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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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•(1205)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Pursuant to the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, April 12 and the subcommittee report adopted earlier today, the committee will now begin its consideration of the main estimates 2016-17, votes 1, 5, and 10 under Citizenship and Immigration, and vote 1 under Immigration and Refugee Board.

I would now like to offer the floor to the minister.

Minister, welcome. Please proceed, if you have any opening remarks.

Hon. John McCallum (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everybody. It's a pleasure to be back.

I will have a few remarks, but I want at the beginning to thank all of you for your work on Bill C-6. I understand that you did all the clause-by-clause consideration in one meeting, so congratulations to everybody on that. I understand that we had two amendments accepted. That's good.

Also, I made a commitment some time ago that we would move forward in the fall on a proper appeal right on the issue of citizenship revocation. I know you heard from various witnesses.

I have said from the beginning that we would do it, but we also don't want to delay this bill unduly. To do it will require certain legislative changes and possibly even machinery-of-government changes, which don't happen overnight. We therefore couldn't include it in this bill, but we are clearly committed to move forward on it in the fall, working with you, who have been listening to witnesses on the subject and I'm sure have some ideas on the best method of going forward on that issue.

I turn now to the estimates.

[Translation]

I'm very pleased to be here today to present Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's main estimates for fiscal year 2016-17.

[English]

I think you've met my officials before, but I should say who they are. We have the deputy minister, Anita Biguzs, and David Manicom, Robert Orr, Dawn Edlund, and Tony Matson, who are all here to possibly answer some questions or give me advice. We're all pleased to be here.

I will focus on some of the most significant allocations we're requesting to help our department meet our goals. As I said in a previous appearance before this committee, these goals are in service of our government's commitment to strengthen our generous and welcoming country through the immigration system and to open Canada's doors to those who want to contribute to our prosperity and to the success of our country.

I can report that our department's main estimates have an overall net increase of \$186.2 million from the previous year. Most of that increase—the great majority of it, \$179.3 million—is for funding to implement our response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

•(1210)

[Translation]

As you know, we achieved our goal of resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February, and we will continue to welcome refugees from Syria throughout this year, as our efforts focus more and more on settlement and integration.

[English]

On that issue of integration, I can report that the latest numbers state that 97% of the refugees are now in permanent housing. I think that's good news. We still have 3% to go, but we're almost there.

That doesn't mean everything is solved. There is still the question of jobs, and there is still language, but housing is a big part of the trip.

The majority of the funds we are requesting in these main estimates for Syrian refugee resettlement will be in the form of grants and contributions. This grants and contribution funding will be used for resettlement assistance through income support for newcomers to cover items such as food, clothing, and shelter, or to fund NGOs for the many critical services they provide during the resettlement process.

[Translation]

Grants and contributions funding will be used, for example, to support third parties who provide settlement assistance, such as language training, orientation to life in Canada, and counselling.

[English]

Another notable increase in these main estimates is \$29.3 million requested to continue to implement and administer reforms to the temporary foreign worker program and the international mobility program. Most of that comes in the form of operating expenditures in order to implement the changes that were introduced in June 2014. These expenditures are related to initiatives and activities that will help to balance our interest in attracting international talent with existing labour market needs.

Mr. Chair, my department's main estimates for 2016-17 also include an increase of \$17.9 million in funding for the passport program, and an increase of \$14.9 million in funding related to the expansion of biometric screening in Canada's immigration system.

There are a number of other items I could mention but I think I'll come to a close to leave more time for questions.

I would conclude by saying that welcoming newcomers and helping them to settle and integrate well into Canadian society is critical to our country's future and has always been an important part of our history.

[Translation]

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring the success of the immigration system, and the main estimates that we are discussing today reflect that commitment.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm happy to answer any questions committee members may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister McCallum.

Mr. Ehsassi, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Minister McCallum, welcome once again before this committee. Obviously, as you can appreciate, every time you make yourself readily available to us, that actually assists with the work of this committee.

In addition, I want to congratulate you on Bill C-6. As you alluded to in your opening remarks, we did go through a clause-by-clause review of Bill C-6. As you're well aware, there were a number of amendments that were suggested either by members of this committee or witnesses who appeared before us. Those amendments fell beyond the scope of the bill.

Just in terms of clarification, you did suggest that your department would be very interested in making additional changes. Could you kindly elaborate on that point and perhaps inform us whether your department is currently considering any amendments to the Citizenship Act?

Hon. John McCallum: I think as I and the Prime Minister and others have said, in general terms, we're always open to amendments, because anything that will make the bill a better bill, anything that will improve it, we're open to it. In this particular case there were two amendments we were able to agree on together. There is this firm and absolute commitment I've made to move forward on the grounds for appeal for citizenship revocation.

There are various different models that could be followed. I'm not sure exactly which one I think.... You heard a lot of witnesses. Some of you may have views on that. We would like to work with you to figure out the best way to implement this appeal right. I've said for a long time that I was open to that, and would welcome that. The exact form remains to be discussed. There may be some amendments that we would have gone with had they been in scope, but they were not in scope. It's possible that at a future date there are other changes we might also consider, but I think in terms of firm commitments we have the two amendments that I think were proposed by the NDP. Perhaps I shouldn't say that; perhaps it was collaborative. However they came, we welcome them, and there's a firm commitment on citizen revocation, and there could be other things but no commitment at this time.

•(1215)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much. That's very good to hear.

If I could turn your attention to the new estimates that you've provided, there are a few questions I have with respect to the biometrics program and the passport Canada program.

With respect to biometrics, I understand that you're allocating \$14.9 million toward the expansion of biometrics screening. Could you kindly explain to us what is meant to be achieved with this new program that's being introduced?

Hon. John McCallum: I'd be happy to do that. The funding will support the expansion of biometric screening to verify the identity of all visa-required travellers seeking entry into Canada. Funding for the second phase will be used to support an additional 44 full-time equivalent staff, as well as non-salary expenditures for activities, as biometric screening will be expanded to all visa-required entries.

There are various items listed, but it's basically to support the expansion of biometric screening and to hire 44 new full-time equivalent staff.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Just out of curiosity, apart from the new estimates that have been provided, could you share with us how much money has been spent to date on the biometric system?

Hon. John McCallum: We'll have to get back to you with a precise number. We don't have it with us at the moment.

Mr. Tony Matson (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): In 2015, funds were authorized of \$175.6 million from 2015 to 2019-20. In terms of our total spend to date, we can get back to you with that total figure.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you kindly.

I'd like to turn now to the passport Canada estimates. Obviously that particular program is done on a full cost-recovery basis. Would you mind explaining how the revolving fund works in that particular instance, and how it would be affected?

Hon. John McCallum: Perhaps I'll ask one of my colleagues here to explain in detail, but as you say, it is a full cost-recovery system. In a sense, it's a model for other things we do, because it does give rise to very quick processing times in general, compared with other things we do. I think on the whole it is a model that works well.

I would ask one of the officials to answer your more specific question.

Ms. Anita Biguzs (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Perhaps I'll open, and then I'll turn to Mr. Orr to provide further details.

It is correct that the passport fund operates off a revolving fund. That means it essentially has a permanent authority that allows it to use its revenues against its expenditures and to carry forward any surpluses or deficits.

These estimates in 2016-17 were forecasting a net decrease in the surplus in the fund of \$17.9 million. That's mostly due to the fact that we have a forecasted increase in terms of spending required to actually continue to support the modernization of the program and in terms of the various measures we're putting in place to ensure that the services are responsive to Canadians. Modernization spending compared to the previous year and other adjustments were related to the forecasted net revenues that come in as a result of passport fees.

I don't know, Bob, if you wanted to add to that.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, Mr. Orr.

• (1220)

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Okay.

Well, I think that essentially covers it. It's a self-funding process, and the deputy explained the surplus.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

My questions relate to the resources scheduled for visa reviews. It's the government's six-month anniversary, roughly. Congratulations. I know that in the campaign platform of the governing party, there's a quote saying, "As a first step, we will immediately lift the Mexican visa requirement that unfairly restricts travel to Canada...."

We're six months in, so maybe "immediately" has a little bit of a different definition. I note the upcoming three amigos meeting. I'm wondering if the minister can inform my colleagues here if the Department of Citizenship and Immigration has conducted a formal visa review, including a technical visit to the country, to provide a holistic, evidence-based assessment of Mexico's eligibility for a visa exemption under Canada's objective visa policy framework.

Hon. John McCallum: I can ask my colleagues to go into more detail on that, but I can tell you that we have been working very hard. My officials and I have been working very hard, and not just us, but in collaboration in particular with two other departments, Foreign Affairs and CBSA. We all have a strong interest in this.

We are certainly working with the Mexicans at various levels to ensure that they work with us when the visa lift occurs and prior to the visa lift, to ensure that conditions are such that we will have a successful visa lift, which will give rise to important increases in tourism and greater friendship between us and our second North American partner. We want to do this without the adverse effects arising that caused the visa to be imposed in the first place.

We are working very hard within the government and with our Mexican partners to ensure that the conditions for success will be realized.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Minister.

In terms of a yes or no answer, would I be correct in understanding that a formal visa review has not yet been completed?

Hon. John McCallum: I didn't say that. I have told you all the ways in which we are reviewing the situation.

On that specific issue, do we have a colleague who would like to comment?

Mr. David Manicom (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): No, we have not conducted the same degree of formal visa review that we have done in other circumstances. We have engaged in a number of technical trips to Mexico and, in combination with the Canada Border Services Agency and Global Affairs Canada, we are working with Mexican officials to identify elements we can undertake to reduce the risk of a visa lift and mitigate security and other concerns. A formal visa review, as it is normally done, has not yet been conducted.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Manicom, with the work that has been completed on a visa review, even though a technical review hasn't been completed, could you explain which indicators Mexico currently meets? Or actually, for the sake of time which indicators does Mexico currently not meet, in terms of being eligible, in terms of best practice, for lifting a visa review.

Mr. David Manicom: Mexico's visa refusal rate is still somewhat above the rate of our objective criteria. The visa violation rate is also somewhat above the normal rate. In many other regards, with regard to socio-economic indicators, Mexico is meeting, or close to meeting, the indicators.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

I will give the rest of my time to Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Carrying on with visas, Minister, or perhaps members of the department, we have had visa problems for some time with Bulgaria and Romania. There were also problems with the Czech Republic, but they have been resolved.

I have two questions. I understand the philosophy of why there have been problems with solving the visa issue with these two countries, but there have been two issues raised. One is that there have been suggestions by Bulgaria and Romania that, unless we solve this visa problem, they won't sign CETA. That is the first question. I realize that means we would get into complicated discussions about CETA, but the fact is that representatives from Romania and Bulgaria have personally made those statements to me.

The European Union has said that unless we solve the visa issue, they are going to require visas of Canadians coming to Europe.

• (1225)

Hon. John McCallum: Both of those contentions as to risks are true. I have not been told, myself, that Bulgaria and Romania would not sign CETA, but I have heard from others, including you, who have heard that. It is also a possibility that the European Union could impose visa restrictions not only on Canadians but also on Americans travelling to Europe.

Mr. David Tilson: I understand that, Minister, and I realize that this issue has been going on for some time. Obviously, Bulgaria and Romania have to do something. It's not just Canada. I understand that, too. The question is, what is the department doing—perhaps it is not your office—to resolve these issues?

Hon. John McCallum: What we are doing, what I have been doing, is engaging in discussions with Romanian officials and European Union officials in order to work very hard to resolve this issue and find a pathway that will lead at some point to visa-free travel from Romania and Bulgaria. We have not made any commitments, but we are in the middle of ongoing discussions with Romania, in particular, and the European Union on this issue. I believe there are discussions by other ministers, as well.

Mr. David Tilson: You have 10 seconds, Minister. Have a good morning.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you very much, and you too, except it's afternoon now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tilson.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you to the minister and his officials for coming before the committee again today. I would like to ask some specific questions, if I may.

The minister announced that in early April he would be sending staff back to the Middle East—Lebanon and possibly Jordan and Turkey—to process privately sponsored refugee applications that were received prior to March 31, 2016. I am wondering whether this has been done, what budget has been allocated to it, how many staff are being sent back, how long they will be there, and how many families have been processed with this additional resource.

Hon. John McCallum: You're absolutely right in terms of the commitment. I've said before that I'm probably the only immigration minister in the world who's major challenge is that I can't provide refugees quickly enough to satisfy the demand from enormously generous Canadian families. It's a good problem, but it's a problem.

Due to this challenge, we are sending back to the region officials from our department, and possibly from others, in order to accelerate the processing of these refugee applicants so we can meet the

commitment I made for all of those who had applied before March 31. We're still working on this, but it's going to happen very soon. We don't yet have the precise numbers of staff, or the precise time periods, but we will have those soon. I can tell you this operation will begin in a matter of days.

We are on it, but we haven't yet nailed down the precise numbers of people.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If I may then ask the Minister to commit to the committee to provide that information to us as soon as it's available with precisely how many staff will be sent back, the budget allocation for it, how long they will be there, how many families will be processed with these additional resources, and how many will still be waiting.

I ask this because there are numerous families who have come forward sponsoring families and who are anxious. The level of frustration is beyond measure. They are frustrated because they've rented spaces and the apartments sit empty. They have no idea when those families are coming. Some of the sponsoring families have asked me to ask the minister for compensation. They felt the monies they've raised have been wasted, and when the families come they may not have the resources to accommodate them. You can imagine the level of frustration.

In relation to that, I need to ask the minister about this. We met and discussed this, and the minister indicated that work is under way with respect to it.

Specifically, there are some applications, and some refugee families, that are in locations where we don't even have a processing centre, particularly in northern Iraq. For example, I have in my riding the Or Shalom along with 100 other sponsoring groups who are waiting for Kurdish families in the northern Iraq area. They've been told there are no processing centres there to process the applications even though the UNHCR has approved them. They are literally at wits end with respect to this. Some of them, I think, met with the minister when he was in Vancouver.

The suggestion that I presented to the minister was to have the UNHCR, the IOM, and other international agencies help with processing the applications, especially in those locations where there are no processing centres, such as northern Iraq.

The minister indicated that was a good suggestion, so I wonder whether that has been undertaken, and if so when we can see families processed so they can arrive here in Canada.

• (1230)

Hon. John McCallum: There were a number of questions there.

First of all, I do agree we will transmit to you the information on the numbers of people going back to the region.

I am acutely aware there are many people across the country waiting anxiously to receive the refugees, which is one of the consequences of what we are doing. I think we will be able to give more advance notice than had been the case in the past as to when particular refugees will be arriving.

In terms of your question about northern Iraq, we are working on that. One example is that I've had conversations in a synagogue in Winnipeg with people who are anxious to sponsor Yazidi refugees, and my staff along with the department are working on those cases. They haven't yet arrived, but we are working on them.

In those and other cases from that part of the world, we are working hard to make them able to come, but I wonder if anyone else among the officials would like to add a comment to that.

Ms. Dawn Edlund (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Yes, Minister.

I would add that we have been able to put forward processing of people in difficult locations. For example, we've continued to process Iraqi refugees out of Syria, and we've done that through partnership with the International Organization for Migration and video-conference interviewing. Canada, I believe, is the only country still settling Iraqis out of Damascus.

We have been able to do that even without a processing centre on the site, but then we have to work to build those partnerships to make that happen.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I've written the minister a letter around the Or Shalom group and their 100 organizations that are trying to bring these refugees over. I wonder if I could get a commitment from the minister to have his official look at specifically those cases to see where they are so I can go back to my constituents and let them know what the process is, particularly with authorizing the UNHCR and other international agencies to go into these sites to process families, and the progress with respect to that. I would like to know the specific numbers of how many families have been processed accordingly, and how many are still waiting. It's really good information to have so we can lay some of the concerns to rest, hopefully.

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

I think my own political staff have already been working on this, but I will check with them to ensure that's true and also make sure we work with officials on that issue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'd like to give my last minute to Mr. Chen, so perhaps you can remind me when I'm at six minutes.

Thank you, Minister, for coming once again and helping this committee out, and answering a lot of questions specifically today for our main estimates.

The main estimates for 2016-17 indicate that IRCC anticipates transferring roughly \$6 million to Global Affairs to support their staff on missions abroad.

I'm wondering if you might be able to tell this committee about some of the specific activities that will be funded by this requested allocation of funding.

• (1235)

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you very much for that question. It's generous of you to give one minute to Mr. Chen.

In terms of your question, however, we are transferring \$9 million to Global Affairs to provide support to departmental staff located abroad for the following: property growth and visa office openings, \$2.5 million; and the eTA initiative implementation and other adjustments, \$6.5 million. That's \$9 million from us to them. There's also \$2.7 million from Global Affairs to us which reflects visa office closures, workload redistribution, and return of previous charges related to chancery costs.

Those are fairly technical issues, but that is the answer to your question.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Are you able to share with us how many staff IRCC currently has on missions abroad as well as the average staff per mission?

Hon. John McCallum: No. Does anybody have an answer to that? I don't know the precise numbers.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, I don't have the precise numbers with me, but we have approximately 300 Canadian base officers abroad. Then we would be supported by about 1,100 locally engaged staff who are actually employees of Global Affairs Canada but work on IRCC issues.

The number of staff at missions varies considerably depending on the demand from that particular location and a variety of other factors, the complexity of the work in the area, and so on.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: You don't have an average size per se.

Mr. Robert Orr: There is no average size. They vary considerably. Some of them, I suppose, such as offices in Beijing and New Delhi would be our largest and very considerable with well over 100 individuals, and some of them are very small indeed.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: How have IRCC staffing and missions abroad changed in recent years, if at all? Do you anticipate future changes at those missions?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, there is no dramatic change. There is a change year by year. Sometimes we'll open certain offices. We've opened Guangzhou. We've opened Dar es Salaam this year, for instance, to respond to demands. The staffing levels may vary somewhat as well according to the demand and the need in that particular area.

There is always some adjustment each year, but it's not a dramatic amount year by year.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: If I may switch, what does the IRCC consider as a high default rate for temporary resident visas? I think we heard, in particular, for Mexico that it still has it, but a rate wasn't given. What's considered high for a default rate for people who are on visitor visas who don't return?

Hon. John McCallum: I'd say that's for Mr. Orr.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes.

Mr. Chair, I'm not quite sure what is meant by "default rate". When we're looking at whether there's a visa requirement or not, we look at a whole variety of factors. One of them is the refusal rate. Normally a rate of about 4% is what we're looking at.

We have the refusal rates of various offices around the world, and they vary considerably as to how many we would be refusing, how many we would be accepting. The overall acceptance rate is 82%.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My concern was, when the example of Mexico was given, that a high number of people weren't returning. That's the rate I'm trying to get at. How do you determine it, and what is considered a high rate?

Mr. David Manicom: Because at this time we don't have exit controls, we don't know the precise number of people who don't return. What I was referring to is the visa violation rate. Those are known violations, whereby someone commits a crime in Canada and comes to our attention as having overstayed their visa and so forth. We also calculate rates of asylum claims.

A visa violation rate of more than 2% or 3% is considered high.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Would you know the visa violation rate for India, per se? Is there a stat?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't have it with me. I could find it.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: It would be nice if you could provide that to us.

Mr. David Manicom: Yes. We could provide it to the committee.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

I will now pass my time to Mr. Chen.

• (1240)

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Speaking through you, Mr. Chair, I'm very pleased, Minister, to hear that the main estimates are seeing an overall net increase in funding for the department, and in particular in the context of Canada's being an open and welcoming country.

I want to ask about the processing times for family reunification. I know that in many cases there are parents and grandparents who are waiting up to four years to be reunited with their families. Some spousal applications take upwards of two years. In my riding of Scarborough North, I've met with constituents, and in fact, just the other week one constituent was almost reduced to tears talking about how he has waited almost two years to sponsor his wife from abroad and about the challenges of waiting so long.

Minister, can you share with us how the budget that is set and the priorities you have given to the department will support family reunification?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Hon. John McCallum: Ten seconds. It will do it well, but if I have a chance to amplify later, I will.

Thank you for the question.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for coming here. As well, thanks to your staff for clarifying some things.

These main estimates indicate that IRCC will transfer \$1.3 million to the computer for schools program of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees by providing them with computers. From which departmental program or area will these funds be transferred? Has IRCC funded these programs in the past? If not, what is the rationale for doing it this time?

Hon. John McCallum: It's a very good question, so good that we're scurrying around trying to find an answer. I think the rationale for providing computers to refugees is that in 2016 it's great for one's life to have a computer.

Does anyone have further detail?

Ms. Dawn Edlund: I don't have further detail; I'm sorry.

Hon. John McCallum: You've stumped us, but we will get back to you on this question.

Mr. Bob Saroya: No problem. May I ask another one, please?

Hon. John McCallum: Yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Funding requested by the resettlement assistance program has substantially increased in fiscal year 2016-17 because of the government's Syrian refugee resettlement commitment, but is expected to return to a normal level the following year. Resettled refugees have the right to apply for family reunification with immediate family members within their first year in Canada, which means that a second wave of Syrian refugees could be expected.

How has the department prepared for this possibility in resource allocation for the resettlement assistance program in the future?

Hon. John McCallum: You're right that we have this within-one-year right to resettle families, and because of the Syrian refugees, and indeed all refugees, we have to budget for and plan for that eventuality in terms of how, in practice, we are doing it.

Dawn.

Ms. Dawn Edlund: Mr. Chair, just to clarify, the resettlement assistance program is available for government-assisted refugees and what are called the blended visa office cases. That's not money that's available for a subsequent wave of sponsorships. If the Syrian refugees want to sponsor other family members in the future, they would not have access to the resettlement assistance program funding.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Mr. Minister, this is the last question.

Media reports suggest that IRCC has shut down expedited processing of private sponsorship applications. The government has indicated that all applications for Syrian refugees received prior to March 31, 2016, will be processed in 2016 and early 2017. Applications received after that time will be processed according to the usual procedures.

How many private sponsorship applications for Syrian refugees are in the processing inventory? Has the department allocated additional resources to finish processing the applications received prior to March 31, 2016?

• (1245)

Hon. John McCallum: You're absolutely right in terms of our commitments, and as I answered to Ms. Kwan, we're working hard right now to determine exactly what processes and how many people will be involved, but it will happen soon and I will get back to you when we know the exact numbers.

There are about 12,000 privately sponsored refugees currently in the inventory. Our commitment, as you said, is that for all of those who applied by March 31 we will do everything in our power to ensure that they arrive in Canada in 2016 or, if necessary, in early 2017.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Could I have another one?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What options are being considered to respond to the ongoing interest in private sponsorship that the Syrian initiative has generated?

Hon. John McCallum: Okay, and I have about 20 seconds to answer that one?

It's almost an embarrassment of generosity. Canadians are so generous that it's making it difficult for me to respond quickly enough with the refugees. That's a major challenge now, which we are working to solve as best as we possibly can.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mrs. Zahid, five minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I would like to thank the minister and the officials for joining us today. I want to specifically thank you, Minister, for all the work you have put into Bill C-6.

Hon. John McCallum: Well, it is I who thank you, or we can thank each other, I guess, but I know the committee has spent an awful lot of time on this.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Further to Mr. Chen's question, I'm going to focus my questions around the backlog processing time as this is one of the most frequent complaints I hear from my constituents in the riding of Scarborough Centre, and I am sure I am not alone.

The status quo is simply not acceptable. Applicants are waiting too long for their applications to be processed. They are living in limbo and often are separated from their loved ones. That's really a thing of concern to all of us.

Minister, you have told this committee previously that lowering processing times, particularly in the family class, is a top priority for you. Your department is asking for a 13.5% increase in funding in these estimates for 2016-17. How much of that specifically will be directed towards decreasing the processing times?

Hon. John McCallum: My officials can seek out the exact number, but certainly it was part of our platform and part of the budget to put more money in to deal precisely with that issue. That has been done. As well, we may get more money in future budgets. That remains to be seen.

We're also working very hard to improve the efficiency with which we process people. For the same amount of money, we can process more people if we do it more efficiently. From the great efficiencies we've learned with refugees, we can transfer some of that learning over to other streams of immigrants.

In terms of your basic question, yes, you are right, refugees are very important. Refugees have been very much in the news. But I would say the single most important commitment we made in the election platform was to bring down the processing times for family class. Over the last 10 years, those processing times have ballooned through the roof to an unacceptable level. In particular, if the heavy hand of the Canadian state keeps spouses apart for two years on average, I think that is unacceptable. We will have measures to deal with that in a serious way soon. I cannot announce it today, but in a number of weeks we will be moving on that.

There are other things that are also important: parents, grandparents, caregivers, PR cards, and others. I put particular attention on the spouses, as part of the nuclear family, as being the really high priority. It's partly because for parents and grandparents, as a consequence of the diminished intake in the large numbers of parents and grandparents allowed to come in for a number of years, that processing time will come down automatically and significantly over the next few years.

That will solve itself, in part, but the spouses need direct action from us to solve it. That will be our first priority. We will come forward in the coming weeks, as they say, with action in this area.

• (1250)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Further to this, I would like to specifically address the issue of inland spousal sponsorships. My office in Scarborough Centre has heard that wait times have grown significantly in this particular area. While there may not be an issue of physical separation, these people do deserve normalization of their status in a timely manner.

What are you doing to specifically address this category?

Hon. John McCallum: Well, in the coming weeks, we will. When I talk about spouses, I don't mean just overseas spouses, I mean overseas spouses and inland spouses.

I think the processing time is somewhat higher for the inland spouses than it is for the overseas spouses. Whether the spouse is overseas or inland, a spouse is still a spouse. One has to work very hard to reduce those processing times to acceptable levels. The levels they're at today are unacceptable.

Now, I know I cannot, as minister, go on forever saying this without action, but I'm telling you that within weeks we will have clear action on this front.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister. I think my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, did you—

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have no questions. It's just that the minister and members of the department have given us several undertakings. It's my understanding that the department is coming back on Tuesday for an hour at 12 o'clock. They probably don't know that yet, but we're inviting them back. I'm

hopeful that the undertakings you've given would be provided at that time.

They're shaking their heads in the positive.

Hon. John McCallum: Well, that's news to me. I don't know if it's news to you, but....

Mr. David Tilson: Oh, you have other things to do, Mr. Minister.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay. Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking to you today.

The Chair: Minister, it has indeed been a pleasure to have you appear, along with your officials.

I would now like to call the vote.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$604,119,156

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$13,706,741

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$1,152,355,205

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$100,834,047

(Vote 1 agreed to)

Shall I report the votes on the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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