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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 87 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today we are studying the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (B) for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

For the first hour, I am pleased to welcome the Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. He is joined by several officials from the department: deputy minister Fox, Ms. Manseau, Ms. Dorion, Ms. Baird and Ms. Park.

Welcome to the committee.

Before the minister starts, I would request of honourable members that instead of having cross-conversations—I know, Alexis, you like it when the French speakers come in—I request that you go through the chair. If the minister is taking a bit longer, just raise your hand, and I will interrupt and take the time into consideration so that members get a fair amount of time for questioning the minister.

With that, Minister Miller, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know that was a very nice way of telling me not to get worked up. I appreciate the indirectness of it.

I want to start by acknowledging that we are meeting here on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

I am here today with the officials whom you named to discuss the work we're doing to strengthen the immigration system and reduce backlogs, and to manage the increased interest in Canada that we see at historic levels, and the need for skilled labour across the country.

[Translation]

As you know, in November, I tabled the immigration levels plan for 2024-26, which stabilizes our annual levels to ensure a responsible path for immigration.

This plan will help businesses find the workers that they need, keep Canada on a path of long-term economic success and ensure that we stay true to our humanitarian commitments.

[English]

At the same time, we are taking steps to ensure that our immigration levels are aligned with pressures in areas such as housing, notably, and infrastructure. We continue to work with all levels of government in this regard and are taking immediate action to address urgent housing challenges, notably for asylum claimants. Through the interim housing assistance program, in particular, Canada is providing \$212 million to reimburse provinces and municipalities to provide safe shelters for asylum seekers and relieve housing pressures on municipalities. This includes \$97 million for the City of Toronto alone, relieving pressures on the greater Toronto area as a whole.

More recently, we announced \$7 million in funding towards a new reception centre in Peel to provide temporary shelter for asylum seekers and divert them from the shelter system, helping to relieve pressures on Peel and the surrounding area. Not only will this provide asylum seekers with warm shelters ahead of the winter months, but the Peel reception centre will also connect them to essential services and supports. We're also taking steps to improve processing times so that we can welcome skilled newcomers to Canada more quickly and more efficiently.

• (1550)

[Translation]

Through changes to our permanent resident immigration programs, we're bringing in the workers needed to address skills and labour shortages across the country.

[English]

This month, I met with my provincial and territorial counterparts to discuss the need to attract skilled workers to address critical labour shortages and to work in a more coordinated fashion.

[Translation]

For instance, construction companies are looking to hire thousands of workers to help build new homes and infrastructure.

The funding will also contribute to capacity building and overall system and processing improvements that support the immigration levels for this year, next year and 2025.

[English]

It will also improve the efficiency of temporary resident processing by streamlining immigration processes to help employers in vital sectors like agriculture, health care, construction and technology to bring in skilled foreign workers more efficiently.

[Translation]

These investments in technology and processing capacity are critical. We've been facing unprecedented demand to come to Canada across many categories of newcomers.

[English]

With new digital solutions, automating certain administrative tasks, and streamlining processes, my department is reducing wait times and application inventories to bring in workers, students and visitors here more efficiently. Funding for improving our temporary resident processing will help us speed up visitor visa work and study permit applications and the decisions that come with them.

[Translation]

While our focus remains on economic immigration that supports employers and communities, we're continuing to fulfill our commitments to reunite families and address humanitarian crises.

[English]

That is why we extended support for those affected by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, providing temporary refuge for more than 200,000 Ukrainian nationals and their family members.

[Translation]

The funding reflects the extension of the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel from March to July of this year. The support measures needed after these vulnerable newcomers arrive have been extended until March 2024.

The Government of Canada allocated \$53 million as part of the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel to support Ukrainian nationals in Quebec in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

[English]

Overall, these measures align with our plan to stabilize immigration, while helping businesses find the workers they need both quickly and efficiently.

We continue to harness our immigration system to chart Canada on a path of long-term success, all while staying true to our humanitarian traditions as a country.

[Translation]

Thank you.

I look forward to answering your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You're right on the dot.

Before I go to the first round, we have two honourable members visiting us. They will be asking questions.

Mr. Godin and Mr. Morrice, welcome to the committee.

There were some questions from committee members about staff. We have booked resources until seven o'clock, but that does not mean we have to go until seven o'clock. You can tell me to adjourn any time, and I will work with that.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I planned for a two-hour committee meeting, since I received a notice stating two hours. I don't see why it would be more than two hours.

[English]

The Chair: I'll take that into consideration. We will most likely stop around six, but we'll give the minister the full hour here.

Without further ado, I am going to Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Kmiec, go ahead for your six minutes with the minister.

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

Minister, in your opening statement, you talked about construction workers. I'm glad there was mention of that. You then talked about different policies to address gaps in the workforce. The one I didn't hear you mention was health care, that is, addressing the shortages in health care that we have. We're hearing stories from across the country about doctors from the United Kingdom, South Africa and other countries with comparable training. They are awaiting permanent residency.

The case I want to bring up is that of an Ottawa-area doctor, Dr. Carmen Bilcea. She applied for permanent residency and was rejected by your department.

Why is that? Have you seen this story?

Hon. Marc Miller: It is both imprudent and bad policy to comment on individual cases.

I understand the individual applied under the express entry draw. I don't think the conclusion is that the person is excluded from permanent residency. That is all I can say publicly about it.

However, it is clear that, in the context of health care workers.... Since the summer, we've drawn in 2,000, which I think is important. There is definitely a need for doctors.

• (1555)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Mr. Chair, she has gone public. It's in the news. There is an article. CTV News Ottawa is reporting on her particular situation. She came to Canada in 2021 from the United Kingdom. She works at Meadowlands Family Health Center. There are 1,200 patients depending on her for health services, and you're telling me that you're not going to comment on this story.

Has anyone in your office reached out to her?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, there are pieces of information that I am not at liberty to speak to you about. What I am at liberty to speak to you about is her permit, which allows her to practise until 2028.

I think you know we are quite strict and stringent about the level of information we share with the public. If someone goes public, it does not mean, correspondingly, that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship can speak publicly and broadly about the details and merits of the case.

I can say quite clearly that we absolutely need doctors in this country, whether they are homegrown or brought in from abroad.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: In the same article, the doctor says that “she will have to return to the UK in a little more than a year, or risk losing her medical licence there where it has to be renewed yearly.” You're saying that because of red tape your office has not spoken to her. You've not reached out to her and nobody has spoken to her. This is a doctor with 1,200 patients.

According to the CMA, in a survey early this summer, one in five Canadians has no family doctor. A family doctor here is saying that they have to go back to their country of origin. You're saying, “I'm sorry, but bureaucratic red tape stops me from talking about it or helping this person attain permanent residency”, and 1,200 Canadians can't keep having a family doctor.

Hon. Marc Miller: With all due respect, I think you're making lots of statements and drawing lots of conclusions that aren't accurate.

The one thing I can say to you is that her case should not be prosecuted in front of this committee. I would also add that this does not preclude our having spoken to her, nor can you draw the conclusion that we haven't.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, we're not prosecuting anything. It's a story printed by CTV News Ottawa, published on November 30. It goes into the details. She says, “It breaks my heart because I do understand how important it is for every single person to have a family doctor.” She goes on to say that “The entire immigration process in Canada is extremely lengthy, extremely torturous, is costly and the outcome is uncertain.”

Do you agree with her?

Hon. Marc Miller: I agree that at times that is the case. Again, to speak to the individual facts of the case in front of this committee is untoward. It doesn't mean that we aren't deploying efforts to make sure people do have family doctors in this country. It is the focus of our department.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's the job of members of Parliament to advocate for Canadians. I see 1,200 patients of hers—and this clinic—

who are going to lose a family doctor, because you're telling me it's red-tape bureaucracy.

Will you commit, Minister, to reaching out to her? Will you commit that one of the exempt staffers on your political staff will reach out to her to resolve this issue, so that 1,200 Canadians can have a family doctor for Christmas?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, this is not something I'm going to talk about publicly. If it gets done, you can draw your own conclusion.

Again, what you're using the committee's time to do is to talk about a news article that I think is very compelling. Some of the conclusions actually do apply to some of the challenges we face as a department. You're also asking me to talk about specifics and facts that exist within the department, which would be utterly wrong to do in a public context.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Let's make it generic, then. If this happens again over the next six months, how will you react? Will you reach out to the doctors to make sure it doesn't happen again?

You have occupational draws that are being made. There are a certain number of spots being set aside for it. I would have thought a doctor who's already practising in Canada would then be eligible to stay and that your department would make sure that they would get one of the very few permanent residency spots afforded to them.

Let's just make this a generic case. In the future, when this happens again, will you reach out to them and make sure that Canadians can keep the family doctors they have now, and that those people will get permanent residency in Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: I've been quite clear both publicly and directly to my department that we should prioritize doctors. In the health care field we're deploying extraordinary efforts to attract people from abroad. It is critical to get doctors. We need to make it easy for them.

That is a very important answer that I'd like to offer this committee. I've kept it deliberately general to preserve important facts and information that we need to keep confidential.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, you say you've directed the department to look at family doctors. It didn't happen in this particular case. She had to go public. She went to a journalist, and it's all over the news right now.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member. The time is up.

Minister, do you want to respond?

Hon. Marc Miller: I can't control what people put in the news. That is their choice. Issues like these are unfortunate when they arise in the public domain. It is clear that we have to do a better job of making sure that we do attract and keep doctors in Canada to make sure that patients are well served.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I will go to Madam Zahid now.

Madam Zahid, you can go to the Minister now for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before the committee.

Minister, I know we all have been deeply moved and concerned by the humanitarian crisis happening in Gaza right now. I know that your colleagues at Global Affairs are working hard to allow all Canadians, permanent residents and their immediate families to leave Gaza. Of course, it is not up to us, but the local authorities on when and how Canadians can leave.

This has raised an issue we often deal with in immigration—the definition of “immediate family”. In the Canadian and IRCC context, it means a spouse and dependant children under the age of 22. In my own culture, and, frankly, most others outside the U.S., it is much broader and includes siblings and grandparents.

Right now, Canada is not helping these people leave Gaza, other than the immediate family members. I've heard from grandparents whose grandchildren have lost their parents and they have no one to take care of them. People have siblings there who have no one else there. They want to come to Canada to be cared for and be with their families.

Will you take this opportunity to redefine the definition of “immediate family”, and help more people with strong ties to reach Canada safely?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Zahid, for that and for your advocacy.

First and foremost, as we continue to see with shock and horror the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, I think that our policies do need to evolve. Despite our best intentions, we do face some very challenging realities on the ground in getting people out at the Rafah gates. That reflects the war. It reflects security concerns of partners on the ground that make it very challenging to get even the narrow categories that we have out and to safety. That includes Canadians, permanent residents and the categories you enumerated.

At the same time, we have been flexible and been advocating for them to make sure that people who don't fall into those categories do and are able to get out, but it isn't a sure shot by any stretch of the imagination. I am looking currently within my department at options to expand that policy, but it is one that is conditioned by a number of considerations, particularly ones related to security and our effective ability to extract people from a war zone.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister. I hope you will carefully look into that.

My next question is in regard to the caregiver programs. I represent a significant Filipino community, and I meet regularly with members of the Filipino community across Canada.

Recently I was in Saskatoon, and the top question I heard was about the two caregiver pilots. These programs are coming to an end, and there's a lot of anxiety over what is to come. I heard both positive and constructive feedback. People are glad they can bring

their families, but they are concerned about the language requirements and processing times.

Will you offer some clarity to caregivers on the future of these programs and talk about why they are so important to Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: I think their importance has been proven. Obviously you're not the only one who has seen the importance of those programs, which have been introduced, as you said, as pilots.

Currently, we are looking at options for expanding them further. The parameters of those have not been discussed publicly yet. We're still doing some work internally to see what considerations can be brought to the table in terms of expanding those initiatives. They have changed thousands of lives and have given people an economic opportunity while filling some important labour shortages and gaps.

There are some successes, and there are some challenges with the programs, as you know, particularly compared with what existed previously. They are ones we have to carefully analyze before we take the next step.

• (1605)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: These pilot programs will be coming to an end very soon. It is really important that people are not left in limbo and that we have the programs so that those caregivers can continue to work.

Hon. Marc Miller: I appreciate that.

I hope you continue your work with our team in advocating and working with us on that program in particular. I know how much it matters to your constituents.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'll share the rest of the time with MP Morrice.

The Chair: Mr. Morrice, go ahead. You have a minute to go to the minister.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, MP Zahid, and Chair.

Minister, as you know, I met with your team a number of weeks ago with respect to concerns in my community about an exponential increase in international students that is leading to their exploitation, as well as knock-on effects in my community from not having the necessary infrastructure to receive that number of students.

I put forward a motion with a set of 10 different constructive, reasonable measures for you to consider to address this.

I wonder if you can comment on your openness to continue that conversation with expediency to make progress on advancing some of these measures.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Morrice.

Yes is the answer. I've looked at it. There are different elements of it that I think are compelling. We are hoping to make some announcements in the coming days with respect to making sure that international students are properly cared for and that they have, for example, sufficient funds to be here.

It is something that we need to continue working on, both federally and provincially, to make sure that people are really assuming the responsibilities in their own jurisdictions.

It has become a program that has been subject to abuse. The worst forms of it should be eradicated immediately, and the perverse incentives that have been created need to be addressed.

It's something we'll have to do carefully and surgically, but I think there are a number of elements in your motion that we will work on with you. I hope to show the results in the next couple of weeks, at least some of them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The time is up.

I will now go to my dear friend, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Miller, thank you for being here today.

You spoke about Ukraine in your opening remarks. In a show of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, Quebec wanted to help asylum seekers, obviously in exchange for reimbursement from the federal government. However, the federal government still hasn't reimbursed Quebec for the money spent, which reportedly amounts to around \$50 million. Much to my surprise, the federal government is funding the initiative in the other provinces, but not in Quebec. As far as I know, unfortunately for me, Quebec is still part of Canada.

Why are you paying for the intake of Ukrainian refugees in other provinces, but not in Quebec?

Hon. Marc Miller: First, that isn't true. We've already supported Quebec with regard to the costs incurred. You may be talking about a surplus.

Without question, it's a Canada-wide program, which obviously includes Quebec.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're telling me that your Quebec counterpart's concerns are completely bogus and that you've footed the entire bill for the intake of Ukrainian refugees. Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Marc Miller: We covered most of the housing costs and many other costs.

In terms of any potential disagreements over amounts occasionally forwarded for reimbursement, I'll be discussing the matter in confidence with Minister Fréchette.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that case, why is Quebec the only province to ask you for a reimbursement?

If the other provinces aren't doing so, maybe the reason is that they aren't spending anything and that you're funding everything on the other side of the Ottawa River.

Hon. Marc Miller: Honestly, let's face it, the Canada-Quebec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens works in Quebec's favour. We hear about disproportionate payments. However, many amounts paid to Quebec are requested by the other provinces. It isn't true that the other provinces don't come and ask us for money. You may have read the newspaper articles about how the City of Toronto is now asking us for \$100 million, on top of the \$100 million already allocated under the interim housing assistance program. It isn't true that Quebec is the only province asking us for money.

I also want to point out that Quebec has a responsibility when it comes to asylum seekers. We're working on this social project together.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Let's talk about it. You keep bringing up the Canada-Quebec accord. However, you give money to Quebec because it has responsibilities that the other provinces don't have. It relieves the federal government of a number of responsibilities. That's why you pay. When the services that you don't provide are delivered by someone else, it's only fair that you pay. That's why the Canada-Quebec accord is in place, Minister Miller. It's a bit tiresome to hear this all the time.

Quebec's demographic weight in Canada is 22%. However, between 2021 and 2023, we took in 55% of all asylum seekers in Canada. Minister Miller, do you realize that federal money is also the money of the people of Quebec? Logically, when the federal government spends one dollar, 22¢ comes from Quebec. It should be simple. Why don't you pay the \$460 million bill? It would be fairer. Quebec would come out ahead, since its spending would perfectly align with its demographic weight in Canada.

What's stopping you from doing this? Obviously, you and the Quebec government don't see eye to eye on this matter.

• (1610)

Hon. Marc Miller: Despite what you said, I'll bring up the Canada-Quebec accord again.

First, this accord contains a multiplier that increases each year, regardless of the immigration levels set by Quebec. These levels have remained stable. You spoke of imbalances, so I identified one for you.

Second, under the same accord, the system of payment agreed upon for a number of years resulted in surplus amounts being allocated to Quebec. We haven't yet had a very public discussion with Quebec about this issue. However, Quebec received substantial payments, far more than it should have been allocated. In my opinion, the exchange of invoices should be discussed with the governments responsible for the matter, in this case the Quebec government.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Exactly. The government responsible for Quebec is asking you to pay the bill.

If there were surpluses, but you suddenly decided that Quebec would pay for asylum seekers in order to repay the surpluses, that doesn't make sense. You can't decide something like that, Minister Miller. That's not how these things work.

Hon. Marc Miller: If you owe me \$50 and I owe you \$100, that's like saying that I owe you \$50, right? It's a mathematical calculation.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes. However, it depends on the agreement reached beforehand, Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: Under what circumstance, even a hypothetical one, would Canada have an invoice to submit to Quebec or another province? I'm asking the member whether this scenario is conceivable.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The more I listen to you, Minister Miller, the more I understand why people in the city of Quebec are worried. They're listening to you too. Even though, as you say, you don't want to talk about it publicly, you keep repeating in every public forum that Quebec owes Ottawa money. This type of announcement is no trivial matter. You're saying that Quebec owes the federal government money when Quebec is paying for all the social services provided to asylum seekers. This includes French-language instruction and housing. Quebec has been reimbursed for only 15% of these costs. In addition to not providing these services, the federal government doesn't want to foot the bill. Imagine that. This is shared jurisdiction at its worst. The federal government does nothing and Quebec does everything and also covers the costs.

You're also saying that Quebec owes Ottawa money. Minister Miller, you really need someone to help you sort things out, because this isn't working at all. It just doesn't work, Minister Miller. Quebec does everything and pays for everything. On top of that, you're saying that Quebec owes Ottawa money. That's a really special kind of calculation.

[English]

The Chair: Honourable member, the time is up.

Minister, do you want to respond even though the time is up?

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: I think that the member already drew his conclusion before asking me the question.

Clearly, a relationship is a two-way street. It isn't a one-way street. Canada has a major responsibility when it comes to asylum seekers. Overall, our relationship with Quebec is in good shape. We have a government-to-government relationship with Quebec. The Bloc Québécois doesn't set the agenda.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will go to Madam Kwan.

Madam Kwan, you have six minutes with the minister.

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

Thank you to the minister and his officials for being here today.

I would like to begin my questions on the issue with the people in Gaza, more particularly the Canadians and people in Canada who are desperate to bring their loved ones to safety. It was brought up on the issue around extended family members and the definition of family.

Can the minister advise whether he will be making any changes to the definition of "immediate family" to include extended family members, such as siblings, parents, grandparents, nieces, and nephews, many of whom, by the way, are now orphaned?

• (1615)

Hon. Marc Miller: As I told your colleague, it is something that we are working on. It's not something that I'm going to commit publicly to at this meeting. It is work that we are doing, considering how desperate the situation is. We are looking at who we can get out and effectively actually get out as opposed to simply issuing a policy and not being able, in the next turn of the hand, to actually get people out. There are a number of factors that are outside our control. However, it's something that I think....

I understand the sentiment. I understand the need. I understand the urgency. It's something that we are working on.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would say this: I get that there are other factors that have to be navigated through in order to actually get the people to safety. First and foremost, for them to get through the first barrier, is the Canadian government willing to accept them and, therefore, create a policy that allows for it in a fair and systematic fashion, not in a one-off situation? Without that policy change, they can't even get through the first door.

I would ask the minister to act with utmost urgency because people are literally dying. The executive director of UNICEF now calls the Gaza strip "the most dangerous place in the world to be a child". That is the reality that people are faced with. I think there's no time to waste. I don't think it's a difficult policy to change in that regard.

I would also ask the minister to provide a special immigration measure for people with family members in Gaza so that they can bring them to safety. Again, without a pathway, people have nowhere to go. They have no ability to begin the process to help bring them to safety.

Will the minister be working on that as well?

Hon. Marc Miller: Recognizing that I am not the sole decider in this.... It's stuff that we are working on with our colleagues at Foreign Affairs and with our partners in the region. It is something, as you've said, that is of the utmost importance.

Again, the policy, perhaps, will not contain everything you're advocating for. It's something that we are working on. It has to be realistic, and it has to actually reflect our ability to extract people, which, I would reiterate for this group, is still extremely limited, even within the categories of people we are trying to get out. I know that you suggested that this is piecemeal, but in cases where we have had facts, circumstances and the ability to get people out in a secure and safe way, we've done so and, I would say, with modest success.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What I'm trying to avert for the government, actually, is to not get into the situation where in the case of Afghanistan there was this hit-and-miss approach. Some people got out and other didn't, to the point where authorization letters that were not official from the department were being handed out. We don't want that kind of controversy. We should learn lessons from what's happened before. It's really important that we do this right.

I would urge the minister to take immediate action to bring in special immigration measures—one, to expand the extended family into the immediate family definition; and two, to allow for people in Canada to bring their loved ones to safety. That includes extended family members. I'll just park that there. I don't want to spend more of my precious time on that during my six minutes, because I want to raise another issue.

With regard to Afghanistan, I've handed a pile of files to the government. I get that you don't want to get into individual cases, but there are cases where de facto dependants are part of that application. Everyone else has been approved within the application except for a single sister, for example, an unmarried sister who will be left behind. There are de facto dependants under the definition of IR-CC. That can't be allowed to happen. The minister must understand the grave danger that this woman would be exposed to if she were left behind. Now the family's stuck in this situation trying to make a decision. Do they leave? Do they not leave? This is not a choice.

Why are de facto dependants being excluded in applications? What is wrong with the system?

Hon. Marc Miller: As I mentioned to your colleague from the Conservative Party, it is difficult to comment on individual cases. I'm not going to say that this is a mistake. These challenges do happen, particularly in the operational contexts we face. Thank you for meeting with my team. I think we have some positive news on a couple of the files. We can follow up with that after.

Again, every case of a person left behind is devastating. We do our utmost to try to get them out. I think we can't dismiss how difficult it is to operate in the region, and I know you're not suggesting that.

• (1620)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I gave the minister some files and I followed up some additional ones. I haven't really had an update on what's happened with those situations. Many of those files actually include what we call de facto dependants who have been left behind.

Just quickly, when will the government lift the ban on allowing families who want to sponsor parents or grandparents to come to Canada to submit applications?

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

Minister, do you want to respond?

Hon. Marc Miller: Okay.

The characterization of it as a ban is inaccurate. We have a limited intake of people. As you know, we do a lottery. It isn't a perfect way to proceed—the previous way not being even as good as that one—but it is about a set number of people.

I know that you object to the cap on this. I know that it creates a lot of personal challenges for families looking to reunite. But that is one that has been decided as part of our levels plan. It is an imperfect mechanism that was put in place to make an even less perfect one better.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, based on the lottery, people could buy a ticket—

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member. The time is up.

Mr. McLean, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister and officials, welcome.

I'll go right into your supplementary estimates here. You're asking us to give our input on \$671 million of additional appropriations you want for this year. In your past yearly estimates, your biggest increase in funding seems to come from professional and special services. There was \$600 million spent in this area three years ago, and \$1.4 billion last year.

How much are you spending in professional and special services this year?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'll pass that one to the deputy minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): In the supplementary estimates (B), what I can say is that we have one element that's the modernization of our platforms. It's a modest one in the supplementary estimates (B). It's about \$18 million. Some of that would be for cloud technology, etc.

We always look at the balance of outside external advice versus internal spend. In the area of IT, I think you have noted that in some years it has been high. I would agree with that, especially as we were launching the digital modernization platform looking at cloud technologies.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you. I have limited time here.

What is the expected number for this year?

Hon. Marc Miller: We can get it to you.

Ms. Nathalie Manseau (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): We have it.

Mr. Greg McLean: I'll go on to my next question—

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: I have it.

The expected number for this fiscal year is \$1.9 billion, but 70% of that is for passport delivery; amounts that we transferred to ES-DC; hotels—

Mr. Greg McLean: I'm sorry. Can we stop?

You said \$9.9 billion.

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: I said \$1.9 billion.

Mr. Greg McLean: It's gone from \$1.4 billion to \$1.9 billion. That's another half-a-billion-dollar increase.

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: Yes, but 70% of that is for...it includes hotels and the interim federal health program, which have increased since last year.

Mr. Greg McLean: That includes the hotels where nobody was really staying half the time, and they were excessively paid for, Minister.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't know what you're referring to, but if you look at the hotel occupancy rate across the IRCC network...the deputy minister is telling me it's 95% to 98%.

Mr. Greg McLean: Can you provide us with the top five payees of those professional and special services, please?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm sure we can provide you with a list.

Mr. Greg McLean: [*Inaudible—Editor*] meeting and we can have the full list later. That would be appropriate. Thank you.

Starting in 2023-24, the government announced \$14.1 billion in spending reductions over five years. That's \$14.1 billion. There will be \$500 million expected in cuts this year to consulting and other professional services. These reductions will be achieved by freezing the \$500 million in the reference levels of organizations like yours for 2023-24. That's this year, yet you've spent another \$500 million on top of your estimates on this.

Are we going in the wrong direction, Minister, as far as your budget goes?

Hon. Marc Miller: Across the system, we are looking at efficiencies. There is no question, in this department in particular, given the rise in the clientele and the historic demands, that we are seeing pressures that have nothing to do with our desire to be efficient in what we actually do...and look at attempts to rationalize how we do immigration in Canada.

That was the point and the conclusion of the strategic immigration review.

• (1625)

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you, Minister, but you continue to push these.... This is the department you're in charge of at this point in time. You continue to push these numbers as if each year you're going to have a reduction, and every time you come back with more supplementaries, it pushes you beyond what the last year's spending was. It seems like there's a lack of foresight in the spending here.

I will note that the full-time equivalency you continue to show in your departmental plan includes a reduction of very minimal numbers of bodies, but very large amounts of funding being reduced in the future. Is this a mirage, or are you actually putting some planning into this about how you're going to meet the needs of the de-

partment with the resources you have presented in the main estimates?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We have commitments to make and that we've made on the professional services reductions. I would note that for the interim health benefit, if we have an increase in humanitarian and compassionate arrivals, there will be, by definition, an increase in that spend in the context of people having access to the interim health benefit. There's not a cap. If people come in, they need the health benefit. It kicks in based on arrivals.

I would separate the interim health benefit from the consulting and contracting that we would do with, let's say, IT professionals. We are demonstrating a reduction as early as this year, going into 2026 and 2027 and beyond, as per the budget 2023 commitment that the organization has committed to the reduction.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member from that party.

Now we will go to the Liberals and Ms. Kayabaga. Please go ahead for five minutes with the minister.

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

Welcome again, Minister, to our committee.

Minister, as you know, Canada has been facing significant economic challenges with an aging population and labour shortages in key areas, such as transportation, homebuilding and health care, and our government notes that immigration has an important role to play in ensuring prosperity for years to come.

Can you explain to this committee how the immigration levels plan that you tabled on November 1 will help grow our economy and support our communities?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

If the committee so decided, I think it would be highly desirable to look at the demographic curve in Canada—not just the one that reflects all of Canada but one broken down by province and, at times, by regions, because I think people should be extremely pre-occupied with how that chart is trending.

If we don't address the lower end of the chart with the younger end of the population through immigration, we will be facing a catastrophe in short order, in the next decades, as people will demand more services for health and more services that they expect to be part of the social fabric of this country. There isn't a part of the country that's immune to that.

You can ask whatever expert you want about those efforts, and they will highlight the fact that Canada has done a good job over the last few years in dealing with it.

What Canadians are also telling us is that it has not come without challenges and without sufficient foresight, including when we're looking at the stress on the health care system, on both sides of the equation. That means people—dentists, doctors, health professionals—working and filling those positions but also the stress that is therefore put on the system by not only the aging population but also the new arrivals. You can apply the same analysis to housing.

There are challenges. The strategic immigration review that I referenced earlier identified those, but what is certain is that we need sustained high volumes in order to address that demographic curve.

The demographic curve isn't addressed slowly through immigration, but it is a big indispensable part of it, and I think it should be the focus of this committee and something on the mind of every person who cares about how this country is going. That, I think, is not necessarily a cyclical electoral consideration but really a generational one.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: What is IRCC's extensive consultation process for developing these plans?

Hon. Marc Miller: What we've heard from Canadians—and, again, the strategic immigration review highlighted it—is that governments generally—and I include the federal government in this—need to do a better job of consulting and working with our provincial and territorial counterparts in dealing with immigration as a whole. I mean not only the outward-facing aspect of it outside of Canada, on which we are the envy of the world—you just need to talk to our partners to hear that—but also the inward aspect of integration and social cohesion, which can be challenged at times if we don't do this in the right way.

The provinces have a very large responsibility in this, one that I spoke to my provincial counterparts on two weeks ago in Toronto and on which we all agreed, despite having different views on different aspects of this. The coordination aspect will be key if we are going to continue what has been a very successful Canadian consensus.

• (1630)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: We know there are a lot of bad actors in the immigration systems and that they have been targeting different people, including international students. What measures are you taking to combat the fraud and to protect the integrity of our immigration system, particularly when it comes to international students?

Hon. Marc Miller: A large number of people want to get into Canada. I would say that most are legitimate, but not all people are entitled to come to this country. That is just the reality of a country such as Canada, as welcoming as we are.

There are also people who are seeking to game the system, and we can't hide from that. Over and above the extraordinary efforts that are deployed by our own department and Canada Border Services Agency, there are unscrupulous actors, and they will prey, as they do, domestically on the most vulnerable.

In the case of international students, we have seen that time and time again, with false offers of hope for a fake institution that doesn't exist so that someone ends up driving an Uber, or with those just taking people's money and leaving them with a fake offer letter at an acknowledged university.

We have taken steps, in the last few weeks, to work on verifying offer letters. We are looking to strengthen the system in many measures, including by working with provinces to regulate designated learning institutions to make sure this does not attack the integrity of a system that is very important for Canada and for some very bright young minds. All they want is to come here to study and perhaps get a good job, and sometimes a pathway to permanent residency and Canadian citizenship.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member.

The clock is at 5:10, so thank you.

I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes with the minister.

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In a nutshell, Minister Miller, you're saying that asylum seekers and refugees are a shared responsibility. However, we know that Quebec takes in 55% of Canada's asylum seekers. We also know that Quebec has a \$460 million bill for the social services provided, such as housing and French-language instruction. Quebec is asking you to pay the bill. The federal government isn't providing any services and doesn't want to pay the bill. Given all these facts, Minister Miller, your conclusion is that the Canada-Quebec accord is a bad agreement, and that Quebec owes Ottawa money.

My question is quite simple. On Friday, when you meet with the minister and she asks you to pay the \$460 million, will you tell her that the Canada-Quebec accord is bad for Ottawa, that it's a bad agreement and that Quebec also owes Ottawa money?

Hon. Marc Miller: With all due respect, I won't reveal the outcome of a conversation that hasn't taken place yet. You're the one drawing conclusions that I think are quite wrong and that will mislead the people of Quebec and Canada.

With regard to the 55%, it should be noted that Quebec has done more than its fair share. In some areas, I'm asking for additional efforts. I also think that this figure should be scrutinized. We have moved a significant number of asylum seekers to the Atlantic provinces. We're paying for their accommodation in hotels, both in the Atlantic provinces and in Quebec. Many people came through Roxham Road. Many of them spoke French. Others moved from Montreal to Toronto. The 55% figure should really be scrutinized.

Two provinces carry the load when it comes to taking in refugees. However, they may reap the benefits when these people become Canadian citizens. These provinces are Ontario and Quebec, given their proximity to the United States and the Pearson and Trudeau airports.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister Miller, you said that I was misleading people and that my comments were wrong. Earlier, you said into the microphone that, ultimately, Quebec may owe Ottawa money. You can read the record if you want.

How am I misleading the people of Quebec? You said it and I repeated it.

Hon. Marc Miller: You said that one level of government is doing everything and the other is doing nothing, but that isn't true.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's completely true. Quebec—

Hon. Marc Miller: The \$700 million figure increases each year, regardless of immigration levels—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're still going on about the Canada-Quebec accord. Is it a bad agreement?

Hon. Marc Miller: —so it can't be said that this level of government does nothing.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Madam Kwan, go ahead, please.

The floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

• (1635)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I just want to go back and touch on the parents and grandparents piece for a minute.

The fact is that the pool has been closed since 2020 for new applications. Come January 2024, it will be four years that people have not even been able to submit an application. As the saying goes, you can't win the lottery if you don't get to buy a ticket. That is the case for parents and grandparents reunification right now for many Canadian families.

I want to go back to the issue around Gaza. The minister said that they're being as flexible as they can be, which I appreciate.

Can the minister advise, on what conditions will the department consider flexibility?

Hon. Marc Miller: As your Liberal colleague rightly said, there are variations of family configurations that aren't the ones that I identify with, with respect to my own family. There are people who

are considered family members who rightfully need to be supported. I think we look at categories of what those look like.

We also look at need. If there's a relative who is disabled or one that needs particular help, I think that's a consideration that we need to be flexible on.

It is also an area where these definitions can become quite broad and it's one that we have to tailor. Clearly, the current definition is one where we have done our utmost, with the current security configuration, to get people out, but it obviously isn't enough.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What do people have to do to get the minister to make that consideration, if they don't have an application in the system?

Hon. Marc Miller: We would have to know, first and foremost, for security reasons, who we are getting out. I think there are some real security considerations that go over and above our discretion.

Foremost, we would have to make sure that those people are the people they say they are and that they are, indeed, part of these broader categories. Then, effectively, we have to make sure we have the ability to bring them out in a way where we can make sure that the families stay together.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: As we know, people's homes have been bombed and all their belongings destroyed. Is the minister saying that unless they have identification documents, they will not be considered?

The Chair: Honourable Minister, you have ten seconds to respond.

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm not being as categorical as that, but for the safety and security of the situation, I think we will have to make sure that the people who claim to be part of this category are the people that claim to be part of the category.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have children who have been rendered without parents. They're orphaned and they are nieces and nephews of Canadian families.

Would they be able to be considered, under special circumstances, to be brought to safety?

Hon. Marc Miller: Obviously, these are hypotheticals, but there are also countervailing hypotheticals.

I can't speak on specific cases, but in the case of children, we do worry about their physical safety and also about the challenges with respect to child trafficking, which does exist.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister and Madam Kwan.

We will go to Mr. Godin.

Mr. Godin, we will go to you for five minutes, and then to Mr. El-Khoury.

After that, we will end the meeting with the minister.

Mr. Godin, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Miller, thank you for being here today.

My first question is for you and it concerns spending. For 2023-24, has additional funding been earmarked for francophone immigration?

Hon. Marc Miller: Are you talking about the supplementary estimates specifically or about the budget in general?

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm talking about funding added to the supplementary estimates. Did the department add any activities for francophone immigration this year?

Ms. Christiane Fox: There has been an increase in funding under the official languages plan. However, this funding isn't included in the supplementary estimates (B), 2023-24. It will appear in future budgets.

We received funding to promote francophone immigration, one of the pillars of the official languages plan.

Mr. Joël Godin: Are you talking about the official languages bill passed in June 2023?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm talking about the official languages plan launched this year.

Mr. Joël Godin: You're talking about the action plan for official languages 2023-28, which came into force in April.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'd now like to talk about the Official Languages Act. You have a new responsibility as a result of the passage of Bill C-13 last June. Has any additional funding been earmarked for this purpose, or had it already been allocated under the action plan, before we even knew the outcome of the bill?

Ms. Christiane Fox: There's funding for francophone immigration under the 2022-24 immigration levels plan, and additional funding under the action plan for official languages 2023-28.

Mr. Joël Godin: This leads me to my next question.

Minister Miller, under the new section 44.1 of the Official Languages Act, your department must adopt a policy. Has this policy been tabled?

• (1640)

Hon. Marc Miller: No. It hasn't been tabled yet, but it will be shortly.

Mr. Joël Godin: Why are we still waiting for it? Can you tell us today when the policy required by clause 44.1 will be tabled?

Hon. Marc Miller: I would say, without committing officially, that it will be around January.

Mr. Joël Godin: That's a pretty evasive answer.

Hon. Marc Miller: You'll see in January. Wait until January.

Mr. Joël Godin: We'll wait until January, yes.

[English]

The Chair: Please, don't talk fast, because it's very hard for the interpreters to interpret.

Please follow through the chair. I would really appreciate that.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, in your opening remarks, you mentioned that there had been an increase in the number of immigration applications. Can you give us the percentages of francophones and anglophones?

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, honourable Minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: Mr. Chair, could you give Mr. Godin more time? I didn't quite understand his question.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Godin, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Minister, you stated in your opening remarks that there had been an increase in immigration to Canada. Can you give us the proportion of francophone and anglophone immigration?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, I can tell you what the situation is outside Quebec.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm talking about all of Canada. I'm not making—

Hon. Marc Miller: As you know, Quebec sets its own immigration levels. I assume that these are exclusively francophone immigrants, although that may not be the case.

The francophone immigration rate outside Quebec reached 4.4% last year. This year, we have just reached a rate of 4.5%, which is a historic threshold. We still have work to do, obviously.

Mr. Joël Godin: Let's talk about targets.

You set francophone immigration targets for the next three years, 6% in 2024, 7% in 2025, and 8% in 2026.

What criteria did you use to establish the francophone immigration targets needed to at least stop the decline of French in Canada? We know full well that these targets won't get us there.

Hon. Marc Miller: There was quite a significant consultation across Canada. We also looked at our resources within the department. The levels we had achieved in our recent history were well below 4%. After taking into account the comments we received and what the department was asking for, we set realistic targets.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

I will conclude my remarks by saying that, unfortunately, the minister has just told us that if French isn't protected and its decline in Canada isn't stopped, it's simply a question of resources. I find that unfortunate.

I would now like to give the rest of my time to my colleague Mr. Kmiec.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, you have one minute. Please go ahead.

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

Earlier today, I asked your deputy minister about the CUAET visa program. The Yeates report talked about how only 10,000 people were the original group that you thought—the department thought—would be allowed to stay as permanent residents.

There are over 200,000 CUAET visa holders. What does the future hold for them? Can you commit to finding a path to permanent residency for these war refugees who have come to Canada?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: First of all, I would like to respond to Mr. Godin's comment.

We've increased our targets to 8%. The Conservatives, on the other hand, did nothing for the entire time they were in power. When the Conservatives were in power, the targets were close to 2% or 3%. So I find it a bit ridiculous to be lectured about this.

[*English*]

My answer to MP Kmiec is as follows.

We will have to have a discussion about what that pathway to permanent residency is for Ukrainians who wish to stay. Currently, we have some geopolitical considerations, as you well know, with respect to the permanence of those people who are here—who are well over 200,000. There is, as you mentioned, a pathway for people seeking permanent residency, but the general expectation is that those people will return to rebuild Ukraine once the war is won. That is a reality, and it is one that is not without geopolitical consequences if we decide to expand permanent residency currently. There are pathways, but are they sufficient? I think time will tell. There is a point where Canada will have to make additional considerations, but we aren't prepared as a country to do that now.

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

I will now go to Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. El-Khoury, please go ahead for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the minister and his extraordinary team.

Mr. Minister, Canada is experiencing an increase in the number of asylum seekers, which has put considerable pressure on Canada's housing system. As winter approaches, the needs become more and more urgent.

Less than two weeks ago, our government announced additional funding for the Region of Peel to open a new welcome centre that will temporarily house asylum seekers.

Can you tell us more about the benefits of this funding, the reaction of stakeholders and how it can help meet the needs of these people?

• (1645)

[*English*]

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you for your question, Mr. El-Khoury.

As you've seen in the newspapers, the sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers, especially in the Toronto area, has made it necessary for the federal government to intervene. Together with the mayors of Brampton and Mississauga in particular, as well as the mayor of Toronto, we made a number of efforts to ensure that people would have a roof over their heads for the holidays.

The announcement we made was for funding for a reception centre near Pearson airport. The funding from the federal government is \$7 million. There will be additional funding from other levels of government. This centre will play an important role in welcoming people who, when they arrive at Pearson airport, will make a refugee claim. The centre will also be used to house people who are on the street.

So it was a very nice announcement. This is what Mississauga and Brampton, in the Peel region, have been requesting for a very long time.

As I'm sure you know, a homeless person died, unfortunately. Obviously, I don't know if there's a distinction to be made between Canadians who are homeless and asylum seekers who are homeless. Death has no regard for a person's citizenship. That said, we definitely need to make an additional effort, and the federal government supports it.

The responsible government of Ontario must also invest the necessary funds. I know they have a historic agreement with the City of Toronto. That said, it must certainly fulfill its role with respect to asylum seekers on its territory. That was done a few decades ago, but the Ontario government unfortunately backed away from it.

One thing is clear: Migration flows are unprecedented at the international level. They affect over 100 million people around the world. Canada is not immune to this phenomenon, although it is quite isolated geographically, compared to a number of European countries where it is prevalent.

[English]

The Chair: The honourable member.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Mr. Minister, Canada is a prime destination for people looking for a new place to work, study, have a better future, start a family, and feel safe and secure.

In recent years, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has received an increasing number of applications. This often exceeds the department's capacity to process applications, resulting in delays and failure to meet service standards.

Can you tell us more about the recent work done by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to improve the experience of newcomers and its clients?

[English]

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: We've had a chance to talk about it. It's true that we're facing a record number of applications from people who want to come and settle in Canada. I think we hit an all-time high in October, when there were still three months left in the year. That puts a lot of pressure on the department.

Obviously, we have to do things better. At the time, everything was done by the handful. This system isn't suited to the 21st century. Digitization is a big step forward. The Office of the Auditor General's report, which was mixed, but still positive, noted among other things the improvement in processing times and services provided by IRCC. That's a good thing. Two years ago, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the wait times were very long. Since that point of reference for the Office of the Auditor General's review, we have made additional improvements. So that's positive. We're moving in the right direction.

Obviously, there are factors beyond our control. As for the rest, my department is working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to improve its points of service. Our credibility is at stake.

• (1650)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury. Your time is up.

With that, on behalf of the committee members, Minister, thank you for being with us today. Hopefully, you will be accessible in the coming days, and we're looking forward to seeing you many more times.

Thank you.

With that, the meeting is suspended.

• (1650)

(Pause)

• (1655)

The Chair: We still have all of the officials that I have already mentioned, so I'm not going to take any more time on that.

We will have one round of six minutes for each party, and then there is a consensus that we will adjourn because of the votes.

Without any further ado, I will go into the questions and answers.

The first six minutes will go to Mr. McLean.

Mr. McLean, go ahead, please.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Deputy, I have a follow-up on the last question I asked. Do you have the names of the five top organizations that were given grants and contributions?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what we can do is that we'll—

Mr. Greg McLean: I'm asking whether you have those. You had about a half hour or more to look them up. Are they available?

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: We don't have that level of detail, but we can provide them to you.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

I went through a bunch of your figures here. With regard to your 2022-23 numbers, it seems that you lapsed some money that was appropriated.

Is it standard practice to appropriate money through this estimates process and then lapse those funds at the end of the year or let them stay on your books? How long do they stay on your books?

• (1700)

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I would say is that for every kind of funding decision, obviously we have a responsibility through the mains, the supplementaries and good fiscal responsibility to account for the money we spend.

In some instances where losses have occurred, for instance, it could be things like the Afghan resettlement program. The pace of arrivals was not exactly as predicted in light of situations on the ground: exit permits from Pakistan to get people in.... That matters to us financially. When people arrive as government-assisted refugees, the interim housing benefits kick in, and those numbers can be fairly large in the context of our appropriations.

That's how I would explain some of the lapses that have taken place as a result of the—

Mr. Greg McLean: Would that amount to about \$1.4 billion between the end of last year and this...?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm sorry, what was the figure that you used?

Mr. Greg McLean: It was \$1.4 billion.

Ms. Christiane Fox: No, that would not have been for that.

I'll let Nathalie speak to that.

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: The total lapse was \$933 million.

Mr. Greg McLean: It was almost a billion. Thank you very much.

In regard to the bulk of the increased spending that you're asking for now, you're asking for \$184 million in operating expenditures and \$475 million more in grants and contributions.

Explain the grants and contributions to me, please.

Ms. Christiane Fox: The grants and contributions for us, as a department, I think are primarily to the settlement and resettlement network. The totality of that spend over the last year was about \$1.3 billion. In terms of the supplementary estimates, in light of the extension of the CUAET program, some of the benefits associated with it—financial assistance, interim housing, language and employment supports—would be part of some of the grants and contributions that we allocate within the department.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

Now, we have a difference here between the numbers. Educate me, please. We're talking about an extra \$57 million coming up. The resettlement assistance program is increasing by \$57 million to \$329 million, plus contributions.

There are grants and contributions. Can you explain the difference between the grants and the contributions for resettlement assistance?

Ms. Nathalie Manseau: A contribution requires a contribution agreement with the recipients and may have some conditions. The grants are non-conditional payments to recipients.

Mr. Greg McLean: IRB, the Immigration and Refugee Board, has not requested any more money this year.

Is it because of the closure of Roxham Road that it no longer requires as much to get people through the process? Has that been a net savings, and will it be a net savings in the final analysis of these estimates?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I won't necessarily speak to all of the details of the IRB, but I would say that the Roxham Road closure has not led to a decrease in the numbers of asylum seekers.

I think that the IRB, as well as other partners in the system, including us, got additional money in past budgets and we're looking at how we can use those funds to match the numbers we have.

I think it would be fair to say that the volumes have not decreased, as a result of the STCA negotiations of the additional protocol.

Mr. Greg McLean: The minister and you both spoke about the housing assistance program, \$212 million. This is extraordinary, obviously, with an excessive number of immigrants coming in at one point in time without infrastructure to house or provide them with services.

Is this something you're going to see lapsing going forward, or is this going to continue as part of your budget lines going forward?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It is something we're paying very close attention to. I think the interim housing assistance program has been essential in protecting the most vulnerable people from staying on the streets and in providing interim housing. As we look at the asylum context around the world, and as we look at its domestic ramifications, we are assessing exactly what the impacts would be and what the best ways to manage those would be, aside from hotels, necessarily.

We talked about the reception centre. With the Peel investment, we are looking at how we can bring service providers into one space. People can apply for their work permits, get some social supports they need and have interim housing.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

Let me refer to the Yeates report because it melds with something else here. The Yeates report indicates that you're going to have to go through a reorganization at some point in the future. You, more or less, have a broken organizational structure, through no fault of your own. It says that your employees have done a good job of holding that all together in the meantime, but you're going to need some funds for reorganization, obviously.

You're also going to need some funds for the digital changes you have to go through and for the plan that is requiring it, yet there are no funds, going forward, indicated in your go-forward plan.

I look at your budget, your estimates, and look at your go-forward plan in your departmental plan, and there's nothing there that seems to speak to the reality of what you're going to face in the very near future, yet it does indicate that you think you're going to reduce your spending.

Could you please comment?

● (1705)

The Chair: It's already at the six minute and 15 second mark, so please be brief.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would say, first, we have done the reorganization. We did it in a cost-neutral way. We listened to the advice of the Yeates report and made decisions as a department. We are reorganized, and that was effective October 16.

The second point I would make is on the issue of the modernization activities. We have been allocated over \$840 million for the digital modernization platform. That is taking us to what the public procurement has been around a client-facing front-end and the back-end supports we need.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLean.

We will now go to the parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Chiang, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here with us today.

I would like to start with the immigration levels plan. It is integral to our immigration plan. It sets a target for welcoming new permanent residents and helps provinces, territories and local organizations plan for years to come.

When developing those levels, consultation is key to ensuring that our immigration levels plan is aligned with the current realities of the labour market, while also ensuring that newcomers have the resources and the tools they need to thrive and to contribute meaningfully to the new communities.

Can you give this committee an overview of the consultation process that went into developing the levels plan?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely.

Every year, as we think about our levels plan, the department engages in very formal consultations with provinces and territories, as well as a number of stakeholders. Those could be business representatives, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, multicultural or ethno-cultural associations and municipalities. The engagement is quite extensive.

I think, as an organization, where we tried to put emphasis and tried to make some changes over the last year was around engaging indigenous leadership across the country and having them be more integral in the development of our levels plan. We benefited from our strategic immigration review, where we went across the country—I, Louise and members of the team—to talk to people about what they needed to see in terms of changes and how Canada can continue to welcome immigration successfully. The consultations are quite an extensive process. That leads to our ability to prepare our advice to government on the immigration levels plan.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you for that answer.

IRCC is requesting to transfer \$1.5 million to Global Affairs Canada to support the Afghan resettlement task force.

Could you provide this committee with an update on the progress of the task force and its plans for the immediate and long-term future?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think the Afghanistan sector within our department, working in lockstep with security agencies and Global Affairs, has had a lot of successes and things to be proud of.

In Canada, 40,000 Afghan refugees have resettled. Almost on a weekly basis right now, we are seeing charter flights leave Pakistan for arrival in Canada. We have a good pace of departures right now. We're working very well with Pakistani officials in being able to access our clients on the ground. This is not always easy. The biggest challenge remains to be our clients who remain in Afghanistan and our ability to support them. Big efforts are being spent on that.

Yesterday, we had a chance to speak with some of our employees. They spoke about their experiences through the Afghan resettlement effort. Highlighting some efforts of some IRCC staff, one in particular was able to reunite a three year old with her father after the mass evacuation in August. Another individual personally interviewed over 3,500 people in desperate situations. This work continues, and our commitment continues. It's not only at IRCC but also at other government departments, including Global Affairs.

● (1710)

The Chair: Mr. Ali, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Through you, Mr. Chair, to Ms. Fox, many of my constituents of Pakistani origin constantly ask me for updates on the issue of enhancing visa processing capacity in Islamabad, Pakistan, which was announced last year under Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy. Can you please confirm that visa processing is currently being done in Islamabad?

Ms. Christiane Fox: In fact, having a greater footprint in Islamabad has been a priority of the government, and, as you noted, it's a commitment in the Indo-Pacific strategy. Interviews being conducted out of Islamabad were an irritant to the Pakistani government, but we can, in fact, now confirm that interviews can be conducted in Islamabad.

We are continuing to look to expand our footprint. We have candidates who are ready to be deployed to Islamabad. We are working with the government to get the visas complete so they can arrive and increase our footprint. That's a conversation we continue to have.

I think, given the caretaker government, that there were perhaps a few delays in getting the conversations that we needed to have going, but I think we are on track, and we're quite proud to expand our team there.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: You're saying that you have some pending visas for IRCC officials who would be working in Pakistan. Currently you're waiting on the Pakistani government for that. Can you confirm that, please?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, that is the case, absolutely, and we hope that we get answers on those very soon.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you so much.

If you'd like to add on any other issues, I'll give my time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Deputy Minister, do you want to say something? Otherwise, we'll proceed.

Ms. Christiane Fox: On Pakistan, I know there's been a lot of attention on deportations and, at times, detainment, so we continue to work with officials. We track numbers every day. We're in communication with our clients who may find themselves in those situations, and it is obviously a big priority for us to work with our clients to try to get them to Canada as quickly as possible.

We are encouraged by progress that we've seen in charter arrivals, and we hope that continues until December and in the new year, but, in our conversations, we continue to work very closely with the Pakistani government.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, dear witnesses. It's good to see you again.

Ms. Fox, when you last appeared before the committee, I told you about a problem raised by the RATTMAQ, the Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec.

We recently heard from representatives of RATTMAQ as part of our study on closed work permits. I told them about the problem they had observed, that is to say that a significant number of open work permit applications they had made for vulnerable workers had been refused at the beginning of January 2023. The RATTMAQ had received eight negative decisions. However, the files were very similar to the previous files, which had always been approved.

Following an intervention made jointly by my office and that of Mr. Lightbound, we met with the office of the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration at that time. Then there was a fairly dramatic change in that case. The situation came back to order shortly after our intervention.

However, we didn't know in detail what had happened. What I learned was that the refusals came from the same official, because each time it was the same officer number.

When I asked you last time, I had the impression that you had some information on the subject, unless I misunderstood. Could you elaborate on that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: When you raised this issue last time, I told you that I had indeed met with representatives of the Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec during our strategic review consultations. At that time, they told me about some cases that had been refused, without giving me any details, however.

After you asked me the question in committee, I went back to my team to find out the approval rate of applications. As you noted,

that rate was indeed low in Quebec. It was 47% in 2022, and now it's 57% in 2023.

I'm looking at the program as a whole. As for the evidence to be demonstrated, the bar is intended to be lower, given that these are vulnerable people. We have issued open permits to vulnerable workers, but I think we need to continue the training with our public servants who are making decisions, so that they are in a position to make the right decisions. As to whether it was a specific official, I don't have those details with me today. I'll ask my team. However, I would say that there is a need for ongoing training for our officers who make decisions about very sensitive cases.

• (1715)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Deputy Minister, my question is very specific. It's really about a specific problem. I don't want to know all the numbers or how and why. I say that with all due respect.

My question is about the officer in question. If I'm aware of the fact that it was one and the same officer, since the officer number was always the same, who almost systematically refused the same type of request when they were normally accepted, I can't believe that the department isn't aware of this situation. If RATTMAQ is aware of it, and if I, as opposition MP, am aware of it, then you must be aware of it. Am I mistaken?

Ms. Christiane Fox: As a deputy minister, I don't know if those decisions were made by the same official. I'll follow up. No, I'm not aware of that.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: However, I talked about it the last time in committee. You told me that you were going to provide us with an answer later, but I didn't receive one.

There's a hypothesis out there, but it may not be true. According to this hypothesis, an official in your department with the authority to decide whether to approve or refuse open permits for vulnerable workers apparently held far-right views. Suddenly, the department apparently came to the conclusion that this was what had happened. The problem was apparently solved in the end, without it being reported publicly. That's just a hypothesis.

So my question to you is, is it credible? Is that a possibility, Ms. Fox?

Ms. Christiane Fox: As a proud public servant, I would tell you that we all adhere to a code of values and ethics. We take training, we have conversations with our employees about what that means to us, both individually and collectively.

There are often people who assume that some activities are the result of bad intentions, but sometimes there may be other reasons. For example, it may be a matter of training, a new file to learn or a new employee. I wouldn't be prepared to tell you today that there was harmful intent. However, I'm prepared to tell you that we often talk about the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector, because it's important in an organization like ours.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I want to be clear: I don't hold it against you, I'm not criticizing you. However, I want to shed some light on this story.

If it turns out that such an activity has occurred in your department, in other words, a person with decision-making power has systematically refused all applications for open permits for vulnerable people based solely on their opinion, which borders on the far right, will you commit today to coming back to the committee and telling us so publicly? Will you commit to being fully transparent, once this has been discovered, and tell us what actually happened within the department and what the consequences were?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely. I'm prepared not only to report to the committee if that's the case, but also to report to the committee on any action taken with regard to that officer.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Minister.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will now go to Madam Kwan.

Madam Kwan, you have six minutes with the deputy minister and the team.

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

My first question for the deputy is with respect to the people whom the government is evacuating from Gaza. How many of them are immediate family members and how many of them are extended family members?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Right now, for the committee's benefit, we work very closely with Global Affairs Canada. The assisted departures, in the first phase, were focused on Canadians, permanent residents, and their immediate families.

As the minister pointed out, there were situations where people came through, perhaps with an aging aunt. There have been cases where people have gotten through the border and we have facilitated the next steps of that process. What we are doing is working very closely with the authorities who are managing the list to try to.... In the first phase, our focus was definitely on Canadian citizens, immediate families and PRs, but we recognize that we also need to think about broader families and are looking at what type of action we can take in that space.

• (1720)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To date, how many of those who have been brought in are extended families?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Just to make sure, it's extended families and those brought over—so many people are staying in Egypt and are not necessarily coming to Canada or are going elsewhere. Not

everybody is coming here. The second, as I mentioned, is that the immediate family was the focus of the assisted departures in phase one.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could we get a breakdown of the number of extended family members Canada helped facilitate who are now in Egypt, and how many actually boarded a plane to Canada and arrived in Canada? If we could get a breakdown of those numbers, I would appreciate it.

Can I get confirmation that we will get that information for the committee?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we can get you that for the committee.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Regarding the interim federal health program, I'm hearing from doctors and people in the health care sector that patients are not able to access the health care service, and that the processing of those applications is severely delayed. I was given an example of people not even getting authorization to begin...the health service. The wait time has been six to nine weeks. It's happening quite frequently in a variety of different health service deliveries, so it is not a one-off situation.

My question for the deputy minister is this: What's going on there? Can the ministry take action to ensure this kind of delay is not occurring and that people are not impeded from getting the health care services they need?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would say that, in certain contexts... We work very closely with panel physicians across the country. Obviously, people need to demonstrate medical evaluations and assessments prior to making their applications in Canada. I don't think that, at this point, there are significant delays regarding panel physicians. Depending on where you are in the country, there may be a bit of a longer wait. We can commit to come back with that.

Is what you're suggesting about six-to-nine-week wait times specific to a health service once someone becomes a PR? Is it specific to refugees? I'm trying to get a sense of the issue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's specific to refugees. They have not yet received their PR, so they're reliant on the interim federal health program. In this case, the six-to-nine-week thing happens to be for someone in need of physiotherapy. It's not because the physiotherapist is unavailable. It's because they're waiting for the process to be completed so they can start the treatment. That is a six-to-nine-week wait time.

That's not the only example. I have many others, but I'm running out of time.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'll definitely bring that back, take a look at what the delays are, and come back to you on next steps.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Regarding the 2020 pool for the parents and grandparents lottery, how many people are in there right now?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I know 24,000 invitations to apply were sent out in October 2023 for that pool. How many remain in that pool after that invitation to apply.... I would have to check, but we have 5,278 applications in the system.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand—

• (1725)

The Chair: I'm going to stop the clock.

Deputy Minister, she asked for a specific number. How many are left in that pool? I would ask your department to provide the exact number of people left.

Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

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

I would like to get that number, since the pool has been shut down for three years now. Come January, it will be the fourth year. I'd like to know what the pool was for each year. I would like to have that information.

Mr. Chair, at this juncture, I would like to move a motion:

That the committee issue a letter to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to urgently call on the Government of Canada to lift the 40,000 quota for the Special Immigration Measure for Afghans so that those who risked their lives and that of their family members, including extended family members, to serve Canada are afforded the opportunity to get to safety in Canada; and, further, that the committee issue a news release on the matter.

The Chair: I want to make it clear to the committee that there are many things we discuss in camera that cannot be discussed here.

This is a motion made in public, so it is a debatable motion.

Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Can we get the exact wording of the motion so that we can see it?

The Chair: Sure.

Madam Kwan, can you give the wording of the motion, please?

Can we discharge the deputy minister and the team?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: Deputy Minister and team, thank you very much for being here.

Mr. Greg McLean: Actually, Mr. Chair, before the deputy minister and her officials are discharged....

Thank you, first of all.

Second, can we get the list of the things that Ms. Kwan asked for to make sure that they're on the record—and that we asked for as

well? It's not just the top five payees but the full list of payees. Can we also get the 500 service organizations that you're aligned with? I think it says, in your plan, that there are more than 500. That would be instructive.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: With that, I would like to thank you, Deputy Minister Fox, Ms. Manseau, Ms. Dorion, Ms. Baird and Ms. Park. The very best to you.

Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The clerk already has the motion.

The Chair: There is something that was talked about in camera that we cannot talk....

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand. I just [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: Thank you.

A voice: Mr. Chair, are we suspended?

The Chair: I'll suspend the meeting for a few minutes here. The meeting is suspended.

• (1725)

(Pause)

• (1725)

The Chair: I bring the meeting back to order, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Mr. Chair, I move to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: There is a motion on floor to adjourn the meeting. It's non-debatable.

I will ask the clerk to take the vote, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I have a point of order.

What did you just say?

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp brought in a motion to adjourn the meeting.

• (1730)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Was that just now? I didn't even hear him.

The Chair: You know, I'm very fair chair. I don't take sides. He did move it, and I have to entertain him.

Also, we agreed before that we would have only six-minute rounds because if the bells rang, then we would have to come back. We would go and then come back.

Anyway, take the vote, please.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 9; nays 2)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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