sitting formally at the table, they are present at the meetings.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would like to raise another issue.

I would like to move a motion if I may.

Mr. Chair, to the committee, and to the witnesses, there are many critical issues before us. There are some issues that people have died from. I have not been able to move this committee to even have a debate about the following issue, let alone study it. I mean no disrespect to what's going on here. This is really important work. I want to do this work. But I also want to move this motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee immediately undertake a study on the current situation regarding the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), given its current funding constraints; its increasing case backlog of 1,000 cases per month; its current situation of over 60 board member vacancies; and the significant increase in asylum claims to Canada in 2017. That this study should be comprised of no less than three meetings; that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship be in attendance for at least one meeting; that the Chair of the IRB be in attendance for at least one meeting; that the study be concluded and that the Committee report its findings to the House; and that due to the urgency of this situation, that these meetings take place prior to June 23, 2017.

Mr. Chair, this motion has been tabled in my name. To that end, I would really like it if we could get the committee members to vote on it. The reason I raise this is that we were just talking about immigration. We just heard from Mr. McKenna about the importance of it and his citing, for example, the refugee community and their contributions to strengthening the economy of the communities as well.

Yet, we have a situation in which the IRB is really stuck. They're unable to process cases. They don't have the resources to do so. We have a bit of a challenge on our hands. Also, with the situation that we have in the broader community, we recently had a death occur when people were trying to cross over to Canada.

This motion, in my view, is very important. We need to get on with a study on it in a timely fashion. That's not to say that the study that we're engaging in right now is not important. Of course it is important. Because of the urgency of this in terms of life and death issues, I think it's something that we should be taking a look at in this committee.

I do apologize to the witnesses who are here with respect to this work that's being done today.

The committee in my view has a responsibility to examine pressing issues in a timely fashion. As we have seen now, and as I was mentioning, lives are at stake when it comes to these issues as the government side continues to refuse to resume debate on my motion to study irregular border crossings.

Mr. Chair, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UNHCR, has noted that by the end of 2015 an average of 24 people a minute were being forced to flee their homes due to war and persecution. A total of 65.3 million people were displaced at the end of 2015. That is compared to 59.5 million just a year earlier. This was the first time in the organization's history—

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): On a point of order, to the distractors, don't attack this Atlantic Canada study in your attempt to glorify your position or politicize your future. We have a study here. We have witnesses who have travelled very far. I think this is very undemocratic of you. I think it's very impolite and very rude.

• (1615)

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, unfortunately, that is not a point of order.

Ms. Kwan, the floor is yours.

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

We welcome the debate by committee members, although I would really welcome approval of this motion. I would love to hear from committee members who say there is no urgency to the motion that I'm putting forward. I would love to hear that debate.

An. hon. member: The motion in the House was not unanimous.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: This was important and must be done.

This is ridiculous.

The Chair: Order.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order of decorum, I believe you have ruled that my colleague has the floor and should be able to speak unimpeded.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Kwan, the floor is yours.

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

This was the first time in the organization's history that some 60 million people have been displaced, and it marks the highest number of displaced persons since World War II. Of the 7.4 billion people in the world, one in every 113 globally is now either an asylum seeker, an internally displaced person, or a refugee. It is because of this unprecedented level of forced displacement that we must examine our systems.

In May of this year I had the pleasure of meeting with the chair of the IRB, Mario Dion. Mr. Dion was proud of the work being undertaken by the IRB, but was also aware of its limitations. During the incredibly informative meeting, the chair explained to me several new efficiency-increasing measures. They include the creation of a new process referred to as a short hearing process. Under this new process, claims by individuals from a country of origin with a claim acceptance rate of 80% or higher will be considered for inclusion by the refugee protection division.

The rationale behind this process is that following a 90-minute hearing, an IRB member can, in the majority of cases, determine that the claim is genuine and should be accepted. This shorter hearing will allow the obvious cases to be cleared through the system faster. Should the IRB member have any doubt in the claim, the claim will move back into the standard hearing process. This ensures the integrity of the system is maintained. This is what I've been advised by the chair of the IRB.

I was also informed of the expansion of countries eligible for the IRB's expedited process. Established in its current form a couple of years ago, the expedited process allows for claims from select countries of origin to be processed without a hearing and only based on the paper submission. Originally, only claims from Syria, Iraq, and Eritrea were eligible for this process. As of June 2017, Afghanistan, Burundi, Egypt, and Yemen were added as eligible countries of origin to qualify for an expedited claim. Just like the short hearing process, if there is any doubt expressed by the IRB member regarding the submission, it will move to a full hearing to determine the authenticity of the claim.

These measures will allow for the clearest cases of individuals needing access to Canada's asylum system to be processed more quickly, as well as for more time and resources to be dedicated to less clear cases to ensure the system's integrity remains intact.

Unfortunately, due to the government's unjustifiable silence on increasing asylum claims to Canada, especially inland claims stemming from irregular crossings from the U.S. into Canada, the growing trend of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric has been allowed to grow and flourish unchecked.

When the IRB announced these efficiency measures, mainstream editorial titles included "Liberals planning to rubber-stamp potentially dangerous asylum seekers". I have been disappointed on far too many occasions by the government's grandiose words on the international stage that are not backed up by action at home. This allows this misinformation to go unchallenged.

Here we have two clear examples of the IRB increasing its efficiency levels. Mr. Dion also shared with me a graph showing the RPD's new system intake from 2013 to December 2016. I cannot table the graph here at the committee. Perhaps we can ask Mr. Dion to bring a bilingual version of the graph to this committee, so we can actually examine that work and understand what it means, what the IRB is faced with, and why we must resource the IRB in order to get this work done.

If they are not successful in reducing the claims and dealing with the cases, and they are creating a backlog of 1,000 a month, we have a problem with the integrity of our system, and that needs to be addressed.

If we want to talk about immigration as it impacts the Atlantic provinces, and how we need to move forward on that, we need to make sure the IRB is resourced appropriately so they can do their job.

The graph was striking for two reasons, Mr. Chair. The first is the significant steady increase in the number of cases finalized on a month-by-month basis by the RPD. In December of 2013, the RPD finalized about 700 cases. In December 2016, they finalized about 1,200 cases. The trend line is clear, and even before these new initiatives, the IRB was been working hard to improve its case processing.

•(1620)

Unfortunately, the second striking feature undercuts these increases in efficiency. As I alluded to in my opening, we're currently seeing an unprecedented number of forced displacements around the world. The result of this is a serious increase in claim

intake at the RPD. For example, in December 2013, the RPD had a new claim intake of about 900 cases. In December 2016, there were 2,200 new cases.

Mr. Dion made it clear to me in no uncertain terms that no number of efficiencies could be undertaken by the IRB...for the lack of funding and over 60 board member vacancies. They need more board members and additional resources to deal with the current global trends in forced displacement.

The persistent and unjustifiable situation regarding legacy claims creates an additional series of problems for the IRB. Claims that were not finalized before the refugee determination system overhaul of 2012 are considered legacy claims. Since they are not subject to the statutory timelines for hearing dates that claims made after the overhaul are subject to, these claims are constantly put off in order to increase the likelihood of meeting the statutory time frames for new claims.

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

Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I believe that we're here for the Atlantic Canada study. We have guests here. We have a very important former premier here. I believe it's disrespectful for us to bring in a motion. I would be more than willing to discuss it at a future point, but I think it's really a waste of enormous time. I don't know if we'll ever get a chance to speak to the premier again. I think it's important that we hear from the witnesses. This is a very important study for Atlantic Canada, and it's important that we recognize that we can't disrespect every witness who comes in.

The Chair: Mr. Anandasangaree, you're getting into debate there. Unless you can reference the standing order that you are using for your particular point of order, I will rule you out of order and will pass the floor back to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan.

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

I'd like to take a moment to address this issue. I get it that we have guests here. I get it that there is important work done, and it is being done. We have set aside 10 meetings for this study. There are other pressing issues as well.

Mr. Chair, I know the committee members don't want to acknowledge this, but the fact is that if the IRB is not functioning properly, it undermines our entire system. It undermines the integrity of our immigration system, and right now, in my view, we have a major problem. The IRB has 1,000 new backlogged cases in their processing time—1,000 cases a month—so we're wanting people to get to the Atlantic provinces to support the economy, and we want to do all of that work.

I don't know how we can actually facilitate that if the IRB is stuck in this situation. We just heard Mr. McKenna talking about the value of the refugee community going to the Atlantic provinces and refugees are welcome there. If we want to make sure that this process is well in place, we need to make sure that the IRB is able to manage these issues effectively and efficiently, and right now it is not. There is urgency to this motion and we need to deal with it, otherwise everything else falls apart. That's why I'm doing this, Mr. Chair.

I want to get back to my point about the situation the IRB is faced with. They actually are dealing with legacy claims. The minister told the IRB to say, “deal with the legacy claims”, and then they didn't give them many resources to do it. There are approximately 5,500 legacy claims left, and that means there are roughly 5,500 claimants who have been waiting in limbo since 2012, not knowing what their life is going to be like, where they're supposed to go, where they're supposed to fit. They do not know right now and they have been stuck in the situation since 2012.

I think we can all agree in no way is this somehow acceptable, but that is the reality right now for these individuals, and the government has chosen not to give any resources to the IRB to process these claims. A lack of political will has led to these individuals' claims for asylum here to be treated, at best, as a second-class request. Mr. Dion was clear in the 2016-17 report on plans and priorities when he stated:

The IRB has reallocated available internal funding to reduce the backlog of legacy cases from 32,000 to 6,500 since the coming into force of the new refugee determination system. In 2016-17 the board's ability to reallocate funding internally will be severely limited, particularly, if the board is faced with sustained increases in intake at the RPD. As a result, commitments made by the board in relation to refugee protection claims that are not subject to statutory time frames, such as the remaining 6,500 legacy claims will have to be revisited unless additional temporary funding is made available.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chair, that request was ignored. Instead, the IRB has once again been forced to reallocate money internally, further straining their budget. Recently, the IRB announced the creation of the legacy task force for claims. By dedicating \$3 million per year for two years and 25 FTE board members, the IRB hopes to finally eliminate this ongoing injustice. That means \$3 million is taken out of the area that the IRB is trying to deal with, because there were no new moneys allocated to them under budget 2017.

Mr. Dion explained that the 25 board members would be some of the most experienced members he had. While it would be great to eliminate the legacy cases, this will also undoubtedly impact the operations of the IRB moving forward—

•(1625)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Mr. Chair, on a quick point of order, I would like to raise my disappointment at this committee's inability to function in a proper manner. I happen to sit on two standing committees myself—

Mr. David Tilson: Who are those people interrupting our meeting? There's a whole table over here. You shouldn't be here—

Mr. T.J. Harvey: For me, having the opportunity to sit on two high-functioning committees, it's very unfortunate that we're going to disregard all the relevant testimony that we could potentially hear today—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey—

Mr. T.J. Harvey: —due to this intervention by my honourable colleague. I recognize her passion for the subject matter.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey—

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Ultimately, this is not the time and place to raise this issue.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey, you have entered into debate. As I said previously—

Mr. David Tilson: He's interrupting our meeting.

The Chair: —unless you can reference a standing order that has been breached, your point of order is out of order.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: I would like to say that as an Atlantic Canadian and a member of Parliament from another riding in this country, I find it very disheartening—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harvey.

I will turn the floor back to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, before you begin, I would like to ask your indulgence for one minute.

I would like to thank the witnesses and dismiss them. I know that some have travelled from afar. I know that the video conference link will expire momentarily. I'd like to thank the witnesses for their insight and their testimony. We look forward to hearing any additional insights they can provide the committee.

Thank you on behalf of all the committee members.

The witnesses are dismissed and the floor is once again yours, Ms. Kwan.

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

As I say, if our immigration system is being undermined, as it is right now with the IRB not having sufficient resources to process the claims efficiently and without a backlog, we are not doing anybody a favour. This includes the Atlantic provinces, which need immigration and our immigration system to work effectively.

It is clear that the IRB is doing everything it can. As Mr. Dion explained, they need resources for their board members to be able to meet the demands being placed on the system.

•(1630)

The Chair: Order, please.

I understand that some people are catching up, but I ask that you do it outside the committee room.

Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: They currently are not able to meet the demand. At my meeting with Mr. Dion in May, the IRB had a backlog of 24,000 cases. Let me just repeat that so committee members can hear this and hear it clearly: there is a backlog of 24,000 cases right now at the IRB. That backlog increases by 1,000 cases per month. Again, let me just repeat that so everyone is clear about the situation the IRB is faced with: the backlog is increasing by 1,000 cases a month.

For various reasons only 50% of the cases are actually heard within the statutory timeframe. IRB is financially stressed. No efficiencies can make up for this. At this very committee I questioned the minister about legacy claims and the need for resources at the IRB. He acknowledged this when stated that “I think the approach should be efficiencies plus resources”. Well, it's clear that the efficiencies are, in fact, being made. What's also clear, unfortunately, is that the minister isn't holding up his end and providing the necessary resources.

To make matters worse, just yesterday the IRB was described as “adequately funded” in response to a question I asked the minister. What prompted this change in opinion? Did the minister misspeak? Was he serious when he said that the IRB was being adequately funded? We had the chair of the IRB say otherwise. They have a backlog of 24,000 cases sitting right now in their docket, and with each passing month another 1,000 cases are added to that. Honestly, in what universe does the minister think this is adequately resourcing the IRB?

You have legacy cases, and people's lives are stuck in limbo for years on end without knowing if they can have permanent residence here or not. I don't know about you, but if I were stuck in that situation and didn't know what my future looked like, each day would seem like a year. These individuals have been stuck in that situation year after year. With this backlog increasing by 1,000 cases a month, we're going to create a brand new category of legacy cases under this government.

Funding hasn't changed. In fact, we know that internal funding has been reallocated, increasing stresses on the system. To echo the serious concerns of the other opposition members of the committee, we need the minister to appear before this committee so that we can ask him these questions. This is a clear and significant change in the way the funding of the IRB is viewed. Members of this committee deserve to know what brought it about. The longer the government fails to acknowledge the issues present in the system, the more the integrity of the system is put at risk in a time of unprecedented global forced displacements and growing anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric. This is something Canada simply cannot afford to allow to happen.

Yet here we are, with this committee refusing to acknowledge the issues in the system and continuing to vote against even debating my motion to have a study on the irregular border crossings. The committee members say I am disrupting the committee and its work. I do not understand why committee members can't even vote on a simple motion.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I put a motion on the table. Give us an answer. Do you agree that we should study the near-crisis situation happening with irregular crossings? The committee members won't own up to it. They would delay the debate, and they won't actually answer the question.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: This is irrelevant to the actual discussion. I don't believe that—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: The member is entitled to make fair points relating to her motion. But this is leading into another motion altogether. We're not debating two motions. We're just debating the motion that's before us.

The Chair: We're getting into debate once again.

Ms. Rempel, you have a point of order.

• (1635)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A point of order on relevancy has been raised. As a member of the committee listening to Ms. Kwan, I'm finding her case showing how the committee has been unable to pass motions relevant to her argument on why this motion should be passed. So it's my opinion as a committee member that her argument is relevant. I would love to hear her continue.

The Chair: We're into debate once again.

Let's get back to Ms. Kwan, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll tell you exactly how the issue around irregular crossings ties into the work of the IRB, because those claims need to be processed by the IRB and if the IRB doesn't have the resources to do it, they cannot do that work effectively. We do have a crisis. A woman just died trying to cross from the United States to Canada. We can stick our heads in the sand and ignore this real issue, but lives are at stake. The work of the IRB is absolutely critical, Mr. Chair, and the board needs to be funded to do that work. That's how it is relevant, Mr. Chair.

The issue of irregular crossings and the increased levels of inland refugee claims stemming from this are contributing to the current stresses on the IRB. Let us be very clear about that. In case people don't understand how that process works, there is a direct link with the IRB. Like other claims, inland asylum claims are subject to statutory timeframes to be heard, and these are contributing to the backlog. If you don't resource it, it will happen. Backlogs will occur and that is what is happening.

Since the Trump administration took office, there has been a significant spike in asylum seekers crossing from the U.S. into Canada at irregular and unauthorized border crossings. From January to April 2017, 2,719 individuals crossing in this manner have been apprehended by Canadian authorities. In all of 2016, a total of 2,464 individuals were apprehended. If this trend continues, we could expect over 8,000 such interceptions this year, over triple the amount of 2016. Imagine the impact on the IRB. If we don't get them resources to process these cases, what will happen to us? How are we going to protect the integrity of our immigration system? We cannot afford to let this happen.

It is public knowledge that the RCMP and CBSA budgets in the communities most impacted by these crossings are being stretched. The biggest impact of this might be the failure of the government to even acknowledge the issue. That undermines Canadians' faith in our system, which we cannot afford to allow happen at this time.

The argument that irregular border crossings allow asylum seekers to “cheat the system” or “jump the queue”, as some people are saying, Mr. Chair, is absolutely false. Inland refugee claimants are included in a specific category in the annual immigration levels plan. The Government of Canada has a settlement target of 15,000 protected persons in Canada, the category under which inland refugee claimants fall, in addition to the 25,000 spots reserved for government-assisted, privately sponsored and blended visa office referred refugees. Any refugees who arrive in Canada by irregular border crossings will not take away settlement opportunities for refugees attempting to come to Canada through traditional channels.

Similarly, inland refugee claims are processed according to their own statutory timeline and will not contribute to backlog in other refugee claims. But that said, each stream will have backlogs if the IRB is not resourced appropriately, and that should not continue.

The notion that irregular—

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Chair, if I may.

Ms. Kwan, I think—

The Chair: Is there a point of order?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I believe we've heard enough, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: We've heard quite a bit from the member.

We're in a position to vote on this.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I raise this because it has come up several times, Mr. Chair.

I note that in Bosc and O'Brien, at page 1052, the standing order reads:

A member of committee may move a motion at any time in the normal course of a meeting, provided that:
the notice period, if any, has been respected.

There is a large list of other reasons why, but given that that is the standing order and I believe there has been appropriate notice given for this motion, I believe my colleague is in order.

The Chair: You're quite correct. Our colleague is in order.

Ms. Kwan, you may proceed.

● (1640)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The notion that irregular border crossing to claim asylum is committing a crime is simply false, Mr. Chair.

Canada is a statutory to the refugee conventions that allow for this to occur under international law. For example, the UN refugee convention declares that:

The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees who, coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened in the sense of Article 1, enter or are present in their territory without authorization, provided they present themselves without delay to the authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence.

Canada signed this convention in 1969, Mr. Chair.

The idea that the floodgates have been opened and refugees are streaming across the border unchecked at levels that the Canadian system can't handle is also not true. However, this is an issue that needs to be addressed. The government can't just ignore it and pretend that we don't need to resource the IRB to deal with it effectively.

The Prime Minister doesn't get to say and note on social media that we welcome refugees, and then not provide the necessary resources to do this work. That is absolutely critical to do if we're going to honour the words of the Prime Minister.

A failure to take any measures will continue to strain the resources of the impacted government agencies, increase backlogs, and undermine public confidence in our systems. If this becomes a crisis, it will be a crisis of our own doing.

The problem is that we're letting it become a bigger issue than it needs to be. We have now seen a death occur. A 57-year-old woman died of hypothermia attempting to make the dangerous crossing from the U.S. into Emerson, Manitoba. The death was entirely preventable. Unfortunately, despite grandiose words and tweets of welcoming, the government's response has been to largely ignore this. When an actual response is issued, it's callous and filled with misinformation.

Take, for example, the Minister of Public Safety, who said, “It is important to follow the rules and cross the border in a legal and regular manner. People should not think that some back door or side door is a free ticket to get into the country.”

Mr. Chair, I believe most of us here today, as well as the minister, know that comment is simply false. The woman couldn't cross at an authorized port of entry. She couldn't, because of the safe third country agreement. The only way for her claim to be heard was through an irregular crossing to make an inland refugee claim.

I've been arguing since the dramatic shift in humanitarian policy in the U.S., following the election of Donald Trump, that the safe third country agreement needs to be suspended. Immigration law experts and refugee advocate groups have long been calling for this to occur.

I have a case in point that highlights the great work the IRB can do when it has the funding and the board members available to do so. On Christmas Eve of 2016, Seidu Mohammed, a Ghanaian asylum seeker whose refugee claim in the U.S. was denied, walked across the Canadian border into Emerson. Freezing temperatures left Mr. Mohammed badly frostbitten and cost him eight fingers. On May 17, the IRB accepted his asylum claim. Mr. Mohammed said his claim was rejected in the U.S. for similar reasons that the Harvard immigration law program, Canadian immigration law scholars and students, humanitarian and civil liberties associations, and others have noted, in repeatedly calling for the suspension of the safe third country agreement. During his lengthy, punitive immigration detention, he was unable to access counsel and adequately prepare for his hearing. Under our system, he was able to do so.

The IRB does good work, and it needs to be resourced to continue to do so. If it is not resourced to that end, backlogs will happen—and they are happening at the pace of 1,000 cases per month, on top of an already huge backlog of 24,000 cases. Mr. Mohammed could have made his claim without losing his fingers had the government suspended the safe third country agreement.

● (1645)

The Minister of immigration, in his answers to me, constantly uses the term “orderly” to describe things. In what way is having successful asylum claimants lose their fingers to frostbite orderly? In what way is finding the woman who died in a ditch from hypothermia orderly? You know what is orderly: crossing at an authorized port of entry and making an asylum claim.

Because of the government's inaction, NGOs are continuing to step in and pick up the slack, while they, themselves, are being underfunded by the government.

I recently met with the Inland Refugee Society of B.C. It has been serving refugee claimants since 1984 and is the primary organization providing emergency support and for settlement needs, such as orientation, information, referrals, and English classes for refugee claimants from when they arrive in Canada. That would be for inland refugee claimants.

They have seen an increase in arrivals in the last two years, and most particularly since January of this year. They have seen their caseload increase by 300% compared to the same time period last year. Their service has been stretched beyond capacity. If the current rate of incoming refugee claimants continues, they will run out of funds for this fiscal year and will have to close their doors. As of May 2017, they've had to cut transit and housing assistance, and they can now only pay the salaries of two and a half staff positions and for the office space they operate out of.

An immediate intervention is needed so that refugee claimants can continue receiving the settlement and integration support they need. Without this support, refugee claimants end up in vulnerable situations, including being homeless, and the transition to self-sufficiency is delayed.

Right now the shelters are full in my community. They have 32 families in a motel that's being funded by the Red Cross. The families are running out of food, and they are desperate for help.

The Inland Refugee Society of B.C. is struggling to stay afloat. By the way, they do not receive one penny from the federal government to do this important work. Inland asylum seekers do not get welfare, and they have no access to support except through agencies like the Inland Refugee Society. Other settlement service agencies and the CBSA are referring inland asylum seekers to the Inland Refugee Society of B.C. It's worth noting that—

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Chair, we have a motion here. The motion is very specific. We're getting into a very elaborate conversation about refugee settlement agencies. That's a completely different conversation altogether.

Mr. Chair, I do think the debate needs to be on point, and on a number of occasions we're seeing the individual going off the point. I would like to ask that you keep the discussion to the actual motion.

The Chair: You're raising a point of relevance, then.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Yes, relevance.

The Chair: I believe that at this point the discussion is still relevant to the motion that was moved.

Ms. Rempel, do you have a point of order?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On that point of order, Mr. Chair, I'd like to reference the Speaker's ruling in the House last week. I believe there were several points of relevancy that were raised, and the Speaker made a point that a great degree of latitude is typically given to debaters. They find that typically, at some point, the person raising this will bring it around to it. I found Ms. Kwan's point relevant. Certainly, in referencing the Speaker's ruling, I believe her arguments are relevant.

The Chair: Yes, chairs typically do allow a certain amount of leeway to allow the member to make their point.

Ms. Kwan, please continue.

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

I believe my points are relevant, and I will tie this in for the member so that he can see it as clearly as I do.

As I was saying, it's worth noting that, according to the Inland Refugee Society of B.C., some 70% of the applications are successful in getting status. Also, with the lack of resources at the IRB, 50% of the cases are deferred and are not heard on time.

What does that mean? It means that those families are stuck in limbo, and they rely on groups like the Inland Refugee Society of B. C. to support them. Also, without their cases being heard, they cannot access any resources anywhere else. They cannot find work, and that is a major problem.

So this stuff is all tied together. I know that members are annoyed that I'm talking about this. It is so very relevant to what we do. This is what we need to deal with. We need to make sure that our government—your government—collectively addresses these issues so that our immigration system is not undermined.

● (1650)

Mr. T.J. Harvey: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: At the moment, the IRB is being undermined without the resources they need, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey, you have a point of order.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: I would like to raise my dissatisfaction with the honourable member's comments today, and this motion specifically isn't centred around the motion itself or its contents, but more around the time limits of the motion.

I think it's very disconcerting that this is being raised at this time. It's such a vital time. We're nearing the end of the session, and committees are working hard to try to get their studies wrapped up.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey, there is no point of order in what you've just stated, and I will return the floor to Ms. Kwan.

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

The approach this committee has taken on this is a bit trying, because it doesn't want to look at the critical issues at hand. If members had been listening to what I've been saying, they would find the relevance of my motion.

Let's be clear about what my motion was, Mr. Chair. Let me put it on the record for the members who might have missed it:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee immediately undertake a study on the current situation regarding the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), given its current funding constraints

The Chair: There's a point of order.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: She is now repeating her statement, and I think there is a standing order on repetition. I don't believe we are here to hear repetition. I just want to acknowledge that I was annoyed.

The Chair: But once again, a little latitude is allowed. Thank you for raising that.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: But not for repetition of the same wording, sir.

The Chair: Repetition and relevance are very important.

Ms. Kwan, please continue. The floor is yours.

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

The reason I was putting the motion back on the floor is that I don't think any of the members heard the motion. They were questioning the relevance of my arguments when my argument backed up exactly why we need to have this study immediately.

The Chair: I'm calling this to order, Ms. Kwan.

I believe you have speaking notes. If you'd like to continue, please do so. The floor is yours.

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

My statements are related to and relevant to the motion on the immediate need for a study, because the IRB, which is underfunded, is seeing an increase of 1,000 cases per month in its backlog. The current situation with more than 60 board member vacancies and the significant increase in asylum claims to Canada in 2017 cannot be allowed to continue. We need to have the minister and the officials here and to have this committee look into this issue to see how we can address it.

The inland refugee services—

Mr. T.J. Harvey: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Harvey, I certainly hope there is a point of order this time.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Mr. Chair, I would just like to say that my annoyance is not related to the relevance of the content of her motion. I think her content is completely relevant to the motion she presented, but I am disconcerted by the timeliness of the motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's not a point of order. Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, the floor is yours.

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

The members will get a chance to vote on this. I will be sure of that. I am coming to the end of my comments about this, and committee members will know that when I make comments like this it's not to drag out the time, but rather to make my point clear. I hope the members will understand that, and I will be looking forward to seeing how the committee members vote on this motion.

As I was saying, Mr. Chair, this contributes to the stress on the IRB and the NGOs like the Inland Refugee Society of B.C. If hearings are delayed, claimants remain in the IRSBC system; they simply don't have the capacity to deal with it because they don't get any funding.

Refugee claimants are resilient and ready to integrate, but they are met with barriers that prolong their settlement and their reliance on social services. An increase in front-end support when refugee claimants are at their most vulnerable would ensure the efficient and successful settlement and transition of this population into Canadian society. Is this what the Prime Minister meant when he tweeted, "Welcome to Canada"?

These situations are entirely preventable. The government needs to take its head out of the sand and acknowledge that things need to be addressed. A great way to start this right here at this committee would be to support this motion to study this. We can study the trend at irregular crossings and the changes that need to occur at the IRB. We can report our recommendations to the government; we can urge government action on this front; and our committee can be the place where all this starts.

I sincerely hope that the government members will support my motion today, Mr. Chair.

With that, I close, and I look forward to hearing the debate or comments from by committee members on the substance of my motion, and to an actual vote. Let's get on with it and get the work done.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Sarai, the floor is yours.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I move that the debate be now adjourned.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is a case in point.

The Chair: Okay.

All those in favour?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A recorded vote, please.

The Chair: A recorded vote.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): The motion is that the debate be now adjourned.

Mr. David Tilson: No.

The Chair: It's a recorded vote.

Mr. David Tilson: He said "that the committee be adjourned".

The Chair: Do you mean the meeting?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, I'm moving that the debate be now adjourned.

Mr. David Tilson: You said "committee", sir.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, I didn't say "committee"; I said "debate".

Mr. David Tilson: I think you did say "committee".

The Chair: Both the clerk and analyst heard "debate".

Mr. David Tilson: Well, I must be hearing things.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

An hon. member: You probably are, sir.

The Chair: I've referred to our support staff here and they all heard "debate", so we will proceed with the recorded vote.

The Clerk: The motion is that the debate be now adjourned.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: I will suspend for a couple of minutes to allow the next group of witnesses to assemble.

● (1655) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1700)

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order.

Thank you to the witnesses for their appearance today and for their patience.

We have before us, from the Association of Atlantic Universities, Peter Halpin, the executive director; from the Canadian Federation of Students—Newfoundland and Labrador, Ms. Sofia Descalzi, the chairperson; and from the Memorial University of Newfoundland by video conference, Natasha Clark, who is an international student adviser.

Welcome to all.

Mr. Halpin, I believe that you'll be starting off. You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Halpin (Executive Director, Association of Atlantic Universities): Thank you.

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee on a subject so important to the future of Atlantic Canada—the successful attraction and retention of new Canadians to our region.

I'm Peter Halpin, executive director of the Association of Atlantic Universities, the AAU. The AAU is an advocacy organization working on behalf of the presidents and students of the 16 universities in our region. Today I will share some data on the attraction and enrolment of international students, their social and cultural impact on our campuses, their regional economic impact, and their interest in staying in the region following graduation, which I think is very relevant to today's discussion. I will also address what universities are doing to position Atlantic Canada as an attractive education destination in the world, as well as our collective efforts to help improve receptivity toward hiring recent international student graduates.

Over the past 10 years, the enrolment of international students in our universities has increased by more than 100%. Today there are more than 13,000 international students studying at Atlantic Canadian universities. These students represent nearly 20% of total full-time university enrolment in Atlantic Canada. As the region's domestic population continues its steady decline, the value of international students to institutional sustainability grows in importance. Atlantic Canada's universities are talent magnets and the best source of new immigrants to the region. Our universities are working harder than ever on marketing the region and our institutions to international students as a welcoming education destination in the world.

With the assistance of ACOA's international business development program, the AAU has led an international student digital marketing research study on behalf of the region's post-secondary education sector. The results of that study will equip our universities and colleges with actionable information about key international target markets and their cultural nuances, who to target within those markets, and when, where, and how to engage student prospects. Currently over 150 countries are represented on our campuses. That cultural and ethnic mix has a profoundly positive impact on the educational and social experience of the entire university community. By way of example, Saint Mary's University in Halifax is considered the most international university in Canada, with visa students representing close to 35% of the total student body. Having more than 13,000 international students in the region also has a significant economic impact. In 2009-10 international students generated \$565 million of economic activity across the region. The Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training, CAMET, is currently updating that study, with results expected this fall.

In 2016 the AAU conducted a graduate retention study among our graduating university and community college students across the region. That research produced an astonishing result: 75% of those international students who participated in the research indicated they would remain in their province of study following graduation if given the opportunity to do so. That's 75%. In order of importance, those students rated quality of life in Atlantic Canada most highly, closely followed by job opportunities, as the major factors that would encourage them to stay. With the generous support of ACOA and its Atlantic policy research initiative program, the AAU is now doing a follow-up study with those international students who responded to the 2016 study to determine what has happened in their lives one year following graduation. We expect those results at the end of June.

● (1705)

Our university leaders believe that we have an important role to play in attracting more international students to the region. We are also committed to working collaboratively with governments, the private sector, and others to help retain those students—the future professionals, entrepreneurs, and citizens we so badly need to populate our region.

On July 10, the AAU will host the Atlantic leaders' summit in Halifax. It will bring together academic, business, community, student, government, and political leaders to examine the barriers affecting retention of international student graduates in Atlantic Canada. The summit features the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, as keynote speaker. The minister will address the Atlantic immigration pilot project, as well as the immigration pillar of the Atlantic growth strategy.

In summary, the AAU is committed to inter-institutional collaboration to better position Atlantic Canada and our universities as a education destination in the world. We are also working collaboratively with other key players to retain as many of our international student graduates as possible in communities right across the region.

Again, thank you very much for your invitation to appear before the committee today. I look forward to your questions and the discussion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Halpin.

Ms. Descalzi, the floor is yours for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Sofia Descalzi (Chairperson, Canadian Federation of Students (Newfoundland and Labrador)): Thank you.

Thank you for the invitation here today. I am the chairperson-elect of the Canadian Federation of Students in Newfoundland and Labrador. Our federation represents over 600,000 post-secondary students across Canada on 80 different campuses, including all post-secondary students in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Private member's motion 39 asks you to investigate the issue of immigration to Atlantic Canada. It asks you to consider, among other things, the challenges of retaining new immigrants and possible recommendations on how to increase immigration to Atlantic Canada. Research tells us that Atlantic Canada needs more immigrants, and international students are an ideal audience for new citizens. For that to happen, however, we must end discriminatory practices at the federal and provincial levels. At the federal level, we need more certainty for existing pathways to Canadian citizenship. At the provincial level, we must end discriminatory practices in overseas recruitment, tuition fees, public health care coverage, and employment standards. If we treat international students with respect, and not as cash cows for budget cuts, they can help Atlantic Canada meet the challenges of our aging society.

I speak as an international student. I am from Ecuador, and I recently graduated with a major in psychology and a minor in French from Memorial University at the Grenfell Campus. I wanted to come to Canada for numerous reasons. There was political unrest in my country, where universities are mostly privatized. As well, employers tend to hire people with degrees from universities outside the country.

But I had no opportunity to study abroad. My mother was widowed when I was 11 years old, and we struggled economically. Then a recruiter from Memorial University came to my high school and told me about Memorial's theatre program and its tuition freeze

for all students. When I was offered a scholarship from Memorial University covering my first year's tuition, I headed north.

I didn't realize that my years here would be filled with anxiety and fear. For example, it wasn't until I arrived at Grenfell Campus that I was told I could not minor in theatre. This was despite communication beforehand, numerous times, with my academic adviser. It was not an auspicious beginning to my time here in Canada.

Starting in 2014 I had long conversations with my mother about whether I could continue my studies. The tuition freeze for international students was threatened. No Ecuadorian university would have accepted my credits due to the difference in language, so if the tuition had increased, it would have meant two years down the drain for me.

Memorial University's new ancillary fees are driving international students away, because many of us simply cannot afford an extra \$600 per year. Immigration rules dictate that we can only work part time, so we can't even take on another job to try to compensate. Meanwhile, we are the ones who use the campus food bank the most. We are already struggling to get by and can't eat proper meals today, let alone when these new fees come into effect.

Memorial University's tuition fee hikes scheduled for 2021 are also driving prospective students away. I know this from my own family. I have cousins who wanted to come to Memorial University but can't afford the added costs. They cannot apply for government loans from either country if they choose to come to Canada. They will therefore have to remain in Ecuador in order to avail themselves of that option. Private loans aren't great either, since interest rates are so high. Now my cousins are considering going to other countries, such as Germany, or staying in Ecuador.

Moreover, nobody told me that in Corner Brook the transit system doesn't circulate on weekends or evenings, the only times I could buy my groceries. The recruiter didn't tell me that I couldn't find a job off campus until I stopped telling people I was from Ecuador, or that many employers wouldn't even hire me because my accent was too thick.

My summers were full of anguish too. Even though I am grateful to live in one of the provinces that provide health care to international students, I always feared summer term, when spring term courses were over and my medical care plan expired. There were no useful courses for my degree being offered at that time, so I couldn't renew my medical care because I was not enrolled in any course, and I could not go back to Ecuador because I could not afford it. I was trapped, working to save money for next semester while hoping nothing would happen to me while I was not medically insured.

• (1710)

Despite the obstacles, I have made my life in the province and I want to stay, but I also know that it is incredibly difficult to immigrate to Newfoundland and Labrador, given the current conditions.

Members of the committee, that's just my story, but I am not alone. Hundreds of thousands of international students have these problems on a daily basis and those problems must end, if we want them to stay and help build our communities. I am honoured to have been chosen by my colleagues to be a public voice for the renewal of our post-secondary sector, and we do have ideas to ensure that international students are treated with respect.

Thanks again for the invitation here. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Descalzi.

Ms. Clark, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

[Technical difficulty—Editor]

We cannot hear the witness on the video conference. We'll return to Ms. Clark when those are resolved and we'll begin with a round of questions.

We'll begin with Mr. O'Regan. You have five minutes, please.

• (1715)

Mr. Seamus O'Regan (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, Lib.): First of all, Ms. Clark, because I know you can hear me, I apologize greatly that we are going to miss your verbal contribution. I'm only a guest here on the committee, but I'm sure this committee of good-hearted individuals will ensure that your input is given at some point.

Ms. Descalzi, maybe I'll begin with you and welcome you here in front of this committee.

You spoke of some of the difficulties you had as an international student at university and some of the things that were wanting in terms of your welcome and your being able to express yourself at your full abilities. Tell me about your experience now, as an immigrant. We've already heard from former Premier McKenna, and from Ms. Lockhart before you, and all the members of Parliament from Atlantic Canada, who desperately want to have more of you in Atlantic Canada, and I think most Canadians do as well.

That was certainly the expression given by the House of Commons, which unanimously supported the strategy. How do we draw more Sofias and how do we retain them? In other words, how do we make life easier for you, so that you choose to stay in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador?

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: Thank you for the question.

One of the things that I have mentioned is making a smoother transition from being an international student to a permanent resident. I am actually going through the application processes now.

For example, there are requirements for bank statements showing \$2,000 in our bank accounts. As an international student, I don't have \$2,000 in my bank account, so how am I going to check that

box, let's say? There is also the uncertainty about which program to go through.

There are diverse options and there's not a lot of guidance as to how we have to approach that process. It just seems that international students try to do everything right. You know, we come here, we know the language, and we still have to go through a cumbersome process to attain our permanent residency. Those application processes need to be revised.

In terms of staying in Atlantic Canada, we need to make sure that there are job options for new immigrants. We need to start building a culture that is not afraid of someone who is not from here and that we don't discriminate based on someone's accent, or the colour of their skin, or their background.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Newfoundlanders should hardly be the people to comment on your accent. I apologize for that.

The Chair: Mr. O'Regan, it appears that Ms. Clark may be on line now and I think you might have a question for her, so let me just test this first.

Ms. Clark, could you say a few words to us?

Ms. Natasha Clark (International Student Advisor, Memorial University of Newfoundland): Good afternoon.

The Chair: Thank you.

I had stopped the clock, so I will restart the clock when you're ready, Mr. O'Regan.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Does Ms. Clark get any time to make a statement?

The Chair: She does have seven minutes. We can either have the statement right now and resume with your round of questions—

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: I defer to you, Mr. Chair. What's the normal protocol?

The Chair: I think it might be helpful in moulding some of the questions you might have.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

The Chair: Ms. Clark, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Natasha Clark: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for having me here.

I've worked as an international student adviser at Memorial University of Newfoundland since 2005. In that time, Memorial has seen a significant increase in its international student population. In my years as an international student adviser, I've seen many students come and go. Some stay, and most wish to stay. I've experienced the many changes within the Canadian immigration system, some that make this dream a reality, and some that create barriers.

To provide some background and context, Memorial University is the only university in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The university was established as a memorial to the Newfoundlanders who lost their lives during the First and Second World Wars.

Memorial is a multi-campus, multidisciplinary, public, and teaching/research university. Memorial has more than 18,500 students, 5,200 faculty and staff spread across four campuses, and nearly 85,000 alumni. As the only university in Newfoundland, Memorial has a special obligation to the people of the province, while at the same time it strives to be a globally distinguished university and inclusive of students and scholars from all over the world.

Memorial has 2,500 international students from over 80 countries. The international student population at Memorial forms approximately 13% of the student population and is growing.

In my role as an international student adviser, I provide advice to international students on any aspect of their adaptation to the new country, culture, and legal system, with particular emphasis on immigration law. As a regulated Canadian immigration consultant, I field many questions from students about pathways to permanent residency.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education conducts regular surveys of the international student population in Canada. In their most recent survey, they cite that 51% of international students plan to apply for permanent residency. I experience this statistic daily in my work with international students. More than half of all my meetings with students on immigration issues involve questions about remaining in Canada after graduation and eligibility for permanent residency.

I meet many students who qualify for the federal skilled worker program or Canadian experience class but do not score competitively on the comprehensive ranking system. I also encounter many students who wish to apply through the provincial nominee program but face challenges in securing skilled employment in their fields to qualify them for the program.

Fortunately, our office benefits from a good working relationship with the provincial government's Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism. The provincial government has identified international students as a desired pool of immigrants to the province and has a designated staff person who connects with students interested in staying here. This is an invaluable resource, as it provides a point of contact for international students early on in their journey to permanent residency in order to provide them with labour market and immigration advice.

Still, there are challenges. The provincial government has addressed many of these in their immigration action plan going forward. International students formed a large part of the immigration strategy launched in 2008 and form a focus in the recently released Way Forward document on immigration in Newfoundland and Labrador, a five-year action plan released in 2017.

In this plan, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador commits to continue to work closely with post-secondary institutions in the province to develop a program to assist international students in obtaining work placements and to explore new PNP categories related to entrepreneurship. The five-year action plan is an ambitious one. The province aims to attract 1,700 immigrants by 2022. In 2014, the total number was 899. The Atlantic growth strategy, I

believe, will go a long way to helping the province achieve this target.

In giving consideration to the questions which are before the committee in this study on immigration to Atlantic Canada, I wish to share these thoughts.

First, as it relates to the challenges associated with an aging population and shrinking population base, for post-secondary institutions this really means a shrinking pool of university applicants. I believe it's important to maintain a focus on international student recruitment and the creation of an educational brand for Atlantic Canada.

Second, as it relates to the retention of current residents and the challenges of retaining new immigrants, two major challenges facing international students are the lack of labour market opportunities and the challenges to entering the labour market, and the lack of pathways for international students to become permanent residents. Through the Canadian experience class, and even with new changes to the comprehensive ranking system, an international graduate with a bachelor's degree and one year of work experience in Canada does not necessarily score highly enough to be competitive in the express entry pool.

Third, in terms of possible recommendations on how to increase immigration to the region and address these challenges, I commend the Newfoundland government's plan to partner with employers to create placement opportunities for international students and to pilot a My First Newfoundland and Labrador Job program for international graduates.

● (1720)

I think it is important to focus on new pathways for permanent residency, particularly around entrepreneurship and low-skilled employment. I hear from many employers that they struggle to hire enough low-skilled employees. This this seems to be a real disconnect with the current immigration system, which really focuses on skilled migrants.

I encounter many international students who are very entrepreneurial in nature, and our institution has various programs to support them in this realm. However, it is very difficult for them to immigrate as entrepreneurs. There is no provincial category for them, and at the federal level there is, of course, the start-up visa program. But it's challenging in this province, as there is only one recognized incubator company that incubates tech companies.

Many of our students are looking to create small and medium-sized businesses, which would ultimately help the Newfoundland economy in creating jobs. There is little opportunity for them to immigrate.

I have known several students who have sold their equity and ownership and essentially become an employee with a company in order to qualify to immigrate as a federal skilled worker.

Of course, another reason why entrepreneurial categories are so important is that in the absence of being able to find employment, or in the face of an economic downturn or recession, many individuals turn to business start-ups as a livelihood.

Lastly, my analysis of the Atlantic immigration pilot initiatives associated with the Atlantic growth strategy is this. I do find that the opportunity provided by AIPP for low-skilled immigrants—

• (1725)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left.

Ms. Natasha Clark: —is great for international students, as many have entry-level positions in category C. It's hard to find skilled work when they first graduate. The no-work-experience requirement is wonderful, as many of them don't necessarily have a great deal of experience.

I thank you very much for your time and the opportunity to speak with the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Clark.

Mr. O'Regan, you have two minutes, 15 seconds.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Ms. Clark, if you were to make one other recommendation, what would it be? In your experience, when looking at the Atlantic growth strategy, the things we've done and the things we hope to do, what would be something that you think could alleviate some pressure and perhaps attract more immigrants and retain the ones whom you meet and see?

Ms. Natasha Clark: I would suggest that it would be attractive to look at an entrepreneurship stream. So within the Atlantic immigration pilot, rather than having a job offer through a designated employer, perhaps it could involve linking them with some business development company or corporation to help in assisting them to create a business. They're creating jobs as well in many cases.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: They're the ones who create the jobs.

Tell me, are there any misconceptions that you encounter from other people about the potential of immigrants in the province, or is that dissipating in your view?

Ms. Natasha Clark: Certainly, I think one challenge I spoke about was finding employment for many of our students. In particular, we have various co-operative education programs. It does pose a challenge for many international students to be competitive in those job markets. They come from high school and a culture where perhaps a lot of the focus was placed on studies and technical skills, and they're competing now with many Canadian students who have worked through high school and have volunteered and developed those skills.

I see that as a barrier. We have programs to help overcome that. We help to develop some of their professional skills and soft skills. There are often misconceptions among employers as well about what is needed to hire an international student. They're quite employable. Their study permit allows them to work. They can get a work permit upon graduation, so I think some knowledge around that area would be beneficial.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Thank you.

I wanted to apologize to all three of our guests, by the way, for the abbreviated amount of time, but let the record show that when Atlantic Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador had their moment here before this committee, others decided to hijack it for other reasons. We're used to that. Note the date, note the time, take down the names.

Thank you all very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for your diligence in telling us what can be done.

I have a question for Sophia.

Sophia, I heard over and over again from students in Toronto that the fees are too high. I've been told that the fees for international students are three times those of the regular students. They can't find work, and sometimes they work for food. Sometimes they work for five bucks an hour cash under the table. Have you ever seen anything like this?

The question goes to you, or anybody else can jump in here.

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: Differential fees are, in my opinion, the first barrier to a student being able to come to or immigrate to Atlantic Canada. As an international student, I can say that it is very unfair. It just shows that there's really no respect for international students who want to come here and start their lives. Because we have those differential fees, because we pay 3.5 times more, and because we can only work part time, we are the biggest users of food banks. As a matter of fact, at MUN 60% of the bags were given to international students.

I cannot speak precisely of anyone getting paid cash and not having a contract, but I can definitely speak to the fact that international students are struggling in very difficult living conditions. We are not wealthy. We have to break the myth that international students are wealthy. We are not. We come here to escape different climates in our own countries and to make our lives here. We need to equalize all students across the board if we are meant to stay here.

• (1730)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Ms. Clark, would you have anything to add?

Ms. Natasha Clark: No, I don't.

Mr. Bob Saroya: I have a question for you, or Peter.

What do we need to do to get those people who come to the east coast to stay there? I have personally seen over the years people who have come to Saskatchewan, who get a phone number for Saskatchewan, who get a post office box number, and then move to Toronto.

Obviously, there is a disconnect between where people who come to the country are supposed to stay and where they actually stay. What would you suggest that the federal or provincial government do to keep those people where they're supposed to be, be that in Atlantic Canada or any other part of the country? What do we need to do to make it right?

Peter, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Halpin: It's a great question. I think the situation for international students isn't that different from that of domestic students when they graduate from post-secondary education. Their number one mission is employment. Finding a job or having the opportunity to begin a career, especially in a field that's commensurate with their studies, is critically important.

That's why I mentioned our Atlantic Leaders' Summit. We are going to focus on that issue, because we need to determine what the barriers are that are keeping employers from hiring international students to the degree we would like to see. Sofia did a great job outlining some of the challenges that international students face, not only while they're going to school, but when they graduate.

We really need to examine those issues very deeply. As I had mentioned in my remarks, it's all about collaboration, and that's one thing that we do very well in our region. There's a concerted effort at the present time, through the Atlantic growth strategy, to really focus on that key issue. One of the pillars is immigration and what we can do to be more welcoming of new Canadians and to do a better job of retaining our international students.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Sofia, how many qualified students do you know who have not found a job in their field, number one, or any job?

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: It is a very unrealistic expectation for international students to graduate and then find a position related to their field, particularly in a managerial position. That's one of the prerequisites to apply for permanent residency. I cannot really testify that I know of any. People try to find links between their programs and their new jobs, but—

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

Ms. Kwan, you have five minutes, please.

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

I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

I think the issue around foreign students is an important piece with respect to increasing immigration levels.

The issue around high tuition fees is a major barrier, as I understand, from you, Ms. Descalzi.

First, what do you think should be done around that piece?

Second, in terms of the current immigration policy as it stands for foreign students, do you think the changes are sufficient? Some changes have been made to the points system, and so on. Is that sufficient to retain the international students, or do you think more should be done? If you think more should be done, what do you think it should be?

•(1735)

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: Thank you for your questions.

I think the answer to the first one is very simple. You should just eliminate the financial fees for international students. Universities have to stop increasing their fees, which are completely unregulated, in the form of ancillary fees or any other sort of fee for internationals, or any student, actually.

The answer to the second question is, no, it's insufficient. I think we should be striving to improve those application forms and processes. There should be some sort of fast track for international students given that they're already here, they already know the language, and they have already assimilated into the culture.

The point system is very confusing. I'm going through it myself and I'm having a lot of trouble. Maybe explaining it better will also be helpful.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There was a point in time when the process was that international students could make an application right off the bat into the permanent residence approach. Right now, they have to compete amongst each other and with other people who are applying to the system. By doing that, this so-called express entry system actually created major barriers, because you first must be qualified to be selected from the pool to make application for permanent residence based on the point system. That actually hampers the system. Some have said to me that the express entry system should actually be eliminated. It actually does not help the system. It's anything but express.

Can you quickly comment on that?

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: I am not very familiar with all the points or the history of entry systems, but I can definitely assure that we can improve it to make it easier for international students to stay here.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Does anyone else wish to comment on the express entry system?

Right now, that process hampers people from getting into the pool. You have to be selected first to enter the pool, so you don't actually get to make a permanent residence application right off the top. If we're talking about wanting to retain students and to get them into the system, shouldn't they be allowed to make a permanent residence application right off the top?

There is that saying, "If you're good enough to work, you're good enough to stay." If you're good enough to study, you're good enough to stay.

Ms. Natasha Clark: I also feel that it's insufficient. The changes certainly have helped, but they don't go far enough towards helping international students and more pathways for permanent residency are needed. Particularly when we look at the post-grad work permit program, it's dependent on the length of your program of study. Those who are doing programs of two years or longer benefit greatly from a three-year permit. Those who are doing less than that, one-year programs, get a one-year postgraduate work permit.

There is an increasing trend in higher education for one-year masters programs. I believe that these individuals are just as desirable and qualified for permanent residency as those who conduct a four-year program. They then have to squeeze within that one-year postgraduate work permit, that one year of Canadian experience, and then also score highly within the comprehensive ranking system.

When the Canadian experience class was introduced, it existed outside express entry. Then with the addition of express entry and the requirement that an applicant have more than 480 points to get in, it was really difficult. I don't think they had many Canadian experience class applicants through express entry, because they were going to federal skilled workers; they were going for nominees; they were going to job offers—

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Natasha Clark: —that were provided an LMIA exemption.

I don't think the Canadian experience class has lived up to what people had hoped it would. There were challenges in the beginning, and with express entry, there are still challenges.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I will close by saying that we need to make sure that the integrity of the immigration system is not being undermined; hence, my IRB motion. We need to get on with it if we want to make the system work for every single province, including the Atlantic provinces.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Harvey, you have five minutes.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll start by acknowledging Ms. Kwan's penultimate remarks about someone being “Good enough to work, good enough to stay” and “Good enough to study, good enough to stay.” I completely agree with her on the premise of those remarks, and with a lot of her line of questioning.

Mr. Halpin, could you elaborate on Atlantic Canada's true potential by our utilizing our international students better and better equipping them to transition into the economy once they've graduated in Atlantic Canada?

● (1740)

Mr. Peter Halpin: That's a great question. Thank you for asking it.

Through the research we've done among international students, one thing we've learned is that they really enjoy going to school in our region. We have very unique universities, among the oldest in the country, and we have many smaller liberal arts resident school universities.

I think, by and large, international students really enjoy the welcome they receive. I know Sofia suggested that it wasn't that great, but I think, by and large, international students do enjoy the Atlantic Canadian hospitality and warmth and sincerity of the people. From what I've learned, I think they appreciate the safety and security of our campuses and our communities. I think overall they have a great student experience. It's not without difficulties. We have

to recognize that. It has to be a great challenge to come from another part of the world and go to school in a distant part of the world.

As I mentioned earlier, I think the key to our success around retention is this collaboration among all levels of government, the private sector, and our post-secondary education sector. There's no doubt in my mind that the timing for this has never been better. I've never seen the will to succeed in this regard being greater than it currently is in our region. This is a topic that is high on everyone's agenda at the present time.

I think right now the timing has never been better for us to develop a collaborative approach to doing a better job of making it easier for Sofia and other international students from across the region to stay.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: In my previous capacities in the private sector I used to tell the HR people in the company I was working with that I didn't care where they got me employees from. I just wanted them to get me the best. I didn't really care where they came from.

I still believe that would be true if I were in the private sector, because that's what's best for the business I'm working on behalf of; it's what's best for the community; and it's what's best for the province as a whole.

I went to school in Nova Scotia, at Dalhousie's agricultural campus. That was a dozen years or so ago now, but at that time some inequities were created just by grouping international students within that campus. I think they have made great strides in trying to address those issues. I can see how international students need the camaraderie of other international students, but they also need the acceptance of the student body as a whole.

Ms. Descalzi, I first want to remark on your incredible English, which I think is far better than my Atlantic Canadian English, which is not very good.

Regardless of whether it is the federal government—

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: —provincial government, or private sector, quickly, what are some tools you think would better equip you or other students to transition into the workforce?

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: If we are not talking about provincial and federal government, I guess—

Mr. T.J. Harvey: It can be provincial or federal.

Ms. Sofia Descalzi: Okay. Sorry. I didn't understand the question.

I guess it would be providing more certainty into their status here. I keep repeating myself, but it's just very important for us students to also have health care coverage in all provinces and not have it expire every four months, because that's really hindering our performance in our studies and in our livelihoods.

It's also about treating us with as much respect as you would treat another Canadian, and not to say “utilizing” students, because that's a little bit...

● (1745)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. T.J. Harvey: Thank you very much.

The Chair: With that, our meeting concludes.

I would like to thank the witnesses for their submissions, their testimony, and their patience.

I know I speak on behalf of all of our committee members—and this is particularly to you, Ms. Descalzi—when I say that you embody the character traits and values that we expect from

immigrants who come to Canada. I know that in the coming years, Newfoundland and Labrador and, in fact, Canada will benefit from students like you immigrating to our country.

Thank you so much.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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