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• (1710)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

We are meeting in public.

Welcome to meeting number 93 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today, for a briefing on recent changes to international student policy and plans for future measures, we have with us the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, the Honourable Marc Miller, along with the officials.

First I would love to welcome, on behalf of the committee members, Dr. Harpreet S. Kochhar, who is the deputy minister. He's not new to the department. He was the ADM in the department. He moved to other departments and he's come back.

Dr. Kochhar, welcome.

We also have Ms. May with us. She is no stranger to the committee. Welcome to the committee as well.

We also have Aiesha Zafar, who is joining us virtually. Ms. Zafar, welcome to the committee.

We have two honourable members joining us. I would love to acknowledge that they are here with us.

Mike Morrice is here. Welcome to the committee.

Also with us, we have Luc Berthold. Welcome to the meeting.

With this, we will go directly to the minister. You have five minutes for your opening statement. Please go ahead.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Chair.

I want to take my turn to welcome the team, particularly Dr. Harpreet Kochhar, who is the new deputy minister for this department. It is his first time in committee with me.

I want to begin by acknowledging our presence on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[Translation]

I'm glad to be back at this committee, twice this month, to discuss reforms to the international student program, as well as international student fraud and an update on the task force. Several of you have already asked questions about those issues.

[English]

In recent years, we have seen dramatic increases in the number of international students who are arriving and hopefully studying in Canada.

Some institutions have significantly increased the number of international students they receive to boost revenues without providing students with the resources and support they need.

[Translation]

This has rendered international students vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. We must have safeguards in place to protect newcomers while maintaining system integrity. That's why we've introduced reforms to the program to improve system integrity, support international students in Canada and better protect them from exploitation.

• (1715)

[English]

As of December 2023, we've established a mandatory letter of acceptance verification system for all post-secondary institutions to help protect students and institutions from fraud. We've also launched a task force to identify genuine international students who are victims of schemes around fraudulent letters of admissions, which we have seen as well.

In January, we increased the financial requirements for international students to \$20,635. This measure will ensure that students are financially prepared for life in Canada and consequently less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

[Translation]

While this was a necessary step to ensure international students can support themselves, we understand that increasing the financial requirements may have a disproportionate effect on students from low-income and francophone countries. We're working on two pilot projects to mitigate that impact.

[English]

Additionally, international students at private institutions that have curriculum licensing arrangements with public institutions will no longer be eligible for a work permit upon graduation. Public-private partnerships are notorious for lacking oversight, and as such do not provide the quality of academic experience that Canada is and should be renowned for.

[Translation]

Not only do many of these institutions fail international students, they also jeopardize the reputation of Canada and its designated learning institutions as global leaders in education.

These measures will safeguard international students, bolster program integrity and maintain Canada's competitive edge in recruiting top talent.

[English]

International students make large financial and personal investments to come to Canada—their families do as well—and many intend to stay here as permanent residents on a path to citizenship. That is not always guaranteed, nor is it the point of the program.

[Translation]

This is the crux of the program; we want and need these students to stay in Canada and fill our labour gaps. However, unbridled growth has led to unprecedented numbers of international students in Canada. This jeopardizes the pathway to citizenship they expect.

[English]

That's why, in addition to these reforms, we've introduced a two-year cap on new study permits. Provinces and territories remain responsible for post-secondary education. They allocate and will allocate cap spaces to their designated learning institutions, which they can and should regulate.

[Translation]

Students here for graduate degrees and PhDs, as well as primary and secondary students, are exempt from these measures.

[English]

To keep the intent of these reforms beyond the cap, we're developing a recognized institutions framework, which we worked on with partners for a long time, thanks to the initiative of my predecessor, Sean Fraser, and which we'll adopt in the coming months.

Many institutions have not only promoted unsustainable growth but also have accepted students without the ability to provide proper supports, including housing, along with, at times, unethical recruiting practices. By penalizing the bad actors and rewarding the good ones, this framework will and should enable a smooth transition towards the abandonment of the cap if we choose to do so.

The cap and other reforms I've mentioned today are not an end in themselves for international students; on the contrary, they'll help to maintain pathways to permanent residency and citizenship if they're available, attract and retain top talent, and ensure that students who settle in Canada have access to essential resources and supports.

I should note that the international students are not responsible for the challenges communities currently face in housing, health care and other services. These are vital services that all Canadians must be able to access, including the students that we welcome.

As we welcome bright students from around the world, we're responsible to ensure they're prepared to navigate life and thrive here, with support along the way.

Thank you, Chair.

I will now take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Honourable members, you've been very kind to me in previous times in the committee meeting when we are having a discussion with the minister. I will make sure that I respect your time. If the minister has to respond to your question, I don't want crosstalk so that the interpreters can do their job effectively and comfortably. Raise your hand, and I will make sure that your time is respected that way.

With that, we will start with Mr. Kmiec for six minutes. Please go ahead.

● (1720)

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

Minister, in your comments, you outlined what the government has done quite late in the game now to try to resolve the problems created by a Liberal government after eight years. I want to ask you specifically, on international students, now that there's a cap of 35% that you've placed on that—a reduction—does the department know how many international students today are homeless?

Hon. Marc Miller: First, just to qualify your comment, MP Kmiec, this is a program that has been supported by many governments, including Conservative governments. The Harper government doubled the program. It's one that has, yes, gotten out of control.

We don't track the homelessness rates of students—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'll take it that you don't know how many—

Hon. Marc Miller: I—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: —are homeless right now. You don't know that, although there have been stories all over the country of international students who are sleeping in their cars on campus.

In fact, the Nova Scotia Community College CEO said in the pre-budget meetings in the fall that he had students calling every single day asking whether they could sleep in their cars on campus while attending their post-secondary institution. It's on the record there.

You have tent cities. You have people basically saying that they have nowhere else to live or you have 25 people living in a home, all while the department kept issuing international study permits to these students. They promised them one thing and they had a different experience in Canada. Why did you allow that to keep happening over the fall?

Hon. Marc Miller: You know very well, MP Kmiec, that education is in the jurisdiction of the provinces. Provinces regulate designated learning institutions. The only entity in this chain not making any money off it is the federal government. The provincial governments get their cut. The institutions get their cut.

We trusted provinces. We trusted designated learning institutions and, on seeing that this was getting out of control, we acted, and I think that's a very important thing to remember.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, are you saying you would have cared more if you were making money on it also?

Hon. Marc Miller: That isn't the answer. My point is that when you talk about responsibility, the responsibility is shared by jurisdictions, and it is very simplistic to suggest that the federal government can simply turn on and off a tap and individually regulate institutions. Your own Conservative government would be the first to complain about that.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You did not include work hour limits in the announcement. You said that those announcements were going to be made in the future. Now you've said in your opening statement that international students are not to blame for the housing crisis in Canada. That's probably the only part of your statement I agree with, that small sliver of a few words.

There is media reporting that the government was actually warned. IRCC officials warned the immigration department that there would be an impact on housing if the international student program was not changed. That was two years ago, to your predecessor. I have the article right here, and this gentleman is still moonlighting as a senior immigration minister all across the country. He was warned two years ago that if changes to the international student program were not made, it would lead to increased housing pressure.

Have you seen those briefing notes and memos that The Canadian Press is reporting on?

The Chair: Honourable Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Marc Miller: As a clarification, am I to understand that you didn't agree with anything in the opening statement about what is happening in Canada? You can't be oblivious to.... These are—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Are you going to answer my question?

Hon. Marc Miller: I am just talking to you about—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Did you see the memo, Minister?

Hon. Marc Miller: I have seen memo upon memo about international students, and under my authority, I have acted. That is what I plan to do and plan to continue.

It is clear that we have issues in and around affordability and the cost of shelter, and there is the impact of volume generated by some concentrations of students in some areas. However, my announce-

ment, to be clear, was not one to deal with affordability; it was one to restore integrity in the system—

The Chair: Honourable member, I'll—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: In the memo being quoted here by The Canadian Press, it says, "Waiving the cap [would] help alleviate labour shortages, a memorandum for the minister conceded, but it could also have other unintended consequences."

Then it continues and talks about other issues that would arise. The memo said it could, "give rise to further program integrity concerns with the international student program".

Minister, will you commit today to instruct your deputy minister to release all the memos, the briefing notes and the internal documents being referred to in The Canadian Press article that appeared on the CBC, no less, on February 13, 2024? The headline reads, "Minister was warned about possible negative impacts of lifting international student work limit".

Will you release them to this committee?

Hon. Marc Miller: What I can say about this process and about the process of decision-making is that ministers are often briefed on a number of risks—the pros, the cons, everything in between—and we take a decision in light of that. I believe that the decision of my predecessor was the right one in the context.

Then we have another decision that we must take in reducing those hours in the coming—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: What are you hiding, Minister? I am asking you to just release the memo. Are you going to release the memo and the documents to this committee—

• (1725)

Hon. Marc Miller: I am not going to undertake, at this time, to release that information—

The Chair: Honourable member, I will make sure that you get your time. Let the minister respond, and I'll come directly to you.

Minister, go ahead, please.

Hon. Marc Miller: I am not going to undertake at this time to release those memos.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Chair, the minister is hiding. He is not wanting to release the same documents that the media has access to. He won't release them to all the members of this committee.

Bloomberg, another media outlet, is now reporting that they've compared the international student program to "student trafficking". The very first line of this article says, "Canada's radical immigration experiment", and it quotes you, Minister, as saying, "People are being exploited".

Is this, then, your fault?

Hon. Marc Miller: I believe there is blame to share across jurisdictions. We—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry. Minister, are you accepting blame for the situation? Are you saying that you and your department have made decisions that have exploited international students?

Hon. Marc Miller: That isn't what I answered, and you know exactly what I answered, Tom.

I have said, time and time again, that there is plenty of blame to go around. The primary responsibility for the quality of the education system is with provinces. We trusted provinces; they did not live up to that trust, and now we are clamping down. I think that is the right thing to do.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, then do you believe that Bloomberg is accurately reporting on the state of the international student program in Canada, that it is indeed student trafficking and that, again, quoting from the article, "Canada's radical immigration experiment" is an accurate reflection of your government's policies after eight years?

The Chair: Minister, the time is up. Please—

Hon. Marc Miller: There are clearly challenges with the integrity of the system, MP Kmiec, but that is not the entire portrait of it. We do attract some of the best and brightest students and we compete with competitive jurisdictions to bring them in. It is still a program we can be quite proud of, but it does have abuses and at times has been a backdoor entry into Canada. That's why we are taking these measures, which I believe are reasonable, and putting them into place.

I look forward to working with provinces and with the institutions themselves on these issues so that we can live up to a visa program that was intended to attract excellence in the first place.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will go to Madam Kayabaga for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome back to our committee. It's always great to see that you're eager and willing to keep coming back to answer our very important questions.

I want to start with a quick question on what happened yesterday. The Province of Ontario claimed that it was blindsided by the cap that you announced in January.

My question is this: Did you get an opportunity to consult before putting forward these measures? Were smaller institutions that are in our communities, such as Fanshawe College, also consulted before these announcements were made?

Hon. Marc Miller: That's an excellent question.

Generally, MP Kayabaga, we have had, both privately and publicly, plenty of opportunity to talk to provinces, including the Province of Ontario, which has seen the largest influx of international students in the past years. We've worked with institutions directly on the recognized institution model prior to my arrival in this position.

My colleague Sean Fraser has said time and time again, in talking to provinces even before I was in this position, that they needed to get their houses in order or we would act.

There is a lot of speculation about who decided the what, when and how about the cap. Mr. Fraser, the former minister in this position and now the current Minister of Housing, was one of the guys who helped me and convinced me to do it. He felt—and I think legitimately—that it was important to do the federal responsibility at this, which is at intake, by continuing to have a more robust mechanism in and around the control of fraud, having the verification letters so that people aren't brought here under false hope, and increasing the financial solvency requirement. This is key, because it's not cheap to live in Canada, so we brought those numbers from \$10,000 to \$20,000, up to international standards, numbers that are comparable to those of our competitors. Then there was this cap, which is the result, frankly, of intransigence from Ontario in particular but provinces in general to get their own ships in order.

Auditor General report upon Auditor General report has said clearly that there were some measures that provinces had to take. They haven't taken them, but there was ample time to have discussions.

In looking at the hockey stick curve that we saw in terms of the growth and the potential growth of international students on a three-year visa profile from what is about one million today to 1.4 million next year, and even more, we saw that we were in the midst of creating a homegrown asylum crisis in Canada through the carelessness in designating a lot of learning institutions that had been improperly regulated.

We had a lot of those discussions, and there have been plenty of opportunities for partners to get engaged and object or do anything along the spectrum.

● (1730)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you for that answer, Minister.

We stated the obvious, which is that education falls under the jurisdiction of the province. However, smaller colleges in Ontario—like Fanshawe College, for example—have expressed that this is going to impact them financially, not just because of the cap on international students but because the provinces will not increase funding to support colleges and universities as they are supposed to.

What would you say for a college like Fanshawe College, a college that needs answers?

Hon. Marc Miller: The answers need to come from the entity that regulates them, which is the province. That may seem like something that is not nice coming from a federal minister, but I don't regulate Fanshawe College.

I do understand and appreciate that colleges, universities and post-secondary institutions generally have been underfunded throughout the years by provinces. Ontario is one that stands out. They have been smart and have adapted and have gone to lucrative ways of increasing their balance sheets and increasing their coffers, but it should not be in an unbridled way. It can't be the case that the post-secondary education system in Canada is bolstered almost entirely by international students, sometimes in higher proportions than by the provinces themselves. That is not a sign of health.

We talk about asylum seekers; over 10,000 asylum seekers came out of the Ontario education system in the last three years. That is a huge warning signal that is important for those colleges. As they do their recruitments, they have to refine their way of welcoming the students when they get here. They also have to make sure that those students have the ability to live and thrive in Canada if they choose to stay here.

We're willing to work with Fanshawe College if it is willing to work with us in terms of falling into the recognized institution model, which will reward institutions that have good practices and good student experiences so that we are not doing what has been done up to now, which is exploiting international students.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: In your opening remarks, you talked about how the continued unbridled growth has led to unprecedented numbers of international students in Canada and that this really jeopardizes other pathways to temporary residence, permanent residence and citizenship. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Hon. Marc Miller: I think I know where you're going with the question.

There are many pathways to becoming a permanent resident, and, by extension, a Canadian citizen. Whether we do domestic draws from people who are already here or bring in talent from abroad is a function of the different programs we have under IRCC or what we have delegated to the provinces to administer.

Given the number of people and the sheer volume, it is clear that not all students who want to stay here would be able to avail themselves of permanent residency. That is not right. It is a young, bright cohort. If we don't control the volumes at intake and have the proper accompaniments for those younger cohorts of the population, they are quite vulnerable. I think that's something that we need to focus on as we infuse the system with a little more robustness.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you, Madam Kayabaga.

We'll go to my dear friend Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes. Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

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

Good morning, Mr. Minister. Thank you for being here.

When you announced the cap on the number of international students, one measure slipped under the radar. I think it needs to be looked at with keen interest.

At that press conference, you announced that only the spouses of international students enrolled in graduate, master's or PhD programs will be entitled to an open work permit. Spouses of medical and law students will also have the right to work in Canada.

You went on to say, "We want to retain the bright individuals."

Mr. Minister, are you saying that a U.S. citizen studying law at McGill is smarter than a Cameroonian studying at the Cégep de Saint-Félicien to become a nurse in Quebec?

Is that what you're saying in that quote?

Hon. Marc Miller: Having graduated from McGill law school, like the leader of the Parti Québécois, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, I can tell you with great assurance that the answer is no.

• (1735)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that case, if your answer is no, you have just contradicted yourself and I don't understand what you said at the press conference.

Could you explain it to me?

Hon. Marc Miller: No. I'm not necessarily contradicting myself.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, you are.

Hon. Marc Miller: Give me a chance to explain.

Most often, the people who enrol for a bachelor's degree are younger and unmarried.

People who do master's degrees in law and can go directly into medicine or law are usually older. They are around 24 or 25 years old, and that's not necessarily the case in Quebec. At that point, they may have formed a couple, found a husband or wife. If these individuals want to come to Quebec as international students, we understand that they're entitled to be accompanied by their spouse. That's very understandable.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Well—

Hon. Marc Miller: I just want to finish my answer.

We have work to do with the Government of Quebec. I mentioned that to Ms. Fréchette just yesterday.

Obviously, this measure is a little blunt for the group studying for a bachelor's degree, but choices had to be made. Compared to what we generally saw, the volume of students enrolled in programs for bachelor's degrees or other similar degrees was unsustainable. We're in the process of getting that volume under control.

I'm not saying it's perfect. If the provinces can justify any exceptions, I'm prepared to look at them.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's just that time is of the essence in terms of enrolment for the fall session.

Take the Cégep de Saint-Félicien, for example. Of the 11 international nursing students enrolled this year, nine came with their spouses and half came with their children. These future nurses are not 19 or 20 years old.

By the way, that doesn't explain your statement, which makes no sense, that people in law or medicine are brighter than other students. I look forward to you coming back to that statement, because, quite honestly, I think it shows contempt and a lack of respect for all the students who have chosen other fields—

Hon. Marc Miller: I didn't say "brighter". I said they were bright individuals. I'll have to check that.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You said "brighter". We'll watch the video together; that will be interesting.

I'm asking you to delay the implementation of this measure, because people in our CEGEPs are worried.

You have to understand that Quebec has a different education system than the other systems across Canada.

I understand that this measure was meant to address what's happening in Ontario. It's very understandable and I'm fine with that. However, the education system in Quebec, which includes vocational training and CEGEPs, is completely different from the systems in the rest of Canada.

Quebec is a distinct society, as you know. We're a nation. You probably voted for that as well.

I'd like you to commit today to delaying the implementation of this measure, at least for Quebec, so that we can look at the specific impact it will have.

In my opinion, this means that there will be 11 fewer nurses in the health care system in my region, Lac-Saint-Jean.

Can you imagine the impact that will have?

Francophone nurses are leaving Cameroon to come here and you're pulling the rug out from under them.

I'd like you to tell me today that you're going to review this measure.

Hon. Marc Miller: [*Inaudible—Editor*] claim Quebec's jurisdiction, I advise you to go see the minister concerned to ask her to come and show me that an exception is justified. If it's appropriate to grant one to Quebec, I'm prepared to do so, but this is a shared jurisdiction. I'm prepared to make exceptions if it's justified, but at the same time, we're dealing with a Quebec government that wants to bring down the number of people who are in Quebec temporarily. Choices will have to be made, but the first step is to come and see me. This is important for people working in health care and for those seeking care.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The Government of Quebec was against capping international students in its territory. People have to watch what they say in committee, because it's recorded.

Do you have a good relationship with Minister Fréchette?

Hon. Marc Miller: I believe I do, yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Oh, really?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, but that doesn't mean we always see eye to eye.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. Since we're talking about good relationships, let's talk about taking in asylum seekers.

In 2017-18, Quebec spent \$294 million, and the federal government reimbursed it \$250 million. In 2019, Quebec spent \$120 million, and the federal government reimbursed it \$94 million. In 2020, Quebec spent \$38 million—there were fewer people because of the pandemic—and the federal government reimbursed it \$30 million. In 2021, after the election, Quebec spent \$135 million, and the Government of Canada reimbursed only \$17 million. In 2022, Quebec spent \$334 million, and only \$49 million was reimbursed by the federal government. In 2023, \$576 million was spent by Quebec, and the federal government only reimbursed it \$150 million.

Why did you reimburse more expenses in Quebec in 2017 than you do now? How can you say that you have a good relationship, given those numbers?

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, your time is almost up.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Having a good relationship doesn't mean we agree all the time. I have a good relationship with you, and we certainly don't always agree.

When it comes to accepting asylum seekers, some responsibilities fall to the provinces and others to the federal government. We're prepared to work with Quebec, but the amounts must be broken down and justified.

It's hard to do that when the discussion is happening almost entirely in public.

● (1740)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Before we go to Madam Kwan, I think the bells are ringing.

Everyone, do we agree to the...?

Go ahead, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): I would propose that we carry on. We're happy to give UC to do that, and then we can allow five minutes or whatever time it takes to vote at voting time and carry on.

The Chair: Okay. Once the bells stop, we will suspend the meeting for five minutes.

We can continue. To do that, I will go to Madam Kwan.

You have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the minister and the officials for coming back to the committee again.

I must first begin by saying that while I appreciate the minister coming—I really do, since this is a motion I moved—I am disappointed. I need to put this on the record: The motion calling for the minister to come and speak about Gaza and Sudan is, in my mind, perhaps the most urgent situation. I had hoped the minister would come and speak to the committee on that issue first. That is not the case. I understand the minister will be returning in March to deal with this issue. Today we're dealing with international students. However, because of the urgency of the situation in Gaza, I had hoped to get some questions to the minister and officials with respect to that situation.

That said, regarding international students, I also have to put this on the record: Minister, when you made the announcement on the cap—this is in the backdrop of the media and others saying newcomers are to blame for the housing crisis—I think it did a disservice to international students in the way this announcement was cast in that context. I don't think that is the right message. I hope that is not your intention, but that is how it is perceived: that somehow newcomers—in this instance, international students—are to blame for the housing crisis.

I can talk all day long about where the housing crisis came from, which is, of course, 30 years of successive Liberal and Conservative governments relying on the private sector to deliver the housing Canadians need and can afford. That's a conversation for another day.

I want to touch on international students, in particular unintended consequences.

In the announcement that came about with the cap—which I do not agree with—was the notion that applicants need to demonstrate financial resources of \$20,000 per year. That's a shift. There are unintended consequences, because there are students who come in on a scholarship, for example. The way this is calculated or dealt with means they may not be able to meet this new requirement now. Many of those who come on a scholarship obviously may well have some financial constraints. Those scholarships enable them to come and enhance their education and have those opportunities.

In fact, my colleague Randall Garrison, the member for Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, wrote to the minister about Pearson College with respect to scholarships for students. He has not received a response yet from the minister on this letter. That was dated January 17, 2024. It asked whether or not IRCC officials would consider the total value of the scholarship, room and board provided by Pearson College to the students as a consideration towards that \$25,000 requirement.

Hon. Marc Miller: I can answer this specific question and speak a little more generally, MP Kwan.

We're willing to look at it. I have not personally seen that letter. Perhaps send it to my P9 afterward and I can talk to officials about it.

The increase in the number was, in the grand scheme of things, rather modest. We were at half of what our competitors are requesting students provide as part of their solvency. We have clearly seen students who do not have the means to support themselves. This is a choice. I think it's a very important choice, but it leaves students

less exploited, given that they perhaps have more financial capacity to live and hopefully thrive in Canada.

I acknowledge your point on Sudan and Gaza. I think that if I were appearing today on Gaza, I would have no good news for you. I don't. I hope to have better news when we appear in three weeks, but there are no guarantees on that. I guess that's an aside, because we're not dealing with that today, but it's not an attempt to dodge anything. I think these are very important issues generally, and we should have the opportunity to deal with them. My presence, obviously, is required at times.

I do not mean to stigmatize international students. In fact, if you look at it in economic terms, a large cohort of bright, young and motivated people with financial capacity are in Canada, where our demographic curve was trending in the wrong direction. The Bank of Canada has highlighted our singular ability to make that curve a little younger in the workforce, and this is notionally a cohort of trained and potentially integrated people whom we could leverage because of their talent and work ethic.

It's notionally a good idea, but because of real challenges in the volumes that have been spiking, it was very important for Canada to pump the brakes.

• (1745)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll just quickly say, on the question around Gaza, that I appreciate that maybe the minister is hopefully going to come back with better news, but there are a lot of questions that need to be answered. Each passing minute, people's lives are in jeopardy. I just want to say that. They may not have the luxury of three weeks. I just need to put that on the record.

On the issue around international students, it was a disappointment to me that the former minister of immigration left and shortly after that he left became the minister of housing. It was almost as though he immediately turned his back on the immigration file and started to point fingers. It is not helpful and it is not useful, and I am very disappointed with respect to that.

Setting that aside for a minute, I will definitely get this letter to the minister—

The Chair: Your time is up, Madam. Please ask the last question.

Hon. Marc Miller: Quite frankly, Sean Fraser is very passionate about his former file. I don't blame him for that. He had a lot of very important views that he communicated to me. He helped convince me to put in place these measures and to have a more robust system that we can be a little more proud of. He's one of my closest colleagues in cabinet, and we have some very important discussions on making sure we are creating and bolstering a system that we can all be proud of.

I take note of your comments, but when it comes Sean's character, I think his passion for this file is one that I share.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: He may be passionate, but he's not helpful when he turns around and blames newcomers.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you, Madam Kwan.

We will now go to Mr. Berthold for five minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Miller, this is the first time I've met you in committee. However, we've often had the opportunity to discuss immigration cases together. I'm sure you will agree that the situation is catastrophic. In the constituency offices, it's horrible. We spend half our time trying to resolve problems caused by delays or errors on forms.

More and more international students are using the services of MPs' offices when they should normally be going to immigration offices. The cases that come through my office are mostly federal, and they must be addressed by the immigration service. Unfortunately, the system is in dire straits.

How do you explain this fiasco left by your predecessor?

Hon. Marc Miller: With all due respect, as a member who has the busiest constituency office in Quebec, I understand your situation very well. I've lived it for eight years.

There are a couple of things.

First of all, it's not just students. We see students come to our offices mainly in May. We're not the agency of first resort. You will agree that it's mostly the somewhat desperate cases, those who haven't renewed their visas.

Mr. Luc Berthold: My question is—

Hon. Marc Miller: What's clear is the volume of cases. The volume has reached historic levels.

Mr. Luc Berthold: How was that allowed to happen?

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't want to dwell on the past. This is clearly a program and Quebec was responsible for it. Quebec was responsible for international students.

That doesn't mean there aren't problems in Quebec. There are a lot of them. Look at the acceptance rate, look at the number of asylum seekers coming out of the university system in Quebec. That's quite significant, thank you.

Quebec was certainly responsible. The fact remains that, in many respects, students face difficulties when renewing their visas. We're trying to address these challenges. All in all, if we take a step back, we see that the student visa program is managing delays well.

Many exceptions can largely be attributed to traffic, but if you were looking to find the Canadian program where immigration is facing delays and wait time issues, it wouldn't be this program.

• (1750)

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Miller, it may not be in this program, but there is a problem in general. It's a fiasco. As you've said, there has been exponential growth over the past eight years.

No one saw this coming, Mr. Miller. You were careful to say that it was a shared responsibility. What is the federal government's share in this catastrophic situation?

I want to share with you one case in particular. A student from India said after his efforts to find housing that his main fear is not being able to find housing.

How could the government let this happen? How could your predecessor let this situation reach such an improvisational level?

Hon. Marc Miller: With all due respect, when a foreign student pays \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 and has to show that they have sufficient financial resources, the responsibility to help them find a place to live, if there is one, lies with the institution that welcomes them and that sometimes charges them exorbitant amounts. Then the responsibility goes to the province and then to the federal government.

We have a shared role—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Pardon me, Mr. Miller—

Hon. Marc Miller: —when it comes to housing. There are a number of initiatives—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Who grants the visa, Mr. Miller?

Hon. Marc Miller: —including by the Université Laval and the University of British Columbia, to make investments in student housing.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Miller, it's a simple question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable member, I will make sure that you get your time. Let the minister finish, and I will respect your time.

Minister, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Frankly, the federal government is third on the list when it comes to student housing.

That's not to say we don't have a role to play. We can help the provinces make investments, but—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Who is responsible for issuing visas, Mr. Miller?

Hon. Marc Miller: You're talking to me about the issuing of visas. It's very important. That's why we're taking on more of the responsibility—

Mr. Luc Berthold: No.

Hon. Marc Miller: —but jurisdiction over education is largely provincial.

Look at your friend to your left. He will say so loud and clear.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Is the issuing of visas a provincial or a federal responsibility?

Hon. Marc Miller: It is the responsibility of the educational institutions that welcome people from abroad to Canada to replenish their coffers—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Why can't you answer my question?

It's a simple question, Mr. Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: —to make sure there is housing for students. If they don't, we'll do it for them.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Miller, I know it's very difficult—
[English]

The Chair: Honourable member, give me a sign so I can acknowledge you. Then it's easy on the interpreters, and I will respect your time. If you raise your hand, I will certainly acknowledge you.

Honourable member, go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Okay, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Miller, I have a simple question for you: Who is responsible for issuing student visas in Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: The federal government is responsible for issuing student visas as part of an international education program. The provinces and educational institutions have a responsibility with regard to this program.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Who is responsible for the fact that the number of visas has gone from 350,000 to 1 million?

It's not Premier François Legault.

[English]

The Chair: The time is almost up. Minister, please be brief.

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: It's not the premier that concerns me the most, thank you, but we relied in good faith on the institutions and provinces that sent us these visa applications. Now, under the new measures, we're asking them to take responsibility for those applications.

[English]

The Chair: There's time for a quick question and a quick answer, but no long questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Miller, in an article published by Bloomberg, you said that students were being exploited.

You said you have a shared responsibility.

I would like you to admit that your predecessor was partly responsible for this catastrophic situation, which resulted in students being seen as a source of income and not as people who come to study in Canada.

Hon. Marc Miller: We all have a responsibility.

However, you should know that, in terms of making money on the backs of these people, the federal government has made zero dollars, the provinces may have made \$1,000 per person, and some educational institutions have made \$50,000 or \$60,000.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Berthold.

I will go to Mr. Ali. Mr. Ali, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for coming here before the committee.

Minister, can you get into more details about how the international student cap works? How were the provincial allocations determined, and who is responsible for deciding if international students are issued a study permit by IRCC?

• (1755)

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Ali.

It's important to take a step back in answering this question to understand that my statutory role and my statutory ability to create caps—

Mr. Shafqat Ali: On a point of order, I'm having a hard time listening because there is noise from the other side.

The Chair: We'll start the clock again.

Go ahead if you want to ask your question again or if you want the Minister to start. I have stopped the clock.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

The Chair: Do you want the minister to reply?

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Yes, please.

The Chair: Honourable minister, go ahead, please.

Hon. Marc Miller: It's important to take a step back in looking at this cap to look at what my statutory authorities are. I can only cap the applications and not the actual issuance of visas. The way it works through the math is that we assume a level of acceptance and rejection at our level, and it churns out a bunch of visas.

The first measure was that we capped the intake at a certain level, and then we distributed it generally by population across Canada. That has resulted in some provinces—Alberta, Quebec, and others—being able to potentially go up by 10%. We don't want unbridled growth, so we've put some limits there. It will result in some provinces having to reduce in certain categories, particularly with these business degrees that have varying levels of legitimacy, and at the undergraduate level by 10%, 20%, 30%, and even 35% to 40% at times. It depends. We are still in discussion with the provinces, but the access is done in a spirit of equity and is spread out by province. That is very important, because there were some provinces that were doing better than others, and some provinces just needed to get their ships in order.

The second measure was to eliminate the ability for private and public institutions to get post-graduate permits. Those are some of the ones that are least regulated and subject to some of the most abuse. Hopefully, that signs a bit of a death knell for those institutions.

The third measure was to limit the availability of spousal permits to those people doing master's and Ph.D.s to attack a volume challenge as well as integrity challenges in an area that we believe was being exploited and was not necessarily legitimate.

That was the spirit in which we did it, and it was coupled with the measures that I took in the fall to increase the solvency requirements for people wanting to come to Canada.

This is not the be-all and the end-all; there is a lot of work to be done. These are mostly quantitative steps, and there are some qualitative steps that need to be taken by provinces in their own jurisdictions to make sure that the program can live up to what it was intended to be in the first place—to attract excellence and not volume. It's not an attempt to get more entries into Canada or for certain institutions to triple or quadruple their fees simply because they are underfunded by their provinces.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Minister, I was with you at Sheridan College when you first addressed this international student issue in Brampton. You went in as soon as you took over. It was brought to your attention, and you took action, so thank you so much for that.

A few years ago our government commissioned an economic report on the economic impact of international education in Canada. The resulting report indicated that in 2018, for example, international students in Canada spent \$22.3 billion on tuition, accommodation and discretionary spending, which translated into a \$19.7 billion contribution to Canada's economy in that year. Ontario benefited from 55.3% of that contribution. Economists estimated that international students' annual spending in that year supported 218,577 jobs and contributed \$3.7 billion in tax revenues. One of the other benefits to Canada is that international students supported the hospitality sector by working in restaurants and hotels, for example.

Is there a plan to compensate or counteract the loss of these contributions that might occur as a result of restricting the number of students?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's an exceedingly good question. It's hard to answer it in 15 seconds, Shafqat.

We need to work with provinces to make sure they are not chasing bad money for short-term gain and creating the long-term pain impact that we've seen on our asylum system, or creating a situation in which people are undocumented here simply because we don't have a permanent resident space to accommodate them. The economic impact is significant.

In broad terms, international students are a huge contribution to the economy, but there are some actors sitting on \$100 million on their balance sheets in some colleges, and that doesn't make sense in a system where, largely, domestic tuition is capped. There is something wrong with that, and I think we need to fix that, at the risk of leaving money on the table. We'll have to work with provinces to make sure that the unintended consequences can be mitigated, but we need them to work with us.

• (1800)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ali and Mr. Miller.

I will now go to my dear friend Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, in 2022, following a request from the Bloc Québécois, this committee conducted a study on the unfairness of the approval rate for applications for study permits from francophone African

students compared to that of foreign students from elsewhere in the world. There were record refusal rates of up to 90%.

Recommendations have been made, and in my opinion, the most important one is recommendation 15. I'm going to remind you of it, since it's normal for you not to know it by heart. According to this recommendation, the intent to settle in Canada should not impede the obtaining of a study permit.

Have you implemented that recommendation?

Hon. Marc Miller: No.

However, among the measures that must be put in place to ensure that students, especially francophones, stay here and have access to permanent residence, especially in regions outside Quebec where we want to promote the sustainability of the francophone community, that is the one I want to facilitate.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're not answering my question. I'm not talking about their situation once they get here; they first have to get here.

Recommendation 15 is that the intent to remain in Canada should not become a barrier to obtaining a study permit. You're talking to me about those who are already here and who will have permanent residence. But they have to get here first and, to get here, first and foremost, they need a visa. A visa has to be issued. Are you going to implement that recommendation? That was the key recommendation by all educational institutions in Quebec.

Hon. Marc Miller: We're looking at that. What I can say about these unacceptably low rates is that they have increased very recently. The Government of Quebec could also put in place a number of measures to encourage that increase. I'm prepared to do the same.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. That recommendation was made two years ago. Doing things for the sake of doing them, we know what that means. It would be good if you implemented the recommendation.

You're the third immigration minister in four and a half years. Do you think it's normal for such an important file to be changing hands every 18 months?

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't make those decisions. I feel I'm not the right person in place right now, but I—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you find it productive to change the Minister of Immigration every 18 months?

Hon. Marc Miller: Look, I know Mr. Fraser, Mr. Mendicino and Mr. Hussen very well, and even Mr. McCallum before them.

I think they have been extremely effective.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Minister.

Now we will go to Madam Kwan for two and a half minutes, and then we'll suspend.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We were talking about unintended consequences from the cap and also the requirement for \$20,000 in people's personal accounts.

When the minister made this decision and announced this cap, did the department undertake any evaluation of what those unintended consequences might be?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's an excellent question. It was one of my largest preoccupations.

First of all, doubling it was a no-brainer. We were just wildly under what internationally comparable countries had in place.

At the same time, when the recommendation came to me, I asked the department what we were going to do to make sure people from west Africa, for example, would not be unduly prejudiced by this type of decision. We are looking at a number of solutions to make sure people like these were not impacted by that decision.

It is no surprise that the diversity of the countries in question is rather limited. The main source country is one that, when you compare it to other countries in terms of the global middle class, does have an availability to mobilize money more easily than do other countries in which there are equally excellent students.

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

I wonder if the minister can table to this committee the documentation that officials provided to him with respect to the unintended consequences of this policy, not just on the \$20,000 issue but also on the other components within this announcement.

• (1805)

Hon. Marc Miller: As the minister, I won't undertake to do it personally, but if the committee decides to so vote, we can look at that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right. In that case, I will move a motion to ask the minister to table documents in relation to unintended consequences with relation to the international student announcement.

The Chair: Your motion is in order.

We can stop the watch at two and a half minutes and we will start the debate on that motion.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just want to get the documents.

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Let's vote.

The Chair: If there's no discussion, we'll go to a vote.

Mr. Clerk, could you call the vote, please?

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Can you please clarify what we are voting on?

The Chair: There is a motion on the floor by Madam Kwan. She is asking for certain documents to be tabled by the minister, and the minister has said that if it is the will of the committee....

Madam Kwan, do you want to read the motion once more?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I don't have it in writing. I just said the words, but it is along these lines: I'm asking for the minister to table with the committee documents from his department with regard to unintended consequences in relation to the international student announcement.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Clerk, please call the vote.

(Motion agreed to: 11 yeas; 0 nays [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Madam Kwan, you have 35 seconds. Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. I appreciate that and I'll look forward to those documents.

The reason I asked for that information is that I wanted to see what work is going to be undertaken and needs to be undertaken to address this issue. I think those unintended consequences are serious.

With respect to that, there's another piece that is another unintended consequence. It is on the issue of students who are fleeing persecution, such as those from Afghanistan and other places. I know that there is a commitment from the government to facilitate education opportunities to them. This cap would mean that they would also be impacted.

Is that something the minister would take into consideration to address, so that those students would not be negatively impacted?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, because the time is up.

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, that's absolutely one of the examples.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, I'm going to suspend the meeting.

It is my understanding that the minister is here until 6:15. Is that correct, Minister, or can you stay a bit longer?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm okay.

The Chair: With that, then I will suspend the meeting and we will come back.

Once we come back, I want you to think about this: The honourable member from the Green Party had asked for unanimous consent to have one question of two minutes. Is there unanimous consent?

Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just have a point of clarification.

The minister was meant to be here for 90 minutes. We were interrupted and started at least half an hour late because of votes. We're now interrupted again because of votes. I would have anticipated that with the 90-minute rotation, I would have had another opportunity with another rotation with the minister.

The Chair: Once the meeting is suspended, we can talk about it and figure it out if you want.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, I would like to have another rotation, because I have more questions for the minister.

The Chair: Now my question to the membership is this: As soon as we come back, is there unanimous consent for the honourable member from the Green Party to have two minutes?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I'm sorry. We can't jump to having the Greens take a round without actually sorting out committee members getting their full round.

The Chair: Sure. Okay.

I'm going to suspend the meeting. We'll come back.

• (1805) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1815)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Mr. Redekopp, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Mr. Miller, in September the senior immigration and housing minister, Sean Fraser, said the government wants to “align our immigration policies with the absorptive capacity of communities that includes housing”. When the government drastically increased the international student program from 350,000 under Harper to, as you mentioned, the hockey stick of 1.4 million that now exists under Justin Trudeau, did you consider the pressure this increase would put on the housing situation in Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: Just on the characterization, I think it's clear that the federal government didn't drastically increase it. This program for 40 years has not had a cap on it.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Did you consider housing when you were working with that program?

Hon. Marc Miller: I think what we did was we trusted provinces to regulate their designated learning institutions. In a context of bringing people in with \$40,000 or \$50,000 for an educational experience, you would expect those institutions to be responsible and to provide access to housing. It's clear that when you look at the volume—and it's part of the reason we took this measure—that there has been an impact of that volume on affordability and cost of shelter.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I guess my point is that you said you took this measure, so you had data to do that. Did you consider housing when you took this measure with the data that you used?

Hon. Marc Miller: Look, this was not a housing decision per se. It was a decision on the integrity of the system, based on the challenges we were seeing and the ecosystem that had been created. We can't deny the impact of the volume on affordability—notably, the cost of shelter in certain areas. Indeed, economists have said that this measure we took as a government currently to put on the cap is probably one of the most important affordability measures we have taken, so it is important, but it was not at the core of it. At the core of it was to make sure that Canadians could be proud of a system for international students.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I'm still a little bit confused. Are you saying that you did take housing into consideration or you didn't? I'm not sure what you're saying. What are you telling me?

Hon. Marc Miller: I can't help you with your confusion, but what I can say is that we knew that affordability challenges we were facing with respect to the large increase in volume in certain institutions were perhaps abusing a generous visa system that is regulated by the provinces.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister, the point of your coming here is to help clarify confusion that we might have here. With respect, I think that's the purpose of your being here.

You're telling me, then, that you do not consider housing impacts when you are looking at the program and designing a program and deciding how many people should be coming into the country.

• (1820)

Hon. Marc Miller: We are absolutely currently looking at that as part of our recognized institution models. What we did, and what we should take responsibility for, is that we trusted institutions and we trusted provinces. Perhaps we should have scrutinized that a little better.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: So there's no system within your department for tracking or being responsible for what the impacts are on housing. It's not something the department looks at.

Hon. Marc Miller: If you're asking me, Brad, whether or not I make sure that every single student has housing, the answer is no. There is absolutely responsibility that lies within the institutions that are making fifty grand off these people to get them housing and to make sure they have the proper learning experience. I don't understand what part of that is confusing.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I've looked through the departmental results reports that you have, and I've looked for anything to do with housing in there. When you're monitoring the output and the results of your staff, I don't see anything in there about housing. There is a little bit about asylum seekers and refugees in terms of dollars, but beyond that it's clear that there's no consideration of housing when you are looking at your immigration plans and making decisions on capping, for example.

Is that true? Is that the way the department works? It does not consider housing at all.

Hon. Marc Miller: By that line of questioning, I'll assume that you haven't read the strategic review I issued in the fall.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Do you know what Canada's vacancy rate was for 2023?

Hon. Marc Miller: In which cities?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: In Canada overall.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't know the general one. I know the ones in certain cities.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: It was 1.5%, according to CMHC, the lowest in recorded data ever.

You said earlier that you didn't know how many students in Canada were homeless, which is another concern we have. Did your department provide you with any research or any information documenting or predicting the housing situation of international students?

Hon. Marc Miller: We knew when we took this decision that there were pressures on particularly the most vulnerable, which includes students. We had obviously seen and witnessed the stories around packing five or 15 students to a house.

Again, we're not talking about people who come here destitute. I don't ensure that every immigrant in this country has a house. I do not furnish them a house. Sixty per cent of the people who come to this country under economic categories go and find themselves housing. I think Canadians would react if we provided those people with a house. People go on the market and use their capital to purchase one. That is the way the system works.

If someone comes in with capital, like a student, you would expect them to find housing; even more so, you would expect the institutions in question to go out and make sure they have housing, because those kids are vulnerable, so there is responsibility here, Brad. We are monitoring that now, and that's why we took the measures—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister, clearly we do not expect the government to provide housing. That's clear. We agree on that.

However, it seems silly to me that the department—and you, as a minister—wouldn't even consider the impacts that the numbers you're producing for international students, for example, will have on students, because, as you said, they are not the problem—

The Chair: The time is up. I'll give the minister the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: That is a good question. I don't think it is correct to insinuate that we don't.

We certainly looked, when we looked to stem the volume and spread out the international visas equitably by province, at the impact on the cost of shelter in certain jurisdictions, hoping that the provinces would actually take action on those institutions that have been the most egregious in leveraging the pocketbooks of international students.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Redekopp. We will now go to Madam Zahid.

You have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before the committee today.

Minister, as you noted in your opening remarks, international students are not to be blamed for our current housing and infrastructure challenges. In fact, what we have seen is that international students tend to be the victims of the housing crisis, as many landlords have been taking advantage of them and charging outrageous amounts for very cramped basement apartments.

How will these measures you have announced ensure that international students are supported when they arrive here in Canada? What role do we expect the institutions to play in this whole process?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's a very good point, MP Zahid. There's no denying that the increased volume of students has had an impact in an aggregate measure—in certain areas, in particular—on the cost of shelter.

When we look at occupation rates in my home city, we see that they have remained relatively stable. The challenge we have faced is in taking these correlative factors, like the number of students, the volume of students and others, and looking at the causation. I

think that is an important, practical, economic and intellectual activity.

Trying to blame immigrants for housing is not only dangerous but false. You only have to look at areas with very low levels of immigration to see the cost of housing soaring, so you can't pin that on the backs of students.

Students are not responsible for the increase in interest rates in the past years. To a large extent—I'm included in this—we have been able to secure relatively free interest on the debt over the last decade or so on the houses we have mortgages on.

There are various factors that contribute to that situation. What we have seen, for example, is that actors like Airbnb should be held to account, because they drive up the cost. That is something we could also analyze when we look at the affordability challenges in this country.

Now, institutions that have been making a lot of money off these students owe it to themselves, to their institutions, to their alumni and to whatever they represent to society to make sure that when they attract people who are paying four or five times the rate that my own children are paying at university, they provide the proper living experience and student experience. That comes with a lot of obligations. It can't just be cashing the cheque and walking away.

I think that is the important lesson to learn from this. The federal government, indeed, has a responsibility to institute some very rough measures to control the intake, but the qualitative responsibility lies largely on the shoulders of the provinces.

● (1825)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Minister, as part of these measures on the international students, you also announced that postgraduate work permits will no longer be issued for those students who are attending institutions with public-private partnerships.

Can you please explain to the committee what public-private partnerships are and why this measure was put in place specifically for these institutions?

Hon. Marc Miller: They're largely private colleges, predominant in Ontario, that have partnered with publicly regulated institutions and have thus been able to access and leverage postgraduate work permits. Those institutions, as you have seen, are largely less regulated than public colleges and universities.

They are the ones that have, in part, been responsible for some of the inequitable growth in the issuance of visas and postgraduate work permits, so there was no longer any reason to issue postgraduate work permits to those institutions.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Since these programs and measures have been announced, I've been getting many inquiries from undergraduate students who had already applied for their spouses' work permits. What will happen in regard to the work permits for the spouses of the undergraduate students who are already in the system? Can those be processed?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's a going-forward measure, Member Zahid, and those ones should, unless I'm mis-characterizing your question, be accepted.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You have only one second left.

With that, I will go to Mr. Morrice for two and half minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mike Morrice: First, I want to thank my friend Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Thank you, Chair.

Minister, as you know, I really appreciated working with your office in light of the fact that of the three post-secondary institutions in my community, one of them approved over 30,000 study permit applications in 2023, which was more than a 1600% jump since 2014, and our community doesn't have the necessary infrastructure to receive that exponential jump.

I feel like you've really heard some of the measures I've brought forward in a motion back in the fall to address this situation, including doubling the minimum financial requirement for students who arrive.

My question is with respect to one of the measures that has not been taken up yet, and that's to have IRCC consider limiting visas and permits to an institution if more than 15% of the international students they accept never enrol in a course or withdraw from their studies or transfer out. This is something that has already been put in place by other signatories of a global agreement on ethical practices of recruiting international students. It's called the London statement.

Can you comment on your openness to continue to pursue this measure as part of the plan to do more with respect to the recognized institutions framework?

• (1830)

Hon. Marc Miller: It's a really good question.

Thank you for working with my office on these measures. They are largely measures that are extremely important, as I mentioned to your colleagues. Some of them more important, such as the affordability actions we've taken as a government, but they are not the end of the story.

I have to continue to remind myself that my role as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship is partly to make sure that I am ensuring that provinces and institutions are exercising their responsibility. There is a large field to occupy there, but if it's not occupied, we are prepared to take additional measures, including looking at factors and equations. We've seen all sorts of different metrics that would inform whether an institution is a recognized institution going forward and to then give them preferential treatment for visas if they can show that the students have the proper experience.

We're willing to entertain further actions, and if you have further suggestions, please work with my team on that.

The Chair: You have five seconds, Mr. Morrice.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Madam Kwan for two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the question around student housing, I absolutely think that it is essential for institutions and provinces do their part and I think that the federal government should show leadership and perhaps initiate a program wherein the federal government contributes a third of the funding, institutions provide a third of the funding, and the provinces and territories provide a third of the funding towards the creation of student housing, both for international students and domestic students. That way you can have a robust plan to address the housing needs of the students.

I'm going to park that for a minute and quickly get into the students who were subject to fraud. We have a situation in which students have now been cleared and found to be genuine by the task force, but they have not gotten their passports back yet. I don't know what the holdup is, and I wonder if the minister can comment on that.

Second, there are students who are still waiting to be evaluated by the task force, and the task force work can't proceed because they might be waiting for a date for the IRB to assess the question on their permit on whether or not it was genuine or whether or not there was misrepresentation. They are consequently in a situation in which people are just chasing their tails and they can't get to the task force.

On that question, will the minister agree that instead of making people go through that process with the IRB, the task force evaluation can move forward first so that they can be found to be either a genuine student or not a genuine student?

Hon. Marc Miller: You've asked me a lot of questions in two and a half minutes. You'd make a great reporter. You're already a great MP. There were a lot of shotgun questions.

I want to give you a proper and complete update on that task force. We can get to the bottom of the passport issue, but I have an update for you that I can provide, either as a sidebar or more officially through channels.

I take your point on the passport issues, and we will follow up on that. I don't have an update for you on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What about the whole idea of doing the task force work first, instead of making the student go through the IRB assessment on misrepresentation? As long as the task force has not finished its work and it is not known whether they are genuine or not, making them go through the other process means they're just going to spin their tail, because that misrepresentation piece is always going to be on their file.

The Chair: The time is up.

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Kwan, I won't do justice to your question by answering it really quickly, but we can follow up on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, for staying late with us today to accommodate the honourable members. Thank you for being accessible to this committee. Hopefully you will stay accessible.

Thank you to you and your deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers.

The meeting is adjourned.

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