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• (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

[*English*]

Welcome to meeting number 12 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, and members are attending in person or using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from health authorities, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person should follow the directives of the Board of Internal Economy.

[*Translation*]

I thank members in advance for their cooperation.

A reminder to everyone, when speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When those participating virtually are not speaking, their mic should be on mute.

[*English*]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on francophone immigration to Canada and Quebec.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. We have the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship; Caroline Xavier, Associate Deputy Minister; Alexandra Hiles, Director General, Domestic Network; and Corinne Prince, Director General, Afghanistan Settlement.

[*English*]

A maximum of five minutes will be given to you, Minister, for your speech, after which we will proceed to a series of questions, as you know. I'll let you know when you have about a minute left.

[*Translation*]

Minister Fraser, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

Good afternoon, Chair and honourable members.

[*English*]

Francophone immigration, both within and outside of Quebec, remains a top priority for the Government of Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Government of Canada recognizes that immigration is key to meet labour market needs in critical sectors like healthcare and agriculture, and to help develop and diversify Canadian communities.

The Government of Canada continues to work with the Government of Quebec to support their efforts to use immigration to address labour market needs, particularly as we recover from the economic impact of COVID-19.

[*English*]

We're going to continue to work with Quebec on innovative ways to use immigration to address the province's labour shortages while also supporting the French language and Quebec's distinct francophone identity.

Of course, the French language is deeply rooted in communities across Canada, not just in the province of Quebec. We recognize that immigration plays an important role in supporting the vitality of francophone minority communities throughout the country.

In 2019, IRCC, in consultation with key francophone stakeholders like the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, announced their comprehensive francophone immigration strategy, which included a target of achieving 4.4% of permanent resident admissions from French-speaking applicants by 2023.

[*Translation*]

And we recognized that it would take some time to achieve. Since we launched the strategy, it has yielded positive results. In 2020, French-speaking admissions represented 3.6% of all immigrants admitted to Canada outside of Quebec, up from 2.8% the previous year.

Yes, in 2021, we experienced a decline to 2% of admissions, due largely to the global pandemic. But the department is making substantial efforts to return to our pre-pandemic admission rates. For example, we are awarding additional points to French-speaking and bilingual candidates in our Express Entry pool.

• (1535)

[*English*]

Given the pandemic's impact on international travel, last year we introduced a new pathway to permanent residence for temporary workers and international graduates already in Canada. This included three additional streams for French-speaking or bilingual newcomers, and as of late January, there were more 6,400 applications included in these streams.

We're also pursuing year-round targeted promotional activities in Canada and abroad, including initiatives to attract more French-speaking immigrants to health-related occupations, and also to work as French language and immersion teachers.

[*Translation*]

Complementing all of these efforts, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, is working to support the Government's commitment to modernize the Official Languages Act.

The bill introduced by my colleague Minister Petitpas Taylor recognizes the importance of immigration and proposes a policy on Francophone immigration with clear objectives and indicators.

Immigration is more than numbers; there is a considerable amount of settlement work to be done with—and for—newcomers.

[*English*]

In 2019-20, IRCC implemented the francophone integration pathway, which offers tailored support to French-speaking newcomers from pre-arrival through to citizenship. This approach aims to strengthen the resettlement and settlement services offered by and for francophone organizations.

[*Translation*]

The Government will continue its efforts to build up the Francophone Integration Pathway, so that French-speaking newcomers are adequately informed of the possibilities of settling in French in Canada and receive quality settlement services by Francophone organizations.

So, we continue working with the Francophone communities to give all newcomers an opportunity to settle and thrive in French and to make a positive contribution to Canadian society.

Francophone and bilingual newcomers are essential to our future.

Significant efforts are made every year in Francophone countries to promote and attract Francophone students and immigrants to Canada, and those efforts will continue.

My colleagues and I would be pleased to answer the committee's questions.

[*English*]

I look forward to the session today.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Bravo, Minister! You were very efficient and delivered your speech in four minutes.

We will now go to the first round of questions. Each of the parties will have six minutes.

We will begin with Joël Godin, who may be sharing his speaking time with Mr. Lehoux.

Mr. Godin, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. If possible, I'd like you to warn me when my four minutes have elapsed so I can yield to my colleague Mr. Lehoux.

Minister, thank you for being with us today. We are grateful that you've agreed to take part in this exercise.

You said in your speech that you were developing an immigration policy to attract more francophone immigrants. That policy doesn't seem to be working given the results we've achieved.

We urgently need francophone immigrants. Can you reassure us that measures will be taken in the coming weeks and months to rectify the situation?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for your question.

Some measures have produced positive results, although overall improvements of the francophone immigration system may vary.

According to data for 2019, 1.8% of all newcomers settled in Quebec. We subsequently made changes and awarded additional points in the express entry system, and the number of francophone immigrants reached 3.6% in 2020.

I'm trying to improve the express entry system's flexibility so we can select more francophone applicants who want to come to Canada and support the people working in the institutions.

[English]

In English, just to make sure that I'm clear—you can tell I've been working a bit at it—there are a number of policies we have advanced that have shown a positive difference. If we go further down those paths that we've seen to be successful and also introduce new flexibility with express entry, new measures for international students and a number of other measures, I'm confident, as we develop this full strategy, that we will see positive improvement.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Minister.

I can tell you that I have a potential solution if you're looking for ways to increase francophone immigration: the African continent. The immigration applications of nearly 80% of francophones from Africa are denied, and those people want to come and work in Canada. There's a problem with the way the system operates, and it urgently needs to be corrected.

That would also help increase the francophone immigration rate here in Canada and provide an incredible source of labour. People are prepared to come and work here. You'd be killing two birds with one stone.

What's going on with the immigration applications of francophones from Africa?

• (1540)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I entirely agree with you. Africa offers major opportunities for francophone immigration to Canada.

As regards foreign students from West Africa and the Ivory Coast, the acceptance rate for francophone immigrants isn't as high as I would like.

[English]

I've seen real progress when we've taken tailored situations to meet the needs of specific countries. When I look at the student direct stream, for example, with countries such as Morocco or Senegal, I see that the students who applied through these streams have seen a significant increase, and faster results in their application as well.

I don't think the policy work is done, because when I look at certain criteria around the proof of funds that a person has to demonstrate or the—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me for interrupting, Minister.

I just want to focus on the Dakar region in Senegal, which is a hub in that part of the world.

Would you please explain how applications are processed? The entire process is centralized in Dakar, Senegal, but then where do those applications go?

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you've already used four minutes of your speaking time.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: You're asking about the process after someone submits an application. After they would submit an application, presuming it's a complete application, an IRCC officer would have to examine whether they meet the criteria to come to Canada. Of course, it depends which stream they apply to come to Canada through. If they would meet the criteria, an IRCC officer would be able to approve them.

We see something unique, though, and it's not specific to francophone or anglophone applications, in certain countries in Africa that have lower rates of approval. It's something on which, if the committee wants to provide advice, I would welcome—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me once again for interrupting, Minister, but I have a very specific question.

What I want to know about Africa is where applications are sent once processing has been done in Dakar.

Are they sent to Canada for follow-up or somewhere else?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's not necessarily the same in every situation. In fact, I'm looking to make further changes to leverage the capacity of the system.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm talking about the Dakar region.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly, there would be folks in Dakar who could be involved. Sometimes it could be moved to a different location. I hear that some people have sensitivities, wanting a local person to look at local applications—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: More specifically, Minister, where are the applications sent?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: It would depend on the specific application. If you'd like to have a summary after the meeting on how applications—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: If possible, I'd like the members of your team to send us a detailed document describing every twist and turn in the path the applications take. I would appreciate that.

I'm going to continue because my colleague Mr. Lehoux is giving me the rest of his speaking time. I thank him for his generosity.

You mentioned Bill C-13 and said you're satisfied with what the bill provides on francophone immigration policy.

Pardon me, Minister, but that policy boils down to two paragraphs: "The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration shall adopt a policy on francophone immigration..."

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. You'll be able to speak again in the next round of questions.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

First, I'd like to thank Minister Fraser, who's appearing before this committee for the fourth or fifth time to discuss immigration.

Minister, I very much appreciate your dedication to our work, particularly on francophone immigration, an issue that's been the subject of extensive discussion in this committee.

[*English*]

I will start with this question. We are all watching with great concern what is happening in Ukraine. Of course, we want to ensure that people who are displaced by the war can quickly get to a safe place here in Canada. That said, there are expectations that the situation in Ukraine will delay processing of applications from French speakers coming from other parts of the world.

Can you speak on that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly. Thank you, Ms. Kayabaga, for the question.

First of all, I think we all agree that the situation in Ukraine merits a significant response, given the scale of this unjust and unnecessary war of aggression. One of the things we wanted to do was to move as quickly as possible. We established a system that was based on the way in which we bring visitors to Canada. That system has the greatest horsepower in terms of the number of applications that we have the ability to process each year.

It's important that we make sure that we properly fund these changes. If we don't, we're asking the same system to do more without extra resources. To date, there's been \$117 million of additional funding profiled to make sure that we are backstopping this new system with the funds necessary to deal with the volume. In the short term, it's possible that we could have some resources pivoting from one stream of business, or even different departments, to help out with this effort. We intend to have the funding come into place to make sure that we can pay for these new services that we're offering so that we avoid the kind of circumstance to the extent possible that you've just signalled.

Certainly, there is no decision to pull away from people who would impact francophone applications specifically. If anything, I would try desperately to avoid that situation.

• (1545)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Minister, on that note, can you comment on what IRCC is doing to track delays caused by pandemic-related border closures? Are they getting back on track?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Just for context, the pandemic really hit Canada's immigration system very hard in two ways. In some parts of the world, it shut down our presence on the ground due to local public health restrictions, and we don't have the same flexibility in every location in the world to allow staff to work from home as we do in Canada.

The second thing it caused was a need to pivot towards welcoming people who were already here on a temporary basis and who were seeking to become permanent residents instead of bringing people from other countries during a time when the border was closed for public health reasons, which I think are now obvious to all of us here.

We are doing a number of things, which I can put into three categories, to address this: resources, technology and immigration levels spaces.

On the resources front, we've added more than 500 staff who are now working, with \$85 million from the economic and fiscal update as it's being deployed across mostly a range of temporary businesses.

On digitization, the technology piece I mentioned, we're on the verge of releasing new functionalities within the modern and digital systems. Some of them have come online already. Just in the interest of time, I'll say that we've added immigration levels spaces so we can welcome more people this year to chip away at the numbers of those who might be waiting to come to Canada.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

Federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for immigration and those responsible for the Canadian francophonie adopted a federal-provincial-territorial action plan to increase francophone immigration outside of Quebec.

Can you speak to what this plan consists of and what francophones in a francophone minority setting can expect to see out of this plan?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it's key that we increase the number of francophone newcomers to protect and promote the French language and culture. The plan includes a target of francophone newcomers representing 4.4% of immigration across the country for 2023.

The measures include considerable support for agencies that provide settlement services in addition to the changes made to the express entry program. It's essential that we continue implementing new measures in future.

[*English*]

The things I'm looking at right now include some of the changes we've talked about with regard to international students, including around changes to the express entry system to give us more flexibility. I want to make sure that we don't prejudge further conversations that I intend to have with groups like FCFA, for example, to make sure they are part of the development of the new measures that we'll introduce. But I think if we keep pushing the envelope, we can bring more and more to better protect the demographic weight of francophones in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I'd like to single out a few points that witnesses have raised. Francophones encounter many barriers, one of which is the French test. This is a major problem as these people, who live and study in French and speak French, don't pass the test.

Would you be prepared to make changes to the test?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm always open to ways that we can improve these things. I haven't seen a specific policy analysis on this particular point. If this is something the committee would recommend, I would be more than happy to look into it.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister, but speaking time is up.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (1550)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Good afternoon, Minister.

First, I'd like to congratulate you on your French. You seem to have found a better teacher than Michael Rousseau's.

I'd like to ask you a question on the Ukrainian nationals file. The Bloc Québécois has been in cooperation mode since the conflict began in Ukraine. We might've expected you to learn from your mistakes after the disastrous way the Afghan refugees were managed.

However, we now see that the situation is worse than that of the Afghan refugees. We proposed that these requirements be lifted, which hundreds of countries have done, but you refused to do so.

People fleeing the war with their children in grocery carts are lining up for days at the only open immigration office in Poland. Nearly 2.5 million refugees are in Poland.

Do you think it makes any sense to have only one immigration office open for 2.5 million refugees?

We also suggested creating an airbridge and chartering aircraft, but, once again, that was denied. People have to buy their own tickets.

We're witnessing the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, and all you can think of is to implement an ineffective program and dismiss out of hand the solutions we propose. It's inconceivable that the department should maintain the status quo while people are living through a war across the ocean.

What's your plan, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I begin, I'd like to thank you for your comment on the quality of my French. When I arrived in Ottawa, I couldn't speak a word, but I've practised speaking every week since I took up my position.

[*English*]

I agree with your characterization of the conflict. Respectfully, Monsieur Beaulieu, I disagree with your characterization of our response being anything like business as usual. In particular, we start-

ed getting ready as of January 19 to have the measures in place to respond effectively.

Sorry, Mr. Chair. I see your audio coming through. I think one of your members needs to—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I have a point of order because Mr. Beaulieu's question has nothing to do with the subject we're studying. We'd like to get back to the subject of our study.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I don't mind if the witness wants to ask those questions.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I support the minister with respect to the question, which is relevant. Who are we to judge its relevance?

The Chair: I'll have to consult Madam Clerk on the point of order.

• (1550)

(Pause)

• (1550)

The Chair: Ms. Kayabaga, we acknowledge your point of order, but perhaps we can get down to the central issue during the answers. Since neither the minister nor the member of the official opposition is opposed, we will allow the minister to answer the question.

Mr. Beaulieu, I stopped the clock. You have used 2 minutes and 16 seconds of your speaking time.

You may continue.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Had you finished, Mr. Fraser?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll continue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'll allow you one minute.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: To put into perspective some of what we've done, I've never seen Canada's immigration system move as quickly as it has in the last number of weeks. We've had to try something new to respond to this crisis. We've done something unique in this situation and introduced a new temporary program to provide safe haven. We had been preparing for weeks before the incursion began by moving biometrics units into the area and by processing as a priority applications that were in the queue.

We've already seen more than 10,000 Ukrainians land in Canada. That's going back to the beginning of the year, just because that's the dataset I had. However, the new system has taken in more than 50,000 applications in a very short period of time. Despite some challenges that we hear about on the ground and then work to fix, we are seeing that enormous numbers of people are moving. Even today we made the decision to move forward with extending settlement supports for Ukrainians who come to Canada, whether it's reception when they arrive, language training, etc.

This is a full-court press, and we're going to do everything we can.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are you going to add more resources in Poland? Do you have any news about the airbridge?

The Chair: I'm going to stop you for the moment, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: All right.

We can go back to the subject of the study.

The Chair: Then I'll let you return to our subject.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Minister, there's been a lot of talk in the media about the high refusal rate for permits for foreign students from Africa and North Africa in particular. Your departmental officials told us that the acceptance and refusal rates for the applications of anglophones and francophones from those countries were the same. However, since these are key francophone immigration pools, that explains why the department has never reached its francophone immigration targets.

How do you explain the high rate at which the applications of students from African countries are refused?

Will the situation change?

Hon. Sean Fraser: When I looked at the number of applications from Africa, I realized that the major difference wasn't between anglophones and francophones. Their numbers are similar. In 2019, the number of francophones was greater...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: But that doesn't really concern the problem of francophone immigration. Even if the applications of only a small number of anglophones in those countries were rejected, you must know that those countries are the main francophone immigration pools.

I'd like to know why the refusal rate is so high for those countries.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: The number one reason we have for refusals from the region is the proof of funds. We require that people demonstrate that they have the capacity to support themselves when they're here, because we don't like to see students become destitute in Canada. It's something we want to protect against.

It's a challenging when you see that certain regions have lower acceptance rates in the system, because you don't like to treat one group differently from the other. That's the number one reason we see for why a person may be rejected from the region.

However, the numbers are similar year-to-year between anglophones and francophones. There's an issue that you're raising, but it's not necessarily one based on linguistics.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Beaulieu, your time is up.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister.

On January 31, 2022, you held a press conference in English only. You're clearly making an effort to speak French, but shouldn't the ability to speak both official languages of the country you represent be one of the prerequisites for the position of Minister of IRCC in Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's important for the government to provide services in both official languages, but being able to speak both official languages isn't currently a prerequisite for my position. However, I do think it's important for me to improve my French. I made a mistake during my first announcement, and I apologize for it. I don't want to repeat it.

When I made my first announcement as the new minister, it was in a virtual environment; I was alone and the context was different. However, I speak French at every opportunity. It's a sign of respect for my francophone colleagues, who have encouraged me to improve my French. That's essential. If I want to protect and promote the French language and culture, it's essential that I speak French in this room and in my community. There are a lot of francophones in Nova Scotia as well, particularly Acadians. We also have the Université Sainte-Anne. Bilingualism is important, but it isn't currently an official prerequisite for the position.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for that comment.

I have to say this issue's also related to our present concerns about francophone immigration. IRCC doesn't seem to be taking the problem seriously. In the past few weeks, we've heard testimony from immigration experts on the obstacles that francophones wishing to immigrate to Canada encounter.

According to Radio-Canada, the refusal rate for people from certain francophone African countries applying to immigrate to Quebec is 80%, which is completely unacceptable.

Stéphane Handfield, one of the witnesses the committee heard from early this month, told us he had seen a decline in the offer of French-language services in your department in the past 30 years of his career as an immigration lawyer.

The testimony we've heard on this committee is scandalous. You just told us that many francophone students wishing to emigrate to Canada don't have the resources to do so. However, we desperately need to attract francophone immigrants to Canada.

What's your government doing to react to this situation and to ensure that francophone African students can come to Canada and that we can lower this 80% refusal rate, which is absolutely scandalous?

• (1600)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for that question.

Before I begin, you must understand that foreign students make a major contribution to our social, cultural and economic life. They form the best possible group of candidates for permanent residence.

Let me be clear: the acceptance rates are similar for anglophones and francophones from African countries. The officers who review their applications rely on a number of criteria.

[*English*]

I feel it will take me too much time to get to your point. There is a challenge here, but it's not necessarily based on differential outcomes between anglophone and francophone applicants. The challenges seem to be common to different regions of the world, based on other criteria that are applied on a case-by-case basis.

I'm interested in capitalizing on the opportunity, because I believe that embracing linguistic diversity is really good for our communities. There's a huge competitive advantage. I was in Calgary, meeting with an organization that promotes economic development in francophone communities last week, and we had an exciting conversation about what we could do to embrace the economic opportunity by attracting francophone newcomers from all over the world.

If there are suggestions from this committee to overcome some of these challenges, I want them. I want to be the minister who increases the number of francophone newcomers to Canada, not just because I think it's the right thing to do—which it is—but because I think it's going to serve our self-interest to an enormous degree.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for telling us that.

We want to emphasize once again that you're the minister and that you have the power to implement measures to ensure that francophone students from Africa can come to Canada. Canada clearly isn't doing what it takes to attract people or to change the rules so they can come here as soon as possible.

It's obvious from what we've heard that we haven't reached our francophone immigration target. Many witnesses have confirmed that we need not only to hit that target, but also to establish a remedial target to restore the demographic weight of the francophone community here at home.

Will you be setting restoration targets?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, we will.

I want to specify that the 4.4% target for 2023...

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: All right.

I'll hold that thought for another question.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Ashton.

[*English*]

Six minutes is so quick.

[*Translation*]

For the next round of questions, Mr. Lehoux and Mr. Généreux will share the five minutes available to them.

Go ahead, Mr. Lehoux.

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for being with us this afternoon.

We've noted in recent weeks that there's a backlog of 25,000 applications from workers in the economic class.

How do you explain the discrepancy between that number and the percentage of the population in Quebec? What's the reason for the discrepancy between the two? The percentage is 22%, but it should be 40%.

How do you explain these backlogs?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: To clarify, Monsieur Lehoux, are you talking about cases inside Quebec or across Canada?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: There are 65,000 pending applications in the economic class for Canada as a whole. However there are 25,000 for Quebec alone, which amounts to more than 40%.

How do you explain that major discrepancy, just for Quebec, in applications pending processing?

• (1605)

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. It's really important that people understand that, for very good reasons, there's a unique system in Quebec compared with that of the rest of Canada.

One thing that happens is that the provincial government of Quebec—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Pardon me for interrupting.

I don't mean to be rude, Minister, but I always told my provincial members that I didn't like to see parties passing the buck. When I listen to Quebec's immigration minister, Mr. Boulet, I can see he's really starting to lose patience.

Hon. Sean Fraser: No.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: That's what I conclude from what I read and hear.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: We have a very good relationship as well, and I would never try to be critical.

[*Translation*]

Actually, I think Minister Boulet's an excellent partner.

[*English*]

But on your question—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Solutions have to be found, Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: —I'm working hard with Minister Boulet on some of those solutions. Perhaps in the days ahead, we'll be more specific in public.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Can you tell us how many of the total number of applications come from workers in the agri-food sector?

By that I don't mean just the agricultural sector, but rather everything pertaining to food processing.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: In Quebec, it will be up to the provincial government of Quebec to select every applicant, for people who are coming here on a permanent basis. It will be up to me to process those they identify as the people they would like to bring.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Based on what I learned in the Quebec government, it appears the problem stems from Ottawa. I'd like someone to give me a precise answer. We don't know each other, Minister, but I've written to you several times on this matter.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There's one clarification I need to offer. There are the people who are invited to apply. The levels that the Province of Quebec set are very important to understand. If more people submit applications than there are levels allowing them to be admitted, we will process up to the levels the provincial government selects.

They've indicated that they want to continue to increase our levels. I think that's a really good thing. We are going to be in a position to process the requests the provincial government makes of us. We don't get involved in the business of telling them whom they should select within the levels they set in their provincial system.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: You're welcome.

[*English*]

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Is it my turn?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Généreux, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you for being with us, Minister.

You could potentially exercise a form of positive discrimination in francophone immigration under section 1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have a different philosophical view of section 1 of the charter. I would never want to seek out to use...

Referring to “positive discrimination”, do mean an act of the state that it's positively interfering, or something that has a positive consequence?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I mean an intervention in response to our inability to reach our target in recent years. I was here in 2009, and the target was 4.4% at the time.

Do you think it would be possible to exercise a form of positive discrimination to ensure we reach the 4.4% target?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: We need to make deliberate decisions that will help us increase the number of francophone newcomers. I don't think it will become a charter argument until we go so far as to violate another person's charter rights.

Doing something positive for one group doesn't necessarily equate to discrimination of another in my opinion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: The problem is that we never reach the target. Even though we've included targets in statutes, they've never been met to date.

You've received a letter from some CEGEP students in regional Quebec who want to meet you. I very much hope you'll participate. CEGEP students from Reunion Island, for example, are required to undergo biometric tests before coming to Canada, but those tests aren't available on Reunion Island. Consequently, the students have to take an 11-hour flight to Paris to undergo them. Imagine the cost associated with that.

Couldn't IRCC employees travel to Reunion Island with the equipment they need to conduct the tests?

I'm going to make a suggestion. I organize passport workshops in my riding. Could we offer those kinds of workshops to foreign students wanting to enrol in CEGEPs? The process is extremely costly for those wishing to study in Quebec.

• (1610)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly, with different locations around... With less than 15 seconds, it's hard to answer.

These kinds of solutions are possible. What would be really helpful for me is for the committee to identify specific strategies. I have confidence we can hit the goal for next year. I really do. I think we might be able to outperform it—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: —and I look forward to other suggestions from the committee.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I apologize for interrupting.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Minister, you've really kept your word. Hats off to you.

We sat together on the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities six years ago, and you were on my right. I was very impressed by your size, and you told me you were very impressed by my French. You added that you were going to learn French, and you did. I congratulate you because you've made considerable progress. It's quite difficult to speak French, and I know it takes a little more time. You're nevertheless able to get your message across.

Feel free to answer my questions in English, if that lets you say more.

Minister, according to the numbers that members of your department sent us today, 29,000 French-speaking permanent residents were admitted to Quebec in 2021.

Would you please tell us how the provinces, particularly Quebec, are included in the process of admitting francophone immigrants?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for your comment. I still study French every week.

The situation is the same in Quebec as in other provinces. Canada and Quebec have entered into an agreement, the Canada–Québec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens, under which the province is responsible for providing language training to permanent residents to promote their immigration into Quebec.

[English]

Moreover, they're required to offer similar levels of service that are available elsewhere in the country.

In the rest of Canada, we work directly with settlement agencies, because it's an area of federal jurisdiction. But for a whole host of very good reasons, the circumstances are different for Quebec. We work with those settlement agencies. We fund them directly, rather than going through provincial governments.

At the end of the day, the quality of the services should be very similar in what is being offered. In Quebec, though, we do it under a separate agreement, where we transfer the money and Quebec makes decisions for the integration of newcomers in its province.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: How do you think you can do more to support Quebec in the admission process?

What else can be done to encourage and maintain high rates of francophone immigration to Quebec?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: In Quebec I would differentiate between temporary and permanent immigration streams. On permanent immigration streams, this is really something where Quebec will have to determine its own fate. Frankly, from my conversations with Minister Boulet, I think they would prefer to have that authority. They have the ability to essentially have their share of the Canadian population, plus 5%, to protect against the potential for immigration to erode their demographic weight over time.

On the temporary programs, I think there are measures that we're working on together to see if we can allow them to get access to people who can come here more quickly. Whether we are looking at people who are coming to work or whether we can continue to work to overcome some of the challenges that have been identified over international students who come from particular jurisdictions, those are the very precise kinds of things that we do have conversations about.

We're going to continue to work in partnership to allow them to meet their immigration goals. From Ottawa, I'm not going to tell them what those goals should be.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Minister, in 2020 and 2021, IRCC established a temporary resident to permanent resident pathway program for individuals who had obtained temporary resident status. By the time the program closed, 4,700 international francophone students who had recently graduated had filed applications.

Would you please tell us how many of those applications came from students residing in Quebec?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll have to get the specific number after the meeting. I can't remember it off the front of my mind, but perhaps we'll send that to the committee, if there's interest in the TR to PR program, after today's meeting.

• (1615)

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Then I'll stop here.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We've been talking about African countries, but there's one francophone country in America: Haiti. In my riding alone, there are 49 cases of people from Haiti seeking assistance, particularly for family reunification. Their cases have been stalled since 2017, 2018 for 2019.

Considering the extreme violence in Haiti, don't you think it would be a good idea to focus your efforts on that country and to allow the visa office to keep more regular hours?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: With regard to the hours of these offices, that has been a real challenge over the course of the pandemic, frankly.

Just to be clear, we have essentially three different categories of immigration in Canada—economic immigration, family reunification and humanitarian. It's really under the humanitarian stream that we look at the country conditions where a person is particularly vulnerable.

Sorry. You wanted to...?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would it be possible to focus efforts on Haiti?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There's an interpretation problem.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Perhaps I'll—

The Chair: I'll stop the clock and look into it.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's working now.

Would you please repeat your question?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Since Haiti is the only francophone country in America and is experiencing extreme violence, would you be prepared to intervene specifically to facilitate the processing of cases related to that country?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: It will depend on the individual file. If there's somebody who is seeking to come and may qualify for our programs, if there's a particularly urgent situation, there are some precedents for acting before. We don't have a specific response to Haiti the way we have to Ukraine and Afghanistan, for example. To the extent that the humanitarian situation demands a response, we always look at those things.

As part of the francophone immigration strategy that we're developing, I'd be happy to have further conversations about the potential in Haiti.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm going back to the African countries.

Are you prepared to grant more temporary permits to foreign students from North African countries, which are the main francophone pools?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, I think that's essential.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to go back to immigration targets.

You said you wanted to reach the 4.4% target this year. However, we'll have to establish restoration targets in order to meet the 2003 target and slow the demographic decline of francophone communities.

Are you committing to raising these 4.4% francophone immigration targets for next year and subsequent years and to making the necessary effort to achieve them?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: The short answer to your question is yes, but I just want to be specific that it will depend on conversations that I've not yet had.

I did have the chance to meet with FCFA previously. We've been working towards the 2023 goal for some time now and I'm confident we can achieve it. To the extent that we want to do more after we achieve and hopefully surpass that target, of course we're willing to do more.

More specifically, one thing I'm really interested in, which I think the committee would benefit from knowing about and perhaps advising me on, is that there's a massive opportunity

[*Translation*]

to use the flexibility the express entry system affords. It would be a good thing if we could select francophones with health care and teaching skills so they could come and work in our communities.

[*English*]

If there are other strategies that people think we can adopt to actually do this, it would be very helpful to me.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: Pardon me for interrupting, Minister.

There are obviously possibilities for certain African countries, for example, but the problem with the refusal rates for those countries is systemic. We have to put an end to the situation.

Going back to the French-language services your department provides, the quality of which isn't up to snuff, we've heard that in testimony before the committee and can see the same message in the media: your department isn't doing enough to protect francophones' rights.

When will you be able to provide French-language services that don't cause additional delays for people who request them?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's essential that clients receive quality service in the language of their choice. When I see—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The next rounds will be five minutes and will be shared by Mr. Godin and Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'd like to go back to the question I asked you earlier.

You said in your opening remarks that you were satisfied with the francophone immigration objectives, targets and indicators set forth in Bill C-13. However, what troubles me and what we can see in other programs is that the bill establishes no performance requirement.

How can you assure Canadians that commitments will be met this time when all the programs we've been discussing for months, indeed years, have failed to achieve the desired results?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Some measures have had a positive impact, but, to your point, I need to show people.

[*Translation*]

It's not enough for me to discuss the problem. I think it's essential that we achieve success. If we can gain some flexibility thanks to the express entry system, for example, and if we invest in the settlement program, I think we'll have a chance to show some results.

[*English*]

My challenge is that it doesn't happen in a couple of weeks or a couple of months. This is the kind of thing where I think we can hit our target next year. I think we can continue to do better. Time will prove me right or wrong.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: Minister, I understand what you're saying, but wouldn't you need some additional tools? You're the Minister of IR-CC right now, but someone else, a Liberal or Conservative, could occupy that position in future.

Shouldn't we find a way to establish a performance requirement? We constantly kick the can down the line, but Canadians aren't seeing the desired results; they're disappointed and have lost confidence in the government.

So how can you tell us that you're pleased with what's being proposed in this bill, when it doesn't provide for a performance requirement?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The reason I'm pleased with the bill is that it would help protect the demographic weight of francophones in Canada. I think that's key in promoting French culture.

I agree with you on one point. It's essential that we get more power, that we allow greater flexibility in the express entry system.

[*English*]

The express entry system has shown itself to be very powerful. When we increased the points for francophone and bilingual newcomers, it doubled the success rate of people to come here. If we pair those extra points with flexibility so we can find the people in

our inventory and get them to the communities where they're going to succeed, and then additionally fund settlement agencies, I think we can do very, very well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Minister.

I now yield to my colleague Mr. Généreux.

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: All right, Mr. Chair.

Minister, there are intergovernmental agreements for student funding, for example. Foreign students, particularly Africans, aren't always able to show they're financially independent.

Is the solution that might help them pay their tuition fees provided by the federal-provincial agreements?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: If there are supports that come from other sources of funds, then that is the kind of thing we could use. To the extent that there is funding for people, then certainly that would make a big difference.

That's not the only reason that some people are inadmissible to Canada. There are a whole host of other reasons. Some of them are based on security considerations; in some cases—I'll be careful here—it's based on whether they're likely to return home.

The conundrum I struggle with is that a lot of these students would make very good permanent residents, but still don't come in because of the proof of funds or the likelihood of their returning home. Those are challenges that I'm trying to develop a strategy to overcome, because I think they make excellent permanent residents.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: To me, it looks like you're managing a lunatic asylum.

We feel as though we've become IRCC officers in our own ridings. Virtually all my colleagues on both sides of the House say so. We're increasingly managing immigration cases, and it's hard for us to get answers from your department. Response times no longer make any sense. We're constantly forced to try and try again, and cases get stalled for long periods of time. This puts stress on the applicants in addition to the financial stress they experience.

The situation isn't right.

Are you short of employees?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. We've just added them and we've actually turned the corner....

Mr. Chair, I see that I'm about to run out of time, but if you'll indulge me for five seconds, I will say that as of last week, we are processing a lot more cases than we were in the second half of last year. There are more than 147,000 cases that have been processed, and by the end of February, there were more than 100,000 approvals.

We're ahead of schedule because of the measures we put in place. There's more still to take hold, and I'm going to keep going.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Drouin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Congratulations, Minister. I distinctly remember that you couldn't speak French when we began sitting together in the House, but I see you've managed to learn it. Congratulations as well on your new position.

The committee has been discussing immigration issues for a long time. The francophone community outside Quebec has been discussing targets and their importance for a long time too. Every time a francophone community fails to meet targets, that furthers its long-term assimilation. That's why francophone communities keenly want those targets met.

Do you know whether your department conducts follow-up before the end of the year? If it did, we could determine, for example, whether you've reached 1% francophone immigration in the second quarter, 2%, and so on.

Otherwise that might be a good recommendation that the committee could make.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't want to tell the committee what it should recommend. It's for this committee to decide. However, to answer your question, we keep track of this on an ongoing basis. It's not necessarily as regimented, as you said, in this state.

Last week, I was asking this question of our officials who are in charge of processing, and I have to say they have done.... There is Dan Mills in particular. I don't like to single people out, but he's done a phenomenal job of trying to make sure that we process as many people as possible in really challenging circumstances and making sure that we don't lose sight of this fact.

Francis, if you'll allow me, I come from a small town that was losing people, young people, fast. However, I wasn't seeing my small town shrink because of the language we spoke or my culture, it was because of where I lived. To have that layered on top of who you are as a person, and your cultural identity, brings this to a whole new level of importance.

I am fixated on trying to help solve this problem—I'm going to do whatever I can—and I'll take whatever recommendations this

committee has to help augment the number of new francophone arrivals.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin: I represent a majority francophone riding. We have a large francophone pool at home in eastern Ontario, although the percentage of newcomers has fallen from 66% to 60%, which troubles me.

Representatives of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario testified before the committee a few weeks ago and offered some suggestions. Among other things, they asked us whether the Canadian government, in partnership with the Ontario government, could help them access those francophones through the express entry system or the province's immigration program.

Are you considering these options as a way to help us meet our objectives? It's not important whether assistance comes from the federal or provincial government as long as the objectives are met.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's essential that the Canadian and provincial governments advance a strategy to attract francophone newcomers.

Some provinces, including Nova Scotia, have already adopted strategies. When our colleague Ms. Diab was minister, she established objectives for that province, and that changed a lot of things in Nova Scotia.

• (1630)

[English]

The federal government also needs to announce measures for these streams that are purely under federal jurisdiction and that the provinces don't have a say over. We're not going to achieve targets if one group does their homework and the other group doesn't do anything. So the answer to your question is yes, and we need to keep working together and then both advance this issue.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Chair, I'd be happy if the minister from Nova Scotia or Scotland, since there's a Scottish community in my riding, managed to achieve the objectives that've been set, which would help us resolve the issue once and for all.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Drouin. Do you want to share your time with a colleague?

Mr. Francis Drouin: Actually, I'd find it annoying to ask the minister a question if he didn't have a chance to complete his answer.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

That completes the round of questions. The minister has appeared before the committee for one hour.

We will suspend briefly to allow him to leave the room.

When we return, we can speak with the members of his team, who will be staying with us.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: We are ready to resume.

For the next hour, we welcome Ms. Xavier, Ms. Prince and Ms. Hiles.

Mr. Gourde, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being with us today.

What are the Canadian government's approximate immigration targets for the next three years?

Ms. Caroline Xavier (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Good afternoon.

Thank you for that question.

As the minister said earlier, we presented the immigration plan for the next three years in February. We intend to admit 431,000 immigrants this year, 447,000 next year and 451,000 in 2024.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you very much.

Assuming there's a massive influx of refugees from Ukraine, as the government has promised, and that 300,000 Ukrainians enter the country, will we keep the same target of approximately 400,000 immigrants, or will we subtract the number of Ukrainian refugees from that number?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for that question.

We always ensure that our immigration plan allows for the admission of a certain number of refugees in the event of a crisis. We take that into account.

As the minister explained, and as you perhaps know, the plan announced on March 17 concerned the temporary admission of Ukrainians because we expect they'll want to return to their country.

Some will probably want to stay permanently. In that connection, we announced on March 17 that we'd be introducing a family reunification program to allow a number of individuals to immigrate permanently. That's included in the plans we've developed. We want to avoid making changes that might affect the priorities the government has announced.

• (1640)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: The biometric tests in Ukraine seem to be delaying the arrival of Ukrainians who need our help. Here in Canada, we unfortunately can't help them except by admitting them. In any case, I believe our resources are very limited.

Would it be possible to expedite the process associated with the biometric tests?

It seems very difficult, and demand is very strong.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for that question.

The situation in Ukraine is definitely disconcerting. We're trying to work as quickly as possible. That's why the temporary immigration program was put in place. It'll help us expedite application processing. We're working with the—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Pardon me for interrupting, but you aren't answering my question.

What's currently causing problems with regard to Ukraine are the biometric tests.

Do you have an idea of the number of tests that can be administered on a daily basis?

How many biometric tests per day can be administered to Ukrainians who want to come to Canada?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: There's a certain number of tests that can be administered at every visa office. When people apply, they have to get an appointment.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: How many are there?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I don't have the numbers to hand, but I could get them to you later.

My colleague Ms. Prince tells me we have capacity for 8,000 appointments a week for biometric tests.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You mean capacity in Poland, where the situation is urgent, don't you?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: That's correct.

The Chair: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Gourde.

A point of order was raised earlier, and we resolved the matter. Consequently, in all fairness, I should remind you that we must stick to the subject under study. Your question is off topic.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Ms. Xavier, will you accept applications from francophone Ukrainians on a priority basis, if they request it?

The Chair: That's a very good question, but you only have five seconds left, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Serré, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Honestly, my question is really important. You asked me to get back on topic in response to a point of order, and now I have a point of order. There are francophone Ukrainians who want to enter Canada. Consequently, I'd like our officials to be able to answer us.

The Chair: I'll stop the clock for Mr. Serré's intervention.

Mr. Gourde, you understood the point of order. The same point of order was raised when Mr. Beaulieu spoke, and in all fairness I called you to order when you spoke, but you had only five seconds left.

I'll restart the clock.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: You have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Did you stop the clock when you called my colleague to order?

The Chair: I did not.

Mr. Joël Godin: Then give him back his time.

The Chair: In that case, he has 10 seconds left.

Go ahead, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: That time has to be enough for the officials to answer my question.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: If I understand the question, you want to know whether we'll admit francophone Ukrainians. The answer is yes. Francophone Ukrainians who have filed an application may enter Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

Mr. Serré, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today I filed a notice of motion with the clerk. I believe all members of the committee received a copy of it this afternoon. It concerns Bill C-13. I just wanted to mention that to committee members.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

Mr. Marc Serré: It's my turn, Mr. Godin.

The Chair: We have a notice of motion.

You have the floor, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, you called my colleague to order because he wasn't speaking to the subject of the study.

How can you allow my other colleague to discuss his motion?

• (1645)

The Chair: We're dealing with a notice of motion. I believe we have to hear a notice of motion when it is submitted to the committee.

Mr. Serré is using his time to address his motion.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, to complete—

The Chair: Just a moment, Mr. Godin.

Was 48 hours' notice given of the motion?

Mr. Joël Godin: No.

The Chair: Mr. Serré, I'll give you 10 seconds to explain the subject of your motion.

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, but I have a point of order.

You can't allow Mr. Serré to speak to a motion that isn't admissible. No 48-hour notice has been given.

We're conducting a study on francophone immigration, and you called my colleague to order earlier because he was asking questions about Ukrainian immigration.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Joël Godin: There's something I don't understand, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Wait a moment. We're going to take things one at a time.

Mr. Godin, I heard your point of order. I don't yet know whether Mr. Serré's motion is linked to the study in progress. The time he is taking to explain things to us is being deducted from his five minutes of speaking time. I have no idea what it's about yet.

Let's wait and see what it's about. If my colleague's motion is off topic, I'll tell him so.

And the clock is still running.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: We don't yet know whether the motion is debatable, because we haven't given my colleague the opportunity to talk about it. According to the rules, 48 hours' notice is required before a motion can be debated, but we haven't even had an opportunity to hear what the motion is. All members are entitled to introduce a motion, whether or not it can be debated.

Our excellent clerk could perhaps clarify things for us. We could then stop arguing.

The Chair: You have the floor, Madam Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Ariane Gagné-Frégeau): The motion does have to be heard, because it's possible to give notice of a motion orally.

The Chair: I believe that's what I'm in the process of explaining to my colleague Mr. Godin.

Mr. Serré, 33 seconds have gone by and I'm going to start the clock again.

You have the floor.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Madam Clerk, for that information. What I am presenting today is simply a notice of motion. You have all received the wording of the motion, which pertains to a preliminary study of Bill C-13. I am filing this notice because we want to inform people ahead of time. I believe that we are all in agreement on this, because we've already discussed it. I am therefore filing the notice of motion in the hope that I will receive your support when we discuss it on Wednesday and move on to the vote.

I would now like to speak to the officials who are with us today. Representatives of the ACFA, the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, and the AFO, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, pointed out when they testified before the committee that francophone immigration targets had not been reached for the past 20 years. In my northern Ontario region for example, the demographic weight issue is extremely important.

You are still expecting to reach these targets, probably in March 2023. In view of testimony and recommendations made to the committee, what concrete measures have you taken in recent months to ensure that our francophone immigration targets are reached?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

We take this target very seriously and want to achieve it. If it's all right with you, I'll give the floor to Ms. Prince, who can give you clear examples of what we have done with a view to meeting the targets in 2023.

Ms. Corinne Prince (Director General, Afghanistan Settlement, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you for the question.

We have been working closely with our Canadian Heritage colleagues for several months now. We enhanced Bill C-32, and in fact made improvements to the bill that had been introduced, and which is now Bill C-13.

You spoke earlier about the obligation to adopt a policy on francophone immigration. Accordingly, what we did in Bill C-13 was add objectives, targets and indicators. This means that once there is a francophone immigration policy, it will include these details.

In a working group, we also worked closely on with the representatives of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta and various representatives of the francophone community. The working group has two goals. The first is to find ways to meet the current 4.4% target in 2023. We also worked closely with the group to come up with solutions with respect to the next target. This means determining what we will be doing after 2023.

This means that we now have recommendations from the francophone community about the future of francophone immigration to Canada, outside Quebec.

• (1650)

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Prince, what are you going to establish in the communities to ensure that the funds go directly to organizations for services in French?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for asking.

We have in fact, for the past few years increased...

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Prince. I'm sorry to have to interrupt you. Perhaps you will be able to get back to this matter later.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I think that in the next round of questions, we should have more than two and a half minutes of speaking time. It seems to me that we normally have six or seven and a half minutes.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but I didn't understand what you were telling me. I'll stop the clock, so don't worry.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: At the moment, it's a new meeting, as it were, with new guests. The Conservative Party had five minutes of speaking time, the Liberal Party had five minutes and normally the Bloc Québécois would also have five minutes. This is the second round in which we have two and a half minutes.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, I think I get what you're saying.

I spoke about it with the clerk last week, and she can correct me if I'm wrong. When we decided on the speaking time, it was for the full two hours. The time allocated in the first round of questions is six minutes for the first speaker from each party. For the second round and subsequent rounds, the time allowed is two rounds of five minutes for the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, and one round of two and a half minutes for the Bloc Québécois and the NDP.

When we begin the second part of meeting, whether it's one hour or two hours, we don't start over again. The speaking time is set for an entire segment. This is always six minutes for the first round followed by two rounds of five minutes for the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, and one round of two and a half minutes for the NDP and the Bloc Québécois. It's all based on the number of seats held by each party.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In that case, you're taking into consideration the fact that it's the same witnesses.

Normally, if we have guests for a one-hour segment and there are other guests for another hour-long segment...

The Chair: It's the same thing. We are still doing the timing the same way.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's not how it works. We've never done that in the past, I don't think.

Usually, we start over from scratch.

That means that we can't ask any of the guests any questions in the second hour if we only have a short speaking time of two and a half minutes.

We can talk about it again, but it doesn't make sense to me.

The Chair: I'm not saying anything about your comment. I'm telling you that the timing for the rounds of questions assigned to the different political parties was pre-established even before we began our meeting. In fact, we all agreed on this and that's how we're going to move forward.

Madam Clerk, would you like to add anything, or tell me if I'm wrong?

The Clerk: You're not wrong; that's how it is. The subsequent rounds follow the same sequence, meaning that you have two and a half minutes, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: And that applies even if it's a completely different group of witnesses?

The Clerk: When there are other guests, we restart the sequence.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So you're treating them as if they were the same guests because the representatives are from the same department.

● (1655)

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, your explanation certainly applies in instances where a meeting has gone on without interruption for two hours. However, what Mr. Beaulieu has pointed out and the clerk has confirmed, I think, when a given subject has been covered in an hour, we go back to starting off all the parliamentarians with six minutes of speaking time when a different subject is addressed or different witnesses are present.

In the current instance, as was the case last week when we welcomed Ms. Petitpas Taylor, we consider it a full two-hour segment. You were very generous last week, Mr. Chair, and I'd like to understand that. You allowed the privileges to two parties, the second and third opposition parties.

I discussed things with you, Mr. Chair, and with the clerk. My understanding is that normally when there are two subjects and two sets of witnesses, we start the timing over again.

The Chair: Is everyone clear on that?

Mr. Beaulieu, you can get back to your questions. You're at 21 seconds.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Ms. Xavier, The minister told us earlier that to reach the francophone immigration objectives, he had changed the point system and that there were more points for a knowledge of French.

Can you give us any details about that?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

Yes, one of the measures we took to increase the number of francophones immigrating to Canada was to assign applicants additional points directly in our Express Entry system. This allows us to acknowledge the fact that they speak French. It gives applicants additional points, and facilitates the processing of their application.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: For these same foreign students from African countries, the rejection rate is higher for Quebec than Ontario. Furthermore, the rejection rate is lower for Quebec's anglophone universities than it is for Quebec's francophone universities, particularly in the regions.

Can you tell us more about that?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for asking.

According to our statistics, the difference you mentioned is insignificant.

I'll check with my colleague Ms. Hiles to see if she has something to add.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: And yet the statistics come from your department. They report that in 2020, 92% of applicants were accepted at McGill University, compared to 12% at the University of Quebec, Trois-Rivières. How can we...

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Yes, but that doesn't mean the rejection was based on language. It's true that the university to which people submit an application may be francophone or anglophone, but each application is studied individually. The application is evaluated on the basis of the information supplied, and the information has to be complete. It doesn't mean that applications are rejected because they were applying to a francophone university.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

Ms. Ashton, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have to say that I agree with my colleague Mr. Beaulieu. I too had the impression that there were two distinct groups of witnesses, because the minister didn't stay with us for the whole meeting. I'd like to thank my colleague for raising that issue.

I had asked the minister a question earlier, but there wasn't enough time for a reply.

The quality of services in French available from your department is not up to the mark. Over the past few weeks, several witnesses told us that your department was not doing enough to protect the rights of francophones.

When will your department be able to offer services in French to everyone who needs them, without causing any additional delays?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

Our obligation is to ensure that all our services are available in both of Canada's official languages. We are not deliberately providing inferior services to francophones, and that's not our intent. We have acknowledged some mistakes in certain areas. For example, some content on our website unfortunately had to be corrected and translated to a higher standard. We are making the required effort to ensure that situations like this do not crop up again.

At our call centres, 90% of officer positions are designated bilingual, because we want to make sure that we can provide our services in both official languages. We also hire bilingual people to ensure that the services are offered in both official languages.

We are not deliberately providing inferior services to francophones. We are truly apologetic about the situation. You are absolutely right to say that it's very important for us to provide services in both official languages. Our goal is to do just that and provide high quality services in both languages.

● (1700)

Ms. Niki Ashton: In concluding, I'd like to use my speaking time to introduce a notice of motion:

That the committee invite the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion for a two-hour meeting to explain to this committee the motives behind the government's appeal of the Federal Court of Appeal's decision to defend the rights of francophones in British-Columbia to receive some services in French.

I hope that we can debate the motion and that it will receive the committee's support at future meetings.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. So you are simply filing the notice of motion, but are not asking the committee to comment on it.

The speaking order for members of the official opposition has changed a lot, but I believe that Mr. Généreux is the next to speak.

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I think that it's my turn to speak, followed by Mr. Généreux.

Is that right, Madam Clerk?

The Chair: Okay.

You have the floor, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to ask several questions in a row to the representatives of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

How many employees work at your department?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I don't know the exact total number, but I do know that the department has over 10,000 employees. That number includes our...

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm going to interrupt right there, Ms. Xavier. If you could, please tell the committee the number of employees, the number of francophone employees, the number of bilingual employees, and the number of anglophone employees. I'd like you to give us an overview of the situation. I'd also appreciate it if you could give us information about employee stability, by which I mean how long they stay at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. According to certain sources of information, there appears to be a high rate of staff turnover. Your department would appear to be a point of entry into the federal public service, but people don't stay. Is that perhaps why the department's operations have been unstable?

Earlier, the minister mentioned that immigrants, whether francophone or anglophone, were often rejected for reasons related to financial resources. Can you tell me what the minister meant by that?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for asking.

As the minister said, a rejection can come about for many different reasons, including inadequate funds. We want to make sure that everyone who comes to Canada, whether temporarily or permanently, will be successful once they are here.

Students, since that's what your question is about, may have their application rejected because they are unable to demonstrate that they will be able to continue to pay for their education while living on their own once in Canada.

We want to make sure that they are really coming here to study and that they will be able to graduate without requiring social assistance from Canada, or from other sources that could make them vulnerable once they are here. So it's only natural for them to have to demonstrate that they have the financial capacity to pay their bills and live on their own.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Xavier. You've answered my question.

Now, is it true that in Canada no special effort is made to encourage immigrant students to remain in Canada, contrary to Quebec, which would like francophone students who come to Quebec to remain?

I'd like it if you could confirm that.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Excuse me, Mr. Chair, I missed part of that question because of a connection problem.

Could you repeat the question?

• (1705)

Mr. Joël Godin: Yes, I'll repeat it. I would ask the chair not to deduct that from my speaking time. Thank you very much.

I'd like to check some information with you, Ms. Xavier. It's about foreign students, whether francophone or anglophone, although more specifically about francophones in this instance. It's been said that Canada doesn't necessarily want foreign students who come here to remain in Canada afterwards, unlike Quebec, where the opposite is the case.

Is that true, Ms. Xavier?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thanks for the question.

Of course, when someone applies for temporary residency, we want to make sure that they are in fact coming to Canada for the reasons stated at the outset. Nevertheless, we are very receptive to foreign students remaining in Canada on a permanent basis.

Having said that, I will now call upon Ms. Prince, who can provide you with additional details.

Ms. Corinne Prince: I could add a few facts to what Ms. Xavier said.

It was specifically for that reason that the department and the minister last year added other ways of gaining access to permanent residency for francophone international students, with no limit on the number. We received over 4,700 applications under the pathway for French-speaking international graduates.

We want to keep international students in Canada to offset shortages in several sectors.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Prince.

I now have a brief question to ask you.

Why is a labour market impact assessment, an LMIA, always required in markets and geographical locations where the rate of unemployment is lowest, particularly in francophone communities?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for your question.

That's part of...

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier. That's all the time we have for now.

Ms. Lattanzio, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My question will be for Ms. Prince.

When you were here before us the last time, I understood from you that there was a good and close rapport and relationship with the Province of Quebec in order to ensure the entrance of francophone newcomers in the province.

Subsequent to your testimony, we had before us Karl Blackburn, the president and chief executive officer of Quebec Employers Council, who had a different take.

I'm going to cite him and give you an opportunity to clarify this so that we can all have a better picture of what the relationship really is. He said:

This dual administration creates political friction. Departments are passing the buck in terms of who is responsible for the lengthy processing times. The finger is regularly pointed at Quebec, which is responsible for determining the number of permanent immigrants entering its territory, as the cause of the backlog of files on the desks of federal public servants. At the same time, the federal government recently admitted to voluntarily slowing down the processing of Quebec skilled worker applications, citing a large inventory of applications, while Quebec had also reduced its admission targets.

Go ahead, Ms. Prince.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, the last time I appeared before this committee I indicated that the relationship between the Quebec ministry of immigration and our federal ministry of immigration was a very positive one. We do include Quebec in our meetings with the provinces and territories at all levels, from the minister to the deputy minister to the assistant deputy minister, and at my level, the DG level. Quebec, as the minister indicated, has a special relationship with Canada in the sense of the Canada-Quebec Accord.

In terms of the applications to Quebec that are processed by IR-CC, I would like to pass the specifics of that answer to my colleague Ms. Hiles. She is from our operations sector.

• (1710)

Ms. Alexandra Hiles (Director General, Domestic Network, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): To build on my colleague Corinne's answer, during the past year, and especially during the height of the pandemic, we worked closely with the Government of Quebec to focus on finalizing applications from persons residing in Canada. That did result in longer processing times, and we are aware of that for certain categories, for persons who are residing outside Canada.

Our focus for this year is really on working through those older cases, which will mean that you will see an increase in processing times, and we are working towards returning to the stated processing time, for example, for Quebec skilled workers of 11 months, as we work through applications that have been pending during border closures.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: When you say that you will be diminishing or reducing the time delays, what delays are we talking about? What time period can we hopefully expect?

Ms. Alexandra Hiles: Current processing times for skilled workers in Quebec, for example, are roughly 28 months, and we are aiming for an eventual 11-month processing time.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Would this be part of your 2023 target?

Ms. Alexandra Hiles: The overall francophone admissions, yes, would be part of 2023 targets, although the 4.4% and the processing times are not directly linked, but we are working to return to the processing standard for Quebec skilled worker cases.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Okay.

I don't know whom to address this question to, so maybe I can continue with you. With regard to your program of *entrée express*, the minister said quite clearly that it seems to be on the right path but needs additional tools.

What would those additional tools be in order to make sure that the *entrée express* program becomes express?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As the minister shared, or perhaps you're aware, the government has given us an additional \$85 million to address the backlog of which Ms. Hiles was speaking a few minutes ago, in particular related to the Quebec backlog processing question.

Having said that, the intent is to be able to make some actual changes to the express entry program, and some of this funding will be used for that, where right now the amendments required are not yet done.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Xavier.

I'm now giving the floor to Mr. Bernard Généreux for five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Prince, I believe I heard you say earlier that you had abandoned the bill. I'm guessing that you wanted to say that you had repealed the bill.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for asking that question.

I'm sorry if I expressed myself incorrectly. In fact, what we did was enhance the bill.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay. I wasn't sure.

In that case, you were talking about Bill C-13, right?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Here is what I wanted to say. The same bill, Bill C-32, was tabled in the House of Commons in June 2021. From that time on, we at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada worked with our Canadian Heritage colleagues and people in the francophone community to enhance Bill C-13, which was tabled in the House of Commons in February. We added a number of items to the provision on the francophone immigration policy. Specifically we added information about objectives, targets and indicators.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: So you're saying that you worked with people at Canadian Heritage. But in fact you had worked with them in previous years.

What's different compared to what was done before? What measures did you improve, apart from the objectives, targets and indicators?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for the question.

As the minister mentioned in his presentation, in 2019, our department drafted the Francophone Immigration strategy, which had several objectives. The Francophone Immigration strategy is a policy, and is not part of a bill, meaning that it is neither legislative nor regulatory. It's an administrative policy which has already led to promising results.

The strategy begins with targeted promotional activities abroad, in countries where French is spoken. That includes selection, in all the programs we mentioned, now and in the past.

The strategy also includes partnerships with the provinces, territories and stakeholders to ensure that our work is consistent with what's happening in the communities and that the initiatives meet community goals and needs.

The strategy also includes a francophone immigration settlement pathway. Over the past few years, we have increased the number of francophone service providers from 50 to more than 80, to improve the services being provided by and for francophones. I always add the word "with" to the list in speaking about services available by, for and with francophones, because I believe...

• (1715)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Prince, before I run out of time, I'd like to know whether it would be possible to obtain the working document you developed to improve results, unless it's confidential.

Ms. Corinne Prince: We would be more than happy to provide the committee with the Francophone Immigration strategy.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I would imagine that you believe this strategy is achieving better results. At least the minister seems to believe it.

I have another question for you.

At the moment, is the first-come first-served principle still being applied, particularly for francophone students who apply, through the various programs available, to come to Canada?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for the question.

Students who arrive in Canada on a temporary visa are not currently eligible for settlement services.

However, if what you're talking about is application processing, I'll ask Ms. Hiles to answer you.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Unfortunately, my speaking time is up. It would be interesting to know why they are not eligible, and so we would be very grateful to you if you could possibly send us a response in writing.

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

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga now has the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking the witnesses who are with us today.

I'm going to ask the same questions I asked the minister earlier. Some witnesses have already told our committee that there are certain barriers, such as a French exam that is overly difficult. In fact, even some francophones, by which I mean people who have attended French schools, always worked in French and speak French at home, fail the exam.

Can you tell us why this barrier exists?

How difficult is this French exam? What changes could be made to have the level of difficulty correspond to a level that would normally allow francophones to pass it?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thanks for the question.

Depending on the program under which people submit an application, there are certain requirements to be met. These requirements apply to more than just one country. I want to make sure you clearly understand that the requirement to pass the exam is applicable to everyone who applies, and not just to those from francophone countries, for instance.

I understand that this might be perceived as a barrier. Nevertheless, the exam currently being used is considered the standard examination that must be passed by people who want to apply for permanent residency.

As the minister said, however, if you are getting that kind of feedback and the exam continues to be an issue, it could be reviewed. We know that many people are passing the exam, but according to what you are telling us, there are certain problems with it. We therefore need to look more closely at the situation to see if the exam is indeed a barrier to people who already speak French.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I'm going to reiterate my question on the same subject.

I did not understand what level of difficulty was set for this exam. As I was saying earlier, francophones have come to the committee and talked about what they experienced. I'm talking here of people who studied in French, in Canada and elsewhere, people whose mother tongue is French. These people wrote the exam and found the level of difficulty too high for them, on the one hand, but they also felt that it would be equally difficult for Canadian francophones in general to pass it.

Can you tell us what level of difficulty this exam has been set at? On what did you base your decision for the desired level of French?

• (1720)

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for clarifying your question.

For the specific standard on which the examination is based, I would have to check and get back to you later with further details. What I can say is that the exams were designed as a function of the program under which a person submits an application. That's why it's hard to give you a precise answer, because we are speaking of cases generally. What I would ask you is to give us a number of specific instances so that we could look at them in greater depth. If the chair is in agreement, we could provide the committee with additional details about the language exams used by the department for its various programs.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Mr. Chair, I would like these responses to be sent to us by email so they can be recorded.

My next question is about francophone immigration from Africa. We know that 60% of the world's francophones are in Africa. And yet, applications from that continent have the highest rejection rate.

Do we want to increase francophone immigration to Canada or not?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for asking that question.

We definitely want to increase francophone immigration to Canada and that African countries, particularly francophone African countries, represent opportunities for us. That's why we did things like introduce the Student Direct Stream, which is available in Senegal, Morocco and other countries with the capacity to send us francophone students. It's definitely a priority.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Sometimes people change the type of immigration after they have submitted an application to come to Canada as students. You were saying that the rejection rates could be explained by the fact that some people, after submitting an application as a student, end up requesting refugee status. Has the number of people in this situation changed or is it the same as ever?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kayabaga. I'm sorry, but your speaking time is up.

I'd like to remind the witnesses that they can always send us documents in response to questions.

We will now go to Mr. Mario Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Xavier, did I understand correctly earlier when you said that 90% of immigration officers spoke French?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thanks for asking that question.

What I said was that over 91% of positions at our call centre, which is mainly based in Montreal, were in designated bilingual positions.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Why did you advertise unilingual English positions in November?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Most of our positions are bilingual, as I said. However, owing to the large number of applications we receive and our desire to continue to provide excellent service to our clients, a number of positions are designated unilingual English. That doesn't mean that most of our employees are unilingual anglophones. When people contact the call centre, they can dial 1 for service in English or 2 for service in French, and their call is forward-

ed to an officer who speaks the selected language. Most of the officers are bilingual, and therefore the capacity is there.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We heard testimony from a lawyer, Mr. Handfield, who told us that they wouldn't speak to him in French, even though it was at the request of his client. I myself witnessed a situation like that.

He and other lawyers have said that their clients often receive an answer in English when they speak to the officers in French. Mr. Handfield told us that the situation was not improving, and that it had even got worse over the years.

How can you explain that?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I apologize for being unable to give details about the case you've raised. But it's clearly unacceptable for a person requesting a service in an official language to be unable to get an answer in that language.

That's not what we're trying to do. As I told you, we regularly hire people who can speak both official languages and are continuing with these efforts in the department.

It's definitely unacceptable for someone not to receive the service they need. I can tell you that if we were to receive a complaint, it might be referred to the official languages commissioner's office, where an investigation would be carried out if required.

Right now, we're trying to do everything possible to respond in the client's preferred language.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Niki Ashton now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A few weeks ago now, Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup testified before our committee about the services she had received from your department. She had tried to contact IRCC, but had all kinds of problems and could only be served in English.

You may be saying that 90% of the officers are bilingual, but that's not what we're hearing in the field.

How can you reconcile the evidence heard by the committee about the quality of service from your department and what you are saying? Is it because of a staff shortage? Are you using unilingual English temporary employment agencies? What's going on at IRCC?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thanks for your question.

I can affirm that our priority is to ensure that everyone can be served in the official language of their choice.

As I mentioned, 91% of the positions at our call centre are designated bilingual. That doesn't mean we have filled all these positions yet.

The number of requests we are receiving at our call centre is definitely growing, but I can assure you that we are doing everything required to hire staff, whether on a temporary or casual basis, for a term or indeterminate period. We are also making sure that we hire bilingual staff to provide the services you mentioned.

I can't give you an explanation for the examples you mentioned. We are very disappointed that these occurred, but I can assure you that we are making an effort so that the situation will get better rather than worse.

Ms. Niki Ashton: We are hoping that's the case, because the evidence we've heard was very worrisome.

I would also like to ask another question, based on testimony that we heard.

With respect to francophone immigration, we also identified a problem with French-speaking staff at day care centres and in the education system.

At our office, we also had similar experiences. We're trying to support our own organizations, but the government is refusing what we are recommending.

Could you have less restrictive criteria for welcoming francophone immigrant students to meet these needs?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I'll ask Ms. Prince to answer that.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but that's all the time we have.

Thank you very much.

All kinds of information and statistics were requested from the witnesses and the minister. I'd like to remind people that any information requested can be sent in writing to our clerk.

Also, please don't hesitate to send us any other information you feel is relevant and which, in your opinion, could help us prepare our report on this study.

So, before adjourning...

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I just want to check that Ms. Prince will be sending us the strategy I asked her for, the one being used by people in the department.

The Chair: That's what I just asked them for.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I know that you just asked them, but I want to make sure that we're all agreed.

The Chair: Absolutely. Ms. Xavier said that she would do that.

And Ms. Ashton, could you send us your notice of motion in writing, even though you have already read it out.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I believe the notice of motion has been sent to the clerk.

The Chair: Excellent.

Just a reminder that next week, we will be receiving the Commissioner of Official Languages, but only for the first hour of the meeting; the second hour will be spent on committee work.

I hope everyone enjoys the rest of the week. We'll be meeting again on Wednesday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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