



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 045

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1550)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 45 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today we will be considering the supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and also the officials.

From IRCC, we are joined by Christiane Fox, deputy minister; Marian Campbell Jarvis, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Hughes St-Pierre, chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister, finance, security and administration; Daniel Mills, senior assistant deputy minister, operations; and Catherine Scott, assistant deputy minister, settlement and integration.

Welcome, Minister. Thank you for joining us today. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Then we will go into rounds of questions.

You can please begin.

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Chair and esteemed colleagues.

[English]

I'd like to start by acknowledging that we are meeting today on the traditional and unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I'm pleased to be joined here today by several officials from IRCC. Thank you for introducing them, Madam Chair.

I'm here to talk about the supplementary estimates (B), as well as the annual report and levels plan that was tabled on November 1. I'm happy to take questions on both of these matters today.

• (1555)

[Translation]

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss our government's plan for immigration to support the economy and our humanitarian commitments.

[English]

Canada is a destination of choice for those seeking to start a new life. We are a democracy that values freedom and human rights, with good job opportunities, strong communities and a high quality of life.

[Translation]

We need more people to fill job vacancies, create new businesses, tackle our demographic challenges and contribute to our health care and social security systems.

That is why our government has committed \$1.6 billion to support processing and settlement of newcomers and implementation of our 2022-2025 immigration levels plan.

[English]

This ambitious plan will see immigration levels increase to 465,000 new permanent residents in 2023 and grow to 500,000 by 2025. Bringing more people to Canada helps fill job vacancies in the short term and fill skills gaps in the long term. At the same time, we help our communities grow.

We must, however, look at immigration not only through an economic lens but a humanitarian one as well. Our plan supports our commitment to do our part to support some of the world's most vulnerable people.

In this regard, I am proud to report that we have now resettled more than 25,300 Afghan refugees and are more than halfway towards our goal of resettling at least 40,000. Of course, we're going to continue our support for Ukrainians who have found safe haven in Canada from the unprovoked war of aggression launched by Russia and the Putin regime.

To continue our commitment in 2022 and beyond, in supplementary estimates (B) we are seeking significant investments to support these newcomers as they permanently or temporarily transition to Canada and access language programs, schools, work opportunities, housing and health care.

[Translation]

By putting resources towards strengthening our immigration system we are improving processing capacity and adding technologies to reduce backlogs created by the pandemic, and to ultimately deliver a more effective immigration system in the years ahead.

[English]

Through significant investments, we've been modernizing our systems and expanding our workforce so we can help to reduce wait times, address the backlogs and return to service standards. As of October 31, we have transitioned to 100% digital intake for most permanent resident lines of business. We've implemented online tools for clients to access updates on their applications and are expanding them further next year.

[Translation]

To process more files, reduce wait times and reduce the inventory of applications, IRCC will have added up to 1,250 additional staff by the end of this fall.

[English]

These measures are going to help IRCC address unique challenges, including the backlogs that stem from the pandemic and back-to-back humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

[Translation]

And it will help us come out on the other side of these challenges with a stronger, more responsive system to support immigration in the years ahead. We are already seeing some of the results of these enhancements.

[English]

While 2021 was a record year for immigration, 2022 is on track to surpass it for permanent residency admissions, with over 431,000 expected newcomers this year. This includes 105,000 sponsored family members, nearly 85,000 refugees, including protected persons, and those admitted on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

We get countless stories, Madam Chair, of how newcomers have come to Canada and made it a better place. Dr. Malhotra, born in India, has delivered over 10,000 babies in Saskatchewan—many in first nations communities—earning her the name “Angel of the North”. Constable Mubiru of the RCMP is helping to build bridges between law enforcement and the African Nova Scotian community in my home province.

[Translation]

Let's not forget the Serbian and Iranian immigrants in British Columbia who are working to feed the homeless.

Immigrants—and those of us descendent of immigrants—have helped to make Canada a better country.

Once again, thank you for inviting me here today. I am now happy to take your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks.

We will now start our rounds of questioning with Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Kmiec, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

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

It's too bad my voice is almost gone. Everyone is going to have to put up with it.

Minister, you were supposed to come here for an hour.

I wonder whether the minister would be willing to stay for the full hour, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, we started at 3:50, and we will end this panel at 4:50.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, I'm not going to shortchange you on time.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you very much for that.

You're asking for \$1.2 billion in the supplementary estimates (B). The backlog is 2.4 million. It's almost the longest it's ever been. It's a little bit shorter than it was in August. It was 1.8 million right before the pandemic. This department has received more staff—almost 3,000 more staff since 2016—and almost doubled its budget since 2016, and the backlog has only increased.

Why should we give you another dollar? Why will it make any difference?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We're starting to see the investments we've received so far pay off in significant ways. If you're interested in a fulsome answer, I can explain to you where the backlogs came from.

Long story short, since the end of July, we've seen a reduction in excess of 300,000 cases. This is the result of investments that we've made to add resources through additional staff, relaxing administrative requirements that have reduced the capacity on our department so we can focus on processing more cases, and adopting more technology.

We're seeing an enormous increase in productivity. Despite the fact that there are significantly more applications coming in, we are still outpacing that intake with greater output and have seen a reduction in the number of cases in the inventory in excess of 300,000.

These investments that we're seeking today through the supplementary estimates process will further improve the ability to continue to chip away at those cases. We're on track for major success.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, there was an Order Paper question response submitted to my colleague from Edmonton Manning that showed your department is meeting its service standards only 46% of the time. In fact, in the programs that are the most important to the economy, like federal skilled worker program and the skilled trades program, it's only 16% of the time. There's another program, the one that takes temporary residents, with temporary permits, and then transitions them to permanent residency. The numbers are equally abysmal.

You're telling me that everything is going really well, but your own department's numbers, updated as of September of this year, are not getting any better. You're in the very low double digits for processing applications on time.

Why should I believe anything you say?

• (1600)

Hon. Sean Fraser: First of all, you didn't need to put in an Order Paper question to find that out. I asked our department to publish all of that information on the Internet so we can have the public continue to hold us to account. I think transparency is really important.

One thing I would point out about the way you presented the data is that you're looking backwards in terms of how many applications have been processed as of the approvals that have come in today. What's important is that this reflects a really challenging set of circumstances that continued to exist during the pandemic when people's travel and our processing capacity, frankly, had been severely diminished.

If you look at the anticipated projections for people who file an application today, things are dramatically improved. I'm not going to sit here and tell you they're perfect. We still need to improve, but by the end of the year, we expect study permits to be back on track. Near the very beginning of next year—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: What does “back on track” for study permits mean?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It means a 60-day processing time for 80% of the cases.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Back in 2015, it took 31 days to do it.

Hon. Sean Fraser: The service standard that we're trying to reach to enjoy the same standard we had prepandemic for study permits, work—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I said 2015, not prepandemic, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, we expect to be back to the 2019 level of service standard that we enjoyed—and that we broadcast online—early in the new year for work permits, and by the end of this year for study permits. TRVs will spill into next year. For permanent residency, we're already back on track for family reunification and for express entry: 12 months for family reunification and six months for express entry. We're moving in the right direction.

The job is not done, and I'm not here to tell you that it is. We need to continue to make the investments necessary to improve this.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Chair, when I'm looking at the numbers, temporary resident visas took 13 days to process back in 2015. These are IRCC's numbers. Now it's up to 72 days as of April 2022. Study permits took 31 days, and now it's 88 days. Work permits took 42 days, and now it's 62.

I'm just wondering whether things are getting better and all of these investments are working. Since 2016, we've been pouring more and more resources into this department. With more people, more money, the backlog has increased.

It's not the pandemic, Minister. The backlog, prepandemic, was 1.8 million. It's over two million. Perhaps it is a little bit better in the last few months, but this is a lot of resources that we poured in to this department. The numbers that I quoted to you go back all the way to 2015, and everything has gotten worse since then.

Why should the people who are waiting to come into the country to study here or to work here, or who are desperately trying to bring in that key worker to get their business started, believe you?

Hon. Sean Fraser: One of the key differences you've left out in your analysis, Mr. Kmiec, is the fact that there are significantly more people coming to Canada.

Look at the massive increase in the number of people applying for study permits each year. We're now pushing in excess of half a million. We've seen a 30% increase this year over the record the year before, and that was a 30% increase over the record previously. When it comes to permanent residency, the year before we formed government there were about 240,000 new permanent residents admitted, and now we're coming up on 500,000 by 2025. So the number of cases in the system has certainly grown.

What we're trying to do is get back to a level where people can predictably know how long it's going to take for their applications to be processed. Very soon we're going to be there across our different lines of business as a result of the investments we have made and hopefully—if the committee adopts these supplementary estimates (B)—the investments we will continue to make.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kmiec.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Kayabaga, you will have six minutes. You can please begin.

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

I want to start by thanking the minister for coming to this committee again. He has come on a number of occasions. I think he's the minister who shows up in committee the most. Hopefully, that's a good record to have.

Minister, you have spoken often about your commitment to bring more newcomers to Canada permanently and how that's a key factor in addressing our country's economy and our country's labour shortages. That said, what do you think can be done to leverage the skills of those who are already here on a temporary status and ensure that they, too, are able to contribute to our economy?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much, Ms. Kayabaga, for the question. This is extremely important.

My view is that Canada needs more people for economic and demographic reasons. A lot of people, I think, see the 500,000 we intend to welcome as permanent residents in a couple of years as a really big number. But it's really important, to the point of your question, to recognize that a lot of people are already here and they're going to transition to permanent residency.

There are a number of different elements to the strategy to continue to welcome as permanent residents people who are already here. Last year, searching my memory, about 157,000 new permanent residents were already international students. The kinds of things we do to facilitate their transition to permanent residency include the extension of post-graduate work permits and the automatic extension for those who are facing potentially soon-to-be-expired post-graduate work permits.

We want to continue to open up the NOC codes for different occupations. We recently had an announcement that will enable 16 new professions to qualify under the express entry system. We have a new tool we're going to deploy this coming year that will allow us to more nimbly target people in key shortages, including in sectors that have workers who are here temporarily to prevent them from leaving and making it worse.

There are other opportunities I want to explore that were outlined in the response we tabled to our colleague Randeep Sarai's private member's motion, motion 44, which include examining whether we should be doing targeted draws for people who are already here and continuing to look at the point system to see how it's going to satisfy people who have Canadian work experience.

There's not one silver bullet, but recognizing that people are using our temporary pathways as a stepping stone to permanent residency, and planning accordingly, is something we must do. Next on the list is to make good on my mandate letter commitments the Prime Minister has given to me to create a pathway to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers and international students.

• (1605)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I appreciate the answer, Minister. I think it would be important to continue to work together on this.

You have tabled ambitious level targets and have provided a very good rationale as to why Canada needs higher immigration volumes, both immediately and into the future. I would like to know what the plan is on delivering these targets and whether we know the impact of increasing the volume of applications as more people than ever want to come to Canada, as well as the ongoing impact of the pandemic and the other factors you have to factor in, such as backlogs for example, as you increase it.

We know we have an aggressive strategy to address the backlogs, but can you speak to what we're doing in this area?

Hon. Sean Fraser: When it comes to processing capacity for permanent residents, this is not something that has me concerned about our ability to deliver. This is not something that is a major problem that we need to overcome. We're already back to the service standard for permanent residency applications for family reunification and, as of this July, we are back to the service standard for the economic class through the federal express entry system as well. This is because we put a plan in place through the immigration levels plan each year that is accompanied by the appropriate resources to make sure that we can continue to grow our processing capacity to match the number of people whom we expect to welcome as new permanent residents.

We still need to do more work to more quickly process people who are coming through temporary streams. You mentioned some

of the pandemic-related challenges. To put this into perspective, there were a couple of things that happened that put extra pressure on the system. The first is that a lot of our offices shut down as a result of local public health measures all over the world. The second is that we made a decision, when the border was closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within Canadian communities, to welcome people as permanent residents who were already here as temporary residents, including through the TR to PR program that existed during the pandemic.

We kept accepting applications at that point in time for people who couldn't travel at that point in time, and this created a couple of years' worth of applications in the system at a time when our processing capacity had been reduced. Layer on top of that the response to Afghanistan and then Ukraine, and the fact that Canada became the world's top destination for people who wanted to move somewhere else in the world, and we have a lot happening right now in our department.

However, by putting the resources into the system to hire 1,250 new people this fall—we're at about 1,100 right now—and by relaxing some of the administrative requirements on the process, including relaxed medical examinations, moving to a digital space and leveraging new technology, including advanced analytics, we have significantly grown our processing capacity. I have all the faith in the world that we're going to be back to a serviceable and reliable processing standard time next year.

You have one minute left, so I will stop my answer there and focus on what you want to talk about.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Going off your last comment on Canada being a destination of choice for a lot of people, we have a proud tradition of refugee resettlement. We have been a leader on a global scale for that.

Can you talk about how we are working to fill in major labour gaps in our labour market, the fact that so many people globally are displaced and are in need of resettlement, and what we're doing in that area, please?

Hon. Sean Fraser: In the 30 seconds or so that I have left, I will say that we are not just a leader; we are the leader when it comes to resettling refugees. We have resettled more people in Canada than any other country in the world in each of the last three years, and more than one-third of the global total in each of the last two years.

To your specific question, recognizing that people who come as refugees have a lot more than they are carrying in their suitcase is really important. We have developed the economic mobility pathways pilot, which welcomes people as economic migrants who happen to be displaced. For anybody who might be tuned in today, look this program up. It provides an extraordinary opportunity, including for employers in my own community back in rural Nova Scotia, to tap into talented people who are displaced and fill key gaps in the labour force. It's something that I want to scale up. It's something from which I want to share lessons with other countries around the world in our capacity as the chair this year of the global task force on refugee labour mobility with the United Nations.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The time is up for Ms. Kayabaga.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Minister, I want to thank you and your officials for your time. You are truly generous. You must be the one who appears the most at committee meetings. I commend you for that and I'm very grateful.

First the flowers, then the tomatoes.

Can you tell me if there have been any changes recently in your department's research office responsible for francophone immigration outside Quebec?

• (1610)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I begin, I want to thank you, because I love flowers.

I have good news. We have just opened a new office in Dieppe, New Brunswick, to look at ways to innovate in the area of francophone immigration. It's very important.

I feel it's crucial that we increase the number of francophone newcomers to Canada—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Minister, I'm going to interrupt you, because I don't have a lot of time. That was not the subject of my question.

Have there been any changes in the management staff of your department's research office responsible for francophone immigration outside Quebec?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I believe I understand the question. We opened a new office last month. It's important that we continue to hire more employees in that area, to increase the number of francophone newcomers. It's essential to promote the French language and culture.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So there is a new director in IRCC's research office for francophone immigration outside Quebec? That's my question.

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, I don't believe there is, but I will look to my departmental officials.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Fox may have an answer.

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): We have reallocated resources within our team to enhance our francophone immigration efforts, as it's a priority for the department.

We therefore opened an office in Dieppe, and it remains to be seen how that will translate into the research team's and the application processing team's work. However, we do have staff actively working to maximize francophone immigration outside Quebec.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are those in leadership positions bilingual?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Of all those who work at the research office, there is not a single unilingual anglophone?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would have to look at the full list of employees, but the team I work with on francophone immigration all speak French very well.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right. Thank you very much. We will double check that, because that's not the information I have.

Mr. Minister, we've heard that the McKinsey firm has been awarded contracts from your department in recent years. How many millions of dollars in contracts did it receive, and what was the nature of those contracts?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll defer to our officials on the number of contracts and the value of any contracts.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we do have the information.

[*Translation*]

We'll get that for you.

Before we do, I'd like to point out that one of the contracts that McKinsey was awarded in the past was to deliver a training program for our black employees wanting to move into a leadership position within the department.

With respect to the total number of contracts, I'll turn to Mr. St-Pierre.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Mr. Hughes St-Pierre (Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Deputy Minister, Finance, Security and Administration, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): The department awarded two contracts to McKinsey, the first in August 2018 and the second in 2019, both after competitive bidding. The last contract was executed in 2019 and there have been no further contracts since.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What was the nature of the contract?

Mr. Hughes St-Pierre: It was to advise us on how to transform the department.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Has the McKinsey firm ever advised the department on Canada's immigration thresholds?

Mr. Hughes St-Pierre: To my knowledge, no.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Minister, are you familiar with the Century Initiative? McKinsey is behind it. It aims to have Canada reach a population of 100 million by 2100.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm familiar with the Century Initiative. I don't know of any connection to McKinsey.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay, I'll tell you about it. It's fantastic. We're told that McKinsey is behind this multi-party initiative, yet the firm continues to receive contracts from your department and the Canadian government. I respectfully submit to you that there may be something to look at there.

On another matter, last week or two weeks ago, I asked the same question several times to representatives of your department, the Canada Border Services Agency and the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, and no one could answer me.

Could you tell me what the asylum process was for people arriving from the United States before the Safe Third Country Agreement came into effect?

• (1615)

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes. I did some research after we discussed it.

Before the agreement came into effect in 2004, if an individual showed up at Canadian customs, they would not be turned back to the United States. They would be accepted and could submit their asylum claim.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're talking about the border crossings, right?

Ms. Christiane Fox: That's right.

Before the agreement came into effect, a third of all asylum seekers came from the United States. Since the agreement came into effect, it only applies to people who show up at official checkpoints in Canada and the United States, and not to those who cross the border in an irregular manner. If an individual shows up at an official checkpoint, they can be told to return to the United States, because it is a safe country.

What we are trying to address now is the Roxham Road issue, because it's beyond the scope of the current agreement.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's it.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. Time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

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

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

Thank you to the minister and his officials for coming to the committee.

My first question for the minister relates to the Hong Kong lifeboat scheme. Approximately 12,000 individuals have come to Canada and applied under that scheme, and 6,487 people were approved as of October 2021. Only 45 had permanent resident status approved by January 2022. According to research from Community Family Services of Ontario, 22% of the open work permit applicants graduated in 2016 or 2017, making them ineligible for PR under the scheme. By the time they complete their PR requirements, the degree, the limitation of five years will be over.

As the minister can see, there remain substantial barriers for Hong Kongers to access the open work permit scheme. It's set to expire on February 7, 2023. No replacement has yet been announced.

My question for the minister is this: Will he eliminate the five-year rule to make the lifeboat scheme actually workable for Hong Kongers? Second, will he extend the program?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thanks very much.

The program you referred to has provided some unique benefits to allow people from Hong Kong to come to Canada. I have no reason to question the numbers you've cited. We wanted to make sure we had a program that we could implement. I think having some objective criteria on the timelines that we could work with to determine eligibility would have been important at the time. Of course, this was before my tenure in the position.

We have not made a decision to formally extend the program at this stage. I'd be happy to follow up with further conversations, if you wish.

I would point out as well that access to Canada for people from Hong Kong was made easy some years ago with the expansion of the eTA program to allow people to travel here more quickly. It's different from a permanent residency stream, I'll acknowledge.

To answer your question, I think there has been some real utility to the program, but we have not made a formal decision on what will happen after the expiry of the existing program.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

I'd love to engage further with the minister on this, about the extension of the program but also the five-year rule. The current situation in Hong Kong has not actually improved. In fact, if anything, it has worsened. Consequently, a lot of these students, if they do not make PR here, will be sent back and will be faced with persecution. These are real issues. I'd love to work with the minister on that to see if we can find a path forward.

I want to bring another situation to the minister's attention. There's a group of 12 migrant workers, mostly women, in Niagara Falls who filed for a vulnerable workers open work permit on November 9. They're subject to harassment, racism and horrible things by the employer. According to the IRCC website, once the application is received, the worker will be contacted by IRCC within five business days. For this group of workers, it has been almost a month. There has been no contact from IRCC whatsoever.

Luckily, they are being housed by the union, by UFCW. This situation was brought to their attention. The union is paying for their accommodations so that they can actually be in a safe environment. The union is ready and willing to line them up with employment. They have good employers who are ready to hire them, but they need that open work permit.

Minister, I can put UFCW in contact with the officials to try to get this sorted out. I don't know why it has taken them more than a month when the standard is five days.

• (1620)

Hon. Sean Fraser: First of all, thank you for raising this with me. I was not familiar with the individual details of this case. We'll discuss it with our officials immediately at the end of this meeting.

For what it's worth, my view on the temporary foreign worker program is that to maintain the social licence to have this program, we cannot allow employers to abuse workers. We need to provide an opportunity for people to seek alternative employment arrangements if they're in an abusive situation.

I will undertake to have this conversation immediately when this meeting ends and report back to you at my earliest opportunity.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would appreciate that very much. These workers want to work, and they should not be subject to abuse. They've been waiting and waiting. Time is not on their side.

With regard to delays in processing for TRVs and study permits, the government website indicates that the processing time is 12 weeks, and yet our office and my colleague's office have been experiencing extraordinary delays in processing TRV and study permit applications. This is especially the case for students or individuals from Africa and Iran.

One student from Iran had to wait for over a year. They are still on track to miss yet another semester next year for their study permit, and there has been no word. No matter how we've tried to phone the urgent case line and phone the inquiry line, zero information can be provided. I don't know how this can be. It's the same thing for African students. One student we are aware of has been waiting for seven months.

I don't know if there are internal issues, or if it's the systemic racism that's been exposed within IRCC with respect to the Pollara report, or what is going on. How is it that cases, particularly from Africa and Iran, are so severely delayed and off the mark from the processing standards? I'm not talking about individual cases. I'm talking about a class of people.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, thank you for raising this with me. It's no secret that we need to improve our processing times. I think we've accomplished significant gains. I think the people who have

been in the system for some time and who are getting approved today have taken longer than what a new applicant who makes their application today will take.

We expect that by the end of the year we'll be back to having 80% of cases processed within the 60-day standard, but there is a real issue that we need to continue to examine with people who come from particular countries, particularly countries that have a majority racialized population, because systemic discrimination is not okay with me.

You've referenced the Pollara report and some really troubling findings. That was something we did proactively and that we should not hide from. We should embrace the change that we need to make, not just internally to our organizations, but in the potential impact our policies have from an outward-facing perspective.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would—

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

We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you have five minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): I don't know if you know, but I was born in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, so that makes me an honorary Ukrainian citizen.

Back in the spring, when Putin was shamelessly attacking Ukraine, you issued a press release on March 3 that said, "IRCC will quickly implement a special family reunification sponsorship pathway for permanent residence." Then you referred to working with the UCC.

In September, you announced additional pathways to permanent residence, but it didn't include Ukrainians, so my question is, do you intend to open up the TR to PR pathway for Ukrainians? If so, when should we expect that announcement?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, I don't have a date for you. Frankly, I thought we would make the announcement very shortly after the initial program, but our focus remained on getting people here more quickly who were seeking safe haven and who needed to flee Ukraine. When we made the decision to extend the temporary status, along with a work permit for three years, I knew that we had established some time to develop the program in the appropriate way.

We've seen a significant number, tens of thousands of people from Ukraine who have now come here, more than 80,000 under the CUAET program alone, and we want to make sure that we develop the program to get it right. We still intend to develop a family reunification pathway for Ukrainians and potentially look at other ways to transition those towards permanent residency through the existing mechanisms should they wish to stay.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: As I look at the numbers you've presented here, it seems like we're always increasing the budget. Is the money for that program in these estimates?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There is some funding within the supplementary estimates (B) that pertain to the services for Ukrainians: \$162.6 million to support some of the special immigration measures for Ukrainians. The different supports we've put in place include settlement services, temporary accommodations, income supports and other measures.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Yes, but I'm talking about the TR to PR program that you're going to be doing. Is that in these numbers?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. This is separate funding for programs we have announced that are in effect now.

• (1625)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: So that's yet to come.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes. However, the development of a new program when we're dealing with spaces that would come from an immigration levels plan would be tied to funding that's accompanying that specific immigration levels plan. I don't expect that you'll see a massive increase in spending to accommodate it because it will be part of larger plan to continue to grow our immigration levels.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Speaking of massive increases in spending, for Afghanistan resettlement, previous budgets had \$258 million. These estimates are adding another \$195 million, for a total of \$453 million, or just about half a billion dollars. For spending money, you get a check mark there.

Results, though, are another issue. I see on your website that 9,000 Afghans have come in under the special immigration measures, and 670 out of 5,000 interpreters' family members.

In the private sector, I was judged on outcomes. Here, we're spending nearly half a billion dollars, but a very small number of people have actually made it to Canada. Can you honestly, with a straight face, say that this program has been a success?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Do you know how many Afghan refugees came here under the Conservative program that existed over four years before we formed government?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The question is for you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll tell you the answer. It was about 800.

We have now welcomed more than 25,000 Afghan refugees. If you think that's insignificant, feel free to take that message back to Yorkton, but I don't think that's insignificant.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The fall of Kabul happened under your watch, so I would expect that would be something you would deal with. I'm talking about the special immigration measures, and I'm

talking about the Afghan interpreters' family members. Those numbers are still relatively small.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't think this is small at all. So far under the special immigration measures, I believe, we're dealing with in excess of 9,000 folks who are here and another 14,000 through our humanitarian programs.

To suggest that this is insignificant boggles my mind. More than 25,000 people who were facing persecution and potentially torture or death at the hands of the Taliban have been given a second lease on life. I have met them. They are living in our communities. They are people who contributed to our mission in Afghanistan. They are people who—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister, what's not insignificant certainly is the amount of money you've spent, for sure. You talk about people you've seen, and I have seen them too—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Are you saying this was too expensive? Is your argument that it was too expensive?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: My argument is that there are people waiting—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Do you know how many refugees you committed to take in your campaign platform in the last federal election? The answer is zero.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister, there are people still waiting. They're stuck in limbo in other countries. They're sitting in Pakistan and other countries waiting to come to Canada because the program is going so slowly. What do you say to those people who aren't here yet?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I say that there are extraordinary challenges. This is like no refugee resettlement initiative that the federal government has ever taken on. The challenges on the ground to move people through a terrain where the Taliban—a listed terrorist entity in Canadian law—has seized control are not like anything we've ever seen before.

This is not as simple as sending a plane to a UNHCR-run refugee camp where we can simply have people board the plane, fly to Canada, land safely and focus on their resettlement once they arrive. This is a set of circumstances that is more challenging than any other refugee resettlement initiative imaginable. We are taking more people than any country on a per capita basis, and one of—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Can you bring them here and do biometrics here? Is that something you can do?

Hon. Sean Fraser: —the most substantial commitments in the world. Twenty-five thousand people is not insignificant.

On the question you're asking about biometrics, we want to insist that we have a rigorous process that allows people to have their security clearances done in advance so we can make sure that, when we make a commitment to a person that they're going to land in Canada, we can reliably project that we're going to be able to welcome and resettle them in Canada.

I'm going to continue to do everything I can until we make good to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees. I believe it's the very least we can do.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will proceed to Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. El-Khoury, you will have five minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

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

First of all, I echo the comments of my colleague Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: you have been generous enough to come to committee meetings on several occasions to share your ideas and answer our questions, Mr. Minister.

We know that more immigrants are choosing to live in large cities, while rural and northern communities continue to experience severe labour shortages.

The data shows that we are making good progress. We see that in recent years, our policies and investments have helped increase the number of immigrants settling in smaller communities. However, we need to do more.

Mr. Minister, are you able to tell us what's being done to attract and retain more newcomers in small and rural communities?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

I come here often because I like the members on this committee.

[*English*]

Mr. El-Khoury, this is a personal question for me. One of the main reasons I wanted to get involved in politics is that I saw that social changes happening in the communities I represent in rural Nova Scotia were having a devastating impact that did not paint a pretty picture for the future of small-town, rural Canada.

I don't know that I've shared this with you before, but two of the hot issues during the 2015 election campaign in my own constituency involved the closure of the River John elementary school and the loss of the mental health unit at the Aberdeen Hospital, the largest regional hospital in northern Nova Scotia. The reason we had to see that school close was the depopulation of the small community. The reason we lost the mental health unit was the loss of a psychiatrist, and they couldn't safely operate it when a professional moved out of town.

One of the main things I hope to accomplish during my tenure, as long as I have the privilege of holding it, is to make sure that we share the benefits of immigration with every community, including small towns and rural communities. We have put a plan in place as part of this year's immigration levels plan to make sure that we can achieve that outcome.

You will probably notice that there is a significant increase in the regionalization of immigration numbers. There's a huge increase in the Atlantic immigration program where communities have the capacity to take more people. There's a significant increase in the provincial nominee programs where provinces can push people to communities that have the capacity to successfully settle them. This summer we increased and expanded the rural and northern immigration pilot program where we took feedback from the communities to better serve the interests of the communities that benefit from it. There are new flexibilities in the express entry system that allow us to do targeted draws, not just by region but also by the sector in which those regions have the highest labour market needs.

Every single day I ask myself what I can do to help small communities survive. Big cities will always be a magnet for newcomers. They are some of the coolest places to live anywhere in the world, with the most opportunities, but small towns are extraordinary places to live as well. Rural communities like the one I grew up in are extraordinary places as well, and to see that we've been able to put in place a plan that will help deliver more people to communities to make sure that our conversations are about growth, not schools and hospitals closing, is going to be one of the most important things I can imagine accomplishing in this job.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you. It's very encouraging to hear that, Mr. Minister.

Canada has a proud tradition of resettling refugees. We're considered a world leader in that regard.

I believe everyone here would agree that Canada must continue to support the world's most vulnerable people. We also need to face the fact that our economy needs workers.

What are you doing to balance the need to address significant gaps in our labour market with the fact that so many people around the world are displaced and need to resettle?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are a couple of different things.

[*Translation*]

We must recognize that there's no perfect plan.

That said, it's crucial that the government consider options for increasing the number of newcomers. With their skills, these individuals contribute to our economy.

We must also continue to welcome vulnerable people who need a safe place to live.

[English]

What we try to do is examine the needs of the Canadian economy and determine how many people we can bring in who will be set up for success. It's not just for them to be brought here, but to be set up for success. Changing the rules to make sure that the people who are going to be chosen to come in for economic reasons meet, in a more tailored way, the needs of the Canadian economy is a big part of the path forward.

At the same time, we want to continue to be a world leader. One of the beautiful things about Canada is the multipartisan support for large immigration numbers.

I'll conclude on this, Madam Chair, because my time is up. We have settled more refugees than any country in the world in the last three years. This is a tradition that I think we should continue, regardless of who is in government, for many years to come.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Go ahead, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

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

Mr. Barton, a former McKinsey executive, was appointed Canadian ambassador to China by Justin Trudeau. In 2016, Mr. Barton advised the government to take in 450,000 immigrants per year, which is the number of immigrants Canada accepts right now.

Mr. Minister, in your view, how much influence do the McKinsey firm and its executives have on Canada's immigration thresholds?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I do not know Mr. Barton. I did not know he made that recommendation and landed on the numbers included in this year's immigration levels plan upon independent reflection on what we ought to do and how many people we can process and successfully resettle in Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you're saying that the McKinsey firm has no influence on the Government of Canada with respect to immigration thresholds.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I had no involvement with McKinsey. Is it possible that they have, in one of the previous reports, given feedback to the department?

I would defer to our officials if that's ever been the case, but it did not inform my decision-making.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I assume you're aware that a criminal investigation has been opened in France regarding the role the McKinsey firm played in the French elections.

Why is the Government of Canada continuing to do business with a firm that's under criminal investigation in another country?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have no information on that.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'll text you the information.

The last time you testified before the committee, you stated that the Safe Third Country Agreement was flawed. However, it's been with us for four years because we've been told for four years that it's being renegotiated.

You also told us that suspending the agreement would produce an influx of asylum claims. However, that's just a gut feeling. We have no studies to prove it would happen, and no one has been able to demonstrate with supporting documents that more asylum seekers would submit claims.

Don't you think that suspending the agreement for three months would show us whether or not the number of claims would go up?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. I don't think we should just try it. I think it is a potentially dangerous idea.

In addition to making sure—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Why is it a dangerous idea?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: —that we do this specifically with our partners on a bilateral basis, I don't believe that suspending the agreement is a good idea. Having an agreement that respects the safe third country principle is something we ought to do.

I have serious concerns not just about the people who make that last step of the journey to cross the border, but about the number of people who will be fleeing—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Migrant advocacy groups took on the government in the Supreme Court because they challenged the agreement. The decision was rendered in 2020, but the government appealed it.

Why do migrant advocacy groups, immigration lawyers and all civil society want to suspend the agreement, but the government does not?

[English]

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

Hon. Sean Fraser: Perhaps I will give a response to my friend after the meeting.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

For all the members and witnesses, all of the questions should be directed through the chair.

We will now go to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kwan, please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The minister advised that it is important for everyone to know the processing standards for their application, yet on the IRCC website, not every stream has that information in the public domain.

Will the minister commit to ensuring that for every single immigration stream, there will be processing standards on the IRCC website, so that people can know and plan?

Hon. Sean Fraser: As a general rule, yes, I think we should, but with one caveat. There are certain instances when it's extremely difficult to be able to reliably project, because the allocation of spaces in the immigration levels plan will be far less than the global demand of people who would like to come out of those. That can make it very difficult to project with any reliability how long it ought to take. However, when we can make a reliable projection, we ought to.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps the minister can actually put that as a caveat on the IRCC website so that people know, because right now, for example, with respect to the processing of refugee travel documents and certificates of identity, there is no processing time timeline. People have no idea, even though they are desperately in need of trying to go back to visit loved ones.

I could go on with the lists, but I won't because I only have two minutes or something. Suffice it to say, that needs to be done. People need to know so that they can plan.

The other thing I want to bring to the minister's attention is this: For urgent processing, this is a real problem. The government indicates that urgent processing through the inquiry line will be dealt with within 48 hours. The reality is that it's anywhere between one week and 10 days, or more. I have multiple cases where people can't get urgent processing. By nature, the situation is urgent, but it's not being processed accordingly.

My question for the minister is this: Will he commit to ensuring that the urgent processing of cases is actually dealt with within the processing time of 48 hours?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We'll do everything we can to get back to urgent processing timelines for urgent cases. I think for many reasons that we've outlined, some of the processes and challenges that we've had have slowed us down. I'll do everything I can to get back to a 48-hour timeline as quickly as possible.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If that doesn't happen, what do we do? How do we deal with constituents who are in desperate need? What do we do? Where do we go?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The reality of the situation that I work in... Look, for urgent cases—to answer your question—if you're not able to get it through the MED line, please get in touch with me if you need to for the truly urgent cases.

I will say that the number of urgent cases coming through... Given our commitments to resettle some of the most vulnerable people and given certain challenging life circumstances with such immigration ambition, urgent cases are coming through to me in larger numbers than they ever have before.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. Thank you.

I'm running out of time. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Oh, I wanted to get one more in.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Ms. Rempel Garner for five minutes.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you can begin, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you. It's always a short time.

Ms. Fox, in the lead-up to the events of late July and August 2021, when did your department first become aware that Afghanistan was likely to fall to the Taliban?

• (1640)

Ms. Christiane Fox: We have always worked extremely closely with all of our security partners and with Global Affairs, so I think what the department did was actively participate in all the dialogue that took place in the lead-up.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would you say that it was several months prior to the fall of Afghanistan?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd have to maybe turn to a colleague to see, as I wasn't there at the time. That's why it's hard to answer that question in terms of—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Just answer briefly, please.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We can, maybe, get back to you in terms of the time frame. I would say that—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would it be safe to say that it was a risk probably a couple of months, two or three months prior to the fall?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Well, yes, I think there are always risks in Afghanistan, and that's something that's always been top of mind. However—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Your government would have been aware that—

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, I think so.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: —there was a need to resettle people.

When did your department provide advice to the government regarding the potential need to resettle Afghans with a relationship to Canada due to the potential fall of their country?

Ms. Christiane Fox: In any sort of crisis and emergency management situation, the department would be working in lockstep with other security agencies to map out exactly what some of the potential avenues are, what some of the policy responses are. We would have provided advice around those issues.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It's my understanding that the IRCC in Islamabad issued a notice to some Afghan nationals sometime in July, suggesting that they apply for a temporary public policy to resettle to Canada. Is that correct?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

On what date did your department begin to select Afghan nationals with a relationship to Canada for evacuation to Canada?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd have to get back to the committee with regard to a precise date.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The reason I ask these questions is just to follow up, Minister, on the line of questions from my colleague, Mr. Redekopp. You made some fairly aggressive assertions around your department's response and the adequacy of the response. You did admit that perhaps the department should be doing biometric data selection, etc., ahead of time and that it would have helped resettle people.

Given your deputy minister's comments on providing advice to the government ahead of time, do you think it would be unfair to say that perhaps the government dropped the ball in the timeline on selecting Afghan nationals, given what you said about how some of this biometric data, etc., could have been done ahead of time?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, I don't think it's a fair assertion to say that any ball has been dropped. I think there are times when I wish we could get people here more quickly. I will always wish that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do you think more people could have been brought to Canada and not been in the situation that you outlined—which is that now we're having significantly more difficulty evacuating them—had your government acted on the advice of the department and perhaps not called a federal election in the middle of this crisis?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I actually think that that federal election was one of the most important moments in terms of the success of the Afghan mission.

With respect to getting animated with one of my colleagues, the difference between—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Minister. Thank you.

Hon. Sean Fraser: —the Conservative and the Liberal commitments on the numbers we were willing to take was extraordinary, we committing to 40,000, and the Conservatives committing to zero.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I asked a yes-or-no question.

Thank you.

Ms. Fox, given the minister's assertion, did the department feel that the federal election.... With the federal election and the government being in caretaker mode, was your department hampered in its

efforts to resettle Afghan nationals during the fall of Kabul during the 2021 federal election?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would say that the caretaker convention allows all departments to react to any health and safety emergency no matter whether an election is called or not. It allows us to continue that important work regardless of an election.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did the caretaker mode hinder the department's ability to make timely responses on the criteria by which the government was selecting persons for resettlement or evacuation to Canada?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Again, I would say that during the caretaker mode ministers are still ministers and deputies still have access to their ministers in order to move the department's urgent business on all fronts.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do you think it was appropriate or did you provide the government with advice regarding the appropriateness of calling a federal election during the fall of Kabul given the resettlement priorities that were precipitated by the fall of Kabul?

Ms. Christiane Fox: The public service doesn't give advice to the government on when to call an election.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Were any concerns raised about the call of an election during the resettlement crisis?

Ms. Christiane Fox: As I said, we have an ability to continue to govern in any period of an election to deal with a health or an emergency situation and we continue to provide services and programs throughout.

• (1645)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Minister, do you believe your predecessor, Minister Mendicino, did a good job in this situation?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, I do. I believe he did a good job when he committed initially to bring in 20,000 Afghan refugees and then to influence the Liberal Party's platform to double that commitment to 40,000.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now end this panel with Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have five minutes.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and the officials here.

Minister, on the recent announcement about the Indo-Pacific region, if we look at the region served by the Chandigarh and Islamabad offices in the Indo-Pacific region, it provides a major source of newcomers to Canada. It's also my understanding that the government is investing nearly \$75 million in this region to meet those ambitious targets that you want to achieve.

Could you please tell me what exactly it means for the people who are represented by the region served by Islamabad and Chandigarh when these offices were earlier opened for visa processing and were closed in the past year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There will be certain decisions that roll out as a result of the spending decisions as to how to allocate that \$75 million. The purpose of making this investment was to grow our people-to-people ties in the region and diversify our interest for social and economic reasons to allow for more people to be coming from those regions to Canada and to speed up the processing times in particular.

There are four different locations that we will be focused on. You mentioned Chandigarh and Islamabad. As well, part of the same announcement was our spaces in Delhi and in Manila. In addition to growing the potential workforce in those spaces, we will be adding a complement of staff to our global network to focus on applications coming from the Indo-Pacific region more broadly.

In addition, we plan to launch initiatives to boost recruitment through the international student program so we can continue to attract more people from the Indo-Pacific region who will come to Canada as international students, many of whom I expect will transition to permanent residency over time.

I think it's a wonderful thing for Canada, and I think it will reduce processing times in the region more broadly.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Minister, diversity is the key to Canada and if we look outside Quebec, we need the francophone immigration to increase. When it comes to the B.C. Francophone Association, very near and dear to me, they have always raised this concern. Are there any efforts that are being made to meet those targets of 4.4% outside of Quebec?

[Translation]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Absolutely, it's a priority for me and our government.

To show how much respect I have for the French language, I'm working hard to improve the quality of my French. In fact, I thank my parliamentary secretary Marie-France Lalonde, who is my French teacher. I also thank our colleague Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe.

To ensure social cohesion in Canada, I need a plan to increase the number of newcomers in general. It's crucial that we increase the number of francophone newcomers to protect the demographic weight of francophones in Quebec and the rest of Canada. We must invest to help francophone newcomers establish themselves here. We need to open a new office in Dieppe to support innovation in francophone immigration. It's also very important that we increase the acceptance rate for francophone students from Africa.

There are many opportunities for Canada if we continue to increase the number of francophone newcomers. That's a good thing for those arriving in Canada, and it's an even better thing for our country.

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Minister.

Recently, you announced some important measures to help solve labour shortages when it comes to particular trades. You have included 16 new occupations. Could you please elaborate on how these additional NOC codes or categories will allow Canada to bring in global talent in some of the high-demand sectors?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is really important. We've gotten the one-minute sign from the chair, so I'll try to be quick.

We made an announcement very recently to expand the express entry system to 16 new occupations, including occupations ranging from heavy equipment operators to chefs, aestheticians, occupations in trucking and transportation, and many others. What's really important in the labour shortage context that we're living through right now is that we expand opportunities for different sectors that have very high demand to continue to share in the benefits of immigration.

When I look at the transportation sector in particular, this is a sector that enables economic growth across the economy. They are screaming for people, as so many other sectors are right now. By opening up the opportunity to benefit from immigration, we're going to help sustain certain industries that will grow the economy as a whole. I think it's the right thing to do, and I'm going to continue to work with our colleagues at ESDC, provincial partners and stakeholders across the country to better understand how we can continue to expand access to immigration to help grow the economy.

• (1650)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, this panel comes to an end.

On behalf of all the members of this committee, I really want to thank you for your time and for all the work that you do on behalf of all Canadians to make sure that we have a vibrant immigration system here in this country.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow you to leave. We will have some time with the officials, and then we will vote on the supplementary estimates (B).

Thank you, Minister.

• (1650)

(Pause)

• (1655)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

We will now go straight into a round of questioning with the officials. We will start our first round of questioning with Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Kmiec, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry again about my voice, but you have no choice.

There is a line in the supplementary estimates that says there's more money for "Funding to increase the reach of Temporary Foreign Worker Program inspections". It's about \$271,000 and change.

How many inspections are being done in person versus virtually right now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: There is definitely a line item in the supplementary estimates on TFW inspections, and we'll have to get you the specific data, because I don't want to give you stats that don't represent the full picture of how many are in person and how many are virtual.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay. I would like just the total number of inspections being done on each one, if possible, broken down by province as well.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Okay.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you.

My next question—

Ms. Christiane Fox: I should just maybe note that this is supports with our other department, Employment and Social Development Canada, ESDC, and Service Canada. They run the TFW program, but we do have some funding to allow for inspections.

• (1700)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: That's why I assumed there was a connection there.

On the Afghans who are being brought to Canada, the minister keeps quoting the 25,000 people and the 40,000 target. We've spent a lot of time focusing on the interpreters who helped the Canadian Forces while on the ground in Afghanistan and the target families that we first of all wanted to bring here.

What about the families of LCAs, the language and cultural advisers? These are Canadians—I think all of them are naturalized Canadians like me—who served in uniform for Canada. Many of their family members are still trapped in either Afghanistan or the region. What is the department doing to assist them?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Maybe I would start by saying—and I think you're aware of this—that there are three main categories of how Afghans are coming through: through SIM, through the families of the interpreters, and then through the humanitarian program, which has seen the bulk of the arrivals—over 14,000 through the humanitarian stream.

Absolutely, we appreciate the vulnerability of these clients. We're working through the various ways in which we can, through any of these three streams, get them back to Canada.

The reality, as the minister noted, is that the situation on the ground is complex. It's extremely difficult to get people out, and—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry, but I'm going to interrupt you. LCAs are here in Canada. Their families are over there. These individuals have top-secret clearance for the duties they fulfill for the Canadian Forces. In many cases, the Taliban are actively looking for their family members so as to put pressure on them to have these LCAs, who are in Canada, reveal Canada's secrets to them. They're using their family members as pawns in this game, which is why I'm asking.

If you don't have an answer here, perhaps you could provide a brief, because I do have other questions specific to the supplementary estimates (B) that I want to continue with.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think the answer would be that we are working with the families and looking at the risks on the ground. Because of what you have articulated, it is extremely challenging for people to get travel documents. If they manage to get out and get into Pakistan, for instance, because they've arrived irregularly in Pakistan sometimes they have lots of challenges finding ways to get out, because of the exit requirements of some of those countries in that region.

We are absolutely aware of the challenges and are working toward safe passages to help family members at risk.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay.

Typically in the supplementary estimates (B) the departmental results for the previous spending are provided. Those are missing here. I believe they're also missing all across government, because the last results that are available on the Treasury Board Secretariat's website are for 2020-21, and we're supposed to have 2021-22.

Where are those results? Does the department have them? Have you submitted them to the Treasury Board? Why don't we have them?

Mr. Hughes St-Pierre: To my awareness, there is nothing different with this cycle from any previous cycle. The departmental results report would have been submitted this fall, and I believe I have a copy here, so I'm happy to—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: The Treasury Board Secretariat's website doesn't have any of that information, which is why I am asking for it. It does a pretty good job of providing them in a digital format so you can compare to previous years.

The minister talked a lot about how all these extra people and all this extra money are going to improve processing times. The problem is that the same departmental plan calls for a reduction of 1,000 FTEs, and an almost \$1-billion reduction in spending over the next two years. That's part of the planned spending, the long-term trend for this department.

How can you square the fact that the department is being staffed up and budgeted up in order to reduce the backlog but the backlog has not gotten a lot shorter, while there is also a very high expectation of large volumes to increase into the future? The annual report on immigration calls for large volumes of applications, while resources are expected to be reduced, according to what the minister and the department have basically put forward to the Treasury Board.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would start by saying two things. The first thing I would say is that our annual report and our levels plan really focus on permanent residency, and it's important for the committee to appreciate that for permanent residency, we get funding for the amount, and it is a capped amount. We determine that number, and it's a mix of economic immigration and refugees, so we map out that number. Every year, the department, through its processing, has been able to meet its target over the last few years: 401,000 and 432,000 this year. We get funding for that planned growth to be able to have the processing capacity to meet those permanent residency levels plans that we make.

On top of that, there's the number of temporary residents, which is uncapped. This speaks to the volumes that we see right now. What we have done—you're absolutely right—in light of the backlogs, in light of the pressures and in light of the increases, is increase our FTE complement to be able to deal with the backlog so that we can start putting a dent in it, but long-term planning—

• (1705)

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

We will now proceed to MP Ali.

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

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Mr. Dhaliwal will take over.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the officials again.

My first question follows up on what was brought to the attention of the minister earlier. There was a MED section of the IRCC that was very helpful to our constituents when members of Parliament were able to talk to them. I want to commend them for the work that they did, not only solving the problems for our constituents but, in fact, also mentoring our staff on those files. That was key because of the experience that I bring, because of my office being the busiest in all of Canada.

At some point in time, are you thinking of bringing that back so that MPs can have similar access to MED to help their constituents?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Madam Chair, the department absolutely recognizes that, because of the backlog and because of the impact on people, the client service aspect of our work needs to be re-emphasized, and it needs to be prioritized. I can only imagine, putting myself in the shoes of people who are applying to come here either permanently or temporarily, what that means for them in terms of the unknown.

There has been and there continues to be an emphasis on what that client experience can be, and that includes looking at putting information on the website so people understand what the backlog looks like and what it means for them, looking at client trackers so they can have a better sense of where their application is in the mix and then what types of support services we can put in place in the department to be able to respond either to MPs or to individuals who call us for information about their cases.

We have groups dedicated to things like conferences or humanitarian and compassionate needs, and, very recently, we've been working with a lot of you on setting up an MP system where the department would make time available so that MPs can come to the department with a set time and set dedicated resources to be able to work through the very challenging files that you all have to work through.

These are some of the elements we're trying to use to be more responsive to what we're seeing. The reality is that, because the department faces the backlog that it faces now, people go through a number of different channels in order to try to get information on their cases. They call the client centre. They try to call their MPs. They may do an ATIP request. It creates even more volume. As a department, we have a responsibility to get through the backlog and then look at the service standards and determine whether they're the right service standards going forward and how we modernize our systems.

The minister spoke about digitization and electronic applications. These are ways in which we're going to be able to be less reliant on paper-based systems and be a bit more focused on how to process in a more efficient way using technology. That's not done overnight, and I think that's why there has been an FTE growth to manage the volume that we're facing, but we have to think about what a modern system looks like, and we are dedicated to doing that.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you. I can tell you that that department was a key success, and I would love for you to consider bringing it back.

Let me focus on the half a million permanent resident targets in 2025. Could you talk about the department's long-term focus on economic growth, particularly when it comes to small cities and towns?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

Madam Chair, obviously, with the labour market shortage the country is facing right now, we have been extremely focused on economic immigration, but we also need to look at how we look at economic integration, where not everybody ends up in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. We have to think about what some of the regional programs are that have given us some success.

A good example of that, I would say, would be the Atlantic immigration program. I think I heard a stat when we were last in the Atlantic region, where some of the universities and businesses told us that for every 10 workers who exit the market, only seven enter. Programs designed to bring economic immigrants to those areas of the country are absolutely essential. The Atlantic immigration program was actually a pilot for five years or so, and then it matured into a full-grown program. How can we use those examples to look at rural and northern needs and how can we better match? I think that's an important lesson for us.

Most recently, in New Brunswick, we launched a pilot program with some of the big employers—Groupe Savoie, Cooke Aquaculture and Irving—to look at what their needs are in their region and how we, as a department, can work with them, the private sector and the province to actually bring workers to those communities that may not have the ability to sustain them from within their own populations. We have to be creative in that.

[*Translation*]

We also need to keep francophone immigration in mind in the context of our work. In the new year, we'll have the flexibility to be more creative about it, and that's going to be a great opportunity for us.

• (1710)

[*English*]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Can you talk about the gender-based analysis audit report that came out and the internal changes you have made based on that policy?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much for the question.

It didn't take the AG; it was just internal to government departments. We have to look at how we apply GBA+ to our programs and policies. I think in our department it is absolutely essential.

We've been working very closely with our anti-racism secretariat within the department to look at not only how our internal practices are impacting our employees, but in addition to that—I know members raised issues like francophone African students—what some of the barriers are that exist because of programs or policies within the department. I think what the GBA+ lens can give us—

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

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

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you can please begin.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Fox, can you assure me that your department has paid no money to McKinsey since May 2019?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Based on the contracts and information we have, that's correct. We've had two contracts.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can you remind me what the nature of the 2018 and 2019 contracts were?

Ms. Christiane Fox: They were for our efforts to transform and modernize the immigration system, including the implementation of our digital process labs. They didn't directly concern the immigration thresholds, but rather the innovation aspect and the practices we wanted to adopt within the department to improve our processes and policies.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So there was nothing after 2019.

Ms. Christiane Fox: No.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Can you also assure me that there's been no movement recently among the department's managers who worked on francophone immigration outside Quebec?

Ms. Christiane Fox: A number of employees work on that team. Personally, I'm not aware of any changes. I met with the team very recently and have not heard of any change of director or director general. Usually in meetings. I work more with the directors general, but I met with some of the managers and I didn't hear of any francophones leaving their positions to be replaced by anglophones.

As I told you, we have a new director of research, but he's part of our policy team. He's not directly connected to the team that deals with francophone immigration, although there is a unit within the department. This position is perhaps more akin to the ones you are referring to, but it's not connected to the team in charge of francophone immigration.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. We will come back to it.

Since 2015, Statistics Canada has produced the Job Vacancy and Wage Survey, which collects data by industry and region.

Instead of requiring businesses to complete a labour market impact assessment every time, why not negotiate with Quebec to tie the temporary foreign worker program into the survey? There's definitely some overlap here. Don't you think it would be a way to remove an irritant and, more importantly, speed up the process?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

We are always looking for ways to work with the provinces and territories to avoid duplication of the work you mentioned, particularly in the case of labour market impact assessments.

I believe that Employment and Social Development Canada has been flexible with respect to the temporary foreign worker program, working closely with Quebec. The department has made some changes, including extending the period of time a worker can stay with an organization. In some cases, the department has eliminated the 6% rate. The department has therefore taken steps to try to address the situation.

We've also worked with Quebec, particularly through the international mobility plus program, which aims to bring economic immigrants to Quebec. This program was intended for permanent residents, but by working with Quebec, we sought to bring people in more quickly on a temporary basis and then have them transition to permanent residency. That way, these immigrants can arrive sooner to work for businesses in Quebec.

• (1715)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm going to keep talking about the issue of temporary foreign workers. I don't know if you read the newspaper articles this morning. They say that employers are concerned about the delays. I imagine we get pretty much the same media review.

Canada and Quebec have an agreement on employment, the Canada-Québec Labour Market Agreement in Principle. Quebec knows its needs for its own territory, by region and by sector of activity. Why is the federal government asking employers for the same things over again when the provincial government already has the answers?

Why not just do away with the labour market impact assessments? It would not only speed up the immigration process, but it would also greatly reduce anxiety among employers and foreign workers, who are waiting to get their work permits to come here.

I understand that Employment and Social Development Canada has made some things easier, but this duplication makes no sense when we already have the answers in Quebec.

What are your thoughts on this?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We need to strike a balance: We must recognize the labour shortage and allow temporary foreign workers to play a vital role in the labour market to help businesses.

We also need to keep in mind that 1 million vulnerable Canadians are looking for work. We therefore need an inclusive process for those Canadians who can be active in the labour market.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand that and I recognize those 1 million vulnerable Canadians.

However, why wouldn't Quebec be more capable than the federal government at doing that work? That's what I don't understand. Quebec is already doing that.

Don't you agree that we should do away with labour market impact assessments?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I feel we should continue to work with Quebec.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. That's well put.

In the spring, to great fanfare, Minister Fraser announced a program to allow Canadians and businesses to donate Aeroplan points to bring at least 10,000 Ukrainians to Canada.

How many people have come to Canada through the Aeroplan program and the Shapiro Foundation?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I don't have the exact numbers, but each month, we have about 300 plane tickets for Master Immigration Services. I can check into the exact number of people.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You say it's been about 300 plane tickets per month since the program began six months ago in June. So that's 1,800 people in total.

Ms. Christiane Fox: There could be more. I can get you the exact number, but it's a program that—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So we have reached a total of 1,800 people out of 10,000.

After the Ukrainian crisis and Afghan crisis fiasco at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, people told us that 15 to 25% of the department's officers were sent to work on the Afghan crisis when it occurred.

People thought the department should have a contingency plan when international crises occur. We know they're going to be more and more frequent—

[*English*]

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

Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Ms. Kwan, you can begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the officials.

To follow up on the question around processing delays for African applicants, as well as those from Iran, could the officials provide the median and the average processing time for TRVs and PR applications, along with study permits for applicants from Africa and Iran for the last six years? That would be minus the two years of COVID, because I understand that things were at a standstill, but it's so that we have some baseline to compare it to.

Can I also get the officials to provide to the committee the turnaround time for PR applicants waiting for instructions to create...the PR portal or to have the photo uploaded so that they can get their COPR? We're seeing unbelievable delays. People are waiting for these steps so that they can move forward with their application. They're stuck there. They can't get on the portal to upload their photos and the stuff that they're supposed to upload to move things forward. What is the hang-up there? That's really what I'm trying to get at.

Also, on the issue around the newly announced 3,000 family member spots for the group of five in the Afghan privately sponsored stream, could the officials advise if those spots are fully subscribed? If so, when did they become full? If not, at what stage are they now?

I'll pause here. If you have answers, I'll take them. If not, I'll move on with my other questions.

• (1720)

Ms. Christiane Fox: Maybe I'll start with where you ended, which is on the 3,000 spots for Afghans in the group of five. It is fully subscribed, but we're going through the subscription. There were a couple of cases of duplication, so we're going through to see whether or not we've reached that capacity, or whether, because of the few duplications, it's going to open up some spots. However, we're very close to it, if not at the 3,000.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If you can advise the committee, I'd like to know exactly when it became fully subscribed. To my knowledge, people tried to get into that program very early on, literally within the first couple of weeks when the program was announced, and it was pretty well fully subscribed. It really goes to show you the demand and the need. I'm just trying to figure out what the lay of the land is.

With respect to that, what is the anticipated timeline for processing? Privately sponsored refugee applications right now are sitting at about three years in terms of processing, so what's the estimated timeline for these sets of applications?

Ms. Christiane Fox: For Afghan processing, it's always a little bit challenging to put a specific time frame on it. Depending on the location of the individual, depending on the challenges, sometimes it's not a question about the processing time frame—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I appreciate that, but I'm running out of time.

I need just a quick answer. Do you have any projection within your department on how quickly these will be processed?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We can give you the processing time that it would take for the department, but there are unknown elements that we don't control.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's fair enough. If you give us that information, I would appreciate that.

Will any of the resources allocated from the supplementary estimates assist with the processing of these applications? If so, how much?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's actually a significant portion of the funding that is going to Afghan refugees, including processing. It's \$647 million—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that all for this stream, or is it for all of it?

Ms. Christiane Fox: No, it's for the entire—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How is it broken down?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We can get you a breakdown of the funding.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

In the supplementary estimates, \$23.9 million is allocated to address inventory backlog for PR applications. Will this be for the backlog, or is it for new applications to meet standard processing?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you for your question.

It's actually a mix of the two. Those funds will help us work on complex matters that have been pending for a number of years, but also continue to meet our service standards for certain categories of applications, including Express Entry applicants and family reunification. The minister has talked about this.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is the entire amount being dedicated for the backlog and not for new applications? Just give a yes or no.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: It's a mix of the two, but as the minister said, immigration levels—

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, but I'm going to interrupt again. I apologize.

Could we get a breakdown, then, on how much is being allocated for the new applications and how much is for the backlog? What is the expected time frame for the processing of these applications? How many do you expect you would actually get through in both of those different streams? If you don't have that figure now, you can provide it to the committee later.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: I don't have a detailed timeline for that, but as the minister said, the annual budgets are used for immigration applications. The funding requested in the supplementary estimates is primarily to reduce the backlog of files. We're basing it on the annual reference levels.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If you can provide us with the projected numbers of how many cases you think you will get through with that amount of money, that would be appreciated, and then how many are still sitting in the backlog untouched.

With respect to IRCC-allocated funding to the IOM, does IRCC allocate funding to the IOM to provide housing for Afghan refugees in third countries? If yes, how much, and then in which country in those third countries? Also, how many units of housing are being funded? Who is responsible for the allocation? Whom can the families contact when they have been promised the housing but no provision of housing has been made available to them?

Can you provide that information to the committee?

The Chair: Your time is up. Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

With that, the rounds of questioning come to an end, and we will have to vote on the supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23.

Yes, Ms. Fox.

• (1725)

Ms. Christiane Fox: Ms. Chair, I just want to confirm that with regard to the \$2 million to the IOM, we will provide that detail and context to the committee.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. We will welcome it.

We will be voting on supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$560,308,238

Vote 5b—Capital expenditures.....\$12,443,903

Vote 10b—Grants and contributions.....\$608,843,145

(Votes 1b, 5b, and 10b agreed to on division)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1b—Program expenditures.....\$1,903,141

(Vote 1b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes on the supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, I want to really thank all the officials for appearing before the committee today.

Go ahead, Mr. Ali.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: On a point of order, Madam Chair, since the officials are here, I wanted to make a request of the department.

Could you please provide the committee with the number, and the approval and rejection data, of study permit applications and TRVs from Pakistan for 2021 and 2022?

Thank you.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thanks.

Like Mr. Ali, I have some questions to be answered. I will hand them in to the clerk

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Once we get them, we will get them circulated.

With that, on behalf of all the members, I want to thank the officials for appearing before the committee. Thank you for always coming whenever we invite you. Thank you for all the work that you do. It's not an easy department. I know from handling the immigration cases in my riding that it's not an easy department.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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