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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

[*English*]

Good morning, everyone.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to meeting 89 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) (g), the committee is meeting this day to commence consideration of Report 9, Processing Applications for Permanent Residence—Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023 Reports 5 to 9 of the Auditor General of Canada.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome all our witnesses.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, Auditor General; Carol McCalla, principal; and Erin Jellinek, director. From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have Christiane Fox, deputy minister, and Marie-Josée Dorion, acting senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery.

It's nice to have you all back with us.

Ms. Hogan will open up with five minutes from the floor. Then we'll hear from Ms. Fox.

Ms. Hogan, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on processing applications for permanent residence, which was tabled in the House of Commons on October 19, 2023. I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. Joining me today are Carol McCalla and Erin Jellinek, who were responsible for the audit.

In this audit, we looked at whether Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada processed applications for permanent residency efficiently and promptly to support Canada's economic, family reunification and humanitarian goals. Overall, we found that despite recent efforts to improve application processing times, most people were still waiting a long time for a decision, with the longest wait times for those applying to refugee programs. At the end of 2022, large backlogs remained across all eight permanent resident programs that we examined.

The department did not meet its service standards for prompt processing in any of the programs that we examined. It also had not established service standards for refugee programs, contrary to Treasury Board directives. People applying to refugee programs waited the longest, on average almost three years.

We also found that the expected processing times provided online did not consider the existing application volumes or backlogs. We recommended that the department be more transparent about how long applicants are likely to wait for a decision. This includes setting realistic and reliable service standards and expected processing times.

[*Translation*]

Despite a commitment in 2016 to better match workload with available staff, the department continued to assign applications to offices without evaluating whether they had enough staff to process them. While digital applications allowed the department to transfer aging applications to other offices better resourced to process them, it had no plans to do so. This leaves backlogged applications to age even further.

In 7 of the 8 permanent resident programs we examined, we found that certain countries of citizenship were overrepresented with respect to application backlogs. In addition, the department did not sufficiently monitor whether the use of its new automated eligibility-assessment tool produced different results for different groups of applicants. We found that applicants who received an eligibility pass from the tool also received faster decisions, while other applicants continued to wait a long time for a decision.

The department committed to addressing systemic barriers to applicants under its Anti-Racism Strategy. However, it had yet to take any steps to collect demographic information about applicants and monitor and correct disparities in processing applications. This is critical to identifying and removing systemic barriers across government programs.

This concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you once again.

[*English*]

Ms. Fox, you now have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to appear before this committee alongside Madam Karen Hogan, the Auditor General.

Thank you, Madam Hogan, to you and your team, Carol and Erin, for the work you did on this chapter.

I also want to start by acknowledging that we're meeting today on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I appreciate the chance to meet with you.

Immigration is crucial to our country's long-term success. To that end, this year Canada has already welcomed approximately 405,000 permanent residents as of October 31, 2023, up from about 388,000 during that same period in 2022. That positions us well to reach our target of welcoming 465,000 new permanent residents by the end of this year as we continue to implement the levels as part of the 2024-2026 immigration levels plan.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada recognizes that modernizing and strengthening elements of our immigration system is necessary to address the challenges associated with welcoming more people.

[*Translation*]

The Office of the Auditor General assessed our department's efforts in 2022 to process permanent residence applications in support of the country's economic, family reunification and humanitarian objectives. The resulting report recommends areas where improvements are needed to boost the efficiency, fairness and transparency of our immigration processes. We thank the Auditor General for her report, and take the concerns she raised seriously.

Over the last few years, we have prioritized improving processing times as part of our commitment to client service and building a stronger immigration system.

[*English*]

Today we are much further ahead, but there is still work to be done. Since the audit period, IRCC has made significant progress in reducing processing times and application backlogs including for the eight permanent residence program areas that were assessed by the Auditor General.

We have hired new employees to assist with processing and we continue our work towards digital applications and harnessing automation technologies to increase our processing capacity and efficiency.

In August of 2022, the department began publishing data on a monthly basis to inform the public about our ongoing efforts to reduce backlogs.

[*Translation*]

I am pleased to report that a number of our economic immigration programs are now processing applications within our service standards. We continue to work toward our goal of reducing overall backlogs and processing 80% of new applications within service standards, accounting for expected delays in complex cases.

[*English*]

However, with the high demand to come to Canada, it will not always be possible to achieve this goal, as the number of applications received annually exceeds Canada's planned admission targets set in the immigration levels plan. We have a managed migration system and we receive more applications than spaces for any given year.

That said, we will continue to address backlogs and improve the workload sharing in regions where backlogs exist by leveraging our global processing network and assigning local resources when they are needed.

Meanwhile, we are pleased to have made strides on recommendation number 6 in the AG's report. We recently opened the permanent residence online portal to private refugee sponsorship groups, and it will be expanded further, to some of our government-assisted refugee referral partners, on December 20.

With this expansion, we're improving convenience and efficiency for these groups to securely submit their applications and referrals.

The department has also been improving its policies and programs as a result of consultations with the public and stakeholders. As we did a cross-country consultation, in which I personally participated, I heard from businesses, academics, NGOs and clients about the challenges they faced with our system.

We released our report "An Immigration System for Canada's Future" earlier this fall. We are committed to continue building a more robust, effective and agile immigration system that is responsive to the most pressing challenges of our time so that Canada remains a welcoming and inclusive destination for people seeking to build new lives here.

• (1110)

[Translation]

We're grateful for the feedback from the Office of the Auditor General, and appreciate this committee's role in upholding the principles of accountability and transparency.

[English]

I am happy to take your questions.

Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now open up to questions.

We will turn to the opposition. Mr. Kmiec, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

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

My first questions will be for the deputy minister.

What is the total inventory of applications, including those beyond service standards right now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Mr. Chair, thank you for the question.

I think what we can indicate to you is that from January to October, the department made 6.2 million final decisions, so that's year to date. That's for TR, PR and citizenship. We have seven million expected for this year. Those are probably the total numbers.

In terms of how many of those for PR are within the service standard, I would say that as of October 2023, 55% are within the service standard for the PR program, which compares to 40% back in July 2022 at the time of the beginning of the audit.

I can also indicate, if it's helpful for the committee, where we were with the aid programs. None were in compliance of the service standard. Where we are now, we have significant progress to report. For federal skilled workers, we're now within service standards, so within six months or less. Right now, it's closer to five months.

We are down in the Quebec-selected skilled workers program. It was at 20 months at the time of the audit. It's at 13 months. We still need a bit of work to get into service standard, but we've made significant progress.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry, Deputy, I'm just going to interrupt you, because I don't get all that much time, especially at this committee.

The AG's report said that for two of the programs, the PSR program and the GAR program, there were no service standards set. The AG's report says that the department said that there was "no plan" to make service standards. That's what it says in the AG's report.

In your detailed management action plan, it says that you have a plan. What changed between when the AG did the audit and said that the department said "it had no plan" to comply with Treasury Board directives to now, when there is a detailed plan that in fact has multistep processes and months in action? What changed between having no plan and having a plan now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what I can say in response to that question is that when I joined the department in the summer of 2022, we were at a pretty high point of service backlogs and service challenges. The first thing we endeavoured to do was meet the service standards we had before we started to commit to shortening them and adding service standards to lines of business.

Priority number one was around trying to get through this crisis of backlog and get to more normal service standards. Part two aligned exactly with where the AG recommended that we go, which was to look at service standards for all our lines of business, including GARs and PSRs, and I can speak to some of the challenges around that—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm going to interrupt you again, Deputy Minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It is part of the plan. It is part of the immigration levels, and we are moving forward on setting service standards.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You have a plan right now, but then who told the AG's office there was no plan to comply with Treasury Board directives? Was it the previous deputy minister?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm not sure exactly who would have had that conversation from my team, but what I can say is that we are committed to look at service standards for the refugee program, including our GARs and PSRs, and that is stated in the immigration levels plan.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: In my discussions with the AG's office—I have an email from them—I had questions about the continuing use of those global case management system codes of former employees. In a pool of 6,000 that they looked at, there are 57 codes still in use.

There were 57 applications identified. Two of the applications were submitted in November of 2018. Those are the oldest. Those were four and a half years old at the time of the Auditor General's review in April 2023. One application was made in 2019, which means it was four years old. The majority of the other applications were submitted in 2022.

I thought they had stopped assigning GCMS codes to old employee numbers. In the case of at least one person who has been waiting patiently since November 2018, that's four and a half years. Is there an error rate because it's still happening in their drop-down menus or something, and people are assigning them to the wrong ones? Is this practice of assigning them to former employees who are not there continuing in the department?

We were told that the AG's office was told this is a management technique being used by different offices to simply manage their workload, but four and a half years is a long time to wait to have your application considered. It just looks like this application may have been completely forgotten.

● (1115)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think that at the time of the use of GCMS numbers, because they were assigned to perhaps an older employee, it didn't mean that a new person couldn't come in to take a look at that code, so I'm not going to comment specifically on the 2018 case.

I think what I have found in my role in this department is that there are times when a file has been sitting for a long time and it gets to my attention either because of direct client outreach or because the issue is raised by a member of Parliament, and we dig in to it. At times it's also because we notice that there could be a missing document. There could be an abandoned file or a security check that's not complete, or there could be a material change in the application such that it requires more time.

I can't speak to the 2018 case you've brought forward, but what I can say is that those numbers are.... I don't think they're in use any more, and we took that to account last year when this first surfaced, so I don't think they're being assigned to that number at this point in time today. That was a change that was made about eight months ago.

Is that fair, a year ago...?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion (Acting Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Yes. Maybe I can just jump in.

We did use the GCMS user IDs that were inactive, as you're saying, Deputy, but then what we're doing is making sure that we're running the queries on a regular basis now so we don't have those cases.

If there's anything left in the system, we've developed queries to make sure we pull them out to take action on them. We do have a bit of management in how we're assigning files in the system, but we're taking measures not to forget files, if that's your question.

The Chair: Thank you. That is the time.

I'm turning now to Ms. Khalid. You have the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Thank you, Ms. Hogan, for a really good report. I think it's important for us to realize the challenges that we go through.

With IRCC, oftentimes—and my own constituency office being an example—we become the last resort for people who are trying to resolve their issues. In my own constituency office, I have at least 300 families who are waiting for decisions on files that have now become backlogged, I would say, in the system.

I'll also take this opportunity to give a big shout-out to my team in my office, to Kristina especially, who does a lot of the work in my constituency office in that respect.

One of the big challenges we hear from our constituents that is addressed in this report as well is that some applications that are very similar to each other will get processed within 20 months, while others will go on for years and some will get processed within six months. I'm wondering if you can help me understand a bit about how these applications that are so similar are prioritized and why that discrepancy is there.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much for the question.

I think that part of perhaps some of the discrepancies can be explained in terms of how, for the permanent residency programs, we have a points system based on express entry, and I think that over the last year we are in a position now, more than we have been in the past, to actually do targeted draws around specific skill sets that the country may need: health human resources, STEM, and skilled workers in some of the construction trades. As a result of that, there's a points allocation system for permanent residency, and someone may be drawn out faster as a result of the skill sets they can bring to the country, which could explain discrepancies.

I would also note that we work very closely with our security partners, and at times what may appear to be a very similar case application can in fact be very different in the context of the information provided by the client, so it is hard to determine the measure between the two.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I appreciate that you said that, because oftentimes when we call in to find out what the challenges are, the constituent will call to try to get to the bottom of why their application is not moving forward. There's a major lack of transparency, a lack of information, and that often leads to people filing for ATIPs just to get that basic information.

Why can't we provide better information to people as their files are ongoing? If you're saying that discrepancies are based on what type of jobs we're looking for, what types of resources we're looking for, why can't we tell that to these really frustrated people who are waiting months and years for some kind of closure in their applications?

● (1120)

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you. I think you're absolutely right. I would agree with you entirely in this context. When people are unsure about their file, they call the client centre. They email someone. They email their MP. They may file an ATIP. It creates a lot more stress in the system overall.

How we've attempted to address that is obviously by trying to improve the client centre, and the call centre experience in particular. We're trying to improve the backlog of web forms that existed during COVID. We're launching status trackers so that people can go online and take a look at where their application stands in the system. We've launched that for family class, citizenship, express entry and TRV applications, and for study and work permits. We're hopeful that when they go online and see their status, people will be aware of where they stand, although that sometimes causes concern. Someone will say, "I've gone into my portal. I'm still in this phase. Can you explain why I'm still in this phase?"

At least we're beginning to use digital technologies so that clients can access their information and track it in real time.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

With respect to digital technologies, I understand artificial intelligence is now being used more and more to process applications.

How does that play with recommendation 9.36, especially with respect to refugee programs, the anti-racism strategy and how applications are processed?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think we have to utilize the technology. For instance, in the call centre, we've adopted robotic processing so that the triaging of documents coming in is not done manually. They're set up in a system so that an officer looking at a case will have all the documents uploaded in one place, versus grabbing them from the various locations they may be in. Using automation, from that standpoint, is helpful.

In the context of the AG report, I would say that what we try to do is.... There are some cases that are more complex than others. That is the nature of the immigration system. I think we need to do a better job of reporting, and we hope that by using automation to triage the processing, we make it easier for officers to review the files they are reviewing. For the more straightforward applications, the benefit is that it's faster. However, it can also benefit the other, more complex cases in the system. We have more people allocated to doing those files if we're using automation technologies to help with the more straightforward ones.

Where the AG's report is helpful to us.... Her team indicated that we need to explain and report on how we do all cases. All people benefit from automation, not just those who fall into the automation categories. The resource allocation distribution that we can do is a benefit for all clients. We just need to demonstrate that clearly.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for joining us. Thanks to the Office of the Auditor General and to the Auditor General for her very good work, as usual, and for this very interesting report.

To sum up the situation, Madam Auditor General, you have found that there are many deficiencies at the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, specifically with regard to pro-

cessing times and follow-up. There appears to be a lack of governance to ensure that processing times are reduced and that people who have chosen Canada or Quebec as their new home are appropriately welcomed.

Everyone who appears before this committee tells us that progress is being made and everything's improving. Well, if that's the case, so much the better. However, I see a major problem in the fact that the department is incapable of processing applications within an acceptable period of time, whereas Canada is currently taking in many immigrants, nearly half a million this year, and immigration targets will be the same for the next few years.

Ms. Fox, how do you think you'll be able to reconcile those two observations? We have an energetic immigration policy on the one hand and a department that can't process all applications on the other.

First of all, do you have the tools you need to get the job done, or are you going to get them? Will they be implemented, given that we just learned from the Auditor General's opening remarks that automated tools haven't been properly used?

How will you be able to manage that, Ms. Fox?

● (1125)

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thanks to the member for her question.

First, it's important to note that the department is on track to implement our annual immigration levels plan. We met our objective last year, and we're sure we can reach our target of 465,000 arrivals this year. Results show that the department has been able to meet the objectives set in its annual immigration levels plan for welcoming permanent residents.

However, we always have to strike a balance among economic immigration, family reunification and humanitarian goals, while also taking into account global circumstances and their impact on Canada. However, the funding allocated to us under the immigration levels plan tabled in the House is designed to help us meet our goals for welcoming permanent residents.

Where the pressure is on is in temporary immigration because it has no limits. We're seeing a sharp increase in that area that at times has an impact on the processing of permanent residence applications. However, we've still met our objectives.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I understand what you're saying about permanent residence applications, but you just said something very important. You said you're seeing pressure from temporary immigration. Let's talk about what's happening now. The closure of Roxham Road was supposed to help us more effectively control the inflow of people wanting to enter the country on humanitarian grounds. However, what we saw was that visitor visas were being issued far too readily and that just as many people as previously were ultimately seeking asylum in Canada.

What you're saying is that this is still putting pressure on the system. Did you tell the minister that was slowing down the processing of applications from people already in the country and seeking permanent residence?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's important to note that approximately 30% of people who are granted permanent residence are already temporary residents in Canada. That pressure doesn't always come from new cases.

With regard to the pressure that temporary immigration puts on the system, the number of students, temporary foreign workers and asylum-seekers arriving in Canada is indeed rising sharply, and we have to use the tools we have to welcome those people.

The situation regarding asylum-seekers in particular isn't specific to Canada. There are 110 million displaced persons around the world. The Americans are seeing 2.2 million people crossing their southwestern border—

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: We aren't discussing the fact that there are migratory flows in the world. That's not the problem. The problem is that we aren't processing applications on time here.

If, on the one hand, we shut down Roxham Road and, on the other, issue visitor visas to people who will undoubtedly claim asylum upon arrival in Canada, we're letting people come into our country and stay here for the four years it takes to process their applications. More particularly, it slows down the processing of applications from people who are already in the country.

So there's a global problem in managing the number of people who enter the country and, especially, how those people are processed.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Asylum applications are in a way processed separately from the immigration system. As a result, it would be hard to determine whether the arrival of asylum seekers has an impact on the way we manage permanent residence in Canada. Various mechanisms are in place to process those applications.

What I'm telling you is that we receive annual funding to process permanent residence applications and that we have met our goals under the immigration levels plan.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being present for this important report, especially the Auditor General.

Oftentimes when I deal with work related to Immigration, Refugees and Canadian Citizenship, similar to the situation with Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations, it's categorized with disappointment, anger and frustration.

This department in particular is famous across the country—particularly to those who need the service most—for being a ministry of delay, a ministry of mismanagement and a ministry of systemic racism.

You failed to make mention of what was a very important call and remarks by the Auditor General this morning. It was related to systemic racism in the service and ways that the anti-racism strategy can be implemented in a way that's concrete but also garners trust. It is a tremendous fact that this ministry continues to harm those persons in my community and across the country.

It's no secret that throughout this very difficult time, especially during the pandemic, there were real people who had to actually pick up these files. In the absence of IRCC doing that work, we had real people who had to do this work. They had to take phone calls from people. They had to listen to them in their time of need. They're a secret public service that no one ever talks about.

Those are the people like Kristina and the people like Elias, who's from my office here. He came from Edmonton because of this important work. He deals with hundreds of these folks. A former refugee himself, he knows the system and he knows how painful the system is. He knows how violent the system can be and how much change is truly required.

To make the commitments made in our treaties between where I'm from in Treaty No. 6... This is a matter of treaty implementation. When we agreed that Canada would have jurisdiction over settlement, we agreed that they wouldn't be doing the kinds of settlement processes that they are today, which leave families worse off at times than when they came and leave them in limbo, wondering where their children are going to be.

Colleagues, these are families. They are real people. It's really difficult for me to try to humanize these systems at times, because we talk about people as if they're numbers or people in a queue or people in a line. These are real families. These are kids by themselves. Elias and I dealt with a case in my office of a 12-year-old girl who was overseas by herself.

This is unacceptable, simply unacceptable, especially given the fact that we have a government that's committed to an anti-racist strategy that in itself has not committed to understanding how that can be implicated in their own systems.

My question will be specifically on what the Auditor General has mentioned in her remarks. She said,

The department committed to addressing systemic barriers to applications under its Anti-Racism Strategy. However, it had yet to take any steps to collect demographic information about applicants and monitor and correct disparities in processing applications. This is critical to identifying and removing systemic barriers across government programs.

Deputy minister, you've served this government for a long time. Your service to this government far predates, in some ways, the anti-racist strategy.

How do you find yourself, as a deputy minister for many departments, with the reality that the anti-racist strategy exists and you see a report like this that suggests these barriers still exist? What are your words to those families who have had to endure these barriers and who have suffered from these barriers? What is your commitment to actually addressing the systemic barriers in a real way that demonstrates you understand what racism is? Trust has been lost, and now the work of rebuilding that trust to get to where we need to be is far harder.

What is your commitment to those people when they find themselves in applications...particularly the sub-Saharan office, where they find barriers like this very consistently? What are your words for those families who are in my office, and offices across the country, who continue waiting and are told to have trust in the system that our Auditor General has found to be non-compliant with our anti-racist strategy?

• (1135)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think I would answer that in three or four parts.

On the first part, I would say that I take pride in seeing what IRCC staff do every single day to support people. I think it is important for the committee to know that we have staff who—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I also agree about those members.

Deputy Minister, this is about you. I know you're trying to evade the question—

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm not evading the question, but I think it's important when—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: —and I want to be very specific in that....

Madam Fox, it's your commitment, not your staff's commitment, not the good work of our public service staff who struggle with this file every single day. I've talked to your public servants. They're struggling with how difficult this work is.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: They need to know that their deputy minister understands what they're going through—not by saying thank you, but by acknowledging that these systems are real, that racism is real, and that you understand that racism is real.

Do you understand that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, I do understand that, and—

The Chair: I want to interrupt for one second, Ms. Fox.

Just so you know, you have about 30 seconds. I would just flag that. It's your time. You can use it however you like. I just want you to know that if you do want an answer, you do need to allow some time—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Chair. There are other rounds as well.

The Chair: That said, you can probe as much as you like.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you.

The Chair: The floor is yours, Ms. Fox.

Ms. Christiane Fox: As deputy minister of IRCC, former deputy minister of ISC and mother of two girls, I am absolutely committed to anti-racism work. I empower my team to challenge ourselves on how the policies we develop have an impact on people. I look at specific case studies and I empower people to bring them to me—data around Nigerian students versus Indian students and looking at the policies and programs we have in place and how our decisions around Afghanistan and Ukraine have an impact on how we respond in other places in the world.

What would I say in terms of my own personal commitment? I not only encourage our conversations between employees; I also support the various networks that exist within my organization and empower them through decisions that I make to give them a voice at the highest table of our department.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: But the Auditor General says you haven't made it. You haven't hit the point.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Well, on the race-based—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: The facts of what you're saying are not real.

We'll follow up with this in another round.

The Chair: I'll have to call it right there. Mr. Desjarlais will have another opportunity, and we'll hear from you at that point.

I will turn now to Mr. Kmiec for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, I want to go back to the question that Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné asked a little earlier.

What is the percentage of people whose temporary resident status in Canada has changed to permanent resident status?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd say it's been steady around 30% for the past few years and could fluctuate in the next few years, but that percentage is more or less the current norm.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Would you be able to provide the committee with accurate statistics for the past three years?

Ms. Christiane Fox: If you're still referring to the percentage of people whose temporary resident status in Canada has changed to permanent resident status, yes, we can provide them to you.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: All right.

My next questions are for you, Ms. Fox and Ms. Dorion.

At what level are these departmental reports prepared?

Are they prepared by assistant deputy ministers, directors general or people in lower-level positions in the departmental hierarchy?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: The reports are generated by teams of course.

I regularly receive them in my capacity as senior assistant deputy minister. I even received one just yesterday.

So the situation is being monitored. We ensure that these cases are processed. We take immediate measures if any of them seem to be pending for too long.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: How frequently are these reports generated? Is it every week, every two weeks, every month?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: They're generated every month.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Could the committee have a copy?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: I imagine that's possible, provided confidentiality rules are complied with and names are redacted.

We can provide them to you on Monday.

[English]

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Mr. Chair, I'm just confirming that we can get that for this committee.

[Translation]

The Chair: That's very good.

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Perfect.

I'll continue now on a different matter. It goes back to the management action plan.

One of the reports talks about developing a pilot program "to test methodologies and [gain] insights about the best ways to collect, analyze, and use race-based and ethnocultural data".

Will self-identified religious affiliation also be part of this analysis and the response?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think we're still developing what that will look like. Back in 2022 we went out to survey some of our clients. First of all, it was to see how many of them would be willing to self-identify with their racial and ethnic identity. In that case, 91% were open to sharing their data.

In terms of the work we have ahead of us, what type of data should we be collecting? How can we work with StatsCan to ensure that we have the right methodologies? I think that will be very important for us as we look at this work. These are sometimes privacy-intrusive activities. How do we put the right safeguards in place to protect not only the data but also how the data is used, making sure we have sort of an ethical and privacy frame to that?

I won't comment on what will be in and out at the end of the day, because that work is still being done, but we take note of your comments.

• (1140)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Did you ask your clients and stakeholders and all the other people whether they think religious affiliation should be tracked by your department?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think the only question we asked so far was racial and ethnic, but we could go back and look at the surveying. We're going to do more surveying of our clients. That could be a question that we could add to the survey.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I ask that because the citizenship and immigration committee has repeatedly asked for religious affiliation to be tracked. That is one of the main ways of persecution overseas. It's a source of persecution against people. Lots of people have names that basically identify what their religious affiliation will be. I'm thinking of Armenians in the Middle East as being a very easily identifiable group.

Your department continues to insist that they don't collect the data. Fine, and I understand it, but the final completion date for this action plan says April 1, 2025. You have lots of time to consider this. I believe you should go back and ask whether religious affiliation should be tracked. It is one of the main reasons that people are persecuted all over the world. Different religions are persecuted in different majority countries, and they are always minority religious affiliations. I'm thinking of Pakistan as another example of where minority religious communities like Sikhs are persecuted as well, but so are the Ahmadiyya. They are also persecuted.

I meet with many of these client stakeholder groups. I'm sure if you prompted now.... I'm just surprised your department didn't ask the question. I'm wondering why that is.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's a survey that we started with phases of work that we would go out with. We can see what the next steps are.

I think there's also probably a worry in the system around clients wanting to share that type of information and being very worried about what would happen if they were to share it. I think it is worth going out and being very specific in getting that data and getting people's comfort level. Clearly, with the data that we have—91%—we're comfortable sharing the other pieces of the data.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Deputy Minister, in budget 2023, the IRPA was amended to clarify that the minister could give instructions regarding the processing of sponsorship applications. That has not been enforced yet. Is that correct?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Here's what I would say. For the privately sponsored refugees, I completely acknowledge that right now the wait time is very high. I think this is—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm just asking about whether that system is in place. Can the minister issue instructions?

Ms. Christiane Fox: He can issue instructions.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Right now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I believe everything.... I would have to check, actually.

It's a yes for PSR intake.

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: Yes, we have the legislative power to do it. We're working on defining and working the details out. That's coming up, but it's not in effect yet.

The Chair: That is the time, I'm afraid. We're a little over.

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

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank the Auditor General, Ms. Hogan, for her very important report. As some of my colleagues have said, this is a subject of some concern for us in our riding offices and especially for our constituents.

I'd also like to acknowledge the work being done by the people in my riding, particularly those in the municipality of Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, where Roxham Road is located. The people who live near that road, and the mayor and councillors, have worked for years to ensure that the welcome is always humanitarian and as efficient as possible.

We're obviously pleased that calm has been restored to Roxham Road and that we now have greater control over the arrival of asylum-seekers.

Ms. Fox, you mentioned that Roxham Road is a slightly different entry point from the official points of entry that refugees use.

Would you please tell us a little about the existing agreement respecting the arrival of asylum-seekers, especially those arriving in Quebec?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

For the moment, you're absolutely right, asylum-seekers now arrive at more official points of entry. Roxham Road was really an unofficial point of entry. Under the agreement reached with the Americans in March, we were able to apply the Additional Protocol to the Safe Third Country Agreement so that people now arrive in Canada at airports and the offices of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, in particular.

We've started using hotels. That's one of the measures that we introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and that have remained in effect as a result of the large number of arrivals. We do this mainly in Quebec and Ontario, where we provide temporary accommodation for people who are in very vulnerable situations. We work closely with Quebec to ensure that these people have accommodation upon arrival.

As regards Ontario, we work with the province, but especially with the municipalities of Cornwall, Niagara Falls, Mississauga and the Peel area. We very recently created a kind of welcome centre concept to ensure, in cooperation with the municipality, that people are able to go there, apply for asylum, receive their work permit and be able to undergo their medical examination. We're trying to

ensure that we welcome people and offer them the services they need and then work with the province to match skills, in particular. We're trying various approaches because the number of arrivals to date is really the highest in the country. That's quite a significant factor in our support for the municipalities.

I'd say that the work permit is an important aspect of the process. We introduced a public policy in November 2022 to issue the work permit first. As a result, people don't have to wait 12 to 17 months to get one. Now they can get a permit in 5 to 30 days, depending on the results of their medical exam.

I think we have to work with the community. I've worked very closely with churches in the Toronto area, where there was considerable pressure to move these people, with the help of volunteers, from the churches and shelters to federal government hotels.

We establish an arrival management plan every weekend and evening, especially in the winter months. There are two ways for the department to go about this. First of all, we need to manage the crisis immediately by ensuring that people are housed and are being treated humanely. Second, we have to look at the long-term situation and examine the system so we can make it efficient when these people arrive in Canada.

● (1145)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Excellent.

That brings me to another question. We regularly receive family reunification applications. Would you please tell us about the agreement that's in force with Quebec on that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: According to the Auditor General's reports, at the time of the audit, reunification with spouses and families outside Canada took approximately 20 months. Reunification now takes 13 months. So it's much easier to do. For people who are in Canada, it used to take 12 months, and now it's 10 months. So we've expedited processing in those cases.

The situation in Quebec is slightly more difficult because family reunification there takes more time than elsewhere in Canada. There's a family reunification threshold in Quebec, and once it's reached, people have to continue waiting to be reunited with their loved ones. That's a challenge, but we're working closely with Quebec on the problem and on its economic and humanitarian program. You can see on the website that processing times are shorter outside Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, I'm going to ask you a question that you can answer with a yes or a no. I asked it earlier, but I don't think I got a conclusive answer.

Do you, as deputy minister, think the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship has the necessary financial and human resources to proceed, from an administrative point of view, with the intake of half a million newcomers a year?

Ms. Christiane Fox: That's not really a question with a yes or no answer.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: You either have the necessary resources or you don't.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We've received significant funding to enable us to do the department's work. However, I have to say that different populations create different pressures. Economic immigrants and refugees involve different types of work. Our ability to meet the demand will depend on those different categories.

• (1150)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I see.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's hard for me to answer with a yes or no. If you're asking me whether we have the necessary resources to manage Canada's immigration levels plan, the answer is "yes". The plan has been introduced in the House, and I therefore have the resources to do the resulting work. However, if there's an enormous increase in temporary visa applications for visits to Canada next week, that will change my answer.

That's why it's hard for me to answer the question. As for permanent residence applications, the department is receiving the funding to do the necessary work.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: All right, but we know that the processing of permanent residence applications isn't one of the department's responsibilities.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It actually is one of its responsibilities.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: But it's possible to anticipate matters for its other responsibilities.

Isn't it?

Ms. Christiane Fox: For this year, considering the current number of studies and temporary work permit applications, we're able to meet the demand. However, a sudden increase of 300,000 or 400,000 study permit applications next year would be a challenge.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: All right, but we know that won't happen. There won't be 400,000 more applications next year. The number of applications is relatively constant.

And how will you process the applications of francophone African students who would like to come and study at our francophone educational institutions in Quebec and are having problems for no particular reason?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I just want to inform the committee that there has been an enormous increase in the number of foreign students. In 2019, I believe, it was approximately 300,000, and the number is now closer to 900,000. That's a major swing. We've made some significant changes to the study permit system. We now verify letters of offer, since last Friday. We're trying to add more measures to the integrity program.

As for francophone African students, I entirely agree with you that we have to increase approval percentages. One of the obstacles

is dual intent, which is addressed by the department's regulations and pushes up the refusal rate.

We also need to consider fraud rates, which are higher in certain regions of the country. However, I entirely agree with you that we need to welcome more francophone African students to Canada.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you're up again. You have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to turn to the deputy minister.

I know you're tasked with a very difficult job, a job that consistently demands that you provide independent evidence to this committee and independent recommendations to better assist our public service.

Oftentimes, in my short time in this place, you have made it very clear that these systems have harmed people and that you have reported those harms. Last month, I asked you about racism when you tabled the racism in the workplace audit directly related to IRCC, and we found that employees of IRCC have submitted to you that they themselves believe that racism exists in the processing of applications.

I'll quote your answer to me when I asked you that question last month. You said:

I'll tell you that the deputy minister has acknowledged that systemic discrimination exists in her organization. In fact, a recent internal audit that was published on their website highlights that employees are raising discriminatory practices in the processing of applications. We found that there really are differential outcomes, but the organization was not analyzing their outcomes in that way. They weren't looking at the results based on race or country.

We did that for them in the audit. We made recommendations for them to better understand that.

Ms. Hogan, do you think that these recommendations will find the earnest reception, change and transformation that are needed to make sure that systemic racism is truly combatted in this country?

I speak to my experiential evidence in this committee. We've seen many Indigenous Services Canada reports that go into decades of unchanging systemic racism.

Do you have confidence that your recommendations are enough to see that the IRCC truly takes seriously the issue of systemic racism when in fact the deputy minister just today didn't even acknowledge it in her statement?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's a large question.

Do I think the federal public service will address this? I think there's a lot of goodwill toward this. I've worked on other audits with Deputy Minister Fox, and I believe she's committed to it. We saw the action plan that the department's put forward here. It's committing to starting to gather that data.

My concern is that this commitment came under its EDI plan, and there's been very little activity until now. The deadline is in 2025-26. It's a long time, but that's a place to start. You need to first acknowledge that there are biases and unintended consequences happening in the system. Gather the data to figure out how to break those down.

What I often don't see, and what I didn't see here, was an acknowledgement that this needed to happen. It's in the action plan that was submitted to this committee. It's just a long way out, in my mind. It's a long way for people to continue to wait to see some changes in the process that will hopefully have a concrete impact on discriminatory practices.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is the time.

Mr. Redekopp, it's good to see you. You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Hogan, it's good to see you again. I think I saw you at the environment committee a few years ago.

You might be aware that at the immigration committee, we recently concluded a study on backlogs in the immigration department, so this audit's very timely. It also lines up well, I think, with what Conservatives have been saying and where we stand on this issue.

I'm concerned about exhibit 9.7, which shows some of the decreases in inventory from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. What it shows that's disturbing to me is the increase in the age of the inventory, particularly at the end of the year. It indicates to me that the department's not following a first-in, first-out type of system, because the ending inventory's age is quite a bit higher. You actually said, in paragraph 9.20, that this is "contrary to its operating principle."

My question to you is this: Why is there no recommendation in the report dealing with this?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I acknowledge that the first-in, first-out principle is an operating principle. It's a great one, but at times it just can't function.

I'll give you an example. If an application comes in and what's missing is a key immigration document, you can request it and then move on to the next file, but if you have to wait for that document to come in, then all subsequent files are delayed needlessly waiting for that file. There needs to be a bit of a balance.

What we found was that operational pressures to meet the immigration level targets drove a behaviour whereby easy-to-process ap-

plications were sometimes treated more quickly. We saw that by analyzing the age of what was sitting in the backlog.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Right, and I guess that's directly my point: I understand what you're saying, but this is a significant increase in age. I would have thought that you would have directed the department to investigate this to try to fix this problem or to manage it.

As a further question, your auditors would have had discussions with the department on this. Were there discussions about not putting a recommendation in there, or was there any political interference in that?

Ms. Karen Hogan: No. No one interferes with our audits and our recommendations. Obviously, we have a conversation with the department and officials around what makes sense in the context and what can be implemented. At times, when they disagree with us, it's because we held firm that we didn't see the outcome we wanted to achieve coming through a different path.

I think we have made recommendations here that they need to better analyze their backlog along many lines, including race, country of citizenship, ethnicity and age. All of that analysis needs to be better done to understand why, and some of it has to do with the office an application is sent to for processing.

That basic element of understanding the capacity in the offices and redirecting applications would have an impact on this. We encouraged the department to do that with our recommendations.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Ms. Fox, on the same point, Minister Fraser introduced an \$82-million bump-up to the budget specifically to process new applications. Is that not politically stating, "We want you to ignore old applications and work on new ones"?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

No. I think the way we've tried to manage it is.... There's a flow of work that needs to be managed, whether it's complex cases, new cases or aged inventory. What we try to do is parse the work out among the teams we have. We have had funding to increase our processing capacity quite significantly, so it's almost like there are task teams that are dedicated to the routine cases, the less complex cases, and for the ones that are more complex, which are usually the aged inventory, a separate team is dedicated to that.

I think the global processing allows us to spread that work around.

• (1200)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Wouldn't you agree that for the minister to say that he wants to give you this money to focus on these simpler, easier cases and not focus so much on the complicated, older cases...?

Is it not political direction to focus on recent cases?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think we got direction to treat all the cases we receive as quickly as possible. We were resourced to deal with the new and incoming ones and try to get back to service standard for those applying into the system today, and also to deal with the backlog.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: How has that worked out?

We still see these kinds of numbers with massive wait times. We deal with this in our office all the time. People have been waiting for literally years, and they have friends who come in sooner and get their applications processed sooner. I believe the minister has directed it this way and the auditor has found this, too.

I was disappointed that there was no recommendation to deal with the fact that the average age of these cases is so old. To me, as an MP, with the things I see every day in my office—and I'm sure all of us see this—this is a critical issue. This can't go on. These old cases have to be dealt with. If they're not, it puts pain and pressure on real people.

These aren't files. These aren't things sitting on a desk. These are actually people, and—

The Chair: Ms. Fox, do you have a brief response to that? I do have to cut you off, Mr. Redekopp.

You might not. That was more of a statement, I think, than a question.

Pardon me, Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Karen Hogan: If I could add, Mr. Chair, I would send the member to recommendation 9.43, which actually recommends to the department to prioritize some of the older backlogged files.

While we didn't use the "first in" principle, we recommended that they understand it and prioritize those older files. That recommendation is there.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I apologize about that.

I'll turn now to Ms. Yip. You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, I was glad to hear that, because when I look at my constituency staff dealing with the backlogs and so forth, I see that it's a lot. Explaining to the constituents is distressing to them too, and it takes its toll on our staff as well.

This question is directed to Ms. Fox.

We've talked a lot about the anti-racism strategy. I haven't quite heard what actual steps are being taken to address these systemic barriers to applicants under the anti-racism strategy.

What are we doing now? What are some of the concrete plans? I know that the action plan goes far into the future, but what are we doing about it now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Just to be clear to the committee members, I have said previously—and I have said this within and outside of my organization—that we acknowledge that there is systemic racism within the department. Yes, I joined a long time ago when those conversations were not taking place, but as a leader in an or-

ganization, I think it is absolutely essential that we ensure that those conversations take place and that we tackle them head-on.

In terms of some of the concrete things we're doing now, it's very important to look at IRCC's footprint around the world and the choices about where we allocate resources. I think there is a huge benefit to global processing. In the current context of the situation in India, our services were less impacted because we were able to move work. I think 89% of the caseload coming from India was managed outside of New Delhi, so that gave us that flexibility.

I think having a footprint on the ground in certain places needs to be improved. I think sub-Saharan Africa is absolutely one of those examples. We used to have between 35 and 40 staff. As of December 2023, for Canada-based staff in certain countries in sub-Saharan Africa, we are at 54 people. We've engaged 22 locally engaged decision-makers. They are part of our decision-making process. That means an increase of about 20 Canadian-based staff on the ground. We are looking to increase that even more.

I think that is a way to have a bit more migration diplomacy, intelligence on the ground and sensitivity to issues that would not necessarily be akin to the issues that someone in another location may face. I think that is one example of how we're trying to address the situation and make change.

Ms. Jean Yip: That's good to hear about sub-Saharan Africa, but what about other places and resources? How is the department juggling to make sure the resources are fair?

• (1205)

Ms. Jean Yip: —to make sure the resources are fair across the board?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I know there are always choices that we need to make around what work we do in domestic processing and what our footprint is internationally. I think we have—and we could absolutely provide to the committee—our footprint around the world and what that looks like. It's got to be cognizant of some of our objectives around francophone immigration, for example.

[Translation]

Our targets for the next few years are quite high: 6%, 7% and 8%. Our international presence will definitely have a direct impact on our ability to meet them. We'd be happy to expand our presence elsewhere, but we're working on strategies for Africa and the Indo-Pacific region so we can ensure the government's objectives are reflected in IRCC's activities around the world.

[English]

Ms. Jean Yip: I'm sorry. There's a lag in the translation and I just wanted to make sure I heard everything. Thank you.

I was looking at this graph on refugee, economic and family class in the report. Why does it take longer to process the economic class than the family class, especially if there are certain skill sets that are really needed?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: I think I would answer this one by saying that when you look at the graph and all the data in the report, that's from 2022. We were just at the end of the pandemic. We accumulated large backlogs of applications during the pandemic, and we couldn't process certain categories of clients coming more frequently from overseas during COVID-19. The borders were closed.

If you look at the stats that you have in the report—for example, the federal highly skilled or the federal trades—we were at 30 to 32 months of processing in December 2022 because we couldn't process those people during COVID, but we do have intake control. We made sure that we controlled the intake. When we look at that today, we're at five months of processing time. The report shows the impact of what COVID did to us by accumulating inventory that we couldn't process, basically.

The Chair: Thank you. That is the time.

I'm going now to Mr. McCauley. You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Welcome back, AG Hogan and Ms. Fox. Welcome, Ms. Dorion.

I have a couple of quick questions, probably for Ms. Fox.

The Service Fees Act requires remissions and rebates to people when we haven't met the service standards. That was suspended over COVID-19, I understand. Has that been re-established? If so, when? If not, why not?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think that for the passport service fee act—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm not referring to passports. I mean for immigration.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd have to check which of our service fees have a reimbursement attached to them. I can get that information to the committee, but I don't have it here.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have we restarted the remission program, or is it still suspended?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'll have to come back. I don't have the answer on it.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How do you not know? This is a major requirement for your department.

I'm sorry; I'm not trying to be rude, but this is a major thing that was suspended during COVID. COVID has been over for a year. How do you not know, as deputy minister, whether we've re-established it?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what I'm saying is that we've re-established the remission order, but I don't have the breakdown of how many programs it applies to.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Could you provide us with when it was restarted and how many we've processed, and whether there's

just a hard no on the ones that applied during the suspension and you're not going to refund those at all?

Ms. Christiane Fox: If the remission order was suspended at the time of the delay, then no, there would not be reimbursement.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay.

I'm looking at the GC InfoBase about your staffing levels.

I understand that there was a surge and there were delays, but there was a 79% increase in your budget from 2018 to 2022 and a 39% increase in staffing from 2017 to 2021. How do we have these massive backlogs with a 79% increase in funding and an almost 40% increase in staffing?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Well, I think my answer to that would be demand. Demand has grown exponentially, and so we have more staff and more funding to deliver on a broader program and a greater program.

• (1210)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When you say “demand”, can you break out the demand for us?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is it demand from the PR level? Is demand from other levels up 40%?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, I think I can—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is there a straight line between increase in demand and any increase needed in staffing?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can definitely give you a picture of the increases.

As you see in the permanent residency program, the increases in the levels plans are quite.... You have the levels increases from over the last 10 years. I can tell you that even in the call centre last year, we saw 10.6 million email and phone inquiries, and that's compared to 4.6 million in 2018. You see a doubling of inquiries into the call centre.

In every line of business—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Do you foresee a need for a continual increase in staffing?

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I would say is that we make our case every year through the budget cycle for what we need in order to deliver on the government's objectives. We articulated that for this year's levels plan for the PR program.

We have grown as an organization, and I think we need to stabilize that growth and execute on the priorities of the department.

I'm not going to say that we're never going to increase; if there was a new demand for a new activity, then I wouldn't want to limit ourselves from making that request, but I think we've—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Are you recording productivity levels and comparing in-office productivity versus productivity at home? Can you share those with the committee, please?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We definitely have productivity levels, both in terms of domestic staff, staff abroad, complex cases—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm thinking more about staff here in Canada working from home.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We can definitely provide that. It's important to note that not all processing staff are working from home. Some are in the office, and we can definitely provide that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: If you look at the report—

The Chair: Be very brief, Mr. McCauley, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What's the low-hanging fruit from the report that we can get to right away?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd say that one of the portals, which is being launched December 20, is definitely one that we can get out right away.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go now to Ms. Bradford. You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In your report, it's indicated that there are some instances in which the factors that lead to processing delays are outside of the control of IRCC. For example, when refugee applicants reside outside of their countries of citizenship, the conditions in those countries where they reside affect the processing of their applications. Can you expand on that and what measures you're taking to mitigate the factors that are outside of your control?

Ms. Christiane Fox: That's probably one of the most challenging things to manage. When you look at country of origin...

I'll use an example as part of my answer. If we have a refugee from Somalia and that refugee is in a camp in Kenya versus a camp in Uganda, the processing time will change because the exit permits may be 30 days in one country and five days in another country. They may be 60 days in a different country. The treatment of the Somali refugee, the experience of that person within our system, would be very different depending on where they were.

There are very important things that the department needs to do in interviewing refugee applicants—ensuring biometrics, ensuring medical exams—and sometimes access to panel physicians in certain parts of a country can be challenging.

How do we try to mitigate that? We work very closely with the UNHCR and with the International Organization for Migration. We're trying to expand our partnerships to get to people who are sometimes harder to get to. Rainbow Railroad is a great example of an organization that has helped us tremendously in Afghanistan. We now have an agreement with them as a referral partner, which allows us to do some work that we weren't able to do before.

It is really important as we look at refugee processing to realize that the country or the location of the individual sometimes has a more material impact than the country of origin.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you for clarifying that.

Building on that, the report recommends that IRCC improve consistency of application processing times across its offices. The report states that certain regional offices have higher workloads than other offices.

What is the plan to address the regional backlogs and disparities in these regional processing times for all applications, but especially with respect to refugee applications?

• (1215)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think it's twofold. The first is that it relies on some of the global processing improvements that we made coming out of COVID that we can rely on to try to help us get through that. The second is increasing our capacity in different parts of the world to try to have more impact on the ground. I think a combination of those two things will help us address some of the recommendations from the Auditor General.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay.

You alluded to this before. Obviously there were a lot of challenges in your department that were presented by COVID, such as not being able to allow people into the country. That said, did COVID present any opportunities for your department?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely. When we were forced to do things and think about things differently, we were able to pivot and go to more digital applications. Citizenship is a good example. We transformed into a fully digital process within 10 months. It probably would have taken longer had it been done outside the COVID period.

I think global processing is another one. It has a real impact on our workload. In the past, if your paper application came in through the Paris office, you were at the mercy of how busy that office was. Now, with global applications and digital applications, we can do triaging a bit more.

We're definitely not done with the modernization piece. There's a lot of work we can do to improve our systems, and we have investments to do that. Things like the tracker to get status updates, the portals launched, global processing and applying for citizenship online, which allows people to become Canadian citizens when they can't attend in person, are all good examples of flexibilities and things we learned from COVID.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: You implemented the automated decision-making process, but there are some concerns about that. Some are saying these tools make decisions without oversight from IRCC officers.

Can you clarify how automated decision-making tools are being used and how you're getting around those concerns if you don't have officers overseeing this now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: At the end of the day, every single decision is made by an officer. That has to be clear for the committee. That is how the legislation works. The automated tools help us with some of the triaging and make the decision easier for the individual officer.

I'll use an example from the temporary resident visa line. As an officer reviews a number of visitor visas, if there's a pre-population showing that this person has travelled to Canada before, or whatever criteria we set, at least it triages some of that initial information to make the decision easier and more straightforward for the officer.

I'll give you an example of how robotics have helped us. We had a big backlog in web form inquiries. I think there were about 275,000 in the backlog in 2022 from people who had sent in web forms. With the use of robotics, we were able to triage that, make decisions and answer questions. We're now down to about 60,000 of those.

Again, I'm not saying the work is complete. There's a lot of work to be done, but these tools help us.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: I'd like to go back to the issue of francophone African students, which is very important for us in Quebec. When you look at the numbers, you see that it's quite a problem. For the same study permit applications, the refusal rate for francophone students is twice that of anglophone students. So there's a problem. More specifically, 72% of students accepted to Quebec universities are denied study permits. That's three out of four students. They're accepted to Quebec universities but denied study permits.

Earlier you acknowledged that there was a systemic racism problem at the department, as was the case in 2020. What specifically has been done to correct it?

Ms. Christiane Fox: The refusal rate situation has improved. More specifically, the acceptance rate is higher than it previously was.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Do you have the numbers?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: The approval rate of francophone African students has risen from 27% in 2019 to 36% today. That's an increase of more than 10%.

• (1220)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Two thirds of francophone students are still being rejected. Two thirds of potential francophone students: that's enormous. It's even more than for anglophone students. How is that the case?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'll say three things.

First, dual intent is a contributing factor. The department will have to make a decision and see what can be done to correct that. The refusal rate is due in large part to the dual intent criterion.

We also look at the financial aspect.

Lastly, the final factor that has an impact on the data and that I look at closely is the fraud rate, which is very high. It isn't specific to the continent; fraud occurs in other parts of the world—

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: There are anglophones and francophones in Africa.

Ms. Christiane Fox: That's correct.

Sometimes officers treat fraud as a refusal. To clarify this, we should separate the categories in order to distinguish clearly between a refusal and a fraud.

I entirely agree that we have to increase the approval rate for francophone African students, which is 36%. Incidentally, I'm discussing this with the people concerned in Quebec. If we remove the dual intent criterion and Quebec confirms a pathway to permanent residence, that lends the process some flexibility. We could work closely with Quebec on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes. I am working to give you another spot after this, so just keep that in mind. Thank you.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to now turn to what has been raised by several of my colleagues, which is the issue of capacity. Mr. McCauley mentioned some of the funding enhancements. It's not lost on me that COVID was, of course, an extraordinary event and that services across the government were often put into a position of deficit. Now most ministries, I believe, have seen improvements to some of this work and have actually found better means of doing that work within their ministries.

When it comes to capacity in particular, we've seen a previous audit of IRCC speak about the lack of support for the sub-Saharan office. You made mention of that capacity change. I welcome that capacity change. I think it's a good change for the office to see that capacity there.

Something the Auditor General pointed out that concerns me, in terms of where this issue may be duplicated or could be duplicated, is understanding what valuable, important or reliable information is actually important in tracking where capacity becomes an issue before it actually happens. That would be the most appropriate means, which I think a deputy minister should be well aware of, to predict when there may be a capacity issue and allocating resources and a plan or a process before it becomes a matter of families not being reunified, which is the issue we're seeing today.

What are some of the verifiable pieces of information—first to Ms. Hogan and then to Deputy Minister Fox—that you cited were lacking in the decision-making process related to capacity funding for offices?

Ms. Karen Hogan: During our audit, what we found was that the department wasn't aware of the capacity of certain offices. While they knew there might have been chronic underfunding and a lack of resources in some offices, they continued to allocate files there based on the country of residence. That country of residence dictates where the application goes.

We compared two offices, one in Tanzania and one in Rome, and we found that the Tanzanian office had the same number of personnel but was receiving five times the workload. Back in 2016 the department committed to doing what it called "capacity-based allocation", and we just weren't seeing that happen. They were not realizing that they couldn't keep sending files to Tanzania and that they should reallocate those to other places. That wasn't happening during our audit period, and that's an important element. Not reallocating them means that all of those files that go to that office will wait longer to be processed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desjarlais. I will come back to you for another turn.

Mr. McCauley, you have the floor for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Chair.

Ms. Fox, I want to get back to a question about resources. I'm looking again at GC InfoBase. Every year your department is consistently lapsing \$1 out of every \$8 that's approved. What is going on that we're lapsing so much money if we have such a spike in demand, as you've stated? Is that lapsing affecting the service?

• (1225)

Ms. Christiane Fox: First, as the deputy responsible, I would agree with you that we have to pay very close attention to the money we're spending and the money we're lapsing. Some of the monies that we lapsed in previous years would have been due to, at times, arrivals and predicting arrivals of Afghan refugees or Ukrainians.

When you create a program, that could be one of the lapses—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry, but I'm going to interrupt you. I get that, but it's consistent year after year. It's not a spike here or there. It's consistent every year that you're lapsing over 12% of your money that has been appropriated.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can speak to last year. This is my first year as the deputy here, so I won't speak to previous lapses. The lapses we had can be explained by the pace of arrivals, and in the context—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Would you get back to the committee on what programs over the past five years have been lapsed for the money that had been approved?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes. Absolutely.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Your comment to my previous question about the staffing was that you're looking to "stabilize" the growth. Could you expand what you mean by that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I mean by that is that in the context of working through the backlog, we hired a number of people to get through that backlog. I think it was the right thing to do. I think it has led to some examples of results. However, the government has

also invested in modernizing our platform, and we have investment that we're working through. What I'm hoping is that through the benefits of some of our modernization investments, we can stabilize the organization so that we can leverage those technologies rather than hire more people.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Were you talking about stabilizing the growth of the number of full-time equivalents or stabilizing the growth of the spending within your department? What specifically were you referring to?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think it's about stabilizing the growth of FTEs. I think it's about looking at the organization and looking at how modernization can help us deal with the surge in volumes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: There was quite a surge in FTEs. Are they focused on the wrong areas? Was a certain amount of the growth focused on permanent residents?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Definitely our processing group, our service delivery organization, did grow. I would say that's where the majority of the growth came from. Then internally we have made some changes to our structures to allow putting resources toward things that I think are quite key to the organization's success.

One example of that is the creation of the international crisis response sector within our department. We created an Afghan sector to deal with the Afghan crisis. I think we need to prepare ourselves for being better positioned to predict and to analyze or to have better line of sight on different crises. That's another area that I have invested in.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm looking at your management action plan. One of the criticisms I always have when these plans come forward—not just yours, but for every department—is that we will look at stuff years down the road. Then our Auditor General comes in and says, five years later or eight years later, that nothing was done.

There seems to be a real lack of concrete action here. I want to read out one specifically: "Cross-training of resources and subsequent workload distribution to help maintain relevant processing knowledge, skills and expertise will continue to take place, ensuring optimally flexibility in the workforce. Global network provides virtual region...."

There's a lot of word salad, but there's not a lot of concrete "we will fix this by this date". There's a lot of "we will look at options to address a program of recommendations at this date". Why is there a lack of concrete "we will achieve this recommendation by this date and fix it by this date"?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think the action plan does speak to specific dates. Even within the overall objective—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: There are dates, but not achievements.

Ms. Christiane Fox: —the work plan does speak to the breakdown of when we can achieve what.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It speaks to a lot more of “we will present a plan by this date”, but not actual achievements. If I read through it, I don't see a lot of these that will achieve the recommendations the AG has provided.

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: Maybe I can jump in here. Since the beginning of this year—we started years before, but this year has been more active—to give capacity in some offices, we are taking more of the TR, the temporary resident program, applications and we are moving them into Canada. Since the beginning of the year, we have—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm going to give you an example.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: A year from now, seek approval for a plan—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCauley. The time has elapsed.

Mr. Blois, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

• (1230)

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, thank you to you and your team. Ms. Fox, thank you as well; I don't think there has been enough.

Obviously this is a committee of scrutiny, but you came into this role in July of 2022, and I think there was a reason. I think there had to be some changes. We were up against it. You're an experienced deputy minister, and I think under your leadership things have improved. I'm sure you will tell me that there's more to be done, and I think this committee will agree with that, but I want you to know that I do think there has been a marked difference in the department over the last year or so.

Since we're thanking public servants, I want to thank Tanya in my own office. She handles the casework. She was with Mr. Brison previously and does really good work.

I have some feedback that I want to give you quickly.

The status updates are making a difference. We are getting fewer calls to our MP offices because people can watch their applications as they go through. Expanding that out through programs would be warranted. There are now scheduled times for MP offices to engage with officers, which helps plan our office days. Those are two really good suggestions there.

This is a little bit off the scope of the report, but I think it's relevant. I want to ask about the recognized employer pilot. A lot of temporary foreign workers come to Kings—Hants in the Annapolis Valley. I would describe the initiative this way: We've gone half the step. We have been able to work on not having to file LMIA's when there's a clear and demonstrable need for the labour, but what can IRCC do to make things easier for the workers who are coming from host countries who have been coming for years, in some cases decades? What can be done to basically to eliminate some of that administrative burden?

Please answer as quickly as you can.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Just quickly, I think the recognized employer pilot is very helpful in working with employers and also in supporting those who come on a temporary basis.

I think the best way to answer your question is by looking at how we can provide, when a client is interested, pathways to move from temporary foreign worker to more permanent residency in Canada. Working very closely with some businesses in New Brunswick, for instance, we were able to develop a critical worker program that has that pathway for temporary foreign workers. I like that example because the six employers that are part of this also contributed to language training. They contributed to some of the social supports. I think that builds community.

I think that's the example that we should try to strive for.

Mr. Kody Blois: I would agree with you. I know from talking to workers that they can create better living conditions for their own family by coming, and there are some who want to come to Canada on a permanent basis. Others don't. Sometimes there's the stereotype of assuming that everyone wants to come to Canada. Whatever IRCC can do to match what has been done at ESDC to expedite those approvals in terms of the actual entry into the country would be good.

I want to mention Ukraine. Ms. Hogan, it wasn't mentioned in your report at all, but Ms. Fox, I assume the government's decision to allow the three-year permit would have had some impact on processing times. Is that fair to say?

Answer quickly.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely. There was a decision around prioritizing the arrival of Ukrainians. That included providing work permits, study permits and income support. Definitely, that had an impact.

Mr. Kody Blois: When I went through the report, there was a process chart that talked about five different levels of processing delay. It talked about application return when there could be a mistake or some type of information not being there.

Again, I don't handle the work directly. My constituency assistant Tanya does, but that's like going into a black hole sometimes. It can be a very minor mistake. The processing time to get that application back and get the information can really drive these delays.

What would you tell this committee we can do better? Where do those folks go in the queue? If there is just a very minor mistake in the application, my question is not only on how we deal with the time it takes to get it back into the appropriate stage, but where those people sit in the queue. How can we work on that?

I think that's part of where some of the major delays come from.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I would say first is that we have to have programs and application forms that are easily navigable before clients come to us. Second is that some countries pause the clock when somebody is awaiting information. Third is they are treated when the information comes in, based on that first-in, first-out principle, noting that we've been waiting during their delay.

Marie-Josée, did you want to add anything?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: Yes. I think it's important to make the difference between an application that's rejected at the beginning because because it's not complete. The applicant is asked to do everything again, and then when we receive it, the clock starts again. There's no waiting for them.

If we've started to process the application and we ask for a document, the applicant doesn't lose their place in the queue. We put it back where it was. It doesn't go back to the beginning.

• (1235)

The Chair: I'm afraid that is the time.

We can get another complete round in of six individuals with various amounts of time.

We're going back to Mr. Redekopp. You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to talk about the recommendation about refugees in paragraph 67.

Ms. Fox, you talked about the UNHCR process and how that was online in 2022, I believe. The non-UNHCR refugees can apply online starting later this month, if all goes well.

At the immigration committee, we've heard a lot of witnesses express their desire to decouple Canada's sponsorship a bit from UNHCR. There are many reasons for this. We've seen some racism and biases at the UN toward certain minorities. The committee even adopted a motion of mine condemning the UNHCR for this with regard to minority Christians and calling on the Government of Canada to fix this.

Ms. Hogan, when you were doing this audit, did your auditors come across different treatment for refugees who go through the UNHCR process versus those who do not?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I couldn't answer that, but I'm watching Ms. McCalla shake her head "no", so I'm going to say no, we did not see different outcomes in those two programs. We really looked along the lines of country of citizenship, country of residency and race.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: As I said, at the immigration committee we've heard many cases of bias and racism that occur in different offices with respect to different groups of people, so I'm a bit surprised that you didn't find out anything in your audit. Was there nothing in there that you discovered about differential treatment?

Ms. Karen Hogan: To go into that level of detail, I'll have to see whether Ms. McCalla has something to add to the discussion.

Ms. Carol McCalla (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): We examined country of citizenship. We looked at application

processing times and decisions by country of citizenship. We found that there were differential impacts among different countries of citizenship.

In terms of government-assisted refugees, we did not do a breakdown of the source of those applicants. For those, it was just the country of citizenship.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You found differential treatment based on country of citizenship. This is a pretty significant thing, because there's a whole racism task force. There's a lot of work going on. Mr. Desjarlais was speaking about the same thing. It's a large focus. I'm a little surprised it was not given a bit more importance in here. I know there was a different recommendation on some other things, but the significance of this is....

I'm curious. Was it somehow downplayed by the department? How did the auditors miss this? It seems like a fairly big thing. It seems to be something that is missing.

Ms. Karen Hogan: With all due respect, I don't believe we missed it, Mr. Chair. Differential outcomes were something we highlighted. We highlighted the need for the department to better analyze the files it processes and the backlog it has along those lines. I was concerned they weren't doing that. This is exactly why we had a recommendation around better use of demographic data and the need for it to be gathered, a commitment they made in their own diversity, inclusion and equity plan.

We definitely looked at it. We highlighted it in different areas throughout the report. I would respectfully say to the member that it's been covered. It's in there. There are recommendations that need to be—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: However, in the section on refugees... Numerous witnesses have talked about this at different committees, so we know it happens. It was not referred to. That bothers me.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We didn't look at the source of the application. We looked at the outcome, where it's sitting, how long it was taking and whether they had differential—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: There is no recommendation here, and that's my concern.

Ms. Fox, you said that 95% of UNHCR GAR referrals are going through the online portal. It's been over a year. I'm reading this out of the action plan.

What's the problem? Why aren't we at 100% with all GARs applying online?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'll have to dig up the exact percentage.

I will say that despite the fact that we offer a digital intake, it's important for us to have processes for those who don't have access so that they can make their application from a digital intake standpoint and that there's a way by which we continue to accept those. I think that's been true not just for refugees in various camps but also even for some rural and remote Canadians, who say they would still like that in-person service or support.

It's about balancing that, but we can take a look at the reason for the gap. I think it's probably explained by limitations with IT infrastructure.

• (1240)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I read your action plan. It says December 31 of this year is the deadline to achieve 100% SharePoint use for all UNHCR GAR referrals.

You're telling me that it's not going to be 100%. That's never going to happen.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What we're trying to do is, through the UNHCR, come to a system whereby they can do it for the refugees. It's not all independent of them. If we're working directly with them, that would be the objective. We're almost there. We hope to get there by the end of December of this year.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, I'm going to pick up on something you talked about: global applications and the importance of having offices in different regions in order to be more efficient and, I think, equitable in the work you do.

The Indo-Pacific strategy includes some dollar investments for the relocation of visa processing offices. I think one of them was... The processing of applications by residents of Pakistan was moved from Abu Dhabi back to Islamabad.

It's now been a year since that happened. Do you have any updates about how that is going? Has that impacted applications coming from the region?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for raising that question.

Absolutely. In our conversation with the Pakistani government, they wanted us to increase our footprint on the ground. Yes, it was about processing, but it was mostly about having the ability to conduct interviews in the Islamabad office. There have been some challenges in getting all of our visas completed, so there was a caretaker mode, given the election in Pakistan. We've been able to use temporary duty officers. For a more permanent footprint, we need to finalize things with the Pakistani government. However, interviews are taking place in Islamabad.

Our team will be further expanding its footprint, given our commitment in the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much for that.

I'm just looking over the management action plan. I see that between January 2023 and October 2023, IRCC has reduced the

spouses, partners and children backlog, except for Quebec, from 24% to 16% of applications on inventory.

I'm wondering if we have a breakdown as to where these backlog applications are in the world, as in where the applicants are residing in the world as they wait.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we can get that. Right now I can give you data that the overseas sponsored spouse backlog went from 20 months to 13 months. I think for a sponsored spouse here in Canada, it went from 12 months to 10 months. However, from that 13 months, we can definitely give you that data of where people are.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you. I'd really appreciate that.

Mr. Blois said that we really do appreciate a lot of the work that you do. I know how challenging this file is, and Canada is held to a really higher standard from across the world. I wonder if perhaps you can compare where Canada stands internationally with comparable countries in terms of our processes for IRCC.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think it's fair to say that some of Canada's actions around refugee resettlement are celebrated around the world. When you leave Canada, you find a huge appreciation for what we are doing. I find my international counterparts are spending a lot of attention looking at how we are doing refugee resettlement in the context of labour pathways. Rather than categorizing people as refugees or asylum seekers or economic immigrants, we are trying to break down those barriers and we're indicating that refugees need supports. They need resettlement supports, but they can also contribute and have skills to benefit the country and benefit communities.

I think one practice that the international community is looking at is our economic mobility program as a bit of a model for use, and that goes with some of our partners—Talent Beyond Boundaries. We need to take a look at that and try to expand it as much as we can, and even look at our asylum population. If we are going to get temporary foreign skilled workers but we actually have a population here now, how can we work with the private sector to leverage this talent?

That's one area that is a focal point for us, but the ecosystem of settlement organizations and resettlement organizations that operate across this country is one of the best ecosystems in the world, and that's thanks to the NGOs, which do amazing work every day.

Those would be some reflections that my partners have shared with me.

• (1245)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Chair, I just want to make one last comment, if that's okay.

I'm really proud of a panel of some very strong women. You guys are absolutely amazing. Thank you. It's nice to see an all-women panel.

The Chair: That's very good. It's not the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last.

[Translation]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My next questions, once again, are about human and financial resources. As we noted a few months ago, IRCC is one of the departments that have employed the most consultants. It would be interesting to know what happened between 2017 and 2019 to quadruple the amount of money spent to hire consultants from \$6 million to \$24 million.

More particularly, what were the results? The scope of the audit covers the years in which spending on consultants rose to \$25 million a year. What was the purpose of that?

Lastly, will you continue employing as many consultants, or do you think that the work has been done, that you have the necessary evaluations and everything you need to implement Canada's immigration levels plan and that you no longer need consultants?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for that question.

For some of our department's activities, such as health care for interim benefit, we will continue to draw on a labour force outside the department.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Pardon me, but "health care for interim benefit" doesn't mean anything.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We deal with consultants and partners—I don't know the right word—who offer services that the department can't provide, such as health care. Payments are associated with that.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: That has nothing to do with anything. We're talking about professional services and the McKinsey firm, which received \$25 million over two years.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes. Sometimes people sort of expand that category.

The increase is mainly related to modernization efforts. When we started working with the new platform, it involved technologies such as cloud computing for which we relied on consultants.

We also have to invest in labour and succession within the department. We've done some work in that area. What explains the increase is the technological shift that we've made.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes, please. This will be your last round.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

There was work conducted in the anti-racism sector by IRCC previous to the Auditor General. Do you know of a report that was commissioned by IRCC related to anti-racism within IRCC by a company called Pollara?

Ms. Karen Hogan: No, I'm sorry; I am not aware of it.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Deputy Minister, are you aware of this report?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, and we've commissioned two.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'll quote from that report. It says, "You just feel like, now that I'm speaking out, am I also going to be looked like as one of those angry black women for speaking up?" The report quotes several employees saying similar items. It finally concludes that racialized employees also told Pollara that they've been passed over for international assignments and professional development opportunities.

The report says that one manager claimed that their evaluation of a racialized employee was "overridden by someone above them to promote a non-racialized employee instead". Racialized IRCC staffers told Pollara that they're marginalized in the workplace and "kept in precarious temporary contract positions disproportionately and for a long time which prevents them from advocating for their own rights" to promotion or speaking out against racist incidents.

That's deeply troubling to me. It's deeply troubling, I'm sure, to the Auditor General. It should be deeply troubling to this entire committee.

I thank the members of the opposition for continuing that line of debate. It's most important to this work. I'd encourage our Liberal colleagues to take this very important topic more seriously. It's not something worth praising.

I want to mention that there is a class action lawsuit now by the Public Service Alliance of Canada against the Government of Canada related to how they've been discriminated against in the public service. The government has responded to that by spending over \$8 million defending itself.

Do you think it's time for the country—particularly your ministry—to stop defending itself against these claims and to start working with racialized workers to see that their claims are properly heard and that their work in this place is truly appreciated?

• (1250)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I absolutely think that at IRCC, we need to work very closely. That's why we commissioned the Pollara report. That's why we didn't hide away from having hard conversations and—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: But you're not doing anything about it.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we are.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You're in a lawsuit.

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, your time is up. I would like to hear from Ms. Fox, if that's okay.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Sure.

The Chair: You know my rule is that once you're over, the witness can finish, but if you interrupt....

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I know the rule well.

The Chair: All right; that's very good.

Ms. Fox, you have the floor for a brief answer.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I would say to the committee is that we work very closely with our Black employee network and our racialized network. We're hearing from them.

How concretely did that change how we make our decisions? One, our executive committee table has become more diverse over the last year. That is a deliberate action to make a representation shift at the heart of the department.

Two, we empowered the networks that we have to give them a voice and funding so that they can advocate different things, such as mentorship programs, which we're supporting.

Three, we created an equity secretariat that has the anti-racism task force, and we listened to our employees to create an ombudsperson within the department.

Four, I think we need to spend a lot of time with middle managers. The direct environment of employees is what exactly impacts them every single day in Canada and abroad.

These are some of the measures we're putting in place.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're turning now to Mr. Kmiec for five minutes. You'll be the last speaker for the Conservative side.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Chair.

We've spoken about capacity. Several members have mentioned that.

Mr. Blois brought up Ukrainians. I want to bring up CUAET visa holders. There were over a million applications, and over 900,000 were approved. It's a big source of pressure for the department. Many of those people then want to apply for PR through different streams. They'd be affected through all of the programs that the AG has reviewed.

In the Yeates report, though, he found—it's on page 11—that there was an internal expectation that only 10,000 individuals would then seek permanent immigration to Canada through a PR program. Is that 10,000 correct? Was that the thinking of the department?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, those were probably the assumptions made at the time, since we did not know how long the conflict between Russia and Ukraine would last or what people's appetite to go to other places such as Poland might be. I think that was the beginning of the work.

I think that work continues, and right now we've launched the PR pathway for 10,000 for family and we're looking at how we will manage the balance of the program going forward.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: There are 210,178 CUAET visa holders. I just checked it.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: According to Pathfinders for Ukraine, 98% of them intend to stay in Canada.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: What are you going to do for the rest of them? How can we make sure that these Ukrainians, who have fled the war and who have expressed an interest, according to Pathfinders, in staying in Canada, can stay? About 80% of them are happy, and 76% of them are working. They want to contribute, so what's the plan to make sure they don't run into the same troubles as those in all of the PR programs that aren't working very well? What's the plan to ensure that these people won't be impacted?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think the answer to that is a whole-of-government effort. It takes the federal government. The provincial nominee program, the PNP, can be leveraged. We raised that with our provincial and territorial counterparts in terms of how we can work together to use PNP space and to use federal space to actually welcome people to Canada.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I've been to enough church basements, including over Thanksgiving, to know now that many of these CUAET visa holders don't have enough points for express entry. Many of them have been given bad information by IRCC, by lawyers or by immigration consultants, and they're struggling. They don't have their certifications. Their licences aren't recognized in Canada. Many of them are struggling to get survival jobs. The cost of living is immense. I met a mother with her 18-year-old son here. They are earning \$2,800 a month and paying \$2,4000 a month in rent. They're just making it, but the son can't go to school. He has to work as well just so that they can get by.

We have a program for those who have connections, who have family members here. For the rest of them, is the government going to look for more information and reach out to different Ukrainian organizations? This is a group of people who have fled, sometimes with absolutely nothing. They left their homes. Many of their homes have been destroyed by the Russian army. They have no village, nowhere to go back to, and unlike those in Europe who have expressed an interest in going back, the ones in Canada have said they would like to stay. What does the path to permanent residency look like for them in the department? Don't say there's a "whole-of-government approach", because every time that's said, I cringe—

• (1255)

Ms. Christiane Fox: How about "whole-of-Canada"?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: —because nothing happens. It means people will say, "it's not my job" or they'll do it halfway or they'll just ignore them or they'll point fingers at somebody else.

I'm asking what IRCC, what this department, is going to do.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I can tell you today is that we are looking at those who are here, those who want to stay here, and it is important to note that we have to work with our provinces and territories, because they have PNP space as part of the levels plan—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Are you going to increase their PNP space?

Ms. Christiane Fox: These are conversations we're going to have with provincial and territorial governments, because I think they have raised with us and we have raised with them the importance of providing some clarity to those who have come here temporarily with respect to what they can expect on the path forward.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Deputy Minister, if the Alberta provincial government reached out to you and said they needed more provincial nominee spots specifically for Ukraine CUAET visa holders, do you believe that your department, your minister, would be willing to say yes? If there were a ministerial meeting of all FPT ministers, would that be something the ministry would say yes to?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think I will leave that to the minister to make final decisions on—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'll ask him later today, so—

Ms. Christiane Fox: —but I think it is important that provincial governments that have integrated Ukrainians into their communities also think about provincial programs to accept them in. I think it can be a joint effort and I think we're absolutely willing to have that conversation with them.

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

I understand that for our last round, there will be two sharers, Ms. Shanahan and Mr. Blois. Do you want me to be the arbitrator of the time or would you like to hand that off to your colleagues?

I see. Okay. We trust you to be fair and impartial, like your chair.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, you said we had already exceeded our target of 4% francophone immigration outside Quebec.

When I began my career as an MP in 2015-2016, I remember how depressing it was on the Standing Committee on Official Languages to see that we really hadn't achieved it. So this is good news.

Would you please tell us about the agreements reached with the other provinces? Is this really a demand coming from the provinces?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we've reached the francophone immigration target a year earlier than anticipated. Last year, we hit 4.4%. The target had been set for 2023, but we achieved it in 2022. So this is good news. We hope that growth will continue this year. It's important.

In the context of the action plan for official languages 2023-2028, we have worked very closely with Canadian Heritage to determine how Canada can increase francophone immigration. It's important to raise the target: 6% is a big increase. That means we need to promote and recruit in a more targeted manner in order to attract people wishing to come to Canada.

We also have to work more closely with the provinces and territories. What we're trying to do with them is include an annex in the bilateral agreement of every province and territory clearly indicat-

ing their immigration target. If we can work together to conduct a promotion and recruitment campaign that doesn't target the same people, which would genuinely help increase the pool of individuals, that will be the key to success. We have to expand the pool in order to meet the 6% target.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's excellent. It's very good news.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Blois.

[*English*]

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you, Ms. Shanahan.

Ms. Fox, when I play golf, I not only try to beat my own score and what I'm capable of, but I also try to beat my buddies, the people I'm playing with, who have comparable skills.

Ms. Khalid asked a question, and I think you did a good job talking about the principles behind our immigration. I know sometimes it would be comparing apples to oranges, but compared to countries that have similar types of processes, how's our processing time? That's what I'm more interested in. Be as succinct as you can, because I have another one or two questions.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Very quickly, when I went over to the U.S., I was surprised to see just how paper-based their system continues to be. To give you another example, Australia did a review of their immigration system, and they mentioned Canada 42 times, so I think it is key in terms of looking at systems that work. I would finally say that other countries have mimicked our express entry point system in order to try to get similar results in terms of talent attraction.

Those would be some of the comments I would make. Around processing times, we're constantly looking at it, to remain internationally competitive. Those are a few points that I would raise to answer the question.

● (1300)

Mr. Kody Blois: Ms. Hogan referenced this a bit in her opening comments about setting realistic timelines. Of course, I want to be lower when I'm on the golf course; you want to have lower processing times in terms of being expeditious.

Are service timelines realistic, and how are they developed? On what metrics are those developed, and is it time for us to perhaps be more realistic with some folks about the challenges we're facing?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think it's important for us, and this is a good time to reflect on where we are with service standards. I think the immigration strategy document we released indicated that step one was to get back to service standard, and step two is actually to re-evaluate those service standards.

I think now we have to look at it in the context of where we are with modernization. There are things that are faster than they used to be, and maybe that warrants a change. There's also a rise in volume, so it's how we can actually look at volume and impacts in terms of productivity.

The third thing I would say, particularly on the international student program, is that the department is looking at setting up a recognized institution, similar in concept to the recognized employer. That would be what an institution would need to demonstrate in order to have access to the program and bring integrity and speed to the level of processing. There's more to come, but that's a bit of—

Mr. Kody Blois: I have about a minute left.

Mr. Kmiec talked about Alberta. I used to ask Mr. Brison, before I was in politics, about how Nova Scotia's PNP was different from Manitoba's. I note that we have the Atlantic immigration program now, which has been, I think, a relatively resounding success.

One number stuck out to me in the OAG report. It was that 3% of applications were approved within the service standard for the federal skilled worker program. I don't think anyone has asked that specific question.

What particularly may have caused that particular delay?

Ms. Marie-Josée Dorion: That's basically the fact that most of those applicants were sitting.... Don't forget that this report was at the end of 2022, not this year. They applied just before the pandemic, and then they sat in the inventory because we couldn't process people who couldn't come here. We stopped the intake, which is good, but if you look at that, you see that those people are now processed within five months. We've adjusted the intake and processed the old cases, and we're back to normal.

Mr. Kody Blois: Okay. It was a calculated decision because people were not able to come, given the health constraints at the time.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That is the time.

If you could just bear with me before I excuse everyone and adjourn the meeting, I just have a couple of questions, as the chair's prerogative, to help the analysts with the report.

The first is for the Auditor General. This is really to recommendation 9.64.

Has IRCC adhered to all the requirements under the directive on automated decision making? If not, could you give us some examples from this? You're welcome to respond now, if you like, which I think is the preference.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Carol McCalla: Yes, we found that IRCC did comply with the requirements, particularly in its quality management of the automated decision-making tool. Our concern was that in using the tool, it wanted—and getting into advanced analytics—all applicants to be able to benefit. However, we found that only those who met the criteria to be processed by the tool at that one decision-making point benefited from faster processing times. The shift in reallocating resources to other applicants had not yet taken place.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The next question is for Ms. Fox or either of you, and it has to do with recommendation 9.36. IRCC's anti-racism strategy calls for results for tracking purposes by April 2024. What is the timeline for implementation after the pilot?

If you have an answer now, that would suffice, but if you would prefer, you're welcome to come back to us as well.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd like to maybe talk to the anti-racism task force team and then come back to the committee.

The Chair: That's fine. Thank you.

Finally, could you provide the percentage of client satisfaction for permanent residents in fiscal 2022-23? Again, you're welcome to come back to us with a written answer if you'd prefer.

Ms. Christiane Fox: We'll provide a written answer.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's what I thought. Thank you very much.

Again, I want to thank our witnesses for coming in today and for fielding all our questions for just slightly more than the allotted time. I appreciate my colleagues' allowing me to ask those questions at the end.

Seeing no objection, I will adjourn this meeting. We will see you back here on Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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