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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)):
Good afternoon, everybody. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 39 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Today we will continue our study on application backlogs and processing times.

I would like to welcome our witnesses who are appearing before our committee today.

We are joined by Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko, vice-president, and also Alain Dupuis, director general, for the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada. Our second witness is Mr. Peter Bhatti, chairman, International Christian Voice. Our third witness for today is Shelley Gilbert, coordinator, social work services, representing Legal Assistance of Windsor.

Welcome to all the witnesses. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

We will start with Mr. Méhou-Loko, representing Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko (Vice-President, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada):
Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting us to appear before you today.

My name is Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko, and I am the vice-president of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, or FCFA for short. Joining me is Alain Dupuis, our director general.

The FCFA is the national voice of the 2.8 million members of Canada's French-speaking minority communities in nine provinces and three territories. For nearly five decades, the FCFA has been standing up for language rights and the French language. The FCFA also plays a leading role in immigration in French-speaking and Acadian communities.

In 2003, the government and francophone minority communities jointly set a 4.4% target for French-speaking immigrants to Canada

outside Quebec by 2008. In 2006, however, the government announced that it was pushing the deadline 15 years into the future. One of the main reasons given by the government at the time was the considerable backlog of applications already in the system.

The government has never managed to make any significant progress towards the target, with francophone immigration stagnating below 2% for most of the past decade. Last year, the official languages commissioner estimated that francophone minority communities could have welcomed 76,000 more immigrants had the target been met as of 2008.

Express entry is the main tool for recruiting economic immigrants, but it wasn't designed to support francophone immigration. It's a general immigration program that was tweaked to take into account applicants' knowledge of French, but it has proven inadequate thus far.

At the bare minimum, express entry should include quotas for the selection of French-speaking immigrants. In addition, applications from French-speaking candidates should be assessed on their own, instead of being lumped together with general applications. Better still, the government should establish a separate economic immigration program tailored to the needs and realities of francophones.

Francophones are also being penalized for the lack of processing capacity for immigration applications in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in relation to family class and student visa applications. A single office, in Dakar, Senegal, handles the applications from 16 countries. Last week's census figures show just how serious the problem is. Take the top 20 countries of origin of French-speaking immigrants who settle outside Quebec. Only two of the countries served by the Dakar visa office are on that list, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon.

Given that sub-Saharan Africa is a massive pool of potential French-speaking immigrants, Canada can—and must—do a lot more. Additional offices are desperately needed in sub-Saharan Africa to process applications.

Canada has failed to reach its target for two decades, so 4.4% is no longer the right number. The demographic weight of Canada's francophone minority community will not be restored under that target.

In April, the FCFA called on the Government of Canada to adopt a catch-up target. It would start at 12% beginning in 2024 and gradually increase to 20% by 2036. A measure like that would make it possible to repair the damage done by the stagnating level of francophone immigration since 2003, while putting communities on the path to growth.

Greater visa processing capacity in French-speaking countries, namely in sub-Saharan Africa, and the removal of visa barriers for international students are two essential steps to reach the catch-up target.

Furthermore, specific francophone streams should be established for economic immigrants and family class immigrants, as well as for the provincial nominee programs and the refugee sponsorship support program.

Lastly, the government needs to support capacity building, so that communities can participate all along the francophone immigration continuum, from promotion and selection to settlement and integration.

Communities expect Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to take concrete steps and actions, so that Canada can fulfill its francophone immigration commitment, as set out in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Thank you for this opportunity.

• (1535)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Bhatti, representing International Christian Voice. He's the chairman.

Mr. Bhatti, you can please begin. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Peter Bhatti (Chairman, International Christian Voice): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our concerns as a sponsorship agreement holder with the private sponsorship program.

International Christian Voice, or ICV, is a registered, non-profit charitable human rights organization. Our core work is to assist individuals and families who have fled religious persecution and are stranded in third countries with little or no hope.

My family and I have personally suffered from religious persecution. My youngest brother, Shahbaz Bhatti, was the only Christian federal minister in the Government of Pakistan and was assassinated by religious extremists in March 2011.

Since 2016, ICV has submitted more than 100 sponsorship applications. The average waiting time for the completion of the sponsorship process has been three years or more. I want to give you an example.

One refugee family fled from their homeland due to religious persecution, in 2013, to Thailand. ICV submitted their file in April 2017. The family was called for an interview in September 2019. The case was refused in March 2020. The head of the family fell

into depression and was involved in an accident in which he was killed. He left behind a young wife and four daughters. After the judicial review, upon reapplying, their application was accepted and his family came to Canada this year. The family suffered for nine years and lost the head of the family.

Here are our concerns.

Application backlogs and processing times are the major concern for the sponsorship agreement holders and for the refugees and asylum seekers, who continue to suffer while waiting for the processing of approvals. In our experience, most of the refugees and asylum seekers who have been persecuted for their faith are from low-income backgrounds, have very little education and lack effective communication skills. They are at a significant disadvantage when trying to effectively share their stories of persecution with the visa officers, which can lead to the refusal of their applications.

It appears that a lack of sufficient human resources may be the root cause of the delays today. Due to unexpected political crises, wars and natural disasters around the world, we see that the same human resources handling immigration cases are pulled to respond to the new crises. These delays put on hold the applications of those who are waiting their turn and are causing a massive backlog.

With regard to recommendations, we strongly request that a dedicated number of staff be appointed to handle PSR applications and other routine immigration activities. Pulling away resources or adding an additional workload on the staff should be prevented.

Visa officials should be introduced to and made reasonably aware of the culture, demographics and political and religious conflicts of the countries where refugees are coming from. Video recordings of interviews have verified that there are incorrect interpretations of conversations during interviews between visa officers and applicants.

We are grateful to the Canadian government for playing an important role on the world stage to assist refugees and asylum seekers. However, we, as sponsorship agreement holders, are facing many challenges with our applications, which is causing prolonged suffering and pain for those we are trying to help.

We would welcome a greater initiative by the government to address these issues as soon as possible. Thank you.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bhatti.

We will now proceed to Ms. Shelley Gilbert, coordinator for social work services, representing Legal Assistance of Windsor.

Ms. Gilbert, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can please begin.

Ms. Shelley Gilbert (Coordinator, Social Work Services, Legal Assistance of Windsor): I would like to thank the members of the committee for the invitation to speak on this very important topic.

In preparation for today, I have both spoken with other service providers and reflected upon the experiences of the people I've had the privilege of working with.

Chairperson, the delays in processing through immigration offices, both in Canada and in our visa offices abroad, are having a dire effect on the mental health of families asking for our help.

Legal Assistance of Windsor is a legal aid-funded clinic, where social workers, social work students, lawyers and law students provide a range of services to our community. As a community heavily enriched by immigration over the past 50 years, we work closely with newcomers, migrant workers, survivors of human trafficking and refugee claimants on their settlement in Canada and in reuniting them with their families.

An issue I would like to raise today is the processing of dependent family members of protected persons. As of Friday, October 28, the average processing time for protected persons applying for permanent residence was 21 months. This 21 months is in addition to the time involved in the processing of refugee claims.

Essentially, families who have experienced violence and separate due to persecution are waiting years to be reunited through the immigration process. In the meantime, separated family members abroad often face the same danger that led their relatives to flee.

Of particular concern in my practice is the experience of women who have faced intimate partner violence and were forced to leave their children behind to seek safety. Facing extreme violence, women leave without their children due to custody issues, the inability to apply for passports or the limited resources available to women with children who are fleeing abusive partners and seeking safety.

During the years of status determination and the 21 months of permanent residence processing, children remain vulnerable to ongoing violence by the abusive partners or the extended family members. The delay provides the opportunity for abusers to use children to exert continuous coercive control over the victim. Fleeing to Canada has prevented physical violence from continuing, but delays in processing allow for psychological coercion and control to continue and, in some situations, for physical violence to be transferred from the mother to her children.

The anguish our clients experience creates additional strains on their capacity to restart their lives in Canada. Many contemplate returning to face their persecutors and protect their children. As you can imagine, others live with feelings of extreme guilt while awaiting the outcome of their applications. All struggle with the negative mental health effects of knowing their families are in danger. We cannot expect symptoms of trauma to lessen and heal when we know the people we love are experiencing the violence once perpetrated upon us.

The lasting damage to relationships cannot always be repaired, leading to higher rates of divorce and separation. Children, especially those who were separated during the developing years and who have witnessed or experienced abuse, often have difficulties in forming lasting relationships with their families after arrival. The trauma of violence and the extended delays in obtaining safety are impacting the mental health of two generations.

What is so disheartening is that many of the administrative delays are unnecessary. Our clients have been asked to provide duplicate forms in addition to the forms filled out by the principal applicant in Canada. Extended security screenings for principal applicants delay the issuing of permanent resident visas for children who would not be subject to such security screenings anyway.

The limited options available to separated families, such as a temporary resident permit, are rarely available. Visa officers continue to refuse such applications, despite evidence of immediate dangers posed to separated family members, even to children living in their own country of origin. In many cases, visa officers still consider lack of family ties in the country of origin as a deciding criteria in refusing a visitor visa, even where clear evidence of humanitarian considerations is provided.

We recommend that this committee consider, under Canada's humanitarian obligations, the effect such policies have on families. As a country that prides itself on understanding the importance of mental health for a productive and fair society, we ask that unnecessary delays—delays negatively impacting the mental health of refugees and their families—be removed.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gilbert.

We will proceed to our first round of questioning. We will begin with Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you have six minutes for your round of questioning. Please begin.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to start with the Fédération des communautés francophones. You mentioned student visas, and I know that there are problems with the post-graduate work program. The government tried to place a band-aid on the program a few months ago with the announcement of an extension of some work permits, but this past Friday I put an Order Paper question into the House of Commons, trying to get to the bottom of why certain post-grads were specifically excluded.

Do you agree that the Liberal government should not be specifically excluding any post-graduate work students at a time when we need these workers?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Thank you for your question, Mr. Redekopp.

We are aware of the problems certain immigration applicants are experiencing right now. We know the government needs to do better and do more. We expect all of Canada's elected officials to speak out about the situation and take the necessary steps so that the visa applications of foreign students in Canada are processed and granted in a timely fashion.

[English]

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

I want to turn now to Mr. Bhatti. Thank you for the work that International Christian Voice is doing in bringing persecuted Christian minorities to Canada. In my own riding of Saskatoon West, Canadian Aid to Persecuted Christians, which is run by your relative Nadeem Bhatti, is doing similar work, and I also want to thank him and his organization.

Helping Christians is not one of those things that get you front-page headlines in the Toronto media elite or praised by gatekeepers or woke folks, but there are still various terrorist organizations like the Taliban, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hamas and others that murder Christian minorities every day. Your own brother, you mentioned, was murdered.

International Christian Voice now sponsors refugees in Canada. We've heard from the Saskatoon and Toronto Catholic dioceses that there are issues with this process at the Immigration Canada level and at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees level.

Regarding groups like Christian minorities, have you experienced specific problems with the UNHCR, and is there something that Canada should do to fix those?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Thank you so much.

Yes, there is a problem with the UNHCR especially, as I mentioned here. When religious minorities apply for immigration through UNHCR to seek asylum in Canada, they are less educated and they cannot present their cases properly. UNHCR wants to have 100% of the evidence, which the applicants fail to do because of their situation in Pakistan and how they are persecuted there.

Also there is biased decision-making by the interpreters about visas. When they are doing the interpretation for our community members, those who are applying for asylum, they do not interpret properly and the result is that our cases are being refused.

I have a friend who just came from Thailand. He witnessed how refugees being questioned by the UNHCR have said, "I can speak English. I want to give evidence in English," and they have been told, "No, no. If you interrupt us, you will have two more years' delay." That kind of thing is happening every day and it causes our cases to be refused.

Unfortunately, when our Canadian visa officers want to go for an interview, they first see the files brought from the UNHCR. Most of the things there are making a decision to see files, but UNHCR is making the decisions about those files. That is the cause of more refusals.

• (1550)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Just so I understand, what you're saying is that the interpreters at the UNHCR are biased sometimes against certain minorities like Christians, for example.

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Yes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's essentially what you're saying.

Interviews aren't always recorded. Do you think it would be a good thing for those interviews to be recorded all the time?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: That would be helpful, especially when we apply for judicial review or anything else to appeal the case. That would help a lot to justify that either the refugee has a problem or the interpreter has a problem or the visa officer gave a wrong decision.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: A lot of the cases from Pakistan are dealt with in Singapore. I'm just curious as to whether you have any information on the Singapore IRCC office regarding this issue of bias and minority Christians.

Mr. Peter Bhatti: In the last few years, we've had several refusal cases from the Singapore office, especially people from Christian minorities. We have appealed several times to IRCC, and I think IRCC is looking at that.

It is a little bit better, but still, it needs to be focused more on these issues.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Do you have more examples of people who have been failed by this process?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Yes. There is one application that was refused recently from IRCC. The guy was a target of the extremists in Karachi, and he went to the hospital. He went through the crisis, but unfortunately because of the circumstances, it did not allow him to give all the evidence, a police report or the hospital report.

Because, Madam Chair and also other honourable MPs, from Pakistan, once a person is accused, especially for the blasphemy law or other cases, they have no space. They are hiding day and night and they cannot produce the proper evidence. Due to that lack of evidence, they are deemed failed. They have never accepted that there is a problem when somebody is accused due to this kind of blasphemy law or other religious persecution, and they have no place anywhere.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Kayabaga, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to start by thanking and welcoming all of our witnesses who have come to speak to us today.

I will address my questions to Monsieur Méhou-Loko.

[Translation]

Good afternoon, Mr. Méhou-Loko.

I'm going to do this quickly so I can get in all of my questions.

Today, the minister, Mr. Fraser, announced new measures to welcome to Canada up to 500,000 people in 2025, and even more after that.

In your opening remarks, you said the 4.4% target for francophone immigration to Canada outside Quebec was insufficient.

What measure do you wish the minister had announced? You don't think 4.4% of 500,000 people in 2025 is enough, so what would be the right target?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: As far as the immigration target goes, the FCFA has repeatedly underscored the need to significantly increase francophone immigration levels and to adopt a catch-up target. The government has never managed to achieve the 4.4% target to date, which explains why the deadline has been pushed back so many times.

Today, what we want is a catch-up target, which would restore the levels of Canada's francophones and, above all, their demographic weight, power and existence, ensuring the survival of French-speaking communities. It's important to point out that Canada's francophone community is part of the country's identity, so we feel strongly that these measures should be taken.

We want to see a 12% target for 2024, increasing to 20% of immigration by 2036. That would give back the francophone community its demographic power.

I will ask our director general to comment on what Mr. Fraser announced today. We had an opportunity to examine what has been done and what was introduced today by the minister. I'll let Mr. Dupuis—

• (1555)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Before Mr. Dupuis takes the floor, can you tell us what you think of Bill C-13? That study has been dragging on at the Standing Committee on Official Languages. The bill could help strengthen all the measures and targets you talked about today.

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: You used the word “dragging”, and that is precisely how we see it.

As we go about our daily lives, we, francophones, have been waiting for Canada's elected officials to vote on and pass Bill C-13, which somewhat bolsters the gains made by francophone communities but, above all, ensures their survival.

Today, our situation is desperate. As we, at the FCFA, recently demonstrated ourselves, our organizations are really struggling. French-speaking organizations are not doing well, and they are the ones—let's not forget—that provide services to francophone communities today. That's why it's so important for those organizations to receive immediate support and for the bill to be passed as soon as possible. The federal government and community partners will then be able to provide assistance to communities and ensure their survival.

You said that the study of Bill C-13 was dragging on. Yes, it's taking a long time. We are rather tired of waiting. We would like to see the process reach a successful conclusion as soon as possible. Once again, we urge the honourable members to hear their fellow Canadians and francophones and to move this bill forward without delay.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: You mentioned the need to open more visa offices. I assume you know about the new visa office in Yaoundé. What are your thoughts on that? What improvements would you say are needed?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: If it's all right with you, Ms. Kayabaga, I'll keep my answer short on the new office in Yaoundé.

Of course, we're extremely glad that a new office was opened in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in central Africa. However, we don't know whether the office is actually handling visa applications, according to the information we have so far. At this point, all we know is that the Dakar office is still providing that service, so it remains a major concern for us. We would like confirmation that the new office will indeed be handling visa applications.

One country processing visa applications for 16 other countries in the same sub-region is very little in terms of capacity, especially given the distance people have to travel. Sub-Saharan Africa is a huge region, so if someone applying for a visa to come to Canada has to get to Dakar from Cotonou, it can be a real challenge. That's why it's a serious concern.

If I may, I'd like to have my colleague, Alain Dupuis, comment on the 500,000 number. I know you were waiting for an answer on that.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Yes. Thank you.

Mr. Alain Dupuis (Director General, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): I would say that Canada's francophone and Acadian communities are very glad to see the immigration levels going up. That's fine, but the proportion of francophones has to go up as well, and that's the big worry. The immigration levels plan for 2023-25 tabled in Parliament today merely has a footnote at the end indicating that the 4.4% target is based on the overall objectives—

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up for Ms. Kayabaga.

You will get another opportunity in the second round.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for taking part in this important study, which has brought us all here today.

I'd like to stay on the same topic, Mr. Dupuis, since you were on a roll. You'll have an opportunity to say more about it. Are you satisfied with the 4.4% the government announced today? You did say in your opening statement that you wanted a much higher target.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: It's no longer appropriate to keep the target at 4.4%. That target was set in the early 2000s because, according to the 2001 census, the francophone community made up 4.4% of the population. Last year's report from the Commissioner of Official Languages indicates that, even if the government had wanted to keep the demographic weight of francophones at 4.4%, it should have set a much higher target at the time. It's 15 or 20 years later, and we are still talking about reaching the 4.4% target maybe this year or next year. The demographic weight of francophones has declined significantly.

That has affected our ability to live in French, to exercise our rights as francophones all over the country and to overcome the severe shortage of education workers. In education alone, more than 22,000 francophone teachers are needed across Canada outside Quebec to keep French-language and immersion schools going. That's a huge problem. We are in a crisis, and what we want from this committee and this government is to deal with the decline of French as they have dealt with other crises in recent years: make it a priority and tackle it with the utmost care and humanity.

That said, Canada needs to recognize that it doesn't welcome enough French-speaking immigrants. What we hoped to see in the immigration levels plan for 2022-24 was more than a figure at the bottom of a big table every year, with the goal of magically reaching a 4.4% francophone immigration target. At the very least, the number of francophones to be admitted under each immigration program should be listed.

Better still would be the creation of a separate program for francophone immigration. Similar to the immigration levels plan for 2022-24, a distinct francophone immigration program could include low ranges and high ranges, and set out terms and conditions tailored to the needs of francophone communities and specific measures to promote francophone immigration in French-speaking countries.

Obviously, fewer countries are French-speaking, so targeted approaches are necessary not only in sub-Saharan Africa, but also elsewhere. Efforts to bring in newcomers must address the economic needs of francophone communities, which are much different than those of the country's English-speaking majority. The whole approach to francophone immigration requires an overhaul, and a specific program is needed. We realize that the 4.4% target stands for 2023, but a new target is needed as of 2024, and that target has to be at least 12% in order to combat the decline of our communities.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: For the committee's benefit, can you tell us whether the federal government has ever reached its francophone immigration targets?

Mr. Alain Dupuis: Never.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

You talked about programs, and the express entry program is meant as a response to processing delays. You mentioned it in your opening remarks. It's one of the main tools the government put in place.

However, the numbers show that 155,830 permanent residents were admitted through express entry in 2021, and only 2,980 of them were francophones. Just 1.9% of those admitted through express entry were French-speaking. How do you explain that?

You said that the government needed to put special programs—different programs—in place, and I think I just proved your point. Wouldn't you agree?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Immigration measures have to be tailored to Canada's francophone community. The government introduced express entry, but as I discussed in my opening remarks, the government must do better than that. Action is desperately needed.

We appreciate being given the opportunity to speak with the committee and elected representatives, but what would be even better would be not having to call on Canada's parliamentarians, time and time again, to take action to meet the targets. What we would much rather is the introduction of measures to meet the targets so that Canada's francophone identity was protected and communities' needs were met, no matter who was elected to Parliament or which government was in power.

Our situation is critical, and the survival of our communities is under threat. Actions have to be taken, and those actions need to be genuine, robust and supportive in order to meet communities' needs. As you pointed out, 1.9% of those admitted through express entry are French-speaking. That's very little, and we expect more. The target has been 4.4%, but as Mr. Dupuis said, we are looking for a target of 12% starting next year, if possible. A significant increase like that would go a long way towards slowing the decline.

● (1605)

Mr. Alain Dupuis: Express entry is being reformed, and that's good, but the only way to make sure the program works for francophones is to set a quota for the number of invitations sent out per year. Applications from French-speaking candidates need to be assessed as a separate category.

If the pool of applicants isn't big enough, the government needs to promote immigration to Canada in French-speaking source countries in order to attract people. Oftentimes, the express entry requirements for immigrants in the economic class are out of step with the economic categories suited to the needs of francophone communities. Express entry reforms should include the introduction of two streams.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There needs to be a category for francophone immigration or a separate program with the same requirements.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: Absolutely.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their presentations.

I want to build on this conversation. The government, year after year, has missed the target, yet the immigration levels just came out again with the same old target. There are no new initiatives attached to it, and there's no new approach to it.

Based on the historical record, do you believe that the government will actually reach their 4.4% target?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: We hope so. We've come here for reassurance about the intentions of Canada's government and elected representatives.

Today, we are once again calling upon Canada's elected representatives to implement a strategy to ensure that this 4.4% target be reached by 2023, and in 2024, that a target of 12% be initiated to make up for lost ground, and significantly slow the the diminishing demographic weight of Canada's francophonie outside Quebec.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Given that—

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Dupuis: I would add that separate programs are required. The mistake over the past 15 to 20 years has been to think that programs designed for the majority could function for the minority. It's not simply a matter of establishing a new target. All sorts of other mechanisms, programs and appropriate tools for the current circumstances need to be developed. The population bases are different and the needs are not the same.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I was going to say that, in addition to the target, you need substantive actions. I'm glad that you clarified that.

If you have any submissions you would like to provide to the committee on what specific actions the government should take to reach that target, please provide that to us, so we can make sure it is incorporated into our report as recommendations for the government.

I'd like to turn now to Ms. Gilbert.

Thank you, first of all, to you and your community for the great work that you do.

Today, again on the immigration levels numbers, the government is actually reducing the number of refugees coming to Canada at a time when there is a global humanitarian crisis. Instead of, at the very minimum, sustaining those numbers, the government is actually reducing them.

Ms. Gilbert, I wonder if you have thoughts with respect to that. What will that mean for the backlog and delays in processing, given that especially right now, with the privately sponsored refugees, the wait time is at least three years?

Ms. Shelley Gilbert: I think that is one of the concerns. Certainly there is a need for people to come for work purposes. We also know that many people continue to require the protection of the Canadian government and need to resettle here as a result of persecution in their countries of origin. We hope the Canadian government will raise the number of refugees accepted, and also recognize that many people apply under humanitarian and compassionate grounds considerations as well.

The individuals we work with very often come to Canada as workers at times and are looking for opportunities to flee violence and also provide for their families. We want to ensure that people who are able to come are able to understand and be provided with the information they need to make the best decisions to keep themselves safe and to ensure the well-being and safety of their children as well.

One of the most important goals of Legal Assistance of Windsor is ensuring that individuals have the information they need so that they can make those decisions going forward.

• (1610)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In Canada, there are already over 500,000 people here as migrant workers or undocumented, which is to say, people who have lost their status for one reason or another. With regard to the immigration levels numbers, the government is silent on the undocumented workers or undocumented people who are here, and the migrant workers.

In your opinion, do you think that the government should put a laser focus on regularizing the people who are already in Canada to meet our labour skills shortage? That would include refugees who are here, people who came from a different country trying to seek refuge in Canada.

I'll ask Ms. Gilbert, and then I will go to Mr. Bhatti.

Ms. Shelley Gilbert: I think that many of the people who are here currently and who have lost their status—for a number of different reasons—deserve the chance to make an application to remain in Canada. They have contributed and continue to contribute to our economy.

They also have many different stories and many different reasons as to why they have to remain in Canada. Many of those have to do with the extreme violence they were experiencing in their country of origin. Allowing people the opportunity to know about and to have programs that are accessible to them and that they are able to follow through with is a really important message to be given to government.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Bhatti, on the question around regularizing the people who are already here, given that there are over 500,000 people who are either undocumented or migrant workers here in Canada, do you think the government should actually put a strong focus on regularizing them to meet the labour skills shortage?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: First of all they need to get the documentation as to how many people are here, and priority should be given to those people who have skills or talent in this country. Then they can make—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Bhatti. The time is up for Ms. Kwan. You will get an opportunity in the second round.

We will now proceed to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. Please begin.

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

Mr. Bhatti, historically we have seen instances of bias, particularly in the UNHCR refugee determination selection process, and you've described that. Would you recommend that, as part of the government's solution to addressing the backlogs, particularly in the privately sponsored refugee stream, the government undertake an independent third party audit of how bias may affect the wait times experienced by certain classes of refugees in the PSR program?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: My recommendation to our visa office, especially in Singapore but in other countries as well, is that for PSRs they have to do independent studies for the refugees. Most of the time, they are getting consultations from the UNHCR, which is I think unfair to the refugees, because they're biased decisions and they are followed up with the UNHCR.

They have to do independent studies. Due to those studies, they have to see the different levels the refugees are coming from: What is their persecution level? What kind of evidence is there—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: To be clear, your recommendation is to decouple Canada's review and selection process for the PSR stream from the UNHCR's process.

• (1615)

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Would you also recommend to the government that they work with either sponsorship agreement holders or families—like groups of five—to find ways to support groups like this that have financially committed to sponsoring refugees but who now, due to the

backlogs, experience multi-year delays in seeing the refugees come to the country?

What I'm getting at is this: I know that sometimes people just give up. After years have gone by, people who have raised funds to sponsor a refugee just walk away from the commitment without hope. Would you recommend to the government to also be working with those people so that we're not losing, due to the backlogs, that investment capacity, if you will, in sponsoring refugees?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: It would be an excellent idea if they could come up with a different program so they can come, with a group of five doing their due diligence sponsorship, and they can fulfill the application of the sponsorship in one year, which is mostly what they're doing.

If they're able to do that, it would be an excellent idea. Then they don't have to be verified, the PSRs. However, the main issue is one of delay. All the sponsorship agreement holders are doing a wonderful job and they want to do more. If we can encourage all our SAHs—those holders—in Canada and support them, if governments supported them more and gave more avenues to them.... They are doing a splendid job.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: What's the number one way to clear the backlog in the privately sponsored refugee stream, in your opinion?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: First, they have to add more human resources. More staff need to be hired who can do the job. Secondly, they have to modernize the application system.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The government has started to use artificial intelligence, if you will, in the screening of certain types of applications. Would you recommend to the government to ensure that bias against certain ethnic groups or other persecuted minorities is removed from any algorithms that would be used to determine PSR status?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Yes. I recommend that to the government. When any visa official is doing an interview, they have to see the applicant's ethnicity and background, and they have to consider that during the interview.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Do you see evidence right now that this is contributing to the backlogs?

Mr. Peter Bhatti: Not much. I think that every day we are getting more backlogs. I'll give you one example.

I submitted one sponsorship application this year, and even up to October, I did not get an acknowledgement of the application. The refugee continues to ask us, "Did you submit the application?" or "Do you have any proof?", and we don't have anything to respond to the refugee. The refugee is in despair and very disappointed: "If it's taking one year to get me the application acknowledgement, how long will it take until they process the application?"

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Rempel Garner.

We will now proceed to Ms. Lalonde.

Ms. Lalonde, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I too would like to thank each and every one of the witnesses here with us, whether in person or via Zoom.

My question is mainly for the representatives of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada.

I feel very strongly about the francophonie. Thank you for being there and always responding to the call and defending it when you're asked to come and testify.

We are mainly studying the backlogs and the processing delays. We're looking for solutions and for ideas about what the government could contribute.

I should perhaps put things in perspective. Moreover, I believe one of my colleagues referred to it. In 2017, under the Express Entry program, additional points were assigned to immigrants who were very proficient in French.

In connection with the subject we are studying, would mechanisms like that help to reduce the time it takes to welcome applicants from francophone countries, and perhaps even more applicants, to Canada?

• (1620)

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Thank you for your question, Ms. Lalonde.

It's true that under the current circumstances, any initiative definitely deserves to be studied.

As for the Express Entry program, my colleague Mr. Dupuis was saying earlier that having francophones carry out a study on behalf of francophones would lead to a substantial increase in francophone immigration to Canada, including to our francophone communities. Having the capacity to work on that would be a very good start. It would in fact enable us to increase this capacity.

Mr. Dupuis, I think I'll let you continue with further aspects of your response.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: I don't think there's much of a difference in terms of response time for francophones and anglophones. As was mentioned with respect to the processing capacity for African applications, there is one office in Cameroon. However, we have a presence in just 17 of Africa's 54 countries. And yet, Africa has the largest population of French speakers in the world and it's where there's going to be population growth.

The processing capacity for applications from Africa is, to be sure, one of our priorities.

As for other areas, I naturally would mention delays that occur at our post-secondary institutions with respect to student visas. In September, there was an entire cohort of students that was still living in uncertainty, and who didn't know whether they were going to get these visas or not. Often, only a fraction of those who apply for admission are accepted and come here.

We have also heard that francophone employers are experiencing many problems and have perhaps become less confident in the system. Francophones are making efforts to have francophone foreign workers come here, but it takes an enormous amount of time.

What we do is spend a crazy amount of time making employers aware in order to encourage them to have francophone immigrants and workers come here, but the processing delays are not meeting the labour market requirements. If the processing capacity issue is not dealt with, it will become very difficult for us to encourage francophones and employers to use these programs. Everything is of course interrelated.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I totally agree with you that we need to increase our processing capacity. Although efforts were made during the pandemic, under rather unusual conditions, we need solutions that specifically target francophones.

What suggestions do you have for the committee?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: First of all, francophone immigration needs to be considered as specific to francophones, and ought not to be included in general immigration targets. Some serious thinking is required, along with a strategy focusing on francophones outside Quebec, if the vitality of these communities is to be maintained. This will require giving the issue some serious thought upstream. A francophone immigration program for minority communities would be a good starting point.

As Mr. Dupuis previously mentioned, it's absolutely essential to increase our service capacity on the African continent and in francophone areas. It's also required in Europe, but particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, because demographically, the strength of the Francophonie is now in these areas.

These factors are definitely among our priorities.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think you're wonderful, but I'm looking forward to not seeing you appear before the committee any more. I get the impression that you've been preaching in the desert for years. There may be a few people listening, but there are certainly no results.

What's your relationship with the departmental policy office that handles francophone immigration outside Quebec? Do you get the impression that there is a meaningful way to communicate with them.

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Thank you for your question, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

It's interesting. I think we now have communication channels, but we are awaiting the results.

I'll let Mr. Dupuis continue, because that's his everyday role too.

• (1625)

Mr. Alain Dupuis: I'd say that Mr. Fraser's office is in fact very much involved.

We've been deliberating about the new francophone immigration policy promised in Bill C-13. However, we have very high hopes for the policy. It will enable us to have a "before and after" picture of francophone immigration in Canada. Its main objective must also be not only to stem the decline, but also restore the balance.

In this policy then, a restorative component needs to be very clear. Everyone needs to be made aware of the fact that we have had an official languages act for 50 years and that our communities have been in decline over that period. The matter requires serious attention and special measures are needed to change things, not only for the francophone communities, but also for Quebec, where French has also been declining.

Our country is made up of a linguistic duality and two highly diverse host communities, but a shot in the arm might help, along with support for the structural components specific to these francophone areas.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

We spoke about sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. Are you telling members of the committee that there aren't enough visa offices in these countries?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Definitely. It's an urgent matter.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Even with the Yaoundé office, it will still be impossible to process enough visa applications.

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: As I was mentioning a little earlier, we're not certain that the Yaoundé office provides this service at the moment. But even if it did, it wouldn't be enough. We will have to increase processing capacity substantially.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: For francophone African students, did you find the refusal rate abnormally high?

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: There appears to have been some progress, but the refusal rate is 34%, which is very high unfortunately. So yes, that's worrisome for us.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting but the time is up.

We will now end this panel with Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have two and a half minutes for your round of questioning.

Please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to go to Mr. Dupuis, if I may, on that previous question, because the status of a lot of francophones who are here may be running out or they are undocumented. What do you think the government should do? Should they be regularizing those individuals?

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Dupuis: I think so.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a temporary program was introduced, called the the Temporary Resident to Permanent Resident Pathway. Thousands of applications were submitted under this program. The problem was that not enough of the applications could be processed for it to have an impact during the pandemic. We'll be watching for its impact this year and next year.

We feel that the idea of a permanent pathway for francophone temporary residents to become permanent residents should be explored, in addition to much faster pathways for students who receive Canadian credentials.

But there's a problem here. Students are asked to come and study here, but they have to prove that they will return to their country. For Canada's francophonie, this way of proceeding runs completely counter to the federal government's policy on francophone immigration.

We are therefore in favour of these rapid pathways to permanent residency.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

The other piece is that, with other studies, IRCC has admitted there's discrimination and racism within IRCC. We are seeing deplorable numbers for francophone African students, for example.

Specifically related to systemic issues, what do you think the government should do to ensure that we meet the targets?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves-Gérard Méhou-Loko: Your question is extremely important, Ms. Kwan.

The problem of discrimination and racism is unfortunately real. It has to be dealt with as quickly as possible to ensure that applications are received and that processing is entirely impartial, fair and equitable, with a view to promoting immigration.

It's the first signal sent to a visa applicant. If at the outset the processing of an application is biased, one can only then imagine how things will go with respect to becoming integrated into and included in Canadian society.

That's why it will be important to have totally decompartmentalized procedures to promote much more equitable mechanisms. At the moment, the government needs to do more to make these procedures more equitable, particularly at IRCC.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, this panel has come to an end.

On behalf of the members of this committee, I want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes so we can get the witnesses for the second panel set up.

● (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1636)

● (1635)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order. Welcome back to the meeting.

For our second panel, we are joined by Saint-Phard Désir, executive director of the Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership. We are also joined by Laura Schemitsch, immigration and refugee lawyer, representing Race and Company LLP. Our third witness for today is Beth Potter, president and chief executive officer, from the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

All the witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks.

We will start with Mr. Désir, representing Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership.

The floor is yours. You can please begin, and you will have five minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir (Executive Director, Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership): Good afternoon, members.

[Translation]

My name is Saint-Phard Désir. I'm the executive director of the Economic and Social Council of Ottawa-Carleton, ESCOC, and a member of the Ottawa Local immigration Partnership, OLIP.

I'd like to point out that I'm not necessarily speaking on behalf of of OLIP. I would also like to have submitted a document to the committee, but I unfortunately didn't have enough time to write it.

I'm here to report to you that many of our clients have told us about how long it was taking for their applications to be processed. In addition, eastern Ontario employers, in Hawkesbury and Van-kleek Hill, told us they were unable to fill all the positions they had available because of processing delays.

We therefore think that it would be a good idea two reduce the time it takes to process applications. The COVID-19 pandemic caused some delays in file processing. The pandemic is now behind us, and we hope that a few more people will be hired to process things. Quite a few employees also appear to have left their jobs during the pandemic and have not returned.

We work with francophone minority communities, and believe that it's extremely important for them to attract immigrants who can speak French, in order to increase the number of francophones in

these regions. It would be very helpful to us if application processing times could be reduced as soon as possible, all the more so as a growing number of people are submitting applications to come to Canada.

Another important factor is the students themselves, in particular francophone students from sub-Saharan Africa, who are also having trouble getting their applications processed within a reasonable period. Our hope is that the Department of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada receives all the support it needs to hire more people to properly process francophone applications.

● (1640)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Laura Schemitsch, immigration and refugee lawyer, representing Race and Company LLP.

Ms. Schemitsch, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can please begin.

Ms. Laura Schemitsch (Immigration and Refugee Lawyer, Race and Company LLP): Thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak today on these important issues, namely immigration application backlogs and processing times in Canada. My name is Laura Schemitsch and I'm an immigration and refugee lawyer with Race and Company LLP. In my practice, I primarily serve clients throughout the sea-to-sky corridor in British Columbia and outside of Canada.

I was called to the bar in 2020, so the majority of my experience as a practising lawyer has involved navigating the immigration backlog, impacted in large part by the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is in Canada's best interests for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to continue to tackle the backlog and to achieve greater transparency and functioning in order to reunite families, bring skilled immigrants and workers to fill growing job vacancies due to our aging population, promote economic recovery and revive Canada's immigration system and reputation in accordance with the legislated objectives of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

At the beginning of 2022, the backlog was estimated at approximately 1.8 million applications, including those for citizenship, permanent residence and temporary residence. As the backlog grew, I recognized growing frustration, anxiety and even despair in current clients and prospective clients regarding increased and frequently unknown processing times. While Canada and the world faced unprecedented uncertainty throughout the early stages of the pandemic, essentially grinding Canada's immigration system to a halt, by 2022 patience from applicants and representatives regarding solutions to the growing backlog was wearing thin.

It was clear to me that the integrity of Canada's immigration system was being jeopardized by the backlog, particularly in light of a lack of transparency and the inability to obtain application status updates through web form requests. Along with other advocates, I aimed to draw more attention to the issue and joined in calls for greater transparency on the backlog and efforts to reduce it. In order to maintain Canada's international reputation as a top choice for foreign nationals who want to come to this country temporarily and/or permanently, it is critical that the government respond with demonstrated actions.

On June 25, 2022, Prime Minister Trudeau announced the creation of a ministerial task force to help reduce application backlogs and improve customer service. One welcome result of this task force is that IRCC started to publish monthly data to help inform Canadians and prospective Canadians on the status of the backlog and forecast what the backlog is expected to look like in the coming months.

Another positive development this year was the resumption of express entry draws in July. Express entry all-program draws were paused for 18 months from December 2020 until July 2022 due to the backlog. Express entry is crucial to Canada's immigration system as one of the main pathways that skilled immigrants use to immigrate to Canada, and its proper functioning is critical to upholding Canada's international reputation as an attractive destination for skilled immigrants and their families.

According to the most recent data released by IRCC on September 30, 2022, there are currently 2.6 million applications in IRCC's application inventories. Of these applications, 1.11 million fall within service standards, and 1.49 million applications are in backlog or exceeding service standards. The majority of the applications in backlog are for temporary residence, followed by those for permanent residence and citizenship.

Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Sean Fraser has indicated that Canada will strengthen its immigration system, reduce application backlogs and improve client experience by modernizing the system. IRCC announced that, starting on September 23, 2022, the department would be transitioning to 100% digital applications for most permanent residency programs.

While advocates are open to IRCC's modernization efforts and want to work with IRCC to improve the current status quo through fair and efficient procedures, confidence in modernization efforts is jeopardized by frequent portal glitches and technical issues, which are widely reported by immigration lawyers. IRCC's website indicates that technical issues can be addressed by submitting a web form. However, since the pandemic, web form requests typically result in extremely delayed generic responses.

In order to truly modernize the system and restore confidence in the department, IRCC could look into implementing live technical support, particularly in this period of transition. This could benefit IRCC because the department could more quickly and easily become aware of glitches and work to fix them, which is important in the long term, while also ensuring that applicants and their representatives can submit important applications efficiently in the short term.

It is clear from the numbers that backlog reduction efforts must continue in order for Canada to maximize the social, cultural and economic benefits of immigration, a stated objective of the IRPA.

• (1645)

I remain optimistic that the government is prioritizing this objective through its efforts to reduce the backlog in consultation with advocates who use these systems daily in order to serve current and future temporary and permanent residents and citizens of Canada.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Beth Potter, president and chief executive officer, from the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

Ms. Potter, the floor is yours. You can begin, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Beth Potter (President and Chief Executive Officer, Tourism Industry Association of Canada): Madam Chair and members of the committee, I'd like to thank you for having invited me today.

My name is Beth Potter, and I'm the president and CEO of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

[*English*]

I acknowledge that we are gathered here today on the unceded, unsundered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation.

TIAC is the national advocate for tourism in Canada. On behalf of thousands of tourism businesses, we promote policies, programs and other initiatives that foster the sector's growth.

Tourism matters. It enables socio-economic development, job creation and poverty reduction. This drives prosperity and provides unique opportunities to women, minorities and young people. The benefits spread far beyond direct GDP impact and employment. The indirect gains extend through the entire travel ecosystem and supply chains to other sectors.

Tourism businesses incurred significant debt to get through the pandemic. Despite some improvement over the summer period, they continue to struggle financially. They face barriers to attracting investment. Disruptions in supply chains, inflation at a 40-year high and rising interest rates are now also impacting their businesses.

The shortage of labour in virtually all tourism sectors has long been identified as a substantial barrier to industry growth. While the dearth in supply of workers predates the pandemic, COVID vastly compounded the problem. Today our businesses have considerably bigger challenges attracting and retaining the necessary workforce to fully run their operations.

In our recent submission to Minister Boissonnault for a new federal tourism growth strategy, we outlined four key priority pillars to help tourism recover from COVID and achieve its full potential.

Among those pillars was the need to develop a comprehensive strategy specifically to attract and retain a sustainable tourism workforce. We identified labour as a key priority because the recovery and growth of tourism largely hinges on addressing the significant labour shortages that exist. The most recent estimates suggest that the sector has some 230,000 vacant positions. To meet growth forecasts as travel resumes, we will need to employ more than 900,000 more people in the next eight years.

Among our recommendations was the need to launch targeted recruitment campaigns and a specific indigenous workforce strategy. We also recommended increasing the number of high school programs, modernizing post-secondary programs and launching comprehensive national tourism job-ready programs, as well as investing in skills development.

As measures that we believe could be actioned in the short term, we recommended prioritizing tourism and creating efficiencies with the temporary foreign worker program, adjusting policies within existing federal and provincial immigration streams to increase the number of workers assigned to tourism and increasing opportunities for international students. Longer term, we recommended working towards creating a dedicated tourism and hospitality immigration stream with a pathway to permanent residency, as well as for governments to invest in affordable housing in close proximity to major destinations.

With that background, I now turn my focus specifically to the topic of the committee's study: application backlogs and processing times for all immigration streams at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. To do this, I share the following: While I understand the fundamentals on how and why such a massive backlog could accumulate and why there are now significant processing delays, I cannot help but voice my disappointment.

IRCC provides regular updates on its website. A couple of days ago, it noted 2.6 million as the total number of applications in all of its inventories. Of those, 1.1 million were considered within service standards, so 1.5 million applications are considered in backlog. I am particularly concerned about the impact this situation is having on our tourism sector and on our drive to build forward from the pandemic.

As the sector that was the first hit and the hardest hit, we fought hard just to survive through COVID. As I have already said, we

continue to struggle financially. Just when things seem to have been improving over the summer and have begun normalizing somewhat after more than two years of hardship, it is deeply discouraging, on top of it all, to now have to contend with these issues related to immigration and processing delays.

I have heard from many of our members, businesses across the country, about their difficulty getting their temporary foreign worker applications approved and permits issued. I have also heard of many cases in which foreign business travellers could not get their visas in time to attend important business events here in Canada.

• (1650)

This all hinders the tourism sector's ability to reach its full potential and compounds the reputational damage our sector has already suffered because of lockdowns, restrictions or other border vaccine and masking requirements over the last 30 months.

It is critically important to our sector that we not only deal with these backlogs quickly—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Potter. Your time is up. You will get an opportunity once we move to our question round.

We will begin our first round with Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Maguire, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can begin.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today, as well.

To start off, I would like to table the following motion with the committee:

That the committee write to the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to request a costing update to the November 2018 report on irregular migration across Canada's southern border.

My office will send the text in both official languages to the clerk, so it can be distributed to the committee. Thank you.

As I said, I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

I want to ask you, Ms. Potter... I have had a number of people in the tourism industry, of course, call me and a number of my colleagues in all parties. The Liberals have finally lifted the remaining border restrictions and dropped the ArriveCAN app. The international tourists are starting to come back to Canada.

Have any of your stakeholders raised concerns about the timeliness of approval for travel visas, for those countries with travel visa requirements? You referred to it. Could you expand on that?

Ms. Beth Potter: Absolutely. Thank you for the question.

Through the chair, I will say that the processing time and backlog on travel visas have had an impact. We have heard from travellers trying to attend business events and meetings, but it has also been a bit of a challenge for some of the tour operators to get international groups into Canada.

This is money we're leaving on the table, as far as the tourism industry is concerned. It just adds to the hardship of businesses within the industry.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

You used the term “disappointment” over the 1.5 million outside of the regular 1.1 million that are still okay in the backlog.

Across the whole tourism sector—whether it's hotels, hunting and fishing lodges, airlines, shops, restaurants or airports, particularly—is there one industry or sector that you think is having a greater labour shortage than others?

Ms. Beth Potter: Thank you again for the question.

Certainly, we are seeing that the hotel sector and the hospitality sector, so restaurants, are seeing the largest number of shortages across the way.

Regarding the hotel sector, one anecdote you may have heard yourself, within your own riding, is that hotels are full. They are not full. They are operating at a reduced capacity, because they don't have the staff to service the clients. You will see, across the country, in almost every riding, that restaurants are not operating on full hours. They are closed certain days. They are only operating dinner service and not operating lunch service. This is compounding the financial rebuild of the industry.

• (1655)

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

Could you expand on your interactions with the duty-free shops along our border?

Ms. Beth Potter: The duty-free stores certainly saw a huge impact, because the border was closed for almost two years, and people going across.... They are a one-way business. If you're leaving Canada, you can go and shop there. They certainly did see a huge impact. It was a big hit for a lot of businesses in border towns, from one end of the country to the other.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm wondering what specific immigration streams your stakeholders use.

Are there specific recommendations you have received from them, regarding how IRCC could provide more predictability for employers and their workers? Could you expand on the number of streams you have and on any suggestions they might have?

Ms. Beth Potter: Absolutely, and thank you for that.

There are three areas we would like to focus on.

One is the temporary foreign worker program. We could expand the tourism NOC codes eligible for that and remove the LMIA requirements, application fee and having to wait on the 30-day job

posting requirement, especially in this particular environment. Those would be specific recommendations we would make to that.

Within the provincial nominee program, we would like to see increased targets that would allow key regions in the sectors to work with the provinces to expand the in-demand skills stream to their provincial nominee program.

On express entry, agri-food was about to launch as a pilot program. We would like to see a similar pilot program launched for the tourism industry that would focus on bringing individuals into those positions.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you. That was just in time.

Have any provinces that you know of designated the tourism sector as a priority under their own provincial nominee programs?

Ms. Beth Potter: Off the top of my head, I believe that.... Do you know what? I would have to get back to you on that.

Mr. Larry Maguire: The other one is that I would agree with you on the temporary foreign worker program. The labour shortages in the tourism industry aren't new, but I look at the TFWP for permanent full-time positions as a band-aid rather than a solution. I never liked the terminology.

What's the best way for the IRCC to provide a pathway for permanent residency for those working in the tourism sector?

Ms. Beth Potter: One is acknowledging that the tourism industry fulfills a needed position within the economy and that those positions that are filled through the temporary foreign worker program—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Potter. The time is up for Mr. Maguire. You'll maybe get an opportunity in the second round.

We will now proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question will go to Mr. Désir.

When we look at the B.C. francophone community, it is a very vibrant community. When we talk about strengthening the diversity of British Columbia, the diversity of Canada, 4.4% of francophone immigration outside of Quebec is very important. It's near and dear to me and the francophone community in British Columbia.

Government has ensured that we will be able to meet that 4.4% requirement. Would you comment on that? Also, what else can be done from the traditional ways of immigration to achieve those targets?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Ever since I returned to Canada in 2007, we've been working to increase the number of francophones in our minority communities. There's been talk of 4.4% for years, but we never manage to reach those numbers. I think one of the reasons is because most francophones are in sub-Saharan African countries and Canada doesn't have nearly enough offices in those countries.

My view is that the number of visa offices needs to be increased and efforts should be made to facilitate the arrival of those who are coming under certain programs, like the ones that enable francophones to come much more quickly to Canada when they have an employment offer. However, this program doesn't perform as well as it might because the slow processing of applications means that employers, after a certain time, cancel the job offer if people are unable to get their visa on time.

I believe one possible solution would be to increase the number of visa offices serving francophone regions. The processing time for francophone visa applications also needs to be shorter.

• (1700)

[*English*]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

My next question is going to go to Ms. Laura Schemitsch.

You talked about the task force to address the immigration-related delays. The minister has taken action and will have hired 1,250 new employees by the end of the fall. What is your comment about that? Would it help to mitigate this backlog problem that we have?

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: Yes. I definitely believe that hiring new IRCC staff will help and should help with this backlog. However, I believe that advocates and applicants need to be updated on the status of that progress.

It's one thing to promise to hire these employees. It's another thing to demonstrate to stakeholders how that is going to prevent further backlogs as well as address the current backlog. It's very important to improve transparency and demonstrate how these new hires will improve the current situation.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Madam Chair, my next question is for Ms. Potter.

Ms. Potter, we are facing a similar situation in British Columbia. I recently had an issue where one of the Punjabi filmmakers wanted to come here, so they applied for the work permit, and there were no issues. All these artists who are coming in get their visas under the work permits, but when they come to do the reconnaissance first, to see if the project is feasible and to see the locations, then the visas are rejected because they can only come on a temporary visitor visa.

Would you be able to comment on how this process can be improved so that we have more people getting approved, particularly when it comes to the tourism and hospitality industry?

Ms. Beth Potter: Just for clarification.... You're asking about travel visas.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Yes.

Ms. Beth Potter: With regard to the travel visas, there's a process that people go through that allows the government to vet them. If they have received a travel visa, then the idea of extending that travel visa, if they have a return ticket, is something that we can absolutely prioritize.

If they're looking to kind of transfer that travel visa into a work visa, again, there is a process in place that should allow for that to happen. As we were looking at them, we would like to see work visas extended. If people are coming in on a temporary foreign worker visa right now, they can come in for, I believe, one year. If we can extend work visas from two years to four years and provide options for renewal, that would certainly assist those individuals coming in with work in mind.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: My time is up. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you can begin, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses who have joined us today, whether by video conference or in person.

Mr. Désir, your opening address was very interesting. Just for my own information, I'd like to ask you a question.

Has the federal government has ever previously met its francophone immigration targets?

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: No.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So it has never happened. Okay. It's very important to make a note of that.

Now, can you explain to the committee how a minority language community, usually francophones outside Quebec, can be more affected by processing delays than majority language communities?

• (1705)

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Of course, it's extremely important for the vitality of our francophone minority communities for us to encourage francophones to come to Canada. In reality, however, as I was saying, the majority of francophones come here from sub-Saharan African countries, and there are very few visa offices processing applications from these countries. So we never manage to receive all the people who could come and strengthen our francophone minority communities.

Sometimes people are confronted by serious problems. For example, students are told they have not proved that they intend to return to their country of origin, while at the same time we encourage them to do just that by coming to study in Canada and remain here. There is a mismatch in what we're asking for and what people at the visa offices are telling people who apply for a visa to study in Canada. It's a problem that needs to be dealt with, because people in the visa offices are only following the guidelines they are given. They have no choice about following the procedures.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Don't worry, I'm working very hard to do something about this situation.

In addition, in a report prepared by this committee on the disparity of treatment for foreign students, there is a blatant inequity between the processing of study permit applications from francophone African students and applications from other foreign students.

In its response to this report, the government admitted that there was in fact racism at IRCC, that it caused inequity and that it was going to deal with the problem.

Do you believe this also affects the delays for applicants from places like sub-Saharan Africa or the Maghreb?

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Definitely.

It has a considerable impact on the issuing of visas for students who are supposed to be coming, and on issuing visas for those who want to come and work.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Mr. Désir.

Good afternoon, Ms. Potter.

Ms. Beth Potter: Good afternoon.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Many people in Quebec have told me that the situation is very difficult for temporary foreign workers, as you know. People tell me that if we were to remove the obligation from the labour market impact assessment, the LMIA, the process would be much faster, particularly in the tourism industry. Do you agree with these people?

[English]

Ms. Beth Potter: I do agree.

The labour market assessment is prohibitive. It extends the time period that it takes to get the application through. The cost that's associated with it is challenging for a lot of businesses. Also, the 30-day wait on advertising the position, especially in this climate, seems redundant.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The response is that these LMIA's absolutely must be done because the last thing we want is someone taking a job from a good Canadian. That's how it's being sold to us, and yet we're told that a million jobs are available across Canada. We're also told that we want get immigration levels up to address the labour shortage. The LMIA's should simply be set aside and brought back when labour market conditions change in Canada.

[English]

Ms. Beth Potter: I agree. I would absolutely agree with that.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

You talked about staff retention earlier. I know this doesn't necessarily pertain to the study, but I'd like to address it since you brought it up. We've yet to see any reforms done to the EI system, and a lot of people who work in the tourism industry are seasonal employees. These individuals are deciding not to come back to work in the tourism industry because they want to find a year-round job so they don't fall into the EI black hole.

Is that one of the reasons for the staff retention issue?

[English]

Ms. Beth Potter: It is one of the reasons. Certainly, seasonality adds a complication to the hiring process within our industry, but the other thing that I would point out is that tourism is a global sport, and we actually move our workforce around the globe.

To be able to bring in staff for seasonality, to bring in staff that follow the seasons.... If I'm talking about staff with special skills, like whitewater guides, they have certain skills and they follow the season around the globe. It's in the ski industry as well. I don't know if the temporary foreign worker is the best tool to bring those folks in on a seasonal basis, but it is the tool that we have right now.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses. My first question is for Mr. Désir.

In our previous panel, the suggestion was that the government should in fact up the 4.4% target to 12%, so as to restore the missed targets over the years. Is that something you would support?

[Translation]

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Yes, this is something we support with the FCFA. The francophone community would like to see a higher percentage so we can get more francophones coming in to make up for the lower percentages we've seen in past years.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Just to build on that, the other aspect of it is that we have a large number of people already here in Canada—migrant workers and students, as well as undocumented individuals—many of whom would fall among francophone community members. Should the government be bringing forward an immigration measure to regularize those individuals?

[Translation]

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Certainly.

We've been calling for this with the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR). It would absolutely be important for those who are already here. It would be a very good thing to regularize individuals who are already here. It would even be a good thing to regularize temporary workers.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Bringing a similar question to Ms. Potter, given the labour skills shortage in the tourism sector, while I understand that you're pushing for a temporary foreign workers scheme to be expanded, the other reality, of course, is that there are a large number of people who are already here. Some of them lost status over the COVID period. Some of them are in fact from the tourism sector, and because of the downturn with the jobs and the closures that were required, they then lost their status. There are people who are ready to work, but because they don't have the status, they can't work.

Do you think that the government should be regularizing them? Should that not be a pool that we should absolutely try to target to meet the labour skills shortage?

Ms. Beth Potter: Certainly if we have a labour pool that is already invested in our industry here in Canada and ready to work, absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you call for the government to regularize undocumented and migrant workers, people with temporary status, who are already here in Canada?

Ms. Beth Potter: As part of a series of other measures we are applying for the government to do, that can be included, for sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

In that pool, there are in fact health care workers, caregivers who have come to Canada and undertaken the work to get their skill set to become a nurse in the health care sector. However, because of immigration rules, they can only work for that specific employer. They can't go work for anyone else. Therefore, they can't meet the shortage in our health care system. That's just one example. There are many people who are ready, willing and able to do this work, but unable to do so because of immigration issues.

I'd like to turn to Ms. Schemitsch on the processing delay issue.

One thing the government likes to do is say it will bring in new resources to target new applications, but meanwhile the people who

already applied are stuck there. There's no focus in addressing that backlog.

To that end, what are your thoughts on that? What should the government do? Otherwise, all of those people who are already in the system, the 1.5 million people minimum, are stuck in the system, waiting and waiting.

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: Thank you for your question.

Again, I believe it's a question of transparency. The government is stating that it will address these backlogs through certain measures, but we see people who are submitting applications more recently than those who submitted applications at the peak height of the pandemic and who have not heard anything about those applications and have no idea of the status of those applications. Those resources, in part, need to basically provide more transparency about how the backlog is being dealt with.

If someone submits their application currently, in November 2022, how long is it going to take for that person's application to be processed, and then, how are we addressing those people who submitted their applications in March 2020 and are still waiting for a response?

• (1715)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

The reality is that, when the government makes these announcements, they say that these new applications will meet the target and say nothing about the people who are stuck in the backlog. There hasn't been any processing since 2019 in the caregiver stream, as an example. People are basically stuck there.

We are speaking about transparency. The reality is that it is opaque. The system is opaque. Should the government put in place an independent ombudsperson, so we can trust the information that's being put out and what's going on in the system?

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: Absolutely. I think it's very important that applicants are able to receive specific responses about their current applications. It is not enough to provide a status update tool or some other kind of generic tool. It is important that applicants are able to receive specific updates. If that means that an independent ombudsman must facilitate some kind of process to ensure that, then I believe it should happen.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up for Ms. Kwan.

Now we will proceed to our second round. We will begin that with Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Kmiec, you will have four minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I was going to start with Laura Schemitsch. Hopefully, I pronounced that right. I have the same problem.

You described in your opening statement an almost heroic attempt by the Government of Canada's IRCC department to clear the 2.6 million backlog. This is a department that has 30% more staff than it did in 2016. It has more than doubled its budget, and the backlog has continued to grow.

In your opening statement, you said that what was going on is jeopardizing Canada's immigration system. How do we square these two statements: your description and the fact the system is being jeopardized? What did you mean?

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: As someone who is a fairly new lawyer, my experience with Canada's immigration system has primarily been one of clients expressing their frustration and uncertainty with the system. In the past year, there has been a lot of advocacy from lawyers and other advocates asking for solutions and greater transparency. I believe it is important to recognize that the government is making certain attempts to improve the situation, while also being critical of some of those measures and the progress.

For example, while it is very possible that a modernized system will lead to greater efficiency, it is still important to acknowledge there are significant issues with the technology and basically forcing representatives to move to online portals that either have not been tested properly or have a lack of technical support. That is going to eliminate the progress that could happen through modernization.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You also talked about streams. A lot of witnesses are talking about more streams. Would adding yet more streams to the system make it more complicated or less complicated?

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: It depends on what industries you're talking about, or what those streams would be used for as solutions.

For example, I do work in Whistler, Canada, where there is a heavy reliance on tourism. I agree with many of Ms. Potter's remarks that there are certain programs and/or processes that small businesses and also large businesses and employers have to move through to bring the labour force they need to support their businesses. Unfortunately, a lot of those processes actually create barriers to those businesses being able to get the labour they need.

Yes, we could create new streams, but it's a more complicated question than that, in my opinion.

• (1720)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Perfect.

[Translation]

Mr. Désir, in your testimony you stated that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada should have even more staff than they do. However, the department has increased its workforce by 30% since 2016. Even though its budget has doubled, the backlog continues to grow.

Do you believe that the department should be hiring even more staff, or is there a systemic problem in the department?

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: You're talking about 2016; there was a pandemic for two years. I feel that had an impact. I don't know if that 30% increase in staff still stands. We would have to see exactly

where the department is now, because my understanding is that a lot of people are no longer there.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up for Mr. Kmiec.

We will now proceed to Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. El-Khoury, you will have four minutes for your round of questioning. You can begin, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

Mr. Désir, how do you feel about the tool for selecting applicants on economic grounds?

Could you tell us more about that?

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: Of course, it's a very good thing to be able to pick and choose people who can come to this country for economic reasons and find jobs quickly. The problem is that employers need people right away, not in 10 days from now. So we need to find a way to speed up application processing so that employers can get people when they need them. We were told it would take about four weeks to four months, but it's taking more than eight months. By that time, employers are already discouraged and they move on.

It's great to have systems in place to bring people into the country to start working right away, but the application processing time needs to be sped up.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I listened carefully to your speech. I'd like to know, what's the main thing you'd like to see included in the documents you mentioned?

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: In my opinion, these are the important things...

We need more immigrants from French-speaking countries, especially in Africa. For that we'll need more visa offices.

We must also facilitate foreign student applications by no longer asking them to prove that they will return home after their studies, since our goal is for them to stay here after their studies.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

I'd now like to address Ms. Schemitsch.

[English]

For clarification, Ms. Schemitsch, I would like to make it clear for you that the increasing demand in applicants is not the same. In 2015, we had 270,000 applications. In 2022, we have 431,000 applications, and that explains clearly why we have more resources. Thank you.

[Translation]

In a March article, you were in favour of authorizing emergency travel between Canada and Ukraine.

Can you tell us more about those measures and how you justified them in spite of the backlogs and processing delays?

• (1725)

[*English*]

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: I believe that those circumstances were very dire, so those measures came into place in order to facilitate helping people during a humanitarian crisis, as Canada has done in the past. I believe that I was also critical of the fact that those measures have not been extended to other communities and other people of different nationalities. It is a complicated question, and I don't believe that—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up for Mr. El-Khoury.

We will proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. El-Khoury has just inspired me.

Ms. Schemitsch, you haven't been doing this job for very long—that's what you stated earlier—but you do have some experience with IRCC.

As we know, we're going to be facing more and more international crises, whether it's climate change or major armed conflicts. Did you find this had a direct impact on processing backlogs?

During the Afghan crisis, for example, 15 to 25% of IRCC staff were focused on that one crisis alone. Did you feel that on the ground, as an immigration lawyer?

[*English*]

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: Can you please clarify your question?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes.

When an international crisis such as the Afghan crisis happens, do you feel that backlogs at IRCC and for all other programs increase because IRCC officers are focused on that one crisis alone?

As an immigration lawyer, do you see that happening during an international crisis?

[*English*]

Ms. Laura Schemitsch: My understanding is that it does occur, and I believe that other colleagues of mine in the immigration bar have suggested that perhaps IRCC should have an emergency task force that is able to deal with those special circumstances that undoubtedly will arise in the future, while not taking away resources from our everyday programs that need to properly function moving forward and to absolutely continue to tackle this backlog.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

In fact, I had even suggested an emergency plan to the government. However, I never heard back from the minister.

That said, I guess it's going to happen, because more and more people are saying that the department needs to have emergency measures to be able to respond to an international crisis.

Do I have any time left, Madam Chair?

[*English*]

The Chair: Time is up.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes for your round of questioning. Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for Mr. Désir.

The issues are systemic racism within IRCC, the processing delays and a variety of other issues, not the least of which is the government missing the targets for francophone immigrants to Canada. Given that this is the state of play, do you think the Canadian government should put in place an independent ombudsperson to look at all of these problems and issues and to make recommendations for government to take action?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Saint-Phard Désir: I believe it's always a good idea to have an ombudsperson. However, I can't prove that these delays are due to racism rather than existing regulations.

For example, international students are told that the reason they're being rejected is because they are not providing proof that they will return to their country, regardless of their country of origin.

In my view, it's not necessarily racism, but we're also not walking the talk here. We're telling them to come study in Canada so that they can stay in Canada.

When it comes to the permanent resident application processing backlog, in my opinion, the major problem is that there aren't enough visa offices.

In any event, it would not be a bad thing to have an ombudsperson.

• (1730)

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes. On the issue around racism and discrimination, we learned from the other study that a number of different factors are in play, including immigration policies that bias against individuals from certain countries, because inherently the requirements for them to prove that they will return to their country of origin are heightened and increased. To address that systemic issue, something needs to be done if we want to bring equalization to that question. Of course, that would be a thing that I think an independent ombudsperson would or should look into—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up.

The time is up for this panel. On behalf of all the members of this committee, I want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee. If there is something you would like to bring to the notice of the members and you were not able to discuss because of the time, you can always send a written submission to the clerk of the committee. We will take that into consideration as we go through the draft report.

For the information of members, our next meeting will take place on Friday. We will complete the draft report consideration of differential outcomes. At the request of the analyst, we will have to use version three, because it can be very confusing to follow that. To make sure we complete that on Friday, please go through version three and be ready. We will be going through version three of the report.

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