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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1700)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): The meeting will now reconvene.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 25, the committee will begin its study on family reunification.

Today we have, as witnesses, the Honourable John McCallum, P. C., MP, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship; Robert Orr, assistant deputy minister, operations; David Cashaback, acting director general, immigration branch; and Paul Armstrong, director general, centralized network.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses to our committee, and I would especially like to welcome back the minister.

We're looking forward to hearing from you, for seven minutes.

Hon. John McCallum (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's good to be back. I think I've been here a few times. It's always a pleasure. I'm very happy to be here with my officials.

I will make a few comments about the theme of your upcoming study on family reunification, and after that I'd be very happy to answer any questions you might have. I would like to give you a summary of the broad outlines of the program and also recent developments and changes we are planning to make. Then I'd be happy to take your questions.

[Translation]

Immigrants sponsored by family members make up one of three broad categories of immigrants within our system—the other two being economic immigrants and refugees.

Although economic immigration programs are responsible for the majority of newcomers who enter this country, the long-standing goal of reuniting families has been an important part of the history of Canada's immigration system, and it remains fundamental to that system.

[English]

Family class submissions can include spouses, partners, children, parents, or grandparents of the sponsor, and, in some limited cases, other family members.

Mr. Chair, from the mandate letter I received from the Prime Minister, and through subsequent announcements and actions, it is clear that we are placing a strong emphasis on family reunification. It

might be said that especially our commitment on quicker processing time for immediate families, nuclear families, arguably is most important. It's a question of judgment. It's certainly one of the most important campaign commitments we made, and one on which we are very serious.

It's true, of course, that the refugee initiative got the lion's share of the media attention. It is very important, but if you go to the fundamentals of our system, the processing times for family class are also really important.

If you ask why we are welcoming new families, it's not just because we're kind, humanitarian people, because we think it's right that people should be reunited with their immediate families and should be able to bring their parents here. Hopefully we are that, but there's also a very economically important dimension to this. We are competing for strong immigrants with other countries around the world, with Australia, U.K., the United States. If we have strong immigrants we want to bring in and say, but you can't bring your family, or it will take you two years to bring your family, they may well go somewhere else.

It's not just a humanitarian gesture; it's also economic sense, in order to attract the so-called best and brightest. You're not going to attract them very well if you don't also allow them to bring their families in without substantial delay.

The other thing I would mention that's relevant for family class considerations—I perhaps have said this here before—is that I don't particularly like the term “economic immigrant”. It almost has the implication that the others are non-economic or have little economic value, and that is not true. The family class spouses generally do as well in the labour market as the spouses of economic immigrants. A significant fraction of the parents and grandparents are in the labour force. Even those who are not in the labour force among parents and grandparents facilitate the work of the mother and father by helping to look after the children. It's a question of degree. All immigrants make both economic and non-economic contributions. We want to give priority to family class, not just to benefit immigrants by allowing them to bring families, but also because it promotes a more successful immigration program for the country as a whole, for economic reasons as well as other reasons.

To that end, we have admitted more family class immigrants in 2016 than normal.

● (1705)

We have 80,000 admissions in the family class, including about 60,000 partners and children, and 20,000 parents and grandparents. How are we going to bring down processing times for families? We have three ways. We're admitting more family class immigrants. If you admit more, you run down the inventory more, and that helps to reduce the processing times. We've also put more money into the system, \$25 million, to support family class immigrants. We're trying to become more efficient, as well, and this is partly through learning from our experience with the Syrian refugees. As you all know, we did it quickly, but I think we did it well in terms of health and security. How did we do it quickly and well? Well, we're looking at how we did it there, and we're importing some of those techniques into how we process family class and other categories of immigrants.

For example, we did things concurrently, instead of consecutively, and that speeds things up. If you do A and don't you start B until you complete A, and you don't start C until you complete B, it takes a lot longer than if you do A, B, and C all at the same time. The department has set up what they call "tiger teams", groups of successful middle-level people who have worked in the system first-hand and who can bring new ideas and suggestions as to how to improve the process. So there are three ingredients to bringing down the processing times: higher levels of admission, more money, and more efficiency.

Through a combination of those things, we are reducing the inventory, the backlog of spouses, and I am hoping to be able to announce before the end of this year a substantial reduction in the processing times for spouses. However, we cannot make the announcement until we do the work to clear out the inventory, so that's why such an announcement is not immediate.

We increased the number of parents and grandparents who could apply each year from 5,000 to 10,000. We estimate that the inventory will be down to 46,000 by the end of 2016, from a peak of more than 165,000 in 2011. Those are big numbers, and that's going to make a big difference in how long it takes to admit the typical parent and grandparent from 165,000 in 2011 down to 46,000 by end of 2016. It's getting smaller, so those processing times will come down.

I will not say much more because I want to answer your questions, but let me just conclude by listing three other things we're in the process of doing. As we committed to in the election, we're going to give more points under express entry for siblings of Canadians. This is an idea I learned about in Vancouver. I think it's a good idea.

We're also going to raise the maximum age for dependent children from under 19 to under 22. We're also going to eliminate the conditional permanent residence measure for spouses and make them permanent residents on entry. Those last two are on their way. They require a regulatory process, so they're on their way to being gazetted, which I think is the term for consultation with Canadians, fairly soon. That regulatory process takes some time, even if it's something as simple as changing the age from 19 to 22. All I can say is that it's on the way to a process of consultation with Canadians in the not-to-distant future.

● (1710)

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would be happy to answer your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move to the seven-minute rounds of questioning to the minister.

Ms. Zahid, I understand you'll be splitting your time with Mr. Tabbara.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Yes, I will be splitting my time with Mr. Tabbara.

Thank you, Minister, and thanks a lot for all the work you're doing on this important file. This topic that we are starting is very important to all of us, I think, and for me it is really very important. In the riding I represent, family reunification is a very big issue, and 90% of the casework in my office is related to immigration.

Minister, when you were here before our committee on June 9 to discuss the 2016 levels and the supplementary estimates, you discussed an adjustment to operating expenditures of \$20.9 million to hire 191 full-time equivalents to support reducing existing family class inventories, increasing family class intake, and streamlining processing, among other activities. Have those people been hired? What impact have they made on the backlog?

Hon. John McCallum: I'll turn it over to Robert Orr for that specific question, but I would say that we've made a substantial reduction—some 21%—in the backlog. As to whether those people have been hired, I'm not sure.

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): A large number of those people have been hired. We have certainly been using the money very effectively. It is largely split between our international region and our centralized network.

I think we're seeing a reflection of that. As the minister said, the inventory has come down significantly. We've also seen a reduction in processing times for spouses, partners, and children. It has gone from 26 months to 22 months for those in Canada, and from 18 to 16 months for those overseas, so we're already starting to see a direct impact of the funds that are being used.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Minister, I represent a large Filipino community in my riding of Scarborough Centre, as does Mr. Sarai in Surrey. We have both heard from our constituents that caregivers in particular face a longer wait time for family reunification processing. What is being done in that regard?

Hon. John McCallum: I was recently in the Philippines and talked about that issue. I've met with caregivers. I think they do a very valuable service, including, as I think I've said here before, for my mother, who is 92 years old and has a great Filipino caregiver.

I acknowledge that there are problems here, that there are challenges here, and that the processing time is too long. That processing time is coming down and will continue to come down, but it is still too high. The general process for fixing it is the same as what I said for nuclear families: it's a combination of higher levels, more money, and more efficiency. It's really the same across the board.

There is some limited progress there, but we don't have all the money in the world. We have to choose priorities. My top priority was the nuclear family, the immediate spouses and the immediate dependants, but we're also working to try to improve the situation for caregivers.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Mr. Tabbara, you have three and a half minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you.

The average processing time for the family class started to increase in 2005. In 2012 the overall processing time for parents and grandparents was 58 months. That's almost five years. Could you elaborate on what changes in legislation—for example, on regulations—led to that outcome?

Hon. John McCallum: Do you mean since 2005?

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Yes.

Hon. John McCallum: It was certainly the case—and I remember documenting this when we were in opposition—that the processing times from 2005 to 2014 or so were up quite dramatically for the family class. I think a part of it was that they were starved for funds and starved for levels space. I told you that there were three things: money, levels space, and efficiency. If you starve them for levels and you starve them for money, your processing times will go up.

I don't have a precise analysis of that, but I remember from the opposition days certainly documenting the upward trend in processing times. There were budgetary reductions in certain years. I think those were the main reasons. I think your committee could look into that in more detail in your study, but that would be my impression.

• (1715)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

Minister, you came to my region and the Waterloo region before, and you met with a lot of individuals there. It's the high-tech sector of Canada, and one of their biggest issues was—and I know you don't like to use the term—economic immigrants—

Hon. John McCallum: I don't mind. Everybody else does.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: They're looking to get the best and brightest in the high-tech sector to come into our region, and one of the main issues they're having is immigration. It's taking a very long time for these highly skilled workers to come to our region to immigrate here.

Hon. John McCallum: I agree with that and I've spoken to high-tech people in various parts of the country, including your region, but also in Toronto, Burnaby, Vancouver, and Ottawa, and they basically all say the same thing. If we say the processing time is six months, they say it has to be six days. They're always in a rush and they're in very globally competitive industries. We will try to do a better job for people in those industries because we think they have a lot to offer, and these are very high-growth industries that, as you know, are important in your region, but they're important in various parts of the country.

In general, what we are trying to do is make Canada a better destination for the so-called best and the brightest. Some people object to that term, because we also need lower skilled people. We certainly want to be competitive with those other competitive countries I mentioned, and that's why we're going to introduce more points under express entry for students. I think everywhere I go nobody disagrees when I say that, of all the people who might become new Canadians, international students are probably the number one choice. They're young, etc.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. John McCallum: Just to finish quickly then, we're doing various things to make it easier for the so-called best and the brightest to come to Canada, both as temporary workers and permanent residents.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Rempel, I believe you're splitting your time with Mr. Saroya.

That will be seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Minister, you mentioned the need to look at different classes of reunification from different cohorts of people who are in Canada, and you mentioned refugees being part of that.

I've had a woman from the Blue Sea region of Quebec call me at my office about three times a week. She's a Haitian woman. She's come to Canada and she has relatives in Haiti she's been trying to sponsor to Canada. Obviously, their situation has been exacerbated by the devastating earthquake that happened in 2010. She's expressed frustration to us, and she feels that other cohorts of people outside of the Syrian refugee community are being neglected in being sponsored to Canada or reunified with their families.

I'm not quite sure just what to tell her, and she phones me three times a week every week, and I'd just like to send her a clip of your response, and I'd like to give her the opportunity, basically, to ask you a question directly. What are you doing for the Haitian community in terms of unifying them and giving them opportunities to come to Canada?

Hon. John McCallum: It's funny you should mention that community, because, obviously, this is not a Liberal-planted question, but it could have been, because—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Oh, my goodness. Standing up for constituents in a non-partisan way, it's crazy.

Hon. John McCallum: All right.

What I'm trying to say is that this is a community we've really reached out to in order to help. I'm saying maybe one of these people might have asked me that, because we made a huge effort. There were Haitians admitted into Canada because of the earthquake back in 2010, and a number of them were undocumented, and we went out of our way to reach out to that community to encourage them to come forward.

I had a press conference in the Haitian part of Montreal with my colleague, the member from Bourassa, who is Haitian, along with the Quebec immigration minister, and we spoke to Haitian radio stations. Our friend went to Haitian churches to really appeal to the people to come forward. We had a simplified form. We even had a special loan that they could take, because we wanted them to come forward so they could become regularized as Canadians.

Now, I'll be honest with you. Not as many came forward as we were hoping, notwithstanding these appeals. I don't know whether it was because we didn't reach them all or we didn't know exactly how many there were, because if they're undocumented, we don't know for sure the exact number.

All I can say to you is that we did everything that we could conceive of to try to appeal to these people to come forward so that we could welcome them as permanent residents, given that they had come here under the special circumstances of the earthquake.

• (1720)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I think the issue she's raising is that there are additional people who want to come to Canada who are part of her family, and she's feeling as though for cohorts outside of the Syrian community—and I am by no means trying to belittle the urgency of the Syrian crisis—the reunification efforts are not equitable at this point.

So as I turn the microphone over to my colleague, I will be referring her file to your office.

Hon. John McCallum: Do that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Certainly I understand that there are only certain priorities that can be priorities, but we also have to show a sense of equity in terms of managing humanitarian needs, and that's something I would stand up for on her behalf.

With that, I'll turn it over to Mr. Saroya.

The Chair: Mr. Saroya, go ahead for three minutes.

Hon. John McCallum: I totally agree with that.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I see Mr. McCallum more than I see my family, both here and in Markham. We've worked together in Markham as well.

The greatest number of calls I get are from students. You mentioned something earlier, and you can finish what you were saying. We have a number of students calling us every day. They've been here for the last two or three or four years. They have done their degrees and they're ready to work. They are having a rough time getting into the workforce. Is there any plan for the students? Can we refer them to your office or what is the future plan for these kids? Do they need to go back or can something be done for them here?

Hon. John McCallum: We have post-graduate employment that they are allowed to take part in for a certain period of time. The main thing that we as a government are going to do that's new is to have more points for students under express entry. I'm not saying it was done on purpose, but I think they were a little bit shortchanged by the previous system, because if you have to get a labour market impact assessment and you're in an entry-level job, then it's difficult. So if they have more points, a higher fraction of the international students will be accepted as permanent residents. Some of them may have problems with being able to stay beyond a certain time, maybe because of this four-year rule. That is a different issue, but it's related and we're looking at that now that we've received the parliamentary report.

The main thing that we as a government are doing is to give more points to admit more students as permanent residents.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Going back to the students one more time, the restaurant industry, the service industry, the agriculture industry, and the food industry are looking for labour, and these people speak the language, understand the system and they're eager to work. If something can be done, that will mean immediate success for the employers as well as for the students.

Hon. John McCallum: They're allowed to work, but they have to get a job. Are you saying they have trouble finding a job? Is that the problem?

Mr. Bob Saroya: The jobs are available, but they're not allowed to work. If someone has qualified as an accountant, he cannot work in the restaurant. So the restaurant guys would love to hire the person, but he can't work there because it's not the job in his trade.

• (1725)

The Chair: Could you give a quick response, please, Mr. Orr?

Mr. Robert Orr: You can follow up on that, but essentially, yes, we are hoping that those who graduate in a certain area will be working in the area in which they have studied. However, there are opportunities for students to work and to join the labour market after they've completed their studies.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead for seven minutes please.

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

I thank the minister and his staff for coming before the committee.

First I would like to ask the minister why at this time the ministry is continuing to revoke the cases of up to some 60 individuals each month who have been found to have misrepresented their citizenship application. The minister acknowledged publicly that there isn't procedural fairness for processing these cases because they don't have that under Bill C-24 and it has not yet been fixed under Bill C-6, so an individual family could be impacted including children who may have, through no fault of their own, been caught up in the situation through the misrepresentation. Will the minister agree that a moratorium should be put in place with respect to revoking citizenship applications based on misrepresentation until such time as the process has been addressed?

Hon. John McCallum: Just by coincidence, I was asked exactly the same question in the Senate question period about half an hour ago, and I said we would look into it. The basic point I made was that I think citizenship should be revoked for people who misrepresent, if that's the situation, but I also think that people should have a right to a proper appeal. Right now, the system is such that there is a review or some appeal. I think it was you who put forward an amendment to Bill C-6—correct me if I'm wrong—to strengthen that appeal process, but it was declared out of scope.

Senator Omidvar is now proposing an amendment to strengthen the appeal right, and I have said that I'm open to that and I like the idea. We don't know yet whether the Senate will rule that to be in scope or out of scope. In the House they said it was out of scope, but the Senate rules are different, so I don't know.

I would certainly welcome that, if she makes that amendment, if it's in scope, and if the Senate accepts it. I said I would look at it, but I don't think we would have a moratorium. I think we have a system that could be improved—as I have just acknowledged—but it has been going for some years. I am hopeful we will have an amendment of that kind accepted in the bill.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that, Minister. I appreciate that.

I guess my point is that the process is broken and unfair. I am not saying people should not have their citizenship revoked, but they should have the opportunity to have an independent hearing, present their case, have compassion and humanitarian reasons be considered, and then have a decision be made by an independent person. That's all I am asking.

In the meantime, until this gets fixed, I think the people without due process should be afforded due process. That is the reason why I am asking for a moratorium. I'll park that with the minister, and I hope he will consider it, because I think it would be a welcome move for many people.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The second question I'd like to ask the minister is this. The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act specifies that refugees can make application within the one-year window of opportunity for bringing families over to Canada. In addition to that, through this experience, many refugees come forward to say that their traditional definition of “family” is different from what we understand it to be. I wonder whether there is any consideration of revising the family unit for refugees.

Also, there is a previous law, from the Conservative government, around cessation—that if you travel back as a refugee to your country of origin, you could actually have your status revoked. That has huge implications, and it is ongoing at the moment. That, too, has not yet been fixed, on the cessation laws. Over 25,000 Syrian refugees have now arrived. Have we told them that if they travel, for whatever reason, back to their country of origin, they could lose their status? If we haven't, that could actually happen to them, and it's not right. That is not what we want to do. Again, I wonder whether there are any plans from the government to deal with the cessation issue.

• (1730)

Hon. John McCallum: I'll refer the question about the definition of “family” to Mr. Orr in a moment.

On cessation, we are now in the process of doing a review or an overview, some reforms to our asylum system, such as the designated country of origin issue, two tiers of countries. Cessation comes into this. This is a bill that will be received by this committee. I think your point about cessation could be covered in that bill. It hasn't been completed yet, but it could be a part of that.

The one-year window... Is the traditional definition of “family” the same for the family class, or is it broader?

Mr. Robert Orr: It's the same.

Hon. John McCallum: It's the same.

I know one can always make the case for broader. It's difficult to do that, because then the numbers become so very large. We went partially in that direction when we gave more points for people under express entry if they had siblings in Canada, on the grounds that having family here would help them settle in faster. To broaden the definition of “family” to include... I don't know how far you want to go—cousins? The problem is that it would become so large.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

On the cessation, I actually have tabled a private member's bill. It's a simple fix, actually—two clauses. I would urge the minister to act on that. It would make a big difference, I think, as well.

Hon. John McCallum: We will look at it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On a related issue—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Caregivers of disabled children are often actually rejected even though they have met their two years. Because their child has some sort of disability, then they're rejected.

I wonder whether or not the minister can comment on that, and whether there will be action to address this issue.

Hon. John McCallum: Can you tell us the rules on that?

Mr. Robert Orr: That may be the case, but I think more broadly the department signalled that it would be undertaking a fundamental review of the excessive demand requirements of the act. So that is under way at the moment, and that may address some of these situations.

Hon. John McCallum: We do have a meeting this month. I have a meeting with all the provincial and territorial immigration ministers. The money for health is their money, and we are discussing that issue with my fellow ministers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a question of privilege, Mr. Chair, the proceedings of an in camera meeting are deemed to be confidential and certainly the review component of Bill C-6 was conducted in camera.

The minister has just divulged the proceedings of an in camera meeting. I don't believe the minister was in attendance at that meeting, so there seems to be a breach of information and confidentiality that is now in a televised meeting. So I do raise a question of privilege and a breach of confidentiality of an in camera meeting.

Hon. John McCallum: What did I do?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: He also divulged your ruling on that as well, I believe, so that's an additional component. Not only was it a breach of privilege on an amendment that was put in a televised meeting, but also your ruling.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, thank you for pointing this out. It is a very serious matter that you raise.

I will be reviewing the blues very carefully to be sure of the details of the matter you have raised and I will, at that point, come back to the committee once I've had that opportunity. Thank you.

We will now continue.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes, please.

• (1735)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome back, Minister. It's always very helpful when you do appear before the committee.

Of course today we're talking about family sponsorships. There is no doubt that it does actually enhance the sense of belonging of newcomers when they have the opportunity to bring relatives here.

In your opening remarks you referred to the fact that sponsored spouses, insofar as the issue of income and earning is concerned, do as well as other groups. Does the department actually have studies that bear this out? How do we know this?

Mr. David Cashaback (Acting Director General, Immigration Branch, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): We do it in two ways. One way is that we're actually able to link our administrative immigration data with tax filing information, so it gives us a nice longitudinal picture of outcomes, mainly economic but also incidence of employment among all of these different categories, which allows us to compare, then, family class immigrants versus other classes of immigrants.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That's great. I'm just very happy to hear this because others are of the view that on occasion families who are sponsored to come here are a burden on our system.

As you know, in 2011 the government introduced the idea of super visas. I'm just wondering what your personal view of super visas is and whether we will be continuing with super visas.

Hon. John McCallum: I think super visas are good. There is a sort of myth out there that the Liberals don't like super visas. That's never been my view.

I think we have two options for parents and grandparents. Either they can become permanent residents as a parent or a grandparent, or they can use the super visa, which gives them a lot of flexibility to spend extended periods of time in Canada, or they can just have a regular visa.

To some extent the super visa and the permanent residence are alternatives or substitutes, or they may do one on the way to getting the other. Also, given that not every parent and grandparent will succeed in becoming a permanent resident, because the spaces are limited, the super visa is a safety valve or an alternative, and some may even prefer it or some may choose to do it because the other isn't available.

I do think it broadens the range of choice. We want to have both, and to the extent possible, we want both to be available. I do think both are useful.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

Just out of curiosity, does the department have records on the uptake for super visas, or do they actually retain information that will tell us what the source countries are for super visa users?

Hon. John McCallum: I'm sure they do.

Mr. Robert Orr: Since December 2011, over 70,000 super visas have been issued. The approval rate is at about 80% on those applications. A number, of course, have gone for extensions as well.

India is a high user of the super visa and China is the highest user of the super visa. That's followed by the Philippines, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

You have already explained your thoughts on various issues before this committee. You did note, in your opening remarks, that of course our immigration system has to compete with the Australian, the British, and the American systems. Are there any aspects of those systems that you find preferable to ours, and what would those things be?

Hon. John McCallum: Their websites are better than our website.

• (1740)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay. All of them?

Hon. John McCallum: Maybe that's not a very scientific statement, but I think the department has done some focus testing, and my staff compared them. It seems that Australia's and New Zealand's websites are easier to navigate.

One of the things we have to do—I'm not really blaming my department, but you asked me, and I think those countries do have better websites—is to improve our level of service on the website. In many ways, the website is the future. It's not the whole future, but it's a big part of it. We are in competition with those countries. We want to do just as well as them, or better, in every dimension that's important, and one of those is the website. Another is processing time.

Sometimes it's difficult to compare. Sometimes you're comparing apples with oranges. Most of the things we do are not purely guided by comparing with other countries, but it's often useful to benchmark. We're wanting to get quicker servicing, more welcoming servicing, and a better website. All of these things we are aiming to achieve.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

Previously we had a category for fiancés. It was eliminated a few years back. I'm wondering whether the department is currently considering the possibility of bringing that category back.

Hon. John McCallum: To be honest, I didn't even know about that. Perhaps Mr. Orr could comment.

Mr. Robert Orr: The fiancé category goes back some years. I think it was subject to considerable abuse, which was one of the reasons we moved away from it. There was also the matter of just the choices within the levels space that we have. If we open up more categories, it probably means something else has to give. There were a number of issues around that.

So no, there is no consideration of opening that category again at present.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

That's it for me.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Tilson, five minutes.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Minister, have you consulted with other levels of government, particularly the provincial levels of government, with respect to the impact that increased social assistance usage and other service delivery by the provincial governments, and I suppose municipal governments, will inevitably have on those governments, as well as on taxpayers, as a result of the family reunification intake?

Hon. John McCallum: Certainly in the context of the refugees, the answer to that question is yes. In a little while, we will have what they call "month 13". Refugees receive income support from the federal government for 12 months. After that, they don't. They either have a job or they take social assistance. We are having a federal-provincial meeting later this month, and officials in my department are talking to provincial officials.

Month 13 is nothing new. We've had government-assisted refugees for many years. This latest cohort is bigger than most, so it is a matter under active discussion.

The point I would make is that it's normal for a significant number of government-assisted refugees to need income support beyond one year. When you think of what they've come from, when you think of the fact that they often speak not a word of English or French, and they often have not much education.... It takes a while to become integrated into Canadian life.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Minister, I understand. You know, we went through that with the Syrian study. We got into that.

This question is specifically with respect to the family reunification issue. The sponsors, as I understand it, and you can correct me, are on the hook for a period of time. However, once they become permanent residents, there's a cost. That's the issue that I've asked for. It could be social assistance. It could be other types of issues that the municipal governments have, and particularly the provincial governments have.

My question isn't with respect to refugees. My question is with respect to family reunification, which is what this meeting is all about.

• (1745)

Hon. John McCallum: My apologies. I misunderstood your question.

Under our system, if your spouse comes to Canada, you have a personal responsibility to support that person for three years. If a parent or grandparent comes, you have a personal responsibility for 20 years. That means that for at least the first three years, in the case of a spouse, and the first 20 years in the case of a parent or grandparent, the individual will not receive social assistance—or they're not supposed to—because the sponsor has the obligation to provide that support.

Mr. David Tilson: We'll have municipalities and provinces come to the meeting on this issue, and they'll tell us.... It seems to me if you're agreeing that you're going to increase the family reunification numbers, that will happen.

I guess then the next question is whether the government, or indeed your ministry, is prepared to increase the transfers to offset the costs that are borne by other levels of government brought by this policy change of increasing the number of family reunifications.

Hon. John McCallum: Perhaps you didn't hear my answer.

Mr. David Tilson: I heard your answer.

Hon. John McCallum: For the first three years—

Mr. David Tilson: I understand that, sir.

Hon. John McCallum: —we don't have any costs.

Mr. David Tilson: Then what happens after three years?

Hon. John McCallum: Then I guess they're like other Canadians.

I don't know if they're abnormally high or low... Perhaps Mr. Orr has an answer.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Cashaback may be able to help out with specifics, but in general the economic outcomes for spouses who come to Canada are quite good.

I think the number who would be on social assistance would be relatively small.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, I still have—

The Chair: Thank you.

There are only two seconds.

Mr. David Tilson: Two seconds. Have a nice day.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you for coming, Minister.

This may sound more like a statement than a question.

I think Canada's foundation is built on family reunification. It's kind of been the cornerstone of our immigration policy, which was a nation-building immigration policy. The true nation-building immigration is done when immigrants put roots in our country; they bring their families and make Canada their home. That has shown that it alleviates the desire to move back. It alleviates loneliness, and it gives a lot of structure for families. I can only stress that if we can do this more, and on a larger scale...

Even with my experience in dealing with economic immigrants as well, those who aren't able to get their families here faster feel a sense of loneliness, a high desire to go back. They don't contemplate the high cost of child care and raising families here. They face a lot of difficulties in starting a family, for that matter. The faster, the more efficient, and more fair we can make it, the better.

My question now is in terms of a policy that I believe the U.S. has. We have a smaller policy that we call "the last remaining relative", but is there a possibility to broaden that word? Sometimes you have four or five siblings. The entire family is here, the parents are here, but there's a sister or a brother left behind.

Is there a possibility that under family reunification, we can look at that? You may not have to have the same speed of processing time, but help unite families who are separated by one last sibling only.

Hon. John McCallum: That's an interesting question, and it's a little bit along the lines of the other question about broadening the definition of family for the one-year window. Yours is more limited.

Did you say we used to have that?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, we have a policy of last remaining relatives, but that's if you have no parents living in Canada or abroad, then you can pick one person and bring them if you have a relative. This would be even if you had a family member, you had parents here or abroad, you could bring the last remaining relative left behind if the entire extended family is here.

• (1750)

Hon. John McCallum: But did you say we once had that program?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, no, I believe the U.S. has something similar, but we don't have that, that I am aware of.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay, well, maybe Mr. Orr has a comment on that. I'm not sure how many people that would involve.

Mr. Robert Orr: I think we would have to look at something like that fairly carefully. Again, it's a matter of choices, and it's a matter of, I think, the levels space as well. If we do that, what numbers are we going to be dealing with? It would probably be quite a complicated program to deal with, and one would have to make choices in terms of levels space, funding, and so on, so there are issues there.

At the moment, though, I think it's important to keep in mind, too, that there are the humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and that a possibility does exist, done on a case-by-case approach. There are about 8,000 cases a year that are dealt with through humanitarian and compassionate grounds. If there are special circumstances, we do have mechanisms to deal with those sorts of cases.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

My second part is about spousal sponsorship debt. If a Canadian woman enters a relationship, and her spouse comes here, and she is abused and separates, currently she's still on the hook for three years to pay for any social assistance that her spouse might incur. Is there anything we can do to work with the provinces? I understand there's a memorandum being undertaken, but those specific women who suffer from domestic abuse are burdened by a legal system that forces them to pay any debt incurred by their sponsored spouses.

Hon. John McCallum: I think Mr. Orr wants to comment, but I want to make one other comment related to that.

One of the things we are doing to deal better with domestic abuse is this three-year provisional temporary residence for spouses, because the problem there, as we heard in spades from various third party groups, is that if a woman is subject to domestic abuse but only has provisional temporary residence, she'll put up with that abuse because, if she leaves the husband, if she's a foreigner, she has no status and might be deported.

We're dealing with that part, but your question is related to my answer on the other side. You're sort of on two sides. He wants to protect the taxpayer, and you want to protect the woman who has to pay for the income of her abusive husband.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: These are rare circumstances.

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Orr, you can be King Solomon.

The Chair: Actually, we're over time at this point.

Mr. Tilson, you have the next five minutes.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

Mr. Minister, you have shown that, in comparison to the numbers contained in the 2015 immigration levels plan, your government is increasing family reunification at the expense of economic class migrants, according to the numbers published in the 2016 immigration levels plan.

Can you tell us what your rationale is for this?

Hon. John McCallum: Well, 2016 was a special year in that we had the commitment on the 25,000 refugees, which meant the refugee number tripled or quadrupled between 2015 and 2016.

We also had a commitment to bring down the processing time for spouses, which meant that we wanted to increase that number, and since the total number was limited, the economic immigrants got cut slightly. But I'm telling you that going forward... I think in some sense that was a special year, and I can't really say what the levels will be now. I don't know, but going forward we would expect in normal times that the economic numbers would certainly rise.

Mr. David Tilson: An internal departmental study published in 2014 concluded that the economic outcomes of parents and grandparents were below the average of all immigrants—all immigrants—with fewer than half reporting employment income, low average earnings, and increased EI usage over time. In other words, there was a net drain on the economy.

What's your comment on that?

Hon. John McCallum: I'll turn to Mr. Cashaback, but I would also say, as I said in the beginning, that parents and grandparents also provide non-monetary services that wouldn't be measured. They look after kids and facilitate the work of the mother and father.

Perhaps you could respond to the numbers he mentioned, Mr. Cashaback.

• (1755)

Mr. David Tilson: I think the real question, Mr. Minister, taking this finding into account, is that when your government decided to double the number of applications for parents and grandparents in this year's immigration plan, were you considering this? It did happen. I understand what you're saying, in that you increased the Syrian refugee issue by 25,000, but the economic people have been prejudiced.

Hon. John McCallum: Do you want to comment on his statistics?

Mr. David Cashaback: I can. I think some of the things that were introduced or modified in 2013 were really to make that period of responsibility longer.

There was the move to the 20-year sponsorship undertaking period. We adjusted the income threshold to sponsor to what's called "minimum necessary income, plus 30%", just to make sure there isn't that sense of a draw on the family income, as well as requiring sponsors to provide three-year evidence of income stability in order to ensure there is the financial stability in the family unit that is sponsoring. It was in response to some of those concerns.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: The 2016 annual report to Parliament for your department indicates the plan to eliminate the \$1,000 labour market impact assessment fee for those applying to bring in a caregiver. Why has this been done?

Hon. John McCallum: We'd have to get back to you on that.

Mr. David Tilson: Okay.

That's an undertaking, Madam Clerk.

Hon. John McCallum: We will get back to you on that.

Mr. David Tilson: Of course you will. You always do, Mr. Minister.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: Has your department done a comprehensive analysis on the impact that the shift away from the economic class immigrants will have on Canada's economy?

The Chair: In 10 seconds, please.

Hon. John McCallum: There is not a shift away from the economic class.

Mr. David Tilson: Of course there is.

Hon. John McCallum: This is a one-year very minor change. The level of economic immigrants in 2016 was much higher than the average of the previous number of years, so I don't really accept the premise.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Dzerowicz, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I very much appreciate your being here today.

One of the key issues in my riding is the change in the difficulty of the language test to become a permanent resident. My understanding is that in 2011 it moved from level three to level five. Many in my riding come to Canada on a work permit and then apply for permanent residency, but they're rejected outright if they cannot pass a level five English or French test.

Now, my understanding is that previously there was a possibility of a substitute evaluation, where the whole picture was looked at. They looked at the economic viability, the family roots, their contribution to Canada, and various other factors, and if they didn't quite have the level of language, that was allowed to pass.

Many who come from non-English-speaking and non-French-speaking countries—many of them in my riding are southern European—have a strong belief in terms of feeling very much discriminated against. I know that some people would say that we want higher levels of English in Canada, and when I say that to those in my community who complain, their response usually is that their level is good enough to get a work permit, but obviously not good enough to get permanent residency.

My question to you is, is there any consideration of moving it back to level three ?

Hon. John McCallum: Not right now there isn't, but we could look at it.

I just want to say a couple of things.

We have become a little more lenient than the previous government on Bill C-6, when we said that the language test would not apply to those 55 to 64, whereas previously it did; on the grounds that, while language is really important, older people don't always come the country with perfect English, but their children and certainly their grandchildren do have perfect English. We were a little more on the liberal side, shall we say, the small-l liberal side, on the language issue on that. Although, I have to acknowledge that there's a whole lot of evidence suggesting that skill in English or French is a critical determinant of economic success in Canada, so we haven't really changed too much of what the Conservatives did on language or what the previous Liberal governments may have done. We've changed a little bit, but we accept the premise that success and competence in language is an important criterion of success. We don't apply that to spouses, but when we're talking about economic immigrants, whom we expect to make a contribution to the economy, we have to take an account of the factors that we think will make them successful. Language is one of them. I don't really see how it's discriminatory. The same consideration applies to any group whose first language is not English.

• (1800)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I guess my follow-up question on that would be; is there actually some report that reflects the change in the impact that it might have had on those who actually end up becoming a permanent resident? Before, it used to be Italian, Spanish, and Polish, and then, all of a sudden, it changed to Burmese and a whole slew of other things. Has there been a study on that or do we have the numbers on the implication of that?

Hon. John McCallum: Actually, I don't know. Does anybody know?

Mr. Robert Orr: A partial answer to your question perhaps is that we do track very carefully the nationalities that do apply and are successful coming to Canada. Yes, that changes over time, but there are a variety of factors that result in that change. As you know, we apply a universal policy and we're absolutely committed to that universal policy, so the same criteria applies to everyone.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay, thank you.

And then my second—

The Chair: Fifteen seconds.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Well, then, thank you very much, Minister, for coming here today.

The Chair: Ms Kwan, three minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is a question around immigration levels. I know that the minister has embarked on a series of consultations, and we anticipate some changes with various categories in terms of changes to the applications. Would that come with changes to immigration levels as well, more specifically, an increase in immigration levels, in order to enhance the number of permanent residence applications?

Hon. John McCallum: I'm sorry, I didn't understand your question. If we have more immigrants, then what?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If the minister is embarking on these consultations, and you're going to relax the permanent residence applications' point system process—let's say students, for example,

that the minister talked about—are you also going to, then, increase the numbers under the immigration levels to absorb those changes?

Hon. John McCallum: It's conceivable, but what we are saying is that we think that international students make an especially valuable contribution to Canada. If we give them more points under express entry, it would mean a higher percentage of all the express entry people that we accept would be international students. Even if the numbers stayed the same, a higher percentage would be students and some other group would be less. However, if we also increase the numbers, then we could have more students and maybe the same number of other people, but I think the two things are conceptually different. More points for students means more students whether—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister. I guess we'll just wait for the numbers.

Can I ask a question, then, on refugee applications? The minister spoke about having a meeting with his provincial and territorial counterparts. I'm wondering whether, in that discussion, the minister will raise the issue of the need to increase welfare rates, because the reality is that they are deficient, for refugees and non-refugees alike.

In fact, I would invite the minister to join a welfare food challenge, coming up on October 16, whereby we will undertake, for one week, to be on the welfare rate for the food portion and see how difficult it is. I tried it last year and almost fainted. I'm not kidding; I almost fainted because of that.

I wonder whether that will be a topic for the minister, and whether he will join the welfare food challenge this year.

• (1805)

Hon. John McCallum: I'll consider it, but I can tell you it is very unlikely that I will suggest to the provinces that they increase their welfare rates. As much as it might be a good thing, it is none of my business, really. It is purely a matter of provincial decision-making and jurisdiction.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: I'd like to thank the minister for appearing before our committee today. It's always a pleasure to have you here, Minister.

I will now suspend for two minutes to allow the minister and his staff to leave. Of course, the department officials will remain for the second hour of our committee hearing.

• (1805)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1810)

The Chair: The meeting will now resume.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks very much to the departmental officials for staying another hour.

I have a few questions for you. The first is related to third parties that we use. I'll use the case of a wonderful Portuguese woman whose mother applied to come here five years ago. Everything's gone perfectly with her application: payments have been made, there have been no issues, and she has gone through the whole process. We're five years later—they applied when she was 76, and she's now 81—and we are told that it's a security check that is holding up her application right now, that it's done with a third party, and that no one can possibly know the timeline for it. It may take up to another five years. I'd like to understand how we are holding our third parties to account. Do we not have some service standards with them?

Mr. Robert Orr: I can't comment, obviously, on a particular case and what the circumstances are there. How security screening is normally done is that it would start initially with officers of IRCC, but we work closely with CBSA on this, and a number of its partners. But it's with CBSA that we do that.

There are some service standards for certain types of applications, and so on. This certainly is outside the norm, and I don't know what the situation is on that particular one. That is definitely outside the norm.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay, there are some service standards. Are those published anywhere? I don't know whether to raise a red flag because it seems so ridiculous, or whether it is just within normal range. I don't know when I should be sort of jumping up and down.

Mr. Robert Orr: I don't know. On the case you have identified there, it does suggest to me that you should be raising a red flag. That does not sound normal.

• (1815)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: In terms of service standards, they're not published anywhere. They're just something that's worked with in the department.

Mr. Robert Orr: That's correct.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That actually leads to my second question. How does the department evaluate how well it is providing services to the public? Is there a series of metrics that is used around customer satisfaction or wait times, or are there some training metrics around having a consistent level of service that's provided across the board, across Canada? I guess there are two types of metrics. Is there any way that the department is evaluating whether it's actually providing good service to Canadians? And two, is there some sort of evaluation on how well the services are being delivered by your department across Canada?

Mr. Robert Orr: There are a number of points there that I would like to mention. We take performance management extremely seriously, and we do have a number of metrics that we measure ourselves against. One of the most obvious would be the service standards that we do have for the various lines of business. All the key lines of business have very definite service standards, which are published. Overwhelmingly, we do meet those service standards. That is one point.

We also do things like client service surveys to have a better indication of what works and what is not working. When we get feedback from our call centre, when we get feedback from emails and so on that come in, we take all of that very seriously and try to improve what we can.

One of the key things, for instance, that we're doing at the moment is a serious review of the kits and the forms on the spousal application form, because currently they're cumbersome. I think we would all acknowledge that, so we're trying to come up with ways to simplify them. We can't do everything all at once, but we're starting with the spouses, and we're starting also with the temporary resident applications.

There are these sorts of things that we are continually doing to try to improve. The Minister mentioned the website as well. That's another mechanism. We did do a major review and it was brought up to date a couple of years ago, but now it needs to be done yet again. There's constantly a series of things that we're doing. We have a client service strategy, which outlines the various things that we are going to do in the next few months, few years, and so on.

So there are a number of measures to manage our interrelationship with the clients and to ensure that we're always improving.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

You mentioned that the service standards for your key lines of business are published. Is that something you could share with the clerk, so that we could get access to that in the future?

Mr. Robert Orr: Absolutely.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I would be grateful.

In terms of your client survey, is that offered just in English and French, or in other other languages?

Mr. Robert Orr: I don't know the answer to that, offhand. I believe it's just in English and French. We could confirm that through the clerk.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Is it just randomly given out in your different key lines of business? Do you have any more information on that?

Mr. Robert Orr: No, the survey is done independently, but we could share the methodology for that survey with you.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay.

If people had a concern about call centres, the length of time, or the service they've provided, how is it that someone would actually provide feedback? Is that easy? How does one access the feedback loop?

Mr. Paul Armstrong (Director General, Centralized Network, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): That is provided through the client feedback mechanism. It's a way that all our clients can provide feedback, whether positive or negative. That feedback is reviewed centrally, and then we look to adjust our procedures and our training if necessary.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: How is it that someone actually gives that feedback? Is it just online?

Mr. Paul Armstrong: Yes, they can do that online.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Is the client service strategy also a public document?

Mr. Robert Orr: No, it's not a public document. It's an internal document, but it's used very seriously within the department.

● (1820)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: When an application is submitted and there is one error, we seem to find that the whole application is absolutely rejected. Why is that the case?

Mr. Robert Orr: I don't think it generally is the case. We try to use some common sense on things. Obviously, we want a complete application. It's simpler for the client. We can provide better service. We can deal with the application more rapidly, and so on.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The minister mentioned earlier today that we are in competition with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, among other countries, on the website issue. Who is winning the war? Who is taking the best of the best immigrants? Where do we stand? Are we number one, number two, or number three?

Mr. Robert Orr: That's a very difficult question to answer in that it often is apples and oranges because the criteria for different countries is used in such different ways. What we would really need to look at is the outcomes of immigrants in the various countries to be able to really establish what's more effective in certain countries than in others.

However, we work closely with our five-nation colleagues to monitor what's going on to ensure that we're on the same wavelength. We recognize that we're in a friendly competition with them, as well. I don't think it's possible, though, to answer who is coming out on top.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are we totally satisfied that we are getting our fair share of the immigrants?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think that's fair to say. I think it's also important to note that various countries will copy what another country is doing. Certainly, other countries have copied what Canada has done and what it continues to do at this moment. There's a lot of interest in what we're doing at the moment in various areas, and I think that signals that Canada is certainly well within the league.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Fantastic.

On another note, caps were introduced in 2014 for the intake of applications for family class sponsorship and for parents and grandparents. What was the purpose of these caps limiting the intake of parents and grandparents?

Mr. Robert Orr: Back in 2011 and prior to that date, there was no cap on the number of parents and grandparents. There was limited space within the levels, and we were not able to deal with those applicants. We built up a backlog of about 168,000 applications, which is not good news for anyone who is going to be waiting for that long.

At that point, there was a pause on applications for some 26 months, from November 5, 2011, until January 1, 2014. Then it was reopened for parents and grandparents, but with a cap so that we were able to control the numbers and not build up a backlog again.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are all these new applications being processed in a priority manner?

Mr. Robert Orr: They are dealt with largely on a chronological basis, so first in, first out.

When we contact the applicants, we contact them on the date that we receive the application, so we do try to respect the date that they applied.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What effect has this cap had on the overall goal of reuniting families?

Mr. Robert Orr: What we are seeing is that the processing times are coming down. We expect that they will come down quite significantly over the next year as we largely work through that pre-2011 backlog.

Obviously if you're dealing with cases from that date, the processing time seems extremely long, which is why I said it's about 73 months at the moment. Once we get to the new cohort coming in from 2014, the average processing times will be far more palatable.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What is the backlog today? Do you have a number?

Mr. Robert Orr: The backlog was at 165,000, and it has come down to about 58,000.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What is the time for processing for these applications at this moment?

Mr. Robert Orr: The average processing time at the moment still appears to be 73 months.

We are starting to deal with cases that were received in 2014, so for those cases and moving forward, the processing time will be far shorter than that.

● (1825)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Starting in 2011, IRCC introduced a number of changes to increase the efficiency of the parents and grandparents sponsorship program and decrease the likelihood of future backlogs and lengthy wait times. However, there continued to be a backlog.

You have already answered what the current backlog is. What measures have been introduced to address the backlog? Is it basically that we are putting on more staff?

Mr. Robert Orr: Most importantly, there has been more space within the levels and in the target that we deliver on each year. That has allowed us to work down the backlog over the last couple of years.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What is the reported level of annual income for the elderly immigrants in the category of parents and grandparents in comparison to all other categories? Is it higher or lower?

Mr. Robert Orr: When we evaluate a sponsorship, we are looking at the sponsor's income. They must meet a minimum cut-off, which is established by Statistics Canada. It looks at the number of people in the household and what is required to meet the basic needs of that family group.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What is the level for the use of old age security and guaranteed income supplement allowance for the parents and grandparents, again in comparison to all other categories?

Mr. Robert Orr: I do not have that information with me, sir.

Mr. Bob Saroya: That's all I have.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

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

On checking the website on the application processing times, specifically with parents and grandparents, it currently says “working on applications received in January 2014”. There's no further information provided.

I wonder, first off, with respect to applications in 2014, does that mean those that arrived prior to January 2014 are in process already? They are all under way and are in processing.

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is it the case that there are different times with the processing of each application because of the complexity of each application? Is that correct? Is that why some appear to go faster than others?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is largely the case. It's also how quickly people respond to our requests for further information.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Currently I believe the wait time for processing parents and grandparents is 73 months or 79 months, if I have it right. That is over six years, which is a long time.

In that regard, does that include the application processing time from the embassy office overseas? Does that include that period, or is it just for the Mississauga processing centre?

Mr. Robert Orr: No, that processing time would be from the date of sponsorship until the date a final decision is made, wherever that might be.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There have been situations where a person mixes up a submission, and mixes it up within the quota. Formerly it was 5,000 and now it's 10,000, but the application is returned to them because some piece of a document was incorrectly filled out, or a signature was missing somewhere, owing to some inadvertent mistake a person has made.

The previous practice was that those applications were taken out of the process, even though they made it within the quota limitations. Is that still the practice today?

Mr. Robert Orr: The practice is that we only accept complete applications within the cap.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When a person inadvertently makes a mistake, you take their application out. These forms, however, are complicated to fill out. Even though people hire expensive consultants, still sometimes they miss things. Is there any consideration from the ministry to request that information from the applicant so we can have the complete information, especially when it is just some minor piece of information that's missing?

One would have to think that, in a reasonable sense, this is unfair, especially when it's a quota system. You're taken out of the quota system because you missed some line somewhere in the provision of information.

• (1830)

Mr. Paul Armstrong: When we're looking at the parents and grandparents, and when the cap opens at the beginning of January, what happens is we receive tens of thousands of applications within the first few days, and the office in Mississauga has to very quickly

do a completeness check. Within a few days, it could be as many as 16,000 applications that are received.

Certainly, the applicants will want to know very quickly if they are within the cap or not. When the department reviews it, it's only the cases that are completed that are entered into the cap. The applications arrive very rapidly, and there's an expectation that a decision on completeness and on the cap-counting will be done very quickly. The department has to look at completed applications.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate that, but I'm saying there is inherent unfairness in that, especially for those who inadvertently miss one little piece of information. I'll park that for a minute.

The website that's been provided does not provide the wait times country by country for parents and grandparents. It used to do so. That way, people had a sense of how long they might reasonably expect to wait. The average times sometimes are not a reflection of reality, because of where you are.

Is there any consideration towards providing that full information once again so that people know how long they can expect to wait?

Mr. Robert Orr: We no longer present the information country by country because of the changes in how we process applications. It used to be that all applications went abroad to a mission, and so results were very dependent on how long that mission was working. That's no longer the case. Currently, a large number of cases are dealt with in Canada and never sent to a mission abroad. Thus, it depends on the complexity of the file rather than the nationality of the applicant. The country of origin really is irrelevant in our processing times.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Are you suggesting that a person from India could be waiting just as long as a person making an application from China, because the country of origin is no longer a consideration? According to the constituents I've come across, there seems to be a significant difference in wait times depending on the country of origin.

Mr. Robert Orr: By and large, it's a matter of complexity, because a large number of cases from whatever country are completely finalized within Canada.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can we get the information from your office listing the countries of origin in the applications and what the wait times are so we can do some comparisons? Maybe there really isn't any difference, but in the cases that have come across my desk, I have to tell you there seem to be significant differences. I would like to see the stats to back that up. If that information can be provided to the committee, that would be great.

You talked a little bit about the threshold, the amount of dollars in sponsorships.

Can you give us a figure, specifically how much?

Mr. Robert Orr: Those figures are available, but I do not have them with me at the moment.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you provide that to the committee?

The Chair: Perhaps we can add this data to the previous undertaking to be provided.

Mr. Tabbara, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the department staffer for being here.

I have two questions that relate to individuals who have come into my constituency office.

One is an individual sponsoring his common-law partner. In 2007, he applied to the application centre in Mississauga and 23 days later he was notified that he qualified as a sponsor for his partner's application, which was then forwarded to the Beijing visa office. A month later he was notified for an interview and an appointment. He was interviewed in Beijing and issued a permanent resident visa. All together the timeframe was three months. Today, however, IRCC's website states that the estimated processing time for sponsoring a spouse or common-law partner from China is 13 months.

What happened to the processing times from nine years ago, and how can we get back to those earlier levels?

● (1835)

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, there's no doubt that there has been an increase in the processing times for spousal applications. I think the minister referred to three main elements to try to bring those times down: money, which has been given to the department to try to work on this; levels space, which is critically important in this; and efficiencies. I think you are already seeing a change from June 2015 to June 2016 in processing times overall—not necessarily for Beijing in particular but overall—which have come down from 18 to 16 months in the overseas context, and from 26 to 22 months for the in-Canada cases, and we are hoping to bring that down significantly over the coming year.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My second question refers to another constituent who applied to have their parents stay here. From what this person told me—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—there's a certain window that opens up, I believe, early in January. Last year they applied to have their mother stay. I believe they handed the application in very early in the morning, right away—I'm not sure if they hand-delivered it or mailed it—but they were ineligible for their parent to stay. Their parent is on a super visa, so I informed them to reapply again for 2017 on the day it opens up.

Are there any reassurances for this individual that if they submit their documents for their parent's sponsorships they can be eligible? I know it's being extended from 5,000 to 10,000 in 2017, but do you have any suggestions as to why this process exists? I also heard that even if they do apply right away, the cap is over within a couple of hours.

Mr. Robert Orr: More or less that is the case. When the cap is opened at the beginning of January—and I believe that in 2017 it will be January 3—there is no doubt that the demand for spaces will be far greater than the 10,000. We receive a large number of applications at that time. I think Mr. Armstrong just spoke of about 16,000 applications for 10,000 places. So yes, unfortunately, some people are not able to get into that cap even though their application is complete and even though it's there right on time. It's just a matter of first-come, first-served. We try to do it in as fair and transparent a way as possible, but inevitably there are some people who are going to be disappointed simply because of the numbers.

I don't know if you would like to add anything, Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Paul Armstrong: Mr. Chair, the department is examining options to see how we can better deal with this great intake in a very short period of time, but we do apply the first-in, first-out principle. We're literally counting the applications as they come in. Part of our challenge is to try to find a more effective way to do that, but the fact will remain that there are a limited number of spaces, 10,000, in the cap for parents and grandparents.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: What would your suggestion be then? I'm not familiar with this process, but is it better to submit it right that day when, let's say, it opens up at 9 a.m.? Is it better to submit it electronically or hand-deliver it?

Mr. Robert Orr: Well, this is exactly what we are trying to figure out at the moment: what is the fairest way to present the document so everyone is on a similar playing field and we're not favouring one group over another? We certainly can't do hand deliveries because, obviously, that's going to favour people who live in Mississauga. So that doesn't work.

We have to try to find the best way to do it. What we have been doing is specifying it go by courier. Everyone has to send it by courier to arrive on that date. It's not a great system, but it's worked for the last couple of years. We are trying to explore if there is a better way, which might be more fair and efficient for everyone.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes, please.

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

Mr. Orr or others, the government budgeted \$25 million for the processing time reductions this year and \$50 million in each of the next three years. At least that's what I understand. Can you tell us what the results are thus far?

● (1840)

Mr. Robert Orr: I think from the \$25 million what you're seeing is that a large amount of the money has been put straight into the processing network, both in terms of the international network and the centralized network that Mr. Armstrong runs.

That has allowed us to bring down the inventory of applications quite considerably already on the in-Canada side. I think the minister provided some figures on that. It was at 33,000 and it's come down quite considerably already, and we're also seeing a reduction in the processing times. As I mentioned, the in-Canada applications have gone from 26 months a year ago to 22 months now. I think we are seeing very tangible results from the investment of that money.

Mr. David Tilson: That's what I'm asking, whether you can give us the latest numbers for year-over-year comparisons.

Mr. Robert Orr: Certainly, that will be available. We can make that information available, the specifics of that.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, and you'll get back to the clerk.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: The previous government brought in the 10-year super visa for parents and grandparents. Could you give us an update on how that program has been working?

Mr. Robert Orr: Thus far, as the minister indicated, I think it's been an important contribution, given the stress on the parent and grandparent numbers. People who previously may not have been able to come, because they would not fit into the cap, are able to join their families for extended periods.

It's a 10-year visa, but you can come in for initial entry of two years as opposed to the normal six months. It's possible to extend the super visa beyond that as well. I think I gave the numbers earlier: about 70,000 have been issued, with an 80% approval rate. We understand that, of those super visa holders, about 4,200 have applications for permanent residence in progress. It seems thus far to be a program that is working well and with limited concerns for the social welfare system and so on.

Mr. David Tilson: Have any issues arisen as a result of the implementation of this program that you can share with the committee?

Mr. Robert Orr: We're not aware of any issues, really. I think there's some anecdotal evidence of people with insufficient health insurance, but that's very rare. I think overwhelmingly we have not found any systemic issues with the program.

Mr. David Tilson: Has there been a failure rate?

Mr. Robert Orr: There has not, that we are aware of.

Mr. David Tilson: What changes overall in processing times have occurred over the last 12 months in the family class category?

Mr. Robert Orr: Well, in terms of the spousal applications, for the overseas, it has gone down from 18 to 16 months processing average, and for the in-Canada, it's gone from 26 months to 22 months.

I think it's also worth noting that those people in Canada are eligible for an open work permit and the take-up on the open work permit has been very high indeed. I think we've also talked about some of the statistics on the parents and grandparents class, where the inventory has come down considerably. Processing time still looks very high, because we've got some very old cases mixed with the newer ones, but we expect the overall processing time to drop dramatically in the next year.

Mr. David Tilson: Are there particular countries that pose difficulties?

Mr. Robert Orr: We watch the refusal rates and so on of certain countries. I think it varies in terms of program, but in terms of the spousal program, for the overseas part of it the highest refusal rate would be for Vietnam, and then Nigeria, Haiti, and China would be in the top five.

•(1845)

Mr. David Tilson: What's the state of the caregiver class, given the large reduction of this year's level plans?

Mr. Robert Orr: In fact, I believe it's just over 20,000 live-in caregivers this year, which is a significant number and has allowed us to bring down the inventory considerably. The inventory is still

significant in that program, but it has come down dramatically over the last few years.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Ms. Zahid, five minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the officials for coming in today.

When discussing the levels before the committee on June 9, Mr. David Manicom said the processing time backlog for caregivers and family members was at 48 months, and was expected to drop rapidly over the next year or two. Where does the backlog stand today for that class specifically?

Mr. Robert Orr: The backlog on August 2016 was 12,188 cases, or 33,866 persons. One of the things we're noticing, in fact, with the live-in caregiver program is that, as we are processing cases, more dependants are becoming part of them. While the number of cases we're dealing with is coming down, the actual number of people we're dealing with within that program, because of the dependants, is actually going up a little bit. Nevertheless, we are still bringing the inventory down.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Has it reduced, then, as compared to 48 months, the average time?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not dramatically since June, no, it's not come down significantly at this stage.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: So it is still at about 48 months or—

Mr. Robert Orr: I believe it's still around that figure. I don't have the precise figure with me.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Could you provide the backlog for spousal class and family reunification class year by year going back 10 years? Would that be possible? If you don't have it now, you can submit it through the chair to the committee.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, I think it might be easier to submit it to the clerk.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Would it be possible to have it for different processing centres or country by country? In dealing with the casework at my constituency office, I noted that there are certain countries where the processing time is higher. For spousal, for a few countries it is up to 36 months I have seen in some cases.

Mr. Robert Orr: There's no question that is the case, and yes, we can provide some of that information. As I've said, I think you're going to see more and more of an homogenization of the processing times for various nationalities as we do more and more processing within Canada.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I have one more request. Would it possible to provide the budget allocations for processing spousal and family reunification class cases for the last 10 years? That also can be provided through the chair to us.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, clearly, I'm not sure exactly what is available, but we will certainly do our best to provide that information.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: With your experience, do you think that there is a link between the size of the backlog and the budget allocations to that?

Mr. Robert Orr: The biggest issue in creating a backlog in the various categories, including family class, has been the levels space and greater demand than there was space for us to finalize applications. I think it's more a question of levels than it is money.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is it the efficiency or is it fewer resources? How would you define it?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think in the broad scheme of things, if you look at it, one of the department's key commitments is to deliver on the levels each year, and we have targets in all the various categories within the levels plan. If you look at the history of the department over the last several years, we've done remarkably well in hitting the appropriate targets, and we are resourced to deliver on those various targets.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'll give you one example. I have seen in some cases that the medical has been done three or four times, because the medical is done, and then it expires when the background checks or the security checks are happening, so that also delays the process. Do you think there is something that could be done?

•(1850)

Mr. Robert Orr: There is no doubt there have been instances where that has occurred, and too frequently. We're making every effort at the moment to try to look at the process from A to Z and to try to figure out better ways to manage that so we avoid that situation occurring.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, I was asking questions about the caregiver class. What's the current status of the caregiver class backlog?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, as of August 2016, the backlog of permanent resident applications is 12,188 cases, or 33,866 persons. While the backlog in cases has decreased since 2014, the backlog in persons has increased since July 2013, as applicants are including their dependants in their permanent resident applications. Previously they were tending to sponsor them after they had become permanent residents, so now we have the numbers increasing somewhat even though the number of cases is indeed coming down.

Mr. David Tilson: Can you tell us which labour markets have been or will be most adversely affected by the shift away from economic migrants?

Mr. Robert Orr: The minister made clear that we have not backed away from economic migration. If you look at the figures in

2016, you will see the economic numbers are somewhat lower than they were in 2015, but if you compare it to all previous years, it is higher than those years, so it's higher than 2014, 2013, 2012, etc.

Mr. David Tilson: You did a good job. I was hoping you'd give a different answer.

Have you noted the labour shortages in any particular markets thus far under this new focus?

Mr. Robert Orr: I do not have that information. It may be better put to ESDC, which is really the custodian of looking at the labour market.

Mr. David Tilson: Can you report on the status and functioning of the pilot program to allow applicants under the spouse or common-law partner in Canada class to work while awaiting the processing of their inland applications?

Mr. Robert Orr: We've issued approximately 20,700 spousal open work permits since that was permitted, which I believe started at the end of December 2014, on December 22, 2014. That has been a valuable component for those who are awaiting finalization of their applications. It has allowed them to work and to become better settled within Canada.

Mr. David Tilson: Have there been any problems?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not that I am aware of.

Mr. David Tilson: Has there been a failure rate?

Mr. Robert Orr: Again, not that I am aware of.

Mr. David Tilson: Can you report on the effect of the 2014 change in the age of dependent children, from 22 to 19 years, who can be sponsored under the family class?

Mr. Robert Orr: The age of dependency was under 19 years of age, so it had an impact on the numbers of people who would be included in the various categories. I'm not aware of other impacts there.

Mr. David Tilson: You can't tell us what the numbers show as a result of this change.

Mr. Robert Orr: I'm sorry, I do not have that information with me.

Mr. David Tilson: Perhaps, Mr. Orr, you could send that to the clerk.

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, we'll look into that.

Mr. David Tilson: I have one more question. Can you report on the changes instituted in 2014 on the income requirements for sponsoring parents and grandparents?

•(1855)

Mr. Robert Orr: Indeed, there were some changes at that time. The period of sponsorship, for instance, went from 10 years to 20. Some of the economic requirements were increased at that point. This was to ensure that the parents and grandparents would not be accessing social assistance.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

My colleague asked a question earlier about the parent and grandparent sponsorships. They're all received in one day, usually, and in a few hours the amount is complete. Do we have a regional breakdown, between the provinces and territories, of how many parent or grandparent applications come from British Columbia versus Ontario? Do we have a regional breakdown?

Mr. Robert Orr: I'm sure we could establish that. We don't have that—

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My point is that I'm worried about procedural fairness. With the courier process, naturally a courier in Mississauga will be able to deliver it, boom, right at 9 o'clock in the morning or whatever time you're starting, while somebody from British Columbia might not have that same efficiency.

Would it be possible to look at other options? For example, if they all had to come in on one day, and there was a lottery for let's say 10,000 out of 16,000, there would be no strategic advantage to anyone—i.e., my colleagues to the left of me—versus those from the west.

I would just ask if you could look into that. I'm not saying it happens. I don't know. I'm just hoping that this bias doesn't happen because of proximity.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, we're not aware of any regional disparity. We're certainly very conscious of ensuring fairness and transparency as we do this. As I mentioned, we are trying to look at whether there are better ways to do this. We certainly welcome ideas.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Second, in our briefing we have numbers for overall wait times for all the different classes, but they seem to go from 2002 to 2012. Is there data from 2013 to 2015? If so, can you get it to the clerk?

Mr. Robert Orr: That should be available. Yes, we can supply that to the clerk.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: On that same notion, what is your targeted wait time for spouses, children, parents, siblings going forward, with all the new funding and new hires? Is there a targeted number, an internal number or an external number, that we can anticipate in terms of wait times for spousal sponsorships and parental sponsorships? Our constituents naturally will be asking that.

Mr. Robert Orr: That's well understood, and we will try to provide that. I don't think I'm in a position to do that right now. We are in a phase of trying to revamp, particularly the spousal program, to find efficiencies, to find better ways to deal with it. We're trying to revamp our forms and our kits, to make them clearer and these sorts of things.

Once we are in a position to do that and to come up with something, we'll come up with an appropriate service standard as well, which reflects the reality and ensures that we're able to deliver on it. We want to be very ambitious, though, in this area.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Finally, I wish I could have asked the minister this, but perhaps you can answer it. The super visa works in a great way in terms of getting parents or grandparents here, those who are waiting. One of the problems I've noticed is that parents and grandparents, parents specifically, come in their early or late fifties, or maybe early sixties, and they find it a burden when they're staying with their children. Their children have to pay for their private

medical bills. They're not allowed to work, but they're anticipating staying for up to two years.

Is there a possibility that the department could look into perhaps allowing them to work on a part-time basis, similar to students, for a 20-hour week, just so that they're not a burden on their children? They wouldn't be taking high-paid jobs away from others. It would be a buffer situation similar to what students do when they work 10 to 20 hours a week while continuing with their studies.

Is that something that has been explored? Or could it be explored?

• (1900)

Mr. Robert Orr: I'm not aware that that has been explored. It certainly was not the intent of the super visa, the way it was set up. Certainly we're open to looking at other possibilities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, three minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I wonder if the committee could also get the information Ms. Zahid asked for on spousal sponsorship, but applied to the parent and grandparent application.

On the question of misinformation or missing information in the application process, there have been situations brought to my attention whereby the application was sent back to someone, rejected, because something was missing, but actually the information was provided, and it was missed by the official who was processing it. The person was then thrown out of the quota system, because the application was rejected. That, of course, is of great concern, because people have nowhere to appeal in that situation.

I'm wondering what kinds of assurances we can have for those who've actually worked really hard to get an application in and it has been rejected, even through errors made by ministry officials. How can that be addressed?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is very much of concern to us, as well. I'll turn to Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Paul Armstrong: In a case like that, the applicant can apply for reconsideration. Without talking about a specific case, if there was an error made by officials, the matter would be corrected.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How would she be able to prove that?

Mr. Paul Armstrong: Well, the individual would write to us, and that's not an unusual occurrence. If somebody has a matter that requires reconsideration, the person requests reconsideration.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How often does that happen?

Mr. Paul Armstrong: I couldn't provide you with statistics on how often that happens, but it does occur.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do people know that they can actually make such an appeal? I'm not sure people do.

Mr. Paul Armstrong: I wouldn't call it an appeal. It's called reconsideration. Many people are represented, either by an authorized representative or by lawyers, and they're certainly aware of that process. I'm not just speaking about family class.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In terms of the spousal application, is it the case also that the processing time for the spousal application, which I believe goes country by country—

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have all the ones who applied prior to the time listed on the website been processed, or are they in the process of being processed?

The Chair: You may have a last quick response.

Mr. Robert Orr: They would be in process. Now, there are some cases that take a considerable length of time, and that's always the case, so I can't say that they've all been finalized, but they would all be in process.

The Chair: I'd like to thank the department officials for appearing before committee.

At this point, the committee shall adjourn.

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