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Chair

Mr. Robert Oliphant

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I'm going to call this meeting to order. This is the 130th meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, as we continue our study of migration challenges and opportunities for Canada in the 21st century.

The witnesses have been told a bit about our study. We are continuing to look at all the patterns, the influences and the experiences of both forced and voluntary migration, and what is going on in the world in terms of people moving. That also extends to Canada's response to that, whether our responses are appropriate or not, and what Canada's needs and responsibilities are in the area of migrating people.

We thank you for attending. In this panel we have three witnesses—one from the Conference Board of Canada and two as individuals.

We're going to begin with Ms. Long, who is coming to us via video conference from my hometown, Toronto.

You have seven minutes.

Ms. Elizabeth Long (Barrister and Solicitor, Long Mangalji LLP, As an Individual): Thank you very much for having me here. My name is Elizabeth Long. I'm an immigration lawyer. I've been certified by the Law Society of Ontario as a specialist in immigration law. Throughout the last 14 years, I've worked with thousands of workers to help them immigrate to Canada.

I would like to start by telling you about my first experience in an immigration office. It was when I was a child. My father had applied for permanent residence through one of the first skilled worker programs in the eighties. In those days, in order to pass, we had to go for an interview. At the interview, the officer asked my father, "Why should I let you stay?" My father provided him with his thesis on artificial intelligence, which he had completed for his Ph.D. program at Simon Fraser University. The officer threw that to the side and said, "That doesn't matter." My father said, "I've been offered a position at Memorial University in Newfoundland as an assistant professor." The officer said, "So what?" It was then that our immigration lawyer stood up, looked the officer dead straight in the eye, and said, "If you don't want these people in Canada, who do you want in Canada?"

This is the question that underlies the basis of the economic immigration programs in Canada: Who do we want in Canada? I

would submit that a formulated points system is not as good an indicator of desirability as is the Canadian labour market itself. Let me first point to a few problematic assumptions that plague the current economic immigration programs today.

Let's first look at how the points system is determined. Analysts who have set the criteria for such programs as the express entry and caregiver programs have told me that one of the main tools to make decisions on desirability is to compare the income tax statements of two groups. For example, high-skilled workers as a group earn more than low-skilled workers; therefore, only high-skilled workers are needed in Canada. Immigrants who speak a higher level of English earn more money than do people who speak a lower level of English; therefore, we need only people who speak a higher level of English.

The assumption that only rich workers are valuable to Canada is clearly faulty. Taking that faulty assumption and using it, then, to formulate the criteria for our immigration programs leaves behind many people who are wanted and needed in Canada.

Another problematic assumption is that there is a clear line between high-skilled and low-skilled work, and that only high-skilled workers are valuable in Canada. The NOC codes that define high-skilled and low-skilled work were never created for immigration purposes. They were created by a group of people in Service Canada for statistical analysis. They were then adopted by the immigration department, which perceived this as an easy way to determine desirability. Surely we need only high-skilled work in Canada, right?

So what's "high-skilled" and what's "low-skilled"? Let me list a number of occupations and see if you can figure out which one is high-skilled and which one is low-skilled. Let's take an office situation. A receptionist? Low-skilled. Secretary? High-skilled. Bookkeeper? High-skilled. Accounting clerk? Low-skilled. Medical assistant? High-skilled. Dental assistant? Low-skilled. Hairdresser? High-skilled. Esthetician? Low-skilled.

• (1535)

As you can see, it is not altogether clear why one occupation is considered high-skilled and another is considered low-skilled. There are also clear gender biases in the categorization. For example, personal support workers, who require college certification, and sewing machine operators, who need extensive training, are low-skilled workers. Construction workers, such as house painters and drywallers, who often haven't even finished high school, are high-skilled workers.

Furthermore, how can we assume that we need only high-skilled workers in Canada, when oftentimes some of the most-needed workers in Canada are those working in jobs that Canadians can't or won't do, such as truck drivers, caregivers, farm workers and the list goes on?

In the end, one of the best indicators of who is needed in Canada are people who are already working in Canada, have done so for an extended period of time, and have permanent job offers. They are clearly able and willing to settle in Canada, and clearly wanted in Canada. To subject them to the rigmarole of having to undergo English exams and a competitive process like the express entry system, which pits them against people who have never set foot in Canada, leaves many workers without the ability to obtain permanent residence. This simply does not make sense.

My proposal would be to have a category to allow to immigrate those who are already working legally in Canada, who have done so for a year and who have permanent job offers. They should not have to undergo the English exams or prove that their work fits into one of the arbitrary categorizations of high-skilled or low-skilled work in order to gain permanent residence.

As you may well have heard in the rallying cry of businesses, unions and workers throughout Canada, if someone is good enough to work, they should be good enough to stay. Thank you.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Jeremic, you go second.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic (Barrister and Solicitor, Anchor Law, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to participate here today.

I'll begin by telling you a bit about the perspective I'm going to make my statements from. I'm a sole practitioner immigration lawyer in Toronto. I largely do refugee work, though I also do some work with economic migrants. My understanding is that the context under which I came to the attention of the committee was that I happened to represent a very nice woman who made a refugee claim with her daughter. Her 8-year-old daughter was accepted as a refugee, but she was not. She was put in a position where she could potentially be deported, while her daughter has every right to stay in Canada.

Now, I also understand that the topic of today's sitting of the committee is voluntary migration. Refugees aren't necessarily often seen to be voluntary migrants, so I'll begin by making a general point there.

The Chair: Just to let you know, you are free to use this time as you would like and as you think would be most helpful for the whole committee.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: All right.

The point I was going to make was that apart from the refugees Canada resettles from UNHCR camps abroad, such as the Syrians we hear so much about, there are voluntary or what we can call "self-selecting" refugees who make it to our border, either through the United States—the "irregular" arrivals we hear about—or through arriving on some kind of visa and then making a refugee claim.

I urge the committee to be aware that a lot of people who come this way, and who we as refugee and immigration lawyers often see, are often very sophisticated people. They're very well-educated people. They can even be wealthy people, because the persecution in their home countries that causes them to leave has nothing to do with poverty. Very wealthy, very smart people can be saying the wrong things about their government. They can be asserting rights that we consider fundamental rights in this country. They risk persecution because of that, and they choose Canada as a place to go and to try to seek protection in. In that sense, they have a lot of agency about where they will go and where they will seek protection.

There are some specific recommendations I can make in the context of their experiences. For example, the nature of the system sometimes creates odd outcomes. You can have a child who, because of her own risk, independent of her parent's risk, is accepted as a refugee but the parent isn't. That parent is often the sole provider for that child as their caregiver in Canada. In this instance, an eight-year-old girl has every right to remain in Canada, but her mother has no automatic mechanism to stay, because her own risk, as assessed by the tribunal, is not seen to be significant enough to grant her protection. This causes the parent to have to apply for permanent residence through humanitarian grounds, which again engages the bureaucracy in an application that will almost certainly be approved.

That raises the question of why we are forcing this parent to engage the resources of the government in an application that will almost certainly be approved because of the facts. We don't have a mechanism for a person like that to stay with their child, who is recognized to be a convention refugee.

There's another thing I often hear in this context. Often families can't make it to Canada together. For example, a father will make it here, but his wife and their children will remain abroad. The father will be accepted as a refugee. As an accepted protected person, he can apply for permanent residence and bring his family here once that PR application is processed and approved, but that can take at least a year. During that year, the family members who remain in the country of origin can be at great risk. The persecution doesn't stop, and it often involves the entire family. Again, there is no mechanism for those family members of a recognized and accepted refugee to come to Canada until the entire family's permanent residence application is processed. It's very ad hoc. It relies on trying to track down the officer who is working on the PR application, urging them to speed it up, essentially relying on their goodwill and discretion to maybe push it along a bit faster. That's something I often hear.

The next point touches a little bit on what the previous witness spoke about. Although refugees, once they have made a claim, have a right to apply for a work permit and work in Canada, the system is designed in such a way that the work experience, regardless of what it is, low-skilled or high-skilled, can absolutely not be used in an application to stay through an economic program. Once you've come here and asked for protection, that is the only way you can stay. You have to rely on that refugee claim. There is no way to stay by transitioning to another immigration stream.

• (1545)

You're waiting for your hearing, you've been working, you've been contributing to Canada's economy and to society, but there's no way for you to rely on that to apply for PR and get out of what I'll call the protection system.

Again, it's because of this idea that the refugees who come here and ask for Canada's help are purely a drain on our resources, and that we're doing it purely for humanitarian reasons. There is very little recognition that even though they're not selected for these points systems and the economic streams, they actually make a significant contribution to society.

I'm about at my seven minutes, so I'll stop there.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Antunes.

Mr. Pedro Antunes (Deputy Chief Economist and Executive Director, The Conference Board of Canada): Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for having me here. I'm Pedro Antunes, deputy chief economist at the Conference Board.

I guess what we can bring today is perhaps a perspective that is a little different from some of the other testimony today and that you might have heard prior to today, because we essentially try to look forward in our analysis. We've done some timely work that this committee might be interested in, around the different economic scenarios and how they play out based on different immigration assumptions.

We've put out a report entitled "Canada 2040: No Immigration Versus More Immigration". If I may, I will submit it to the committee.

The Chair: Yes, you may.

Mr. Pedro Antunes: I've been at the Conference Board, I have to confess, for a very long time. I'm in the forecasting business, if you like. It's a tough business, and people often criticize how we can get the next few quarters or the next year right, or how we can guess what the next economic scuttlebutt will be, based on tariffs or trade or whatever other issues. I would turn that around. When we start thinking about the longer term, about the demographics of the economy—what we call the supply side of the economy—that tends to be a lot more solid.

I remember when we started to do long-term forecasts all those years ago. One of the first issues that came up was that, in our models, our unemployment rate would start to go south and all of a sudden turn negative, which in fact can't happen, so we knew we had a problem. Since then, we have focused very much on issues around productivity and immigration, because of this looming baby-boom

cohort exodus that is essentially going to drive down economic growth going forward.

The report that we will submit looked at what Canada would look like in a no-immigration assumption. We know that's impossible. Economists are always trying to imagine crazy, hypothetical scenarios. However, it allows us to look, in the baseline scenario, at the contribution of immigration to the economy and, in a higher immigration scenario, at how that changes and looks going forward.

I'll give you some highlights of what we found.

What's really timely is that we've just received, I think yesterday, the new immigration targets for the next three years. They align very much with our getting to the 1% immigration assumption scenario. Those targets are looking at getting to 350,000 by 2021, which is essentially what we have in this report. That's about 0.9% of the population. It's certainly a little higher than what we've had in the past. In the last 15 or 20 years, we've had in-migration at about 0.8% of the population. That's adding a little bit. We're heading toward 1%, but that's in a scenario, a background, where essentially the aging of the population is causing the natural rate, that is, births less deaths, to contribute less and less.

Currently, immigration contributes to about 70% of overall population growth. By the time we get to 2034, immigration will forcibly account for all of population growth. If you have immigration at 1%, there's also emigration, so you can think that we're going to be between 0.8% population growth and 1% population growth, depending on those numbers, but probably around 0.8% or 0.9%. That would be a slight decline, but it would be fairly stable population growth compared to what we've had in the past.

In our assumptions, we looked very carefully.... In fact, in those same targets, we've assumed that the share of economic versus family versus refugee stays about the same. Those shares are about 58%, 26%, 16%, in order. We've made those assumptions in our scenarios as well. We look very carefully, and we track. As immigrants come in, we know that they make a certain percentage less than the average wage in Canada in year one, year two, etc., depending on the class. We track that all the way through the immigration streams that we're adjusting over time. We've done a careful job there.

What that allows us to do, then, is look at these scenarios. For a set of economic indicators that may be of interest—for example GDP, which is essentially just income, as I'm sure you all know—we can look at indicators such as the number of workers to retirees—dependency ratios, if you will. We can look at one of the biggest challenges for Canada, which is health care costs as a share of revenues—which is obviously a provincial issue—and other indicators, such as GDP per capita, etc.

What are the challenges? Let me start with the health care challenge. I think what we see with the higher immigration assumption versus immigration as is—the status quo scenario—is that essentially we have health care costs now as about 35% of provincial government revenues, and no matter what, they're going to increase.

• (1550)

In a low immigration scenario, they would increase to about 43% of provincial government revenues. In a 1% immigration world, we could bring that down to about 39%. This is by the time we get to 2040, so this is a long-term perspective. These are important challenges because as you eat up more of this share, it leaves less ability to do other things with your revenues.

We think that in a 1% scenario, GDP would stay in line with recent history: that is, about 2% of the economy. Remember that our trend GDP used to grow closer to 3% just in the early 2000s, so this demographic change around the labour force is having a very important impact on our ability to grow revenues. We can't get away with that, no matter what, but we can dampen the effects by looking essentially at how immigration plays in that role.

I'll just give you a quick example. I talk to organizations and people in the private and public sector who are looking at the challenge around hiring. The challenge around hiring is a very high rate of retirement, and that's only going to continue to climb. We think all baby boomers are out of the workforce; that's absolutely not true. It's just the front-end boomers, a small cohort. In recent years, the retirement rate has increased from about 0.95% of the labour force to 1.2%. That means 170,000 retirees just a few years ago, in 2010, and today we're at 230,000 to 240,000 retirees. For organizations looking to grow their workforce, it's essentially about one for one: For every one net new person you add to your workforce, you also have to add an additional person to replace a retiree.

Here are some of the other ratios. The worker-to-retiree ratio currently in Canada is 3.6 workers per retiree. Again, no matter what, that is going to grow over the next decade and a half, but with a 1% immigration scenario we mitigate that to about 2.6 workers per retiree. We go from 3.6 to 2.6, rather than 3.6 to 2. That's just another statistic to give you a sense of how important these changes are.

There are a lot of details in the report, but also some important observations we've done in previous work. It's not just growth for the sake of growth; it's growth for these reasons that I've talked about. It's not just bringing in immigration in terms of numbers. It's also very important to ensure, as some of the prior testimony has indicated, that people have the ability to participate more fully in the workforce.

We know this is a problem. We've looked at some of those costs, and we think that things around credentialing alone cost the economy and the individuals—I'm macro, always thinking about the big picture, but obviously this is an advantage for both—around \$13 billion to \$17 billion a year.

• (1555)

The Chair: I need you to wrap up.

Mr. Pedro Antunes: In terms of those settlement services, language training and credential recognition are really important to labour market outcomes.

The last point I want to make is about perceptions. We have to be careful about perceptions. We've seen protectionist rhetoric drive up an agenda in the U.S. that is completely off what I think is economic understanding, and we need to be aware that perceptions are important in this space as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to questions. Mrs. Zahid, go ahead.

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

Thanks to all the witnesses for their important testimony.

Mr. Antunes, I was going through your report, "Canada 2040: No Immigration Versus More Immigration". You wrote about the role of the family class in supporting economic immigration and the need to boost the labour market outcomes for this category. Have you studied the impact that reuniting the family has on the prospects of economic class immigrants, having the family together for support and removing the stress of separation?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Yes, I think all of these things play out. I once had a colleague who's also an economist tell me that economists are like artists—they try to paint reality with the fewest brush strokes possible.

I have to confess that we haven't dug into monetizing or making assumptions that would allow us to give you an economic impact of family reunification. We do know that there are all sorts of effects in terms of providing support to family, especially where we see small businesses that lack support and may not have access to capital and financing as readily as other entrepreneurs. We do see stronger families playing a role in some of these areas.

The assumptions we've made around the family class and the refugee class are straight from the historical data. I think we've taken a conservative approach. We have not bettered the outcomes of immigrants in Canada in the scenarios that we've built, but I think that all of these things, including better settlement, better language and essentially seeing better labour market outcomes, would obviously be an upside to the scenarios you have.

• (1600)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I represent a riding where people from across the world have settled. They run family businesses. They're small businesses that are creating good middle-class jobs. I think that where they have their families to give them a hand, that really helps them a lot in those cases. What would you say in regard to creating more middle-class jobs and how these new immigrants who are coming in and creating more businesses are helping?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Yes, absolutely. I think it's just that when we get to the data at that level, the micro kind of data, it's harder to find and harder to compile all of that information and give you a number, top line. I would say that there is clear evidence, absolutely. There's anecdotal evidence. There are people in the field who do more qualitative research and can give you a better sense of these types of impacts, but yes, we acknowledge in the report that family class is important and also helps stimulate economic outcomes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: We are going to hear in the next hour from Michael Donnelly from the University of Toronto, whose research on Canadian support for immigration shows that Canadians are less supportive of immigration than we often assume, and that Canada is not immune to the sort of anti-immigrant rhetoric we are seeing elsewhere.

I know that it's not possible for you to summarize your whole report, but in brief, what would be the impact of sharply reducing the immigration levels? Do you think the numbers Professor Donnelly found could be different if more Canadians were aware of the consequences?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: We did build a no-immigration scenario. Again, it's counterfactual, but essentially we see GDP or income growth slow to about 1%. I think there are significant costs that we need to be aware of beyond just growth for the sake of growth. I talked about some of them. These kinds of ratios with respect to labour markets dependency are very important pieces that would only get worse in a zero-immigration scenario.

Beyond that, Canada is a big country, and I think one of the challenges for immigration is to see if we can get more immigration in areas where we're seeing slower population growth. We see the challenges faced by some of the Atlantic provinces, for example. Some have had success in terms of being attractive to immigration and holding onto their immigrant population.

Essentially, there are challenges with economies that have very weak economic growth or very weak population growth. It's much easier to get into a market where there is some economic growth and some potential for you to attract investment and people, rather than to try to take away market share from somebody else who's already there. We even hear about small towns having to close at some point. Shutting down a town is a huge cost. I think Canada has room for more immigration.

To go back to the perception issue, I think we need to be careful and we need to be aware of it. I think we need to better educate folks. This is part and parcel of what we're trying to do with some of the immigration research we put out. Also, I think we need to be flexible. If we see spaces where technology, for example, is replacing workers, we need to be aware of that and be proactive about it. If we see a business cycle hit us—and one will hit us sooner or later—I think we need to be able to adjust to those scenarios.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Ms. Long, during many of our previous testimonies we heard about the relationship between the legal and the irregular migration streams. We heard about how cutting down on the availability of regular and legal immigration streams usually leads to an increase in migrants seeking out irregular channels, often at risk and at much cost. Can you please talk about the relationship between legal and

irregular channels? Are there some legal changes that should be made in Canada to discourage irregular migration?

The Chair: Please be very brief.

Ms. Elizabeth Long: Yes.

When the law is such that people cannot stay after they work... For example, there was a change a few years ago by the Conservatives that limited the workers to staying for four years. The "four-in, four-out" rule forced thousands of workers to suddenly wake up one day and all be illegal. It's things like that—when the law does not make sense, creates havoc, and creates a lot of difficulty for people—that are completely unnecessary. We need to create laws where, if we attract people to Canada and they are contributing to Canada....

Clearly, as we've heard, the people are needed. Immigration is needed in Canada. We need to be a country, then, that encourages them to stay, and not a country that—

• (1605)

The Chair: Sorry, I'm afraid I need to end it there. Someone may follow up with a question on that topic.

Mr. Tilson, go ahead.

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

Mr. Jeremic, do you know how many asylum seekers or refugees of any class are employed or unemployed?

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: Well, initially, immediately after their arrival.... I'm talking about people who make their own way to Canada and then make a refugee claim. That's whom I see through my practice. I do not see resettled refugees. There's basically nothing for us lawyers to do once Canada has given them permanent residence.

Initially, they're not employed, simply because it takes a few months for them to get a work permit, but once they have one, virtually all of them work.

Mr. David Tilson: Where did you find that out?

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: Everything I'm saying is anecdotal and from my practice. Assign what weight you will to that, but—

Mr. David Tilson: The reason I asked the question was that, to justify what you're saying, presumably you have some facts, but if it's anecdotal, that's fine. That's your answer.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: I can provide you with examples, if that's what you'd like.

Mr. David Tilson: Sure.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: For example, I might see an individual who's escaping present-day Turkey because of their political opinion and opposition activity to the government. They tend to speak English reasonably well. They're educated people who've been able to get either a Canadian or a U.S. visa to come here. Once they get that work permit, they will find, in the beginning, just any job. It could be a service sector job. It might be driving for Uber or whatever.

Again, anecdotally, through what I see in my practice, they don't want to stay on Ontario Works. They don't want to be dependent on social services. They do want to make an effort to integrate into the economy.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

Ms. Long, I was interested in your legitimate comments about how we choose those who are skilled and not skilled or low-skilled. You also made some comments that language is not an issue. The problem with that, of course, is that Canada is French and English. We speak French and English in this country. We don't speak all languages. Many people do, but as far as the law and everything else is concerned, it's French or English.

I am interested in the legitimate criticisms you made about how we choose high-skilled and low-skilled people. Do you have recommendations as to how that can change?

Ms. Elizabeth Long: Yes. I think it's a faulty assumption that we only need a certain group of people who already have work in Canada. Many provinces now, with their provincial nominee programs, don't care if it's defined as high-skilled or low-skilled work. If they have a job offer, they should be able to stay.

Mr. David Tilson: There is an issue around whether someone is high-skilled or low-skilled. You made some reasonably good criticisms of that. You must have some thoughts as to how that can change.

Ms. Elizabeth Long: My change is.... Why are we making that distinction? If someone has a job offer and an LMIA, which shows that Canadians can't do the job or aren't willing to do the job, then we need them in Canada, period.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Antunes, in recent years Canada's immigration system has focused on economic migration. We do have family reunification. We do have humanitarian streams. But if you look at public opinion, it seems that the reason why most Canadians support the levels of immigration we have is structured around the benefit of the economy. That seems to be the philosophy. Some say that if we move away from that, public support will drop significantly.

You study public opinion. What's your comment on what I've just said?

• (1610)

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Fair enough. I'm not sure I can claim to be an expert on public opinion. I think there are pollsters out there that probably know more.

Mr. David Tilson: Well, that's what you do, though.

Mr. Pedro Antunes: We do track what's being said. I do think it's an important issue. I think we have to educate first. I think we have to be flexible if things are changing.

We have seen the outcomes of things turning for the worse in other areas: very protectionist agendas, for example, and right-wing agendas in other parts of the world.

I would just say we have to be aware of it.

Mr. David Tilson: The problem we have is that we want people to come to this country for all kinds of reasons, compassionate reasons. They are having terrible experiences in other countries through war, pestilence and everything else, but the concentration seems to be on economic migration. That seems to be, at least in my experience in my riding, what most people are interested in. They are interested in the others, but the concentration is on economic migrancy. If we move away from that, what will the public think?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: That's a difficult question to answer. All I can say is that we have taken a very careful look at the economic contribution of each of the classes. We've kept them in line with recent history and with the targets we have currently. I talked a bit about those, but essentially it's 60% or just slightly below that for economic migration.

I think you're right. The focus, certainly from industry, from what I see from organizations that are employers, is on the economic stream. I think we've had a very successful program, in terms of the nominee programs, to bring in people who have, essentially, a job offer that enables them to land in this country running.

Mr. David Tilson: Your recent report on the 2018 Canadian immigration summit suggests that the government could be doing a better job strengthening the relationship between itself and the settlement sector. We talk a lot about the settlement sector in this committee.

Do you have any observations or suggestions as to how the government can improve in that area?

The Chair: Answer very briefly.

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Again, this is a bit outside of what we're specifically researching. I think there are folks in that area who would probably be able to give us better suggestions.

What we are seeing is that the labour market outcomes really aren't as solid as they could be. I talked about a number of pieces, including the language issue, which you talked about earlier. I think it's very important. There are lots of studies showing that labour market outcomes are negatively affected by language skills in particular. I think that's one area that perhaps we should focus on.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you for your comments.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

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

I thank all the witnesses for their presentations today.

Ms. Long, I would like to touch on this issue. Canada used to have a program, under the federal skilled worker program, wherein whether you were low-skill, medium-skill or high-skill, you had a pathway to Canada. That's now done away with.

I wonder whether you would recommend that the government bring a similar program like the federal skilled worker program?

Ms. Elizabeth Long: I'm not aware of a program where there was low-skilled work under the federal skilled worker program. That may have been before my time. But I would certainly recommend a program where people are allowed to have a clear path toward permanent residency, especially people who have proven that they want to be in Canada. They are here, and they are working in Canada.

Mr. Tilson brought up the issue of language. Right now, people are required to undergo language exams where they have to show that they have a university level of reading, writing, listening and speaking, when they are, for example, in the trades or in positions where they absolutely do not need that to be viable in Canada. They are working in Canada; obviously, they can settle in Canada.

My recommendation would be to have a situation where if they are working in Canada, they can immigrate to Canada, regardless of high-skilled or low-skilled work experience.

• (1615)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In the caregiver stream, it's been established that Canada actually needs those workers in this country, yet we continue to require them to work for two years before they can make an application. On the principle of "good enough to work, good enough to stay", would you recommend that the government scrap this two-year work requirement to allow workers such as caregivers to come to Canada and have permanent resident status on arrival?

Ms. Elizabeth Long: I would recommend that workers who have been determined, who already have a job offer in Canada, be allowed to stay.

Under the current express entry system, if caregivers were actually considered to be high-skilled, they could very likely come through express entry very easily. But, because of this high-skilled/low-skilled distinction, where express entry allows only people who have high-skilled work to immigrate through the system, this is not possible.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you also apply that principle to international students? There are a lot of international students who have studied here, have been educated here and have even gotten work experience here, yet they don't have a pathway to permanent residence. I mean those who want to stay, obviously.

What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Elizabeth Long: International students are clearly very desirable people to come to Canada. They're young. They have studied in Canada. They have work experience in Canada. And yet, many of them can't get through the express entry system because of things like age. When you're in your thirties, I'd say that every birthday is not a happy birthday, because every birthday your points are going to go down by five or six, up to 10 or 11 points.

There are also things like language exams. We have Ph.D. students who cannot get the level of language in order to immigrate. It seems a little ridiculous—not a little, a lot ridiculous in these kinds of cases.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I'm now going to turn my question to Mr. Jeremic.

Global TV previously did a series of stories, and one in particular that was brought to my attention—in fact a number of them were brought to my attention—was about a mother who brought her little boy and her 11-year-old girl to Canada. The reason was that the 11-year-old girl was going to be faced with FGM in her country of origin.

When she came to Canada, she made an asylum claim application. The girl was accepted, and the mother and the boy were rejected, thereby making an orphan of this 11-year-old girl.

I'd like you to comment on that and on what Canada should do by way of policy change for cases like that in which we are actively breaking up families.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: Thank you.

I had an almost identical case to the one you mentioned. The simplest thing to do would be to allow that individual—that child who has been accepted as a protected person—when they're applying for permanent residence, to include their parent on that application, whereby the parent would get permanent residence automatically on the basis of their child's application.

It works in the reverse. If a parent is accepted but for whatever reason a child is not, that child is that adult's dependant, so when the adult applies for permanent residence, the child gets it as well. But it doesn't work in the reverse: If the child is the protected person but the parent isn't, the parent is kind of out on their own. As you say, the logical conclusion is that the parent can be deported and we have an orphaned child who has every legal right to stay in Canada.

A simple change would be a change to the regulations that currently prevent children from including their parents in their PR applications. That's the most straightforward recommendation on that front.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The UNHCR, in fact, commented on this. Their senior legal counsel said that Canada should have an obligation to ensure child refugees are afforded the right to family. The individual went on to say, "The importance of children to have their parents in their lives is so fundamental. It's recognized in international laws, it's recognized in domestic laws. And that's why UNHCR calls on all states to protect family."

Would you agree with that statement?

• (1620)

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: I would agree with that statement. My understanding is that whenever anyone has gone to challenge this provision in court, the government has always settled. The DOJ has always settled.

The presumption in the immigration bar is that they don't want a precedent. The government doesn't want a precedent whereby a court would say that the current rules are a violation of those obligations. What happens is that you include the parent on the application anyway; it's refused, and then you file a judicial review application and the government says, "Okay, we'll settle this. We'll let them be processed together."

As I said, the assumption in the bar is that they don't want a precedent. The reasons you've raised are probably why they don't want a precedent.

The Chair: Mr. Ayoub, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

My question is going to be in French, so if you need the interpretation, please go ahead.

[Translation]

My first question is about Canada's immigration policies and its targets. Canada currently intends to receive 350,000 immigrants. How far can we go? We're told the target is 1% of the Canadian population, but will we have to put a cap on that number at some point?

Mr. Antunes, you've worked out forecasts on Canada's capacity to increase its population. We are talking about immigration, because I think it is the quickest way to increase population, but what is our ultimate objective for the coming years?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: That is a good question, and that is one of the aspects we looked at.

You mustn't forget that most immigrants are not that young. They arrive in Canada when they are already 30 or 35. If Canada decided to increase its immigration targets substantially, this would not necessarily make the Canadian population younger, since the arrival of those immigrants would continue the aging trend. The dependency ratio I spoke about will not be totally improved, even if immigration targets are consistently increased.

We wanted to stay within reasonable parameters, but we did study scenarios involving higher targets. I wanted to say that the biggest challenge lies with how we receive those immigrants and ensure that they have a better future. Before we increase the targets too much, we need to begin really improving immigrants' success rate in joining the labour market.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Can the Conference Board of Canada analyze the quality of the economic integration of immigrants, and of refugees, to determine to what extent they participate in and contribute to Canada's economic life?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: In fact, we do have very good data on that. Our data indicate that an immigrant with refugee status will during the first year earn about 20% of the average Canadian salary, and that it will take him a long time, almost 20 years, to earn 50% to 60% of the average Canadian salary. We follow these things closely, and we have very good historical data on that.

The point we want to get across is that there are challenges of all kinds, the most important being to ensure better labour market integration before we even think of increasing immigration targets too much.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: We are talking about the same thing.

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: We want to see better results, and that is why I wanted to make sure that you had that data, which seems to be the case. We have to be able to assess the overall quality of immigration and not its success at the individual level, and Canada must define the broad political directions needed to improve the lot of immigrants and its labour force.

What other solution could be considered to increase the Canadian population aside from immigration, which is in fact a simple, brief, one-time injection? As you were just saying, it does not make the population younger. Have you thought about the concept and costs of a policy to boost birth rates? Is there a connection between the two? We know that the current government has brought in a policy for young families and gives them non-taxable subsidies. Would a birth subsidy be another way of increasing the birth rate of Canadians born in Canada?

• (1625)

Mr. Pedro Antunes: Public policy is another option. It all depends on your objective, whether it is economic growth or improving dependency ratios. We did not study both of those scenarios. I can, however, tell you that day cares and early childhood education have managed to increase the birth rate of the population in some cases, which proves that public policy can be successful. However, we have to remember that after birth, it takes 15 to 18 years before a young person joins the labour force.

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Quite so.

However, when it comes to immigration, it's important that people stay here permanently. Other witnesses said that some immigrants, and even refugees, see their stay as temporary because they eventually want to return to their own country. All of that has to be factored into a global perspective, which is that we want to make sure that we let in people who will stay as long as possible, since we invest in them.

You spoke about people's perceptions about immigration, and I understand that that is outside of your field of expertise. However, who should be responsible for influencing and changing those perceptions; is it politicians, the government, or economic councils, or business?

There is a shortage of jobs in Quebec but also elsewhere in Canada. In your opinion, what events would change things and allow us to convince the population of the job situation, and of the fact that we cannot meet our own needs?

Mr. Pedro Antunes: The Conference Board and other private organizations have looked at that. Some of the research done by the Conference Board—and I don't mean to boast—has tried to bring some perspective to the debate. We have to react to the impact of immigration and other policies on people's lives. We also have to accept the evolution of the labour market and of technology. In the United States, people had the impression that it was free trade rather than automation that had caused job losses. So, we have to make sure that people are well informed.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

We have two minutes for Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: I have a question for Mr. Jeremic and Ms. Long. It has nothing to do with the statements you made, though.

About a year ago, this committee made a presentation and a report to the government on the state of the immigration consultant industry. We recommended that the government disband the regulatory body and put it under the control of the department. Nothing has happened since. This is the third time the committee has studied consultants, yet the horror stories about consultants continue, in my opinion.

As lawyers—and perhaps you are biased—is it still as bad as we think?

We'll start with Ms. Long.

Ms. Elizabeth Long: Yes, the horror stories continue. Although you might think I'm biased, I think immigration law is one of the most complex areas of law, and it also has a very deep effect on a person and their family.

I am part of an analytics committee of immigration lawyers internationally, and we have asked our members about the policies regarding consultants in other areas of the world. Canada is one of very few countries that actually allow consultants to practice, and the results speak for themselves when we do.

• (1630)

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: I agree with my colleague.

From what I've seen when I've looked at work that consultants have done—on appeal, for example—it tends to reinforce the horror stories, as you say.

The problem is that consultants are limited in what they can do. They can put forward an application but they can't represent someone in court. The lack of training and the very narrow scope sometimes prevent them from seeing what can happen with an application down the road if there's a problem or if it needs to be appealed. Unfortunately, a lot of the things that determine what is going to happen down the road are things that are done at the very beginning. If you don't get it right at the beginning, you're really limiting how you can fix it later on.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, I've recently had a number of cases in my riding in which people who were going through the immigration system had poor representation at their hearings—particularly before the IRB—and these were lawyers.

What can be done to improve the representation by lawyers before the IRB? You may not agree, but in my observation as a member of Parliament who is talking to these people, the representation is terrible. I used to be a lawyer, so I can recognize some of this.

Mr. Jeremic, go ahead.

Mr. Aleksandar Jeremic: I don't necessarily disagree with that statement. I think there's a wide variety of representation that can be found. The problem, I think, is fundamental to the practice. A lot of these people are new to Canada. They don't necessarily know how to find lawyers. They rely on members of the community who may not be giving them the best advice.

I don't necessarily know how we can do this: equip people who are looking for legal representation to know what they're entitled to from a lawyer and what they can demand so that they know they're getting the best kind of representation.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end that there.

We'll count on you to help your profession.

Thank you.

We're going to suspend for a moment as we welcome out next witnesses.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I will call us back to order.

The previous witnesses are certainly welcome to stay and listen, because the testimony will be really good.

Thank you very much for coming.

Ms. Go and Ms. Chien, thank you especially for getting here. I know you had flight difficulties, but you made it.

Ms. Avvy Go (Clinic Director, Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic): Yes.

The Chair: Thank you for persisting.

Maybe we'll begin with Professor Donnelly, just to give you time to get yourself settled here. I know it was a rush.

Professor Donnelly, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Donnelly (Assistant Professor, Political Science, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, As an Individual): Hello, and thank you to the committee for inviting me.

I'm a political scientist whose research and teaching focus on the relationship between public opinion and public policy, primarily in North America and western Europe, although I do occasionally look elsewhere.

As a beneficiary of Canada's generous immigration policy, I am quite grateful to the policy the way it exists, but I'm glad the committee is looking for ways to improve it and to respond to challenges that have arisen or are likely to arise in the future. In my comments today, I'm not going to offer any specific policy recommendations. I'll offer instead my thoughts on three big themes that I think are often underemphasized in debates and discussions around immigration policy in Canada.

The first theme I want to address is the extent to which the Canadian public is unusually tolerant of immigration or unusually enthusiastic about immigration relative to similar countries. In short, Canadians are people, and in any large group of people there will be a decent-sized chunk who are not very tolerant, not very excited about outsiders.

Canada is neither unusually tolerant nor unusually intolerant. Like many other countries, Canada is made up of some people who accept immigration, some people who are enthusiastic about it, and others who are not very enthusiastic. Measuring xenophobia and related attitudes is a notoriously difficult thing to do. We are not very good at it, but we try. I think a fair assessment of the evidence would suggest that Canada is somewhat more tolerant on average than typical wealthy countries, but only somewhat. It is by no means exceptional or an outlier.

One recent survey asked Canadians to evaluate the impact of immigration on the economy. Canadians were more enthusiastic, more positive than 18 European countries that were asked the same question. They were less enthusiastic than three. That same survey asked a question about whether we should accept more immigrants from poor countries. There, Canada was smack in the middle—more enthusiastic than 10 and less enthusiastic than 11. The majority of Canadians are satisfied with current levels of immigration, but a substantial group takes a dimmer view. About a third would be happy to see fewer immigrants arriving each year, and many Canadians, perhaps a quarter, would like to see a more racially or religiously discriminatory policy.

I'll turn now to the second theme I want to raise today: Policy matters for public attitudes, but only to a degree. Policy helps to improve acceptance of immigration, but only somewhat. Geography probably deserves more credit than institutional design for the relatively consensual immigration politics Canada has seen. Consider the attention that has arisen around the comparatively small number of asylum seekers crossing the border from the U.S. Those asylum seekers, plus all the refugees resettled under formal processes, amount to a very small per capita number when set against the large flows seen recently in countries like Germany or Greece, let alone countries like Lebanon or Turkey.

There are three big things that I think we know about how policy can shape public debates around immigration. First, events and particular policy failures matter. The most direct short-term and visible impacts of policy on public perceptions appear when something goes wrong. The public responds to perceived or real policy failures, to events that draw media attention and have clear narratives with villains, heroes and victims.

In the absence of such a key event, most people just don't think about immigration most of the time. Indeed, even major changes

don't seem to move immigration attitudes in the aggregate or on average. Most events move some people one way and other people other ways. Neither the great recession of 2009-10 and the euro crisis nor the Syrian refugee crisis seems to have shifted the average immigration opinion in Europe in the places I study.

• (1640)

Instead, both of those big events changed the coalitions supporting immigration, changed which types of people supported immigration and moved political parties to more firmly tie their identity to their position on immigration, which has to some degree polarized or politicized the debate without changing attitudes on average.

A second big piece of the policy literature that I think is relevant here is that immigrant voices matter in Canada more than they do in most places. One form of what we call policy feedback is the long-term relationship between the citizenship or naturalization regime and the politics of immigration in the future. The comparatively generous naturalization policy here means that there are large communities of migrants whose voices and votes end up mattering in politics, and this makes it harder, though by no means impossible, for the ugliest forms of anti-immigrant arguments to rise to the top of the agenda. Since we know that public attitudes are profoundly shaped by the issues and arguments that political and media actors place on the agenda, this is an area where policy has undoubtedly contributed to reducing political conflict.

Finally, we have something that's been discussed already today. The selective nature of Canada's immigration policy targeting economic benefits does seem to matter and does seem to increase public support for immigration, though it does so only within a fairly small group of the public. The limited impact is attributed to the fact that some people don't know about the selective nature of the system. Some people don't trust the system to work as it is designed. Others simply take their position on immigration based on factors other than what they perceive to be the economic benefits. The effect of policy design on the politics of immigration is an open question that many scholars are working on. I am cautiously optimistic that we can continue to find ways of designing policy that will reduce the conflict and increase support for immigration.

The final theme I want to raise steps back a bit from the realm of immigration policy and considers the broader context of the policy arena. Particularly, I think the committee would be well advised to consider many other forms of policy that directly impact policy debates around immigration. As I am sure other witnesses prior to me have emphasized, labour markets, educational systems and social assistance programs all interact with immigration policy in important ways.

To those sectors, I'll add the importance of considering how policies that impact political parties and civil society matter for immigration outcomes. Political parties, religious groups, non-profits and trade unions have all played a role in the past both in promoting immigrant integration and in channelling public anxiety about immigration toward productive engagement rather than destructive resistance. These kinds of organizations have all, to some degree or another, seen their influence on public opinion wane in the last few decades. Policy-makers considering how to regulate, support or restrict the activities of those groups should consider how those actions might influence the ability of such groups to promote successful integration and consensual immigration politics.

Thanks for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We also have representatives from the Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic with us.

You are going to share your time. Ms. Go, I understand that you're going to begin. Go ahead.

Ms. Avvy Go: My name is Avvy Go, and I'm the clinic director of the Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic. With me is Jin Chien, who is our staff lawyer. We will be co-presenting this afternoon.

We are a community-based organization that provides free legal services to low-income members of the Chinese and Southeast Asian communities in Ontario. We thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to talk about the issue of migration this afternoon. We will be focusing on three specific groups of migrants: refugees, migrant workers and family class immigrants.

Ms. Chien will talk about refugees and migrant workers, and I'll deal with the family class immigrants.

I'll begin our presentation with three general comments that sort of align with what Professor Donnelly has just said.

First of all, many so-called voluntary migrants are forced to leave their home countries due to reasons beyond their control. Climate change, economic and social disparities, and the absence of democracy and the rule of law are just some factors that contribute to the increase in global migration. From our point of view, the categorization of non-refugees as voluntary migrants can therefore be misleading.

Second, in the face of the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric in the U.S. and Canada, how we talk about migration matters. We should avoid using divisive language that creates false dichotomies between immigrants and refugees and perpetuates an unfounded sense of crisis, which in turn inflames anti-refugee sentiment and encourages discriminatory behaviour.

Accordingly, we are calling on the government, through this committee, to change the narrative on migration by highlighting the positive obligation of Canada towards refugees, the critical role migrants have played in building our nation and the value of their contributions in shaping our collective future.

Third, in recognition of the fact that persons of colour represent an increasingly large proportion of immigrants across all classes, we ask

the government, through the committee, to adopt racial and gender-equity lenses to evaluate the impacts of all immigration laws and policies on racialized communities.

Ms. Jin Chien (Staff Lawyer, Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic): Turning now to the issues facing refugees, Canada has legal obligations, as we all know, towards this group under international law, particularly as a state party to the 1951 refugee convention. The government's policy in this regard must be guided by both treaty and domestic law, namely IRPA.

In response to the recent rise in the number of refugee claimants from the U.S., we call on Canada to rescind or suspend the safe third country agreement with the U.S. and to ensure that any reform to the refugee determination system continue to respect due process rights for all refugee claimants in a manner consistent with domestic and international human rights law.

On the issue of migrant workers, the Canadian immigration system heavily prioritizes economic migrants, as we've heard and as evidenced in the recent adjustments to immigration level targets for 2019 to 2021.

This group is comprised primarily of well-resourced, so-called high-skilled and highly educated workers. Those considered low-skilled, including caregivers and seasonal agricultural workers, come to Canada under the temporary foreign worker program and generally have no right to stay permanently. Their immigration status is often tied to time-constrained and employer-specific jobs, which makes them exceptionally susceptible and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. What's more, many of these so-called temporary jobs are more long-term in nature, and they're left vacant due to low domestic worker retention rates.

We submit to the committee that Canada should provide permanent residence to all migrant workers upon arrival in Canada and adopt the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, as well as the ILO Convention 189, concerning decent work for domestic workers.

We also call on the government to develop and implement a comprehensive, transparent, inclusive and ongoing regularization program for all persons living with precarious status in Canada.

• (1650)

Ms. Avvy Go: Family reunification is the pillar of our immigration policy and serves to make Canada a competitive destination for high-skilled immigrants. However, family class intake levels have been shrinking over the last two decades. Changes in the laws have also made family reunification much longer and more difficult for many Canadians.

The restrictions currently imposed on the sponsorship of parents and grandparents in particular have a disproportionate impact on racialized communities, which are more likely than others to embrace an extended family structure. They are also more overrepresented among the low-income households, and are therefore less likely to meet the minimum necessary income requirement for their sponsorship.

We are asking the committee to recommend lifting the quota on the parents and grandparents sponsorship, repealing the MNI requirement, scaling back the sponsorship period to 10 years and increasing the overall level of family class immigrants to 50% of the overall immigration intake. Given the importance of extended families, we also ask the committee to ask the government to redesign the family class program to allow for the sponsorship of siblings and other relatives to Canada.

In conclusion, Canada is regarded as a model for the world in regard to its immigration and refugee policy. Immigration is central to Canada's long-term economic strategy and growth. We welcome the very modest increase in the resettlement of refugees as well as family class members in the proposed 2019-21 immigration plan. However, these increases are far from adequate, in our respectful submission.

Canada can best sustain its leadership role by adopting immigration and citizenship policies that prioritize permanent immigration over temporary migration, remove barriers to citizenship and facilitate equitable access to the labour market for all racialized and other marginalized groups. As well, Canada should continue to demonstrate respect for human rights by accepting more refugees, ending indefinite immigration detention, and adopting concrete measures to address racism and other forms of discrimination against all people living in Canada, regardless of their immigration status.

Thank you.

The Chair: We're going to begin with Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming.

In preparation for today, I had an opportunity to see what Twitter was saying about the levels plan. I notice that Goldy Hyder, the president and CEO of the Business Council of Canada, tweeted this:

Canada to increase annual immigration admissions to 350,000 by 2021. Talent is Canada's key strategic resource. Businesses know we have the talent & if not we can get it. Key consideration for investing in Canada.

I ask you both, in the context of levels and what can be absorbed in society, whether or not this target of around 1% is right.

In the case of Mr. Donnelly, how will Canadians or the public see a 1% target generally? Are they supportive or not, and should it be higher or lower? In the case of Ms. Go and Ms. Chien, you're asking for much more than that, so what target are you suggesting?

Mr. Michael Donnelly: On the first question, whether this is the right target, I don't have an opinion about any particular target.

On the question of whether Canadians will accept this, I think they will. I think it can be sold in a way that is convincing. I think that it

could be rejected, and it would be rejected, if it were presented as some unreasonably large thing by political elites.

What we know about the way the public reads numbers is that nobody understands what these numbers mean unless you're in this field and this is what you do day to day. In terms of what they can be told in advance of the arrival of migrants, I don't think the numbers matter. I think the framing and the discussion of this—how it will benefit Canada and how it will benefit immigrants and natives alike—are more important.

Once they arrive, they will be accepted, to the extent to which they integrate in labour markets and to the extent to which they are able to not be segregated from society in a way that would frustrate many natives. I think there's always the danger of demagogues picking on particular cases and highlighting that and turning Canadians against immigration. I think a numeric target has very little to do with whether that happens or not.

• (1655)

Mr. Nick Whalen: Go ahead, Ms. Go.

Ms. Avvy Go: We don't usually take a position on the actual percentage or number. However, I know that organizations such as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants have been pushing for the 1%. That seems to be sort of a consensus among many groups.

I guess from our perspective, it's more about the mix as opposed to the number. We are hoping to see a different mix from what we have right now. For instance, I'm old enough to remember that before the 1990s, we had a much higher level of family class immigrants. With the evaluation by CIC in 2015, looking at the family class program, they found that 43% of the economic immigrants coming to Canada chose Canada because they could sponsor their families later.

I'm more interested in the—

Mr. Nick Whalen: Let's just pause there for a second.

On the one hand, in some of the recommendations provided, you've been suggesting to rescind the safe third country agreement, which would allow people to come to the border and, as the Conservatives would argue, jump the queue. We only have so many settlement services available for people. We're trying to scale up to 1%.

How can you rationalize allowing people to come to the border and take settlement services in a finite resource environment and then also ask for more family class? You don't leave any room for any other type of economic migration, which Mr. Donnelly suggests is what supports public confidence in our system.

Ms. Avvy Go: First of all, we think the refugee policy is distinct and separate from the immigration policy. I think—

Mr. Nick Whalen: Are you saying that they don't need settlement services?

Ms. Avvy Go: I'm saying that the rationale for refugee policy is different from that for immigration policy. We accept refugees not because.... Refugees do have economic contributions to Canada, but we do not accept them on that basis; we accept refugees because we have an international obligation to do so.

People are coming through the border regardless. I have clients who may not be necessarily coming directly from the United States, but somehow they will have to go through the United States to come to Canada because of the journey they take. Many of them are going through other ways, irregular ways, to come to Canada. They are not in the news because they are not coming in the same way that we're seeing in the news.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Sure.

On a related topic then, Mr. Donnelly, have you tested how important fairness is to public confidence in the immigration system? You talked a little about whether political leaders are suggesting that it's good, attainable and doable, or whether political leaders are suggesting that it's not.

Is there a public perception about making sure that the system is fair and equitable? With thoughts around fairness and equity, such as saying that queue-jumping is something that would upset people, or taking resources away from local people or not integrating well, whereas integrating well, contributing to resources that everyone gets to enjoy together, and following the rules-based order...are two sides of three of the same issue.

How do those narratives affect public support for the higher levels of immigration that we're trying to get to?

Mr. Michael Donnelly: On the question of fairness, I'm not aware of any attempt to measure the relationship between perceptions of fairness and attitudes directly. I do know that confidence in institutions—trust that the government knows what it's doing, trust that the bureaucracy works—is generally associated with a belief that immigrants will come and integrate well. To the extent that this is a measure of fairness—that we think the government is doing its job and processing people smoothly—that would address your question.

Mr. Nick Whalen: That's good.

Ms. Go, on a counterpoint to that, if you believe we should greatly increase the amount of immigration to the country, you also believe that the system is working and it's integrating people well.

Ms. Avvy Go: I don't think the system is working as well as it could.

One of the barriers to integration—

Mr. Nick Whalen: Then why are you asking for us now to add more people from various classes if you don't believe that the system works?

Ms. Avvy Go: Once again, I'm not talking about the number. In fact, if you read our submission, you'll see that we actually do not talk about the number. We're just talking about the mix. We don't have a position on the overall number. We're just talking about the mix within the overall number.

One of the key reasons why people are not integrating well is the equity barrier to the labour market. Many studies have shown, for

instance, that if you're a newcomer or from a racialized group, you are more likely to earn less money and not be able to get the job that you were trained to do. Those issues are something that the government can work with. I know that various types of government, various parties, have tried to work on it, but it is something that we can do better. If people are integrated better, they will also be seen as contributing better to the economy, which will, I think, in turn make Canadians more accepting of more immigrants to Canada because, after all, we need immigrants to drive our economic engine.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

I need to end it there, sorry.

Mr. Tilson, go ahead.

Mr. David Tilson: I have one question for Mr. Donnelly, and then Mr. Maguire will take over.

It's a question that I asked Mr. Antunes of the Conference Board of Canada, which was about how in recent years Canada's immigration policy has focused on economic migration. Although we do have family reunification and humanitarian streams, it seems that the reason why most Canadians support the levels of migration is that we have structured it to benefit the economy. That seems to be the case. Some say that if we move away from that, public support will drop significantly.

Most of your presentation was that you study public opinion. Do you agree or disagree with what I just said?

Mr. Michael Donnelly: It would certainly cost support to move away from an emphasis on—

Mr. David Tilson: We're all politicians, of course, and we look at public support. That's our problem in this whole game.

Mr. Michael Donnelly: Yes. It's certainly the case that support for immigration would be hurt if it were perceived as less economically beneficial.

I don't have hard evidence, but my guess is that the mix, the leaning toward economic immigrants, has improved and has helped to maintain support for immigration. How large is that effect? You've suggested a substantial drop. I'm not sure that it would be a substantial drop, just because I think it's hard to see substantial drops in attitudes toward immigration, even in the presence of things such as the Syrian refugee crisis in Germany.

Mr. David Tilson: Our problem, of course, is that we have all these other reasons: people who are in terrible camps around the planet, along with pestilence, war, climate issues and all these other things. I could go on. These are very serious issues. We are a compassionate country. We have an obligation to help these people, but I guess we do look at public opinion. That's why I asked you that question.

Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Ms. Avvy Go: May I answer?

Mr. David Tilson: Yes.

Ms. Avvy Go: I think it's also important to think about how we can change the narrative. The assumption behind that sentiment is that family class immigrants are of no economic benefit to Canada. However, once again, I'm citing CIC's own study from 2015, which looked at both spousal sponsorship applications and sponsorship of parents and grandparents. It talks about the economic benefits of having parents and grandparents come to Canada. A very high number of sponsors are able to return to the workforce because their parents and grandparents are here, or their spouses are able to return to work.

We think of parents and grandparents as the only people who come through family class. I came from the family class sponsorship myself. Most of my siblings came through the family class sponsorship, because we have an eldest brother who came here in the sixties. Eventually, everybody moved to Canada as a result of that. We are all in professions. We are all doing whatever it is that Canadians would deem to be successful careers.

I think a lot of these assumptions can be changed with the right information to the public, just as assumptions about refugees as queue jumpers can be changed if we change the narrative ourselves.

The Chair: Mr. Maguire, go ahead.

• (1705)

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

Thanks for your answer. Welcome back.

It's good to see you as well, Mr. Donnelly.

To follow up on my colleague's question in regard to this perception of moving away from the economic stream and how that impacts economics, it seems to be fairly accepted. I think that's what you were saying and what my colleague indicated, but the recent Angus Reid poll showed that 49% of Canadians today have lost faith in the immigration system, as opposed to 36% in 2014. That's according to a survey they just did. That's quite a significant change.

You said that it's very hard to see that change, Mr. Donnelly. That's a pretty significant change right now. I guess I would say that there has been a move away. I want your opinion on what you think we could do to change that vision, if you will, of the Canadian population.

I'll let you answer that first.

Mr. Michael Donnelly: I haven't seen that poll. Did you say it's an Angus Reid poll?

When you say that they've lost faith in the immigration system.... I would not be surprised by a big jump in trust in the system. That's the kind of thing where a single perceived failure can shift attitudes fairly widely, but on broader measures, such as whether we should bring in more immigrants, how many and so on, that's where I think you see more stability.

To maintain that trust in the system, if that's what you want to focus on, I think the main thing to do is to avoid perceived failures and perceived inefficiencies. That means avoiding real failures and inefficiencies, but it also means presenting the system in the best possible light.

Mr. Larry Maguire: What I meant was that 49% of people today want to see a lower immigration level.

We all know that we need immigration, as each of you has said, to grow our economy here in Canada and be responsible citizens in the rest of the world. We look at bringing in refugees. The numbers are there.

I'm interested in your comments, particularly with your experience, Ms. Go and Ms. Chien, as to the levels that we could use in those areas, and how best to find the areas where this work is required.

When bringing these people in, we can't just have them on a welfare system forever. They have to come in and be able to find jobs, and they do, on the immigration side. We need to make sure that we are getting them into areas where they can basically become more permanent residents, as opposed to temporary, as you said earlier.

The Chair: I'm afraid you talked out the clock.

I'm sorry, I can't give you a chance to respond.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

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

I thank our witnesses for their presentations.

Thank you, Ms. Go, for your comment with regard to changing the narrative.

I'll just jump in and say this. If you devalue and dehumanize refugees and immigrants, of course there will be a backlash. We're seeing some of that, frankly, as a result of the U.S. President's discriminatory rhetoric and policies that are hateful and targeting segments of the community. When you have that, you allow for, I think, emboldened people who want to bring forward racism and really fan that fear.

That's another story for another day.

What I want to get into is the makeup of our immigration system. Ms. Go, you talked about that. One of the issues that I know are front and centre for many immigrant families is family reunification—parents and grandparents. We have a lottery system, which is absurd—to say that your ability to reunite with your family is based on the luck of the draw.

The government increased the number of applications: however, they did not increase with the levels' numbers. It's like saying that a thousand people can apply for this one job and at the end of the day there's just one job.

What are your comments about that, and what should we do on that piece?

Ms. Avvy Go: I think right now there are a number of issues with the sponsorship of parents and grandparents. Even though the quota has been set, my understanding is, after talking to the minister himself, that oftentimes we're unable to even meet the quota.

I think one of the reasons is that many people will simply not qualify, or they will not apply, thinking that they do not qualify. At our clinic, we see a lot of those examples. Once again, OCASI did a survey of the agencies, and many of the agencies said that many of their clients do not apply because they know that they do not qualify. I think we need to change the requirements, as well as the quota system. If you change one without the other, you will still have the same problem.

Talking about the changing narrative, we need to think about the family class system as an integrated system. It's not just about the spouse or parents; it's also about the siblings and other relatives, which we used to have. People coming through the economic class, but with an assisted relative, were given an extra point. Some of my relatives and family came in through that way as well.

If you think of family class more broadly and treat all family members equally, then you will not have a system where some family members are being privileged over others. We need to rethink the whole family class system as well.

● (1710)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

That's a good recommendation from you, to expand family reunification beyond parents and grandparents to include siblings, aunts, uncles, and extended family members. In fact, that's how I came, by the way. We were allowed into this country because my aunt sponsored my dad, and we came as a family.

With respect to another piece, related to temporary foreign workers, the principle is that if you're good enough to work, you're good enough to stay. Why not allow temporary foreign workers to come into the country as permanent residents on arrival? I'd like you to comment on that.

We used to have a program in Canada where people with different skill sets—medium, low and high—were allowed to come to Canada based on the immigration system, not a temporary foreign worker program. I wonder if you can comment on that, whether we should bring back something like that.

Ms. Avvy Go: Sure. I totally agree with you that if people are good enough to work, they should be good enough to stay. I'm not the only one who says that. Even the Canadian Federation of Independent Business supports that. I think they also recognize that many of the jobs filled by temporary foreign workers right now, as my colleague has mentioned, are in fact permanent jobs that should be filled, but they are not being filled right now.

In a way, the employer takes the easy way out because temporary foreign workers are cheaper. They are tied to the employers. They are more vulnerable, so I guess they are more obedient workers to work with.

We lose because we are losing these people. Once they work here for four years and they are gone, the employer also loses. That's why so many of the employers are pushing for a permanent residence pathway for the temporary foreign workers. They have trained these people, and they want to keep them on.

Again, it's not just about the number; it's about the mix. Going forward, we should think about that. If you think of the economic

class, it's not just about highly skilled and highly educated workers. We need workers in various sectors. The workers who are brought in as temporary workers are filling job requirements. They are filling jobs that need to be filled, so why not allow them to come in and stay permanently?

We should also be thinking about having a regularization process so that those who are here right now and are in the temporary foreign worker program would also be able to apply for permanent resident status. That can go toward the 1% or 2%, or whatever quota you decide at the end of the day.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: From the government's own expert advisory panel—it was actually the former minister, the Honourable John McCallum, who did this—the recommendation was to call for 400,000 immigrants to come to Canada, in terms of the levels number. We're not there, and we have some way to go.

That said, we have an aging population. People are not having as many children as they used to, and we need immigrants, for our economy and for our GDP. That is one key reason, if you don't care about anything else.

To that end, with respect to changing our immigration policy, is it time for the government to take a deep breath and say that it's not just about politics or popularity but about doing what is good for the country, to come back with policies that reflect both our need for GDP growth and our need for cultural, community and family support?

● (1715)

Ms. Avvy Go: Yes, I agree with that. I think different governments are trying to do that, and we don't always get it right. Sometimes the way we talk about immigration policy can be clumsy or can perpetuate some of the stereotypes out there, but I think that if there is a will, there is a way. By having this kind of public consultation and public discourse, changing the narrative, once again, will set us on the right path.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With respect to consultation, by the way, the government is undertaking consultations regarding anti-racism, which relates to this work. The government is having closed-door consultations, and we don't know who's being invited.

Do you agree with that, or should it be an open-door consultation process?

Ms. Avvy Go: Just to give myself as an example, we were given an invitation to attend a consultation on a Tuesday after a long weekend. I received that invitation on Friday afternoon. It hasn't been a very helpful process, but we have been trying to speak to the minister and the parliamentary secretary about this issue. We hope that the process going forward will be much more open.

The Chair: I'll need to end it there. We're quite a bit over time.

Mr. Tabbara, go ahead.

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

Thank you to all three of you for being here. I know they provide a lot of great services to a lot of newcomers.

Ms. Go, you mentioned in your opening statement that we should lift the quota on parents and grandparents. In 2015, roughly 95,000 parents and grandparents applied, and only 5,000 were eligible. We increased that to 10,000. We recently increased it to 17,000, and in 2019 it will go to 20,000.

Why do you feel that we should be lifting that number now and having 100,000 individuals who are grandparents? They could be seniors. They could be older in age. Why do you think we should lift the cap and have these immigrants come to Canada?

Ms. Avvy Go: They should be treated like other immigrants. If there are no quotas on spousal sponsorship, then there should not be a quota on parents and grandparents.

Again, as I mentioned earlier, it is not just about lifting the quota; you have to look at the requirements as well. If the requirements remain unchanged, even if you increase the quota three times, you will still get the same number because people are simply not applying because of the very restrictive requirements of MNI—at LICO plus 30%—plus the 20-year sponsorship period, plus the three-year income tax requirement. All those things make it difficult for people to qualify as parents and grandparents.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I understand it can be cumbersome, but at the same time I think we should be cognizant and have a levels program to ensure we're getting immigrants from different brackets, whether they're economic, students or parents and grandparents.

Ms. Avvy Go: You're getting only immigrants from the high brackets under this class of sponsorship.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Absolutely. But what I'm saying is that the overall numbers need to be increased. We can't just lift the caps on parents and grandparents without increasing immigration levels in other fields. We could be bringing in many seniors, increasing our median age, which is 43 in Canada, lifting that even higher.

I think you have to be careful to have a levels program whereby you're bringing in international students or economic migrants, whether they're high-skilled or low-skilled. I think you have to be very careful when talking about lifting the cap. I agree it should be increased, but I don't agree it should be lifted.

Ms. Avvy Go: I understand, and we can have that policy debate. But to be very honest, even before the quota was put in, there was an informal quota because there were never enough resources to process the sponsorship of parents and grandparents, which created the backlog of 150,000 and led to the moratorium in November 2011. I'm giving you a history lesson of what happened to the sponsorship program.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That's correct. The backlog was 167,000 or 168,000. It has now been reduced to just under 30,000, and we're on our way to reducing that backlog.

• (1720)

Ms. Avvy Go: The backlog was created because the resources were not put in there to process the applications.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You're correct. I agree with that.

You talked a lot about there being a heavy priority on economic migrants, on high-skilled labour. I have been advocating for individuals coming in through the skilled trades. A lot of times you would be getting a lot more points at a certain age if you have a

master's degree or a Ph.D., etc. But I think the government should be looking at.... I consider them high-skilled workers. Some may view them differently.

What would you say in terms of those in the skilled trades? How do you think the government should be looking at the points system? Do you think it should be altered?

Ms. Avvy Go: I agree that we should look at the different skills and different professions and trades. It is harder to find someone who can fix elevators than to find a lawyer in Toronto right now—I'm just telling you the truth. Many trades are understaffed right now. I think it is important to bring in people with different skill sets, different education levels. I agree with you that we will call them high-skilled workers, but they may not have the high level of education that often comes with the economic class immigrants. I think it's a question of looking at the level of skills as well as the level of education.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Mr. Donnelly, I want to wrap this up. We've been getting a lot of polarization, and a lot of that has been coming from the United States. Why do you think this is growing? Do you see what governments can do to stop this kind of polarization? Should we send out information that historically this has been an economic driver, that it has been great for our country, that it has enabled us to broaden our relationships with other countries in trade, etc. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr. Michael Donnelly: Yes. On the broad question of why this is happening throughout the west—this rise of fairly xenophobic, obviously racist politicians and political parties—on that front, there's a lot going on and I wouldn't pretend to be able to explain it all. But I would say that certainly economic dislocation combines with pre-existing xenophobia to produce this kind of potent mix.

I guess the one thing I would say, in terms of what the government can do to push back against that and to prevent it from spreading north, is that by far the most important thing is that the messages people get aren't mixed, that the message people get from politicians, both on the government side and on the opposition side, is unified—that this is a good thing, that immigrants have a positive impact on Canada.

Once you have a mixed message coming from political elites, people are much better able to pick and choose the message that fits with their viewpoint. Then you do see polarization.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I would like to slip in a question just before Mr. Maguire has his turn again. It's for Professor Donnelly.

I am so old that when I was a student at U of T, we didn't have a department of political science and we didn't have a department of economics. We had a department of political economy. The rationale that was given to us as students—and I believe it continues to be correct—was that there are no political discussions that are not economic, and there are no economic discussions that are not political.

I know you are a political scientist. I am wondering whether there is collaborative work going on on this issue that you either know about or might be called to do at some point where we look at the intrinsic relationship between the economics of migration and the political opinion, because I think we're circling around that.

The question I'll raise is about grandparents or parents and family class. I haven't seen a single study, but intuitively I believe that if we are getting a 25-year-old programmer or electrician or medical receptionist coming to this country, they have been educated—elementary school, secondary school, college, trade school, university. They've had a first job where they've made their mistakes and learned. They arrive here market-ready. The value of that person to this country is immense. If we attract them because we have a comparative advantage that their parents or grandparents may be sponsored later—so they don't go to New Zealand or Australia but come here because they have that hope in their pocket—the amount of money that senior could potentially cost even in the last 10 years of life is overwhelmed by the economic benefit we're getting by having that skilled, or even unskilled, worker coming into the country.

I'm not sure Canadians have thought that through, and I'm not sure we have the academic evidence. The Conference Board is back in the gallery still. I'm just wondering whether you know of that evidence and whether you can get it to this committee to help us understand that relationship.

That's my sermon, sorry.

• (1725)

Mr. Michael Donnelly: On the general question of whether political scientists still talk to economists in this area, yes, we spend a lot of time doing that.

On the question of the cost-benefit analysis of one worker in any given group and their family, that's not something I've done. I imagine the Conference Board has done things along those lines, or at least you could back it out from their estimates.

In terms of how to convince people that this is the case—assuming it is true, which I believe as well—I think it takes people going out and saying this even in places where it might be unpopular. It takes politicians, union leaders, religious leaders, business leaders and basically everybody we turn to when we ask, “What should I think about this? I haven't thought about it today; I haven't thought about it in a month; I haven't thought about it in a year.” All of those people need to be saying the same thing.

The Chair: I see a paper or a book coming when you collaborate well. Thank you.

Mr. Maguire, are you sharing?

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You're adding to my time, so thank you so much.

First, I want to correct the record. I said 400,000. It should be 450,000. That was the number from the expert panel by way of recommendation to the former minister, John McCallum.

I want to ask a question about asylum seekers. Ms. Chien, you made a recommendation that the government suspend the safe third country agreement, given the situation in the United States.

We also have a situation now whereby if you are a child and you come with a parent as an asylum-seeker, you qualify under our current rules and laws to be an asylum-seeker, but your parent does not, so we're in the business of breaking up parent and child.

Do you agree with that policy, or should that be changed? If it should be changed, how so?

Ms. Jin Chien: We've already heard from Ms. Go that family reunification is a pillar of the immigration system. We've heard about individuals who bring in their grandparents and parents, and although those grandparents and parents may not necessarily be contributing directly to the economy, there is a social, intangible aspect. Similarly, as we've heard from the chair, if the child stays in Canada there is intrinsic value. There's an opportunity cost if we lose them, if they return to their home country or go to another safe country. If that child is admitted as a refugee, they will be educated in Canada, and that child does need family support.

I can't think of a single instance where.... We've seen this with our neighbours to the south and their policies, where there are family divisions. I don't know of any children who would stay in the country if they were removed from their families and raised in the foster family system that we have here.

I would say that, obviously, any reasonable person would agree that this is not the right policy. How do we go about having that parent be recognized for their contributions and not have to resort, for example, to H and C applications?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: And when they do, isn't that just a waste of our resources? It's a waste of resources in the very jammed IRB, which doesn't have enough resources to process cases. It's a waste of resources for legal aid lawyers. Often it's legal aid that provides that kind of resource, and so on.

So, for those applications, should we not just allow for the child to bring the parent as part of the application?

• (1730)

Ms. Avvy Go: Yes, and I think that's an example of the very narrow way we define family. We look at it in one direction and not the others, and that's exactly why we have a two-tier system where parents and grandparents are seen as a different class of family from spouses and dependent children. That's a perfect example of that narrow definition.

The Chair: We need to end there.

Thank you very much.

I will remind the committee that we're going to meet Tuesday but we're not meeting Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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