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Chair: Julie Dzerowicz



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

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

We have two panels of witnesses today. For the last 15 minutes of our second hour, we're going in camera so we can discuss committee business.

I have a few general comments off the top.

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format, so we have someone joining us by video conference. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those participating by video conference or Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation. You can choose “floor”, “English” or “French”. Of course, for those in the room—and these remarks are specific to the witnesses—you can use the earpiece if you need to listen to either French or English.

I have two cards, which I will whip out of my knapsack when one of you guys starts speaking. If I hold up a yellow card, it means you have one minute left. Red means your time is up and your mic goes off.

Always kindly wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. Please do not speak over each other. It will be very hard for our translators to translate, and it makes their job very difficult. Of course, please ensure that all comments are addressed through the chair.

Members, as you know, raise your hand if you wish to speak. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

I thank you very much in advance for your co-operation.

I want to give a warm welcome to Mr. Fergus, who is here in place of Ms. Sodhi.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 16, the committee is resuming its study on Canada's immigration system.

It is with great pleasure that I announce our witnesses for the first hour of today's meeting. As an individual, we have Mario Bellissi-

mo, lawyer and certified specialist, Bellissimo Law Group Professional Corporation.

I think you are someone who is well known to this committee, sir. I welcome you.

From Hong Kong Watch, we have Aileen Calverley, co-founder and chair. From Stats Canada, we have Laurent Martel, director, centre for demography, and Ron Gravel, director general, who is with us via video conference.

It's nice to welcome you all as well.

Each of you—Mario, Hong Kong Watch and Stats Canada—will have up to five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

I'm going to ask Mr. Bellissimo to start us off for five minutes.

Mario Bellissimo (Lawyer, Certified Specialist, Bellissimo Law Group Professional Corporation, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair, Vice-Chairs and honourable members. It's a pleasure today to appear again before the committee.

Canada's immigration system stands at an inflection point. It faces many challenges. Those specific to my comments today include over two million applications pending, processing times extending into decades, and the absence of timely communication. The lack of redress for minor issues and years of digital stampedes have created cascading effects, duplicating declining transparency and mounting pressure on tribunals, courts and Parliament itself. These problems point to a widening gap between policy ambition and administrative capacity and delivery.

IRCC has made real progress through digital transformation and client service reforms that reflect genuine commitment. The issue, however, is not commitment or dedication, but architecture and delivery.

This study arrives at a pivotal moment. Our brief, which will be before the members once translated, hopefully, draws upon the CBA's 2025 report, “Law, Technology, and Accountability: Reimagining Canadian Immigration for the 21st Century”, and its recommendations to strengthen governance, fairness and transparency, a must-read for those committed to co-creating a new way forward. I encourage the committee to hear directly from the CBA.

Our brief builds on that foundation, as well as others: COSTI, C.D. Howe, TMU and Broadbent.

We've put forward 10 fiscally realistic recommendations to make immigration delivery more transparent, predictable and accountable. At the heart of our proposal are two imperatives that are often seen as competing but are in fact complementary: facilitation and enforcement.

Facilitation will demand a new ethos of communication, transparency and timely delivery at IRCC. Enforcement must be firm but proportionate and focused on integrity, not control.

Bill C-2, the strong borders act, illustrates the risk of overcorrection. It consolidates broad executive powers without adequate parliamentary oversight and clear procedural safeguards. It does risk deepening the very instability it seeks to correct, with serious consequences, including constitutional vulnerabilities.

We call for more parliamentary oversight, widespread consultation and collaboration, and a statutory immigration ombudsperson so applicants can seek redress without turning to the Federal Court simply to learn at what stage their application is.

We also urge binding service standards through the Service Fees Act and a universal expression-of-interest model to transparently align application intake with delivery, ending the cycle of runaway inventories, security check delays and siloed decision-making. For example, families in need of care for elderly loved ones should not wait years for the support to live with dignity.

We cannot allow false narratives around immigration to take hold. We must better communicate the essential role that immigrants play, at every level of our society, in pushing back against division, hate and otherness.

Parliament should link levels to indicators in housing, health care and labour, while ensuring the vitality of francophone communities across Canada, preserving both growth and cohesion.

Also, we make suggestions toward an enhanced refugee system that will protect humanitarian commitments while reinforcing timely border integrity. As technology reshapes immigration decision-making, we need stronger legislative AI and automation oversight and digital equity. As well, statutory recognition of counsel to safeguard fairness and due process in the immigration world is essential.

These measures reflect global best practices and would free resources through smarter upstream reform. They do not require major new spending, just enhanced coordination, accountability and openness across departments and across ministries, tribunals and courts.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge the dedication of many government officials, settlement agencies and legal professionals who continue to deliver under immense pressure. Their commitment is not in question, but they need a stronger framework, one consequential to all current and future Canadians.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

• (1535)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Bellissimo. That's excellent timing.

Next we will hear from Ms. Calverley, from Hong Kong Watch.

Aileen Calverley (Co-Founder and Chair, Hong Kong Watch): Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

The Hong Kong pathway is a special and temporary public policy launched in 2021 in response to Hong Kong's national security law. This policy was designed to provide a lifeline for Hong Kongers seeking freedom and safety. Alongside the U.K.'s BNO visa, it represents a remarkable collaboration between Canada and the U.K., two countries united by shared democratic values and compassion for those seeking refuge.

However, the Hong Kong pathway was placed under the humanitarian and compassionate category, the H and C, along with several other special public policies. This immigration structure is unsustainable. All public policies, whether for Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Ukraine or Sudan, should have their own dedicated admission quotas, rather than being restricted by the limited H and C quotas. The H and C admission target for 2025 is only 10,000.

As of this year, more than 20,000 Hong Kong pathway applications remain in the backlog, and fewer than 2,000 PR approvals have been issued in 2025. According to IRCC's website, those who applied after July 2024 now face estimated wait times of more than 10 years. That's a sharp contrast to the 6.5 months back in February 2024, when priority processing was still in place.

The backlog of PR approvals has created uncertainty and stress for those whose work permits have expired. I spoke to a mother in Markham whose work permit has been pending for more than eight months, leaving her 10-year-old son unable to attend school. I have seen families in tears in my community centre after their open work permits were wrongly rejected. One applicant, who was expecting a baby, even lost her job and her health care coverage because of a missing form, IMM 5707, a document that was not listed on the checklist.

These are not isolated cases. They show the human cost of slow, inconsistent processing and the heavy psychological toll placed on those waiting in limbo.

There is also a significant economic impact. Without PR, Hong Kongers cannot transfer their MPF retirement savings from Hong Kong to Canada. I testified in the committee last year about this. With an average balance of around \$45,000 per account, billions of dollars are trapped in Hong Kong right now, funds that could help families settle and could be reinvested in the Canadian economy to create businesses and also to create jobs.

Moreover, Hong Kong-trained doctors cannot practise in Canada without PR status, yet, without Canadian work experience, they cannot qualify through the economic stream of the express entry, even as Canada faces a national shortage of doctors.

The Hong Kong pathway was established as a lifeboat for those seeking freedom, and Canada must ensure this lifeboat reaches shore and fulfills its promise.

Here are my recommendations:

Ensure that all remaining H and C quotas for the Hong Kong pathway are used this year, and allocate additional slots to clear the backlog.

Allocate economic-class quotas to qualified H and C applicants, and lower the points threshold, similar to professions such as health care and STEM, to fast-track their applications.

• (1540)

Grant AIP, approval in principle, status earlier in the process, allowing applicants immediate access to work, health care and education. This would stabilize families, support employers and prevent loss of status due to administrative delays. In addition, fix the system errors that have led to wrongful rejections, and establish an appeal system.

Finally, allocating a 20,000 admission target to the Hong Kong pathway would be a win-win solution, upholding Canadians' humanitarian values, unlocking billions in private savings to boost our economy, and reaffirming Canada's commitment to the Hong Kong community, which has contributed immensely to our country for the last four decades.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. That literally took you to exactly five minutes, so thank you very much.

Mr. Martel, will it be you, or will it be Mr. Gravel speaking?

Laurent Martel (Director, Centre for Demography, Statistics Canada): It's going to be my colleague, Ron Gravel.

The Chair: Mr. Gravel, we cannot hear you. Perhaps you can unmute yourself or turn up the volume. You will have to disconnect and reconnect.

It might have to be you, Mr. Martel.

[*Translation*]

Laurent Martel: My colleague Mr. Gravel just sent me a message to tell me that it was the technician who muted him.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Martel, are you able to give the remarks?

Laurent Martel: I am currently looking for the speech. I will call my colleague, Ron Gravel, to send it to me. I should be able to find it somewhere. Let me finalize this.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Gravel, you've unplugged and replugged. Yes. It's like a computer, you know.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I'm just wondering if we could proceed to questions.

Laurent Martel: I can probably deliver the remarks in five minutes, if needed.

The Chair: We have Mr. Gravel, so let's get going, please.

Mr. Gravel, if you're able to do it in less than five minutes, we'd be grateful.

Ron Gravel (Director General, Statistics Canada): Thank you very much for this invitation to contribute to your work on immigration and citizenship.

[*Translation*]

As the national statistical agency, Statistics Canada is mandated to collect and publish objective and independent data and analyses on a wide range of economic, social and population topics, including permanent and temporary immigration to Canada.

The immigration data used and disseminated by our agency comes from a number of sources, such as the population census conducted every five years, administrative data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, which is an important partner, as well as social and economic survey data. We also establish linkages between some of those data sources.

Every five years, the population census provides an instant and detailed picture of Canada's immigrant population, including at fine geographic levels. For example, the 2021 census showed that 23% of people living in Canada were born outside Canada, and that number rose to 47% in the Toronto census metropolitan area. The census also helps describe the characteristics of the immigrant population, including socio-economic, family and linguistic characteristics.

Between censuses, we publish quarterly demographic estimates that enable us to track changes in the size of the Canadian population, including the population of permanent immigrants and non-permanent residents. In response to legal obligations, IRCC also uses this data to track the achievement of the targets set out in the annual immigration plan.

The most recent demographic estimates show that after two years of record population growth in 2023 and 2024—approximately 3% annually—this growth has slowed over the past 12 months, primarily driven by a decline of 100,000 people in the number of non-permanent residents.

It's important to know that the non-permanent resident population calculated by Statistics Canada differs from that of temporary residents and refugee claimants recorded by IRCC, with the two organizations having different objectives. For us, the objective is statistical and consists in properly measuring the size and characteristics of the Canadian population, whereas IRCC is responsible for administering various immigration programs.

The longitudinal immigration database is another important source of data to better understand immigrants' economic outcomes, such as their pathway to labour market integration or their income. This is a linkage between IRCC administrative data and tax data from the Canada Revenue Agency.

Our agency's surveys also collect other information that is not usually available in the census or in administrative data. That includes information on health, victimization and social cohesion.

Finally, Statistics Canada produces and disseminates population projections that are used as a planning tool by a number of federal departments. IRCC, in particular, uses these projections in planning future immigration levels, including francophone immigration, as part of the objectives of the modernized version of the Official Languages Act.

I will conclude by saying that we pay close attention to the quality of statistical information, which includes, of course, immigration data and analyses. While our agency is not responsible for the immigration system or migration policies, it works collaboratively with key partners to continuously improve its statistical programs. Therefore, Statistics Canada has acquired entry and exit data from the Canada Border Services Agency in recent months. That data is currently being evaluated to help us understand how it could enable us to further improve the measurement of Canada's non-permanent resident and immigrant populations.

Thank you for your attention. We remain at your disposal. My colleague Laurent Martel will be pleased to answer your questions.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gravel.

[English]

You were one minute short, so I appreciate that.

With that, I will say thanks to all of you for your remarks.

We're now going to begin with the first round of questions, which will be a total of six minutes.

We'll start with Ms. Rempel Garner, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair. I'll direct my questions to Statistics Canada.

The broad topic for legislators is trying to understand the data the government is using to set immigration levels, which I now understand will be embedded within the federal budget this year.

This is for either rep from StatsCan. Does your agency track how many temporary residents—I suppose you use the term “non-permanent residents”—access health care on an annual basis?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: Thank you for the question.

First of all, Statistics Canada releases population estimates on a very regular basis—that is to say quarterly—which are used by various departments, including IRCC, to meet various needs. That's how we work. We provide that information to the Canadian public and to the departments, and it is the responsibility of the departments to use it—

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Mr. Martel, I'm so sorry to interrupt you. I have only a very few minutes, so I'll keep my questions concise, and I'd appreciate it if you could answer that way.

Do you track how many non-permanent residents access health care in Canada on an annual basis?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: We have various statistics on health. I know, for example, that we've shared information on hospitalization rates for different categories of the population in the past. At Statistics Canada, there is no data currently available on health care costs for non-permanent residents.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Again, Mr. Martel, do you track how many non-permanent residents access health care? That's just in numbers.

Laurent Martel: No, I don't.

[Translation]

I don't have those figures.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you. It took me two minutes to get there.

Does your agency track how many births occur to non-permanent residents on an annual basis?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: Deaths of non-permanent residents are included in the population estimates.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm sorry. The translation didn't come through.

Can we pause?

Laurent Martel: Births among non-permanent residents are included in demographic estimates, yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: They're in estimates.

Laurent Martel: They're also in births recorded in Canada every year, yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

For non-permanent residents.... This would not be visitors to Canada. This would be—

Laurent Martel: Exactly.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How many births occurred among non-permanent residents in the last year?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: I don't know that number off the top of my head right now. So I can't give you that information.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Could you table that?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: Yes, we can follow up and provide you with that information.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Does your agency track how many individuals are currently in Canada on an expired work permit or visa?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: I don't have the specific number, but people whose permits are being renewed are factored into the population estimates program.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. You don't track how many people are here on an expired....

A recent Sun article discussed this, saying that Canada's population growth might be three times higher than Ottawa has estimated “because a large number of people who were supposed to leave the country aren't being tracked.”

How hard would it be for your agency to get a list of expired permits from IRCC each week to run against your entry and exit system?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: The entry and exit database is currently being evaluated at Statistics Canada. We also receive IRCC data on a monthly basis. There is currently no agreement between Statistics Canada and IRCC to obtain this data on a weekly basis.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Mr. Martel, there was an article on blogTO that cited a video you are in. You said Canada's population is skyrocketing to 42 million people.

Based on your analysis, does Canada have adequate infrastructure to accept the continued level of temporary residents we've seen

in recent years? By “infrastructure”, I'm particularly talking about housing and health care. How would you know?

• (1555)

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: In 2023 and 2024, Canada's population growth was nearly 3%, which is extremely high compared with other countries. That obviously poses some challenges in terms of Canadian infrastructure.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I note that a lot of analysis suggests that wage growth for temporary residents is quite a bit lower than for permanent residents.

Would that be a correct assessment, based on your analysis?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: I can't confirm that. However, we know that, between 2001 and 2021, the gap in employment rates between immigrants and the rest of the population narrowed considerably.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Based on that extrapolation, if Canada continues to accept high levels of temporary residents or residents who are unable to get credentialed, would that continue to be a drag on wages and, as such, economic growth?

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: I cannot answer that question, but I can say that the number of non-permanent residents currently being admitted to Canada has been declining for three quarters, significantly slowing Canada's recent population growth.

[English]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: However, the levels are still quite high year over year. Perhaps it's not year over year, but they're high for what Canada can support.

If we have a delta, as your analysis suggests, between wage growth for temporary residents and per capita GDP growth, has the government asked you for any advice on how to model out whether or not the Canadian economy benefits from this bit of a myth that we need high levels of immigration to sustain economic growth?

The Chair: That's the time.

Give a very quick response, please.

[Translation]

Laurent Martel: We have not received any such requests.

That said, Canada's population growth has slowed significantly over the past three quarters. If we extrapolate, Canadian population growth over a 12-month period could be less than 0.5%, which would be a significant slowdown, compared to the 3% growth in 2024.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martel.

We'll go to six minutes for Ms. Zahid.

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all the witnesses for coming before the committee today.

My first question is for Ms. Calverley from Hong Kong Watch.

From your organization's perspective, what are the main factors contributing to the processing delays in the Hong Kong pathway program? Is it primarily a resource issue within IRCC, security screening bottlenecks or document verification challenges specific to Hong Kong?

Aileen Calverley: The problem, actually, is not resources. It's the admissions targets. That's very obvious. A lot of Hong Kongers have received AIP. Their applications are actually ready to go. They just need to have that slot in terms of the quota. Then IRCC will send them CPP and they can start the PR process.

I think the problem was that when the whole temporary public policy started in 2021, we were told there was no limit. To me it was like, "How could you possibly have no limit? There must be a limit." There was no limit for work permits. If you come in as a student, after you fulfill the requirement, you have to apply for PR via stream A or stream B, but then there's a limit. Suddenly there's a limit. We were told that the limit for this year was 10,000, but that also covers the other special policies that came after the Hong Kong pathway, such as for Sudan, Ukraine and also Afghanistan.

All these public policies should have their own allocations rather than all the newly created public policies put under H and C. H and C has always had a very limited admissions target. Last year it was 13,800. This year it's 10,000. Next year it could be 5,000, but then we got at least 50,000 or 60,000, maybe more, in the stream under H and C. It's unsustainable.

Hong Kongers didn't expect this. When they applied, if Canada had said the limit was only 10,000, first come, first served, and that was it, that would have been much easier, but they said there were no limits. A lot of them have spent four years here already. They're paying taxes, they're working, they're studying and they're paying tuition fees. When they apply to H and C and start from there, they need to wait for 10 years. This is really a big problem for all the applicants. As well, they are only on temporary work permits.

• (1600)

Salma Zahid: What impacts have these delays had on the applicants whose applications are in the system—for example, on their employment or study opportunities or in regard to family reunification or personal safety? How have these differed between the open work permit and permanent resident streams?

Aileen Calverley: All delay is huge to them. For temporary residents, sometimes some jobs take only PRs. Some of the applicants

are high-flyers. They're from U.S. Ivy League schools. Some Hong Kongers are making \$260,000 and paying \$80,000 in taxes. They need to travel around the world for that job, but a temporary resident cannot fly around, so without PR, this kind of job is actually not possible for a Hong Konger.

When the work permit will expire within three years, that's big trouble for these people. For a lot of them, their work permit expires next year, as they applied this year. They then rely on maintained status. I think some employers need IRCC education. A lot of employers don't take maintained status. They don't understand it. They look only at your work permit. If it's expired, that's it. Some applicants may change jobs. They may move to another job. It's not possible when your work permit is valid less than six months. A lot of employers won't take that. With IRCC errors, they reject them because of LMIA. For the Hong Kong pathway, you do need LMIA, but they were rejected, with no appeal system. I think the appeal system is important. If you've not submitted form IMM 5707, which is actually not on the checklist, you're rejected, and then you have to reapply. That takes eight months.

That's why a lot of families have no status in Canada. They cannot go back to Hong Kong for political reasons, or because they're still waiting for PR. They're not supposed to leave the country. Where can they go? They have no legal status. Are they waiting for PR for another 10 years? A lot of Hong Kong—

The Chair: You have one minute.

Salma Zahid: Keeping in mind that resources are limited and there are many urgent cases around the world, what specific policy or operational changes would you recommend to reduce the processing time and restore confidence in this program for Hong Kongers?

Aileen Calverley: Because a lot of Hong Kongers are going via stream B—they have work experience, but they cannot meet, for example, the express entry score of 500—I would recommend that we lower it to match health care or STEM. Then we can fast-track, at least, a few thousand applicants, who can go via express entry.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Zahid.

Thank you, Ms. Calverley.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for joining us today.

Ms. Calverley, we saw each other yesterday. I'm very happy to see you again.

In your opinion, how would transferring candidates eligible for the permanent residence pathways for Hong Kong residents to the express entry system alleviate the current problems?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: I'm sorry, but I couldn't hear the translation. Is it express entry? Can you repeat it? I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is my time starting over, Madam Chair, since there was a problem with the interpretation?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, you can repeat it, please.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Calverley, in your opinion, how would transferring candidates eligible for the permanent residence pathways for Hong Kong residents to the express entry system alleviate the current problems?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: Right now I don't know what the solution is, but this is the best solution, because, as I understand it, the levelling plan will be cut down—although maybe not the economic stream. A lot of Hong Kongers can contribute very well economically. They're entrepreneurs. I understand that quite a lot of them have around 450 points. Two years ago, that could get you through EE, but now it's around 500. The points are very high right now, so I think this is a good way to fast-track some of the applicants.

Also, I think it is the new government's goal to help with our economy, so they want young professionals to contribute to the economy. I think this group of people is possibly the best way to get some economic allocation to clear the backlog.

• (1605)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You talk a lot about the economic impact, and we hear you. I would like you to tell us about the importance of Hong Kong applicants to the Canadian economy.

According to you, one option would be for the express entry point system to take into account candidates' economic contributions, such as tax payments and job stability. Is that what you're telling us?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: I'm not sure of the question. I'm so sorry.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're telling us about the economic contribution of Hong Kongers. Do you establish a link between the economic contribution that these people could make to Canada and the number of points they could collect under the express entry point system?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: I think that now, for the health care category, IRCC lowered that to 470. I think we can also allow H and C applicants to go through EE with 470, for example. For STEM—that is the science, technology, engineering and mathematics group—I think their points are around 460. The government can allocate lower points for this group of professionals, so why can't it create one system to allow H and C applicants from similar categories? We can say, for H and C applicants—no matter which public policy, Ukraine or Hong Kong—that if you meet 450-460 points, you can go via EE. That is another way to clear the H and C backlog.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I want to go back to the mandatory provident fund. Last year, you testified before this committee during its study on pensions and the mandatory provident fund amounts that were being withheld in Hong Kong, particularly by Canadian companies.

About 20,000 people in Canada are affected by this problem and can't withdraw their money. Can you tell us about the financial impact that represents not only for those people, but also for the Canadian economy?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: The MPF is very important. A lot of Hong Kongers try to withdraw their money from their retirement savings but cannot, because without proof of permanent residency to the Hong Kong Monetary Authority or to our financial institutions like Manulife and Sun Life, they won't let you withdraw the money. You need to have permanent residency. We testified and talked about that. We also have Manulife executives coming here. They make it very clear that, without proof that they are moving here permanently, Hong Kongers cannot withdraw the money. It's a huge amount of money, because it's \$40,000 per account, and we are talking about 40,000 to 60,000 people. We are talking about billions of Canadian dollars that can be transferred from Hong Kong to Canada, which will really help our economy.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Those companies, such as Manulife, are meeting the Hong Kong government's criteria, but in so doing, they are preventing those people from accessing the money that belongs to them.

Do you think those companies are involved in some form of transnational repression, even if inadvertently?

[English]

Aileen Calverley: Actually, I think that Canada needs to fast-track Hong Kong pathways applicants. If Canada delays, they have to wait for 10 years, and I don't think they can get the money from Hong Kong anymore. We can see the experience in the old days in the Soviet Union, such as in Poland: "You can go but not your money." It's another type of what we call financial, transnational repression. You can leave but not your money.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Calverley.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

• (1610)

[English]

That ends our first round.

We are now going into our second round, which is a total of five minutes.

Our first questioner will be Mr. Michael Ma.

Michael Ma (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions are addressed to Ms. Calverley.

When the Hong Kong pathways program was launched in the summer of 2021, Hong Kongers were made a promise by the Liberal government. Many vulnerable families used up their life savings to support their initial years in Canada, hoping this was an investment in their future.

Ms. Calverley, has the Liberal government made good on its promise to the legitimately vulnerable people in the Hong Kong pathways program?

Aileen Calverley: I think we are grateful for the scheme and to the Liberal government. Throughout the years, a lot of Hong Kongers came to Canada because of this scheme. We were very happy until last year. A lot of Hong Kong people in our community are very disappointed, because we were told that it was unlimited, although there were not a lot of people applying. For example, the U.K. BNO scheme got 230,000 going to the U.K. In Canada, we now have 20,000 cases stuck and another 12,000 already approved. We're talking about 32,000 cases; we're not talking about tons of people flooding Canada. Actually, it's not a lot of people. They choose Canada because they like Canada more than other countries; that's why they're here. They contribute to society as well. Hong Kong people are very entrepreneurial, and they don't rely on the system or on any benefits. They contribute, and they pay taxes.

I will reply to Michael Ma, MP, that they are very disappointed with the government right now, especially when they entered after the submission date of.... If you submitted after July 2024, the answer is that you have to wait for more than 10 years. How can they be happy with that?

Michael Ma: That's great. Thank you.

Those who are in the Hong Kong pathways program—net contributors to our society, as you mentioned earlier—are paying international tuition, mortgages or rents while waiting for permanent residency.

Does your organization have any data on the consolidated economic footprint of those in Hong Kong pathways to Canada?

Aileen Calverley: The majority of the new immigrants through the Hong Kong pathways are young professionals between 25 and 35. We don't have an official number, but the contribution is very good. They are mainly in finance, IT, AI and the engineering industry, and they're paying high taxes. An unofficial number is that they are paying, on average, much higher taxes than the average Canadian. Their average salary, even as a temporary resident, is much higher than the average in Canada.

Michael Ma: Following up on that, I understand some of these applicants have purchased homes under the non-resident tax scheme, and they were promised a refund when they got their PR status. Can you speak to that, please?

Aileen Calverley: This is a very devastating situation, because before February 2024, the application timeline was only six months, and back in 2022 it was two months. That's why they purchased homes and they paid extra taxes of over \$200,000 and up to half a million dollars. Some of them have already lost this money. A lot more people will lose this kind of money next year if the PR applications continue to be delayed.

I feel so sorry for these families, because they actually need this money for resettlement or so they can reinvest in businesses in Canada. Now all this money is going into taxes, and there are no rebates.

Michael Ma: I have a very quick question.

I was shocked to hear in early October that processing times have now changed, as I think you mentioned, under the Liberal government. Can you walk us through the substantial changes in your organization in terms of the processing times you're seeing?

Aileen Calverley: This is huge. We received 500 emails in our system from people asking for help because they cannot wait for 10 years. They need help. Also, especially if their work permits are about to expire, they're very frightened. We have received quite a lot of rejection cases, and we hope we can pass on the rejection cases so that their MPs can help them, because they need their status to continue to work.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Calverley.

That's five minutes. Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Next, we have Mr. Peter Fragiskatos.

Peter Fragiskatos (London Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to start with Mr. Martel, and then I'm going to go to Mr. Bellissimo.

Mr. Martel, you talked about a change in population recently and about Canada's population going down substantially. You also spoke with Ms. Rempel Garner earlier about the decline in the temporary, non-permanent resident population. Could you speak to those points again and offer more details?

Laurent Martel: Yes, for sure.

[*Translation*]

Population growth in Canada hit a record high in 2023 and 2024. Only a few times in our history has it been this high. The main reason for this growth is not a natural population increase, meaning the difference between births and deaths; it's international immigration.

Over the last three quarters, so since October of last year, the number of non-permanent residents in Canada has declined considerably. IRCC also revised its targets for permanent immigration downwards, which led to a decline in population growth.

According to our most recent data, from the second quarter of 2025, quarterly growth was 0.1%. On an annual basis, that translates to a growth rate of less than 0.5%. This shows how much population growth has declined in Canada over the last few months.

[*English*]

Peter Fragiskatos: Can you speak about the non-permanent resident decline? I think you're talking about an overall decline.

[*Translation*]

Laurent Martel: Our population estimates for the last three quarters show that the decrease in the number of non-permanent residents is closely linked to study permit holders, work permit holders, and those who have both a study permit and a work permit. Those are really the main reasons for the current decline in non-permanent residents in Canada.

[*English*]

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I suppose you would say, then, that the policy measures introduced to get to that result are having their effect. Is that correct?

[*Translation*]

Laurent Martel: I can't comment on the government's policies. What I can say is that Statistics Canada has noted a decline in net migration associated with non-permanent residents over the last three quarters. According to the data we measure, it would appear that the targets in last year's immigration plan are being met.

[*English*]

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bellissimo, thank you very much for appearing at committee today. You put a number of things on the table.

I want to ask you about the digital turn that we're seeing. Many democracies are taking that up in a variety of ways. I'm trying to understand how the digital transformation—the revolution, in fact—that we're seeing can make government services more efficient.

Do you have thoughts or recommendations for this committee specifically on that? How could that help, for example, in more efficient processing time at IRCC?

Mario Bellissimo: I think we can look at the European Union's AI act. Italy also just passed a comprehensive package.

My belief is that with legislative guardrails as to explainability, notice when it's used and plain language, the opportunities are immense for the wonderful leveraging of technology. Much of what we're talking about today can be heavily alleviated with proper tracking when the technology allows that.

However, if we do it without those guardrails, you now have things like algorithmic impact assessments and privacy impact assessments, which are wonderful, but we need to get it to a mass universal level where all people can understand how it is benefiting, as opposed to creating a narrative that it is to be feared, when it's really the opposite if it's deployed ethically and innovatively.

Peter Fragiskatos: Sir, I have only 30 seconds. I wish I had about three hours to talk to you about this. We'll have to follow up, but you would say, then, that Europe is ahead on this and we can look to their models there.

You mentioned artificial intelligence and what you seem to believe is an appropriate balance between AI and ensuring that privacy is maintained and things are done efficiently and effectively—ultimately in a way that's congruent with democratic principles.

• (1620)

Mario Bellissimo: Yes. I think we have some good things in Canada, like some of the soft law and directives, but I think we need to codify those so they have teeth.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bellissimo and Mr. Fragiskatos.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Martel, can you tell us why the data regarding non-permanent residents weren't published on your website between 2018 and 2023?

Laurent Martel: No, I couldn't tell you.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Would your colleague be able to tell us?

Laurent Martel: Are you talking about the numbers for 2018 to 2023?

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I am talking about the numbers for non-permanent residents that were not published, and then, all of a sudden, they were.

Statistics Canada is a neutral organization. Did IRCC ask you not to publish those numbers on your website?

Laurent Martel: Absolutely not.

I know at some point changes were being made to IRCC's processing system, but I don't recall such an omission between 2018 and 2023.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm telling you. From 2018 to 2023, the data regarding non-permanent residents weren't published on your website.

Laurent Martel: I think I understand what you're talking about. There is a distinction to be made between the number of non-permanent residents and the flow of non-permanent residents. There might've been some periods of time when the numbers of non-permanent residents weren't available. Regarding the flow, meaning changes from one period to the next, the data have always been available.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand that. What I am referring to are the numbers published in 2023 that weren't published between 2018 and 2023.

Laurent Martel: Yes. That was the number of non-permanent residents.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes.

Laurent Martel: At the time, we were adjusting our methodology.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There's never been any communication between IRCC and Statistics Canada regarding those numbers?

Laurent Martel: We've always been in communication with IRCC. The department is the one sending us the data. That's how we can—

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay, but did you have any contact regarding the publication of those numbers?

Laurent Martel: No, not that I'm aware of.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Gravel, have you had any contact related to those numbers?

Ron Gravel: No.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Could you send us all the communications between IRCC and Statistics Canada on the publication of data regarding non-permanent residents?

Laurent Martel: I believe the access to information process can be used for that kind of request.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, but if the committee asked you for those communications, could you provide them?

Laurent Martel: I guess so.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, I ask that all correspondence between Statistics Canada and IRCC on the publication of numbers regarding non-permanent residents between 2018 and 2023 be sent to the committee. It is a committee request.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. We will do that, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. I think that's your time as well.

Thank you, Mr. Martel. Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We have seven minutes left, so I am going to give three and a half minutes to the Conservatives and three and a half minutes to the Liberals.

Mr. Redekopp, you are up for three and a half minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Bellissimo, you spoke in your opening remarks about Bill C-12 and constitutional vulnerability.

Could you expand on what you were referring to there?

Mario Bellissimo: I think that's in respect to the fact that any time we set timelines as they relate to refugee claimants—14 days, one year—you risk losing an individualization of the process. The fact that they may not then have a hearing before removal, even though they might go through the pre-removal risk assessment process, leads to constitutional vulnerability, as does some of the potential data sharing.

Some of it has now been tabled in Bill C-2, but in Bill C-12, that kind of data sharing does get into some privacy concerns and risks pushing us back.

Brad Redekopp: In your opinion, Bill C-12 is at risk of being constitutionally challenged.

Mario Bellissimo: Yes, I believe it is, as it currently reads.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

You were here, I think, in the last Parliament, a number of years ago. From what I recall, the discussion was about approving technology and things like that, that were needed.

Since then, we've had this massive failure on the part of the government with asylum claims and a lack of managing the system, which has led to people being almost compelled to seek asylum.

My question for you is, do you see a strain being put on the system partly because of that, and are there some changes that you think should be made in terms of technology?

• (1625)

Mario Bellissimo: As I referenced in my previous response, I think we need to leverage the technology to control intake versus output.

We can have wonderful policy ambition, but if it's not tied to administrative capacity and, basically, an operational ethos of communication, transparency and facilitation, we're going to continue to have runaway inventory, disappointed applicants and, basically, damage to our global brand.

I think there's a wonderful opportunity for leveraging that technology to bring that to ground and move forward in a much more coordinated way.

Brad Redekopp: Part of the need in a country like Canada is to be able to track people when they exit the country.

Do you have any knowledge or are you aware of any system that Canada uses to track that? Do you think Canada has the ability to do exit tracking?

Mario Bellissimo: Yes, they have an exit and entry system. They do track.

CBSA is also developing a new tool called TCI, which is going to potentially use predictive analytics to determine if someone might not comply when they enter Canada.

These are potentially good initiatives, but we've learned from other countries like New Zealand, when they launched similar technology, that it failed and was found not to be predictive. It was found to be discriminatory.

Brad Redekopp: If I could just interrupt—and you can finish off just explaining the dangers of using AI in where you're going here—what are the dangers of implementing that technology?

Mario Bellissimo: The dangers are that if the predictive analytics are used in a way that places people in digital prisons that are not unique to them, that are based on widespread characteristics, we move in areas where—as we've seen internationally, and in some cases in the criminal context here in Canada—we can run afoul of privacy and proper identification and proper predictive work, because the technology is not there yet. That's why we need those legislative guardrails.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bellissimo.

Thank you, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Fergus, you have three and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

One of the things I really like about sitting on a committee as an MP is that we get evidence and updates. Thank you, Mr. Martel, for providing us with the data for the first two quarters of 2025, because I had only the data for the first quarter.

According to the numbers I had, the Canadian population grew by a little more than 20,000 people in the first quarter, and Statistics Canada says that immigration is responsible for almost all that growth. Is that correct?

Laurent Martel: Yes. During the period of high growth, more than 99% of that growth came from immigration. Growth is now declining. In the last quarter, so the data that we published on September 24, immigration accounted for approximately 72% of population growth.

Hon. Greg Fergus: How many people does that amount to?

Laurent Martel: I don't have that number with me.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Then I will rephrase my question.

Statistics Canada has estimated that the Canadian population grew by 20,000 people in the first quarter, so from January 1 to March 31, and says that almost 100% of this growth is due to immigration. Am I wrong?

Laurent Martel: Considering that the population growth was 0.1% and that 0.1% of 41 million is about 20,000, yes, that's possible. Actually, it's close to what's called population stagnation.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Could Statistics Canada provide us with the most recent data on fertility in Canada?

Laurent Martel: The most recent data we have were published a few months ago and showed that, over the past seven years, the fertility rate of Canadian couples has been on the decline. We have now reached 1.25 children per woman. The 2024 data on fertility are available on Statistics Canada's website.

Hon. Greg Fergus: It's 1.25 then.

Laurent Martel: Yes. That is the total fertility rate, so the number of children per woman.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I imagine the replacement rate for an industrialized country is about 1.5 or 1.7.

Laurent Martel: It's actually 2.1 children per woman.

Hon. Greg Fergus: How do immigrants and permanent residents help mitigate the impacts of a low fertility rate in Canada?

Laurent Martel: Without immigration, there would be a decline in Canada's population. It's been true for a while, because Canada has not reached the replacement rate since the mid-1970s. It's obvious that immigration is the main driver of population growth. Without immigration, the Canadian population would've been declining for decades now. That's exactly what other countries, including Japan, are going through.

• (1630)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I understand my questions are a little more prescriptive in nature, but what variables do you think the government should focus on when trying to balance immigration with social needs, such as infrastructure, housing and essential services?

Laurent Martel: Here's what I will say. We know that a 3% population growth rate means the population will double in about 25 years. That is a very high growth rate and would give rise to many infrastructure challenges.

Hon. Greg Fergus: That's not what I asked.

Laurent Martel: That's how I would answer your question. Back when population growth was 3%, those working in demographics considered immigration levels to be very high. Returning to a growth rate closer to 1%, for example, would allow us to adapt our infrastructure better.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martel.

Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

I want to thank the witnesses for their time and for their excellent testimony today, as well as their patience in answering all of our questions.

We are going to suspend for about five minutes, so the witnesses can leave, and we'll come back with the second panel.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: Welcome back. I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of our new witnesses. We are continuing in a hybrid format.

Kindly wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are participating by Zoom, and we do have one person participating by Zoom, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking. At the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. A reminder to everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to warmly welcome our witnesses for the second panel. From Rainbow Railroad, we have Rabab Al Khatib, deputy head of programs. From Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, we have Mehmet Tohti, executive director, and Zaimira Dilimulati, project manager, M-62.

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for being with us today. Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks for Rainbow Railroad and Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, after which we'll proceed with rounds of questions.

We're going to start with Rainbow Railroad and Ms. Al Khatib, thank you.

[Translation]

Rabab Al Khatib (Deputy Head of Programs, Rainbow Railroad): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Members of the committee, thank you for inviting Rainbow Railroad to deliver testimony during the study of Canada's immigration system. My remarks will focus on ways to improve the order, fairness and effectiveness of the asylum system.

[English]

Rainbow Railroad is one of the few non-profit organizations operating globally at the intersection of forced displacement and the persecution of LGBTQI+ people. We provide direct services in the form of access to asylum mechanisms, cash assistance, critical information and service referrals, and post-relocation support.

Additionally, we engage in human rights advocacy with other non-profit organizations and governments, including the Government of Canada. We fund smaller organizations that serve LGBTQI+ people internationally. While over 123 million people are forcibly displaced globally, we estimate that between 8.6-12.3 million LGBTQI+ people are forcibly displaced.

Rainbow Railroad publishes data annually about the state of LGBTQI+ persecution and its correlation with forced displacement. This persecution varies in severity from discrimination up to death.

Chair, over 60 countries criminalize same-sex intimacy, and in countries such as Uganda and Afghanistan, it is punishable by death.

This year, Rainbow Railroad is projecting that we will receive a record number of requests for help from at-risk LGBTQI+ people. We are currently receiving one request every 26 minutes, and over 90% of those requests are for assistance with international relocation to Canada. Within this context, access to asylum pathways remains critical.

Canada has developed a strong global reputation for the advancement of 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, including creating pathways to protection for LGBTQI+ refugee claimants, which contributes to its soft power. This reputation is the direct result of a compassionate policy that leads to life-saving programs for LGBTQI+ people fleeing persecution. One such program is the government-assisted refugee partnership with Rainbow Railroad, which offers end-to-end LGBTQI+ competent humanitarian protection for queer and trans refugee claimants overseas.

Chair of the committee, we offer the following recommendations to improve fairness and efficiency based on our experience working with LGBTQI+ refugee claimants.

Hire and train more decision-makers and introduce fast track procedures for clear-cut SOGIESC cases, which will expedite processing and reduce the current backlog without sacrificing fairness.

Ensure the consistent application of guideline 9 on SOGIESC-related IRB proceedings among decision-makers.

Study Rainbow Railroad's verification protocols. They offer nuance and years of expertise in credibility determination of SOGIESC claims, which can reduce fraudulent claims and the costs associated with denying legitimate claims.

Expand regional access and increase funding for the GAR partnership with Rainbow Railroad to accommodate more overseas LGBTQI+ refugee claimants.

Remove the proposed provision in Bill C-12 that renders refugee claimants ineligible if they entered Canada after June 24, 2020 and made the claim more than one year after the day of their entry.

Expedite the processing of refugee claimant work permits to reduce reliance on social services while they wait.

Ensure universal access to legal aid for inland refugee claimants.

Partner with 2SLGBTQI+-competent organizations to develop and deliver trauma-informed care, support and services for LGBTQI+ refugee claimants.

Given the limited time, we will submit a brief to the committee that provides additional context.

Thank you.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you so much. Thank you for being brief as well.

Mr. Tohti, you have five minutes, please.

Mehmet Tohti (Executive Director, Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Mehmet Tohti, and I serve as the executive director of Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, URAP. URAP is a leading Canadian organization that works closely with the Government of Canada to strengthen the national response to forced labour, foreign interference and transnational repression, which can be defined as a state-led effort to silence, intimidate and control individuals abroad.

Today, I would like to focus on URAP's role as a referral partner to IRCC for the M-62 program, through which Canada has committed to accepting 10,000 Uyghur refugees by 2026.

This motion, passed in 2023 with unanimous support, represents a historic commitment. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of Parliament present today and their respective leaders. Thank you to all for your vote and for your leadership and for the recognition of the Uyghur genocide through your unanimous vote on the resettlement of Uyghur refugees into Canada.

The recent refoulement of 40 Uyghurs to China by Thailand is a shocking reminder that China's pursuit of Uyghur deportation remains active and that upholding Parliament's will, therefore, is crucial.

Despite international condemnation from the UN and dozens of governments, the concentration camps in the Uyghur region remain active, holding up to millions of Uyghurs. Beyond these camps, forced labour, mass surveillance, forced sterilization and the separation of families and children continue to define life in the region.

Even those who have fled remain unsafe. Around the world, Uyghurs continue to be targeted through transnational oppression and forced deportation, as refoulement remains an ongoing threat.

I speak today not only as an advocate but as a victim of transnational oppression myself, as 36 of my family members remain disappeared since 2016. Five have died, including my mother and two of my sisters. I learned of their deaths just two weeks before the projected vote on M-62 on January 16, 2023, when I received the call from the Chinese state police, who tried to threaten me by telling of the tragic death of my family members, implying that there would be more to come if I do not stop what I'm doing.

However, my situation is not unique. It is shared by thousands of Uyghur refugees, who look to Canada to uphold the parliamentary will to protect this vulnerable population.

Reaching the target of 10,000 refugees by 2026 is still achievable, but as we have had around 140 arrivals, significant challenges remain ahead. M-62 is facing processing delays and maintains a limited annual quota and allocation in the immigration levels plan, making it difficult to meet that 10,000 target.

I'm aware that immigration remains a complex issue for both Canadians and our government. It is essential that we ensure that our infrastructure and resources remain sustainable amid a growing influx of newcomers, yet we must balance these practical concerns with Canada's core value of humanitarian protection.

The M-62 program is an exemplary demonstration of this balance, offering a model of managed humanitarian resettlement of vulnerable Uyghur refugees with the best talents and professional credentials that contribute directly to Canada's development. To explain how, I would like to introduce briefly my colleague, the project manager of the M-62 program, who will share how the incoming refugees represent the best talents that Prime Minister Carney identified in his mandate letter in May, addressed to cabinet to strengthen the Canadian economy.

• (1645)

Zaimira Dilimulati (Project Manager, M-62, Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project): Good afternoon. My name is Zaimira, and I have been serving as the project manager of M-62 since July 2024. In this role, I work closely with both case workers and administrative staff to ensure the successful execution of the refugee referral process.

Uyghur refugees are not only survivors of internment camps, systematic oppression spanning decades and pervasive surveillance. They are also resilient individuals who have rebuilt their lives after fleeing persecution.

Of the 770 applicants we have referred so far, more than half hold higher education degrees in skills such as business, science, skilled trades, STEM and social sciences. Over 80% are of working age, ready to transfer their skills and expertise to Canadian businesses and institutions. Additionally, a significant number of them are bilingual in Canada's official languages and possess competency in several others.

Lastly, on behalf the new arrivals, I would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Canadian government for establishing the successful program, the only resettlement program in the world that offers Uyghur refugees a lifeline and the opportunity to live in freedom. We call on Parliament and the IRCC to increase the allocation of Uyghur refugees under the immigrations levels plan, to expedite arrivals and ensure that those most at risk can find safety in Canada without further delay.

Thank you, Madam Chair and honourable members. We would be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dilimulati, and thank you, Mr. Tohti.

Now we start off with six-minute rounds.

Our first person will be Mr. Menegakis for six minutes.

Thank you.

Costas Menegakis (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for appearing before us today.

Mr. Tohti, first of all, let me express my condolences to you for the five family members you have lost, sir, and my deep feelings for the 36 other family members whose whereabouts you are unaware of. In fact, as you know, in 2021, the Canadian Parliament voted in favour of labelling the Uyghur situation truly a genocide. As you correctly pointed out, in 2022, a private member's motion

was passed, expediting the ability for 10,000 Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims to come to Canada.

We're almost in 2026. Did I hear correctly that of the 10,000 Parliament approved in 2022.... We're basically about 70 to 75 days away from the new year, 2026, and only 140 have come. Is that correct?

• (1650)

Mehmet Tohti: That is the correct number. As of October 16, there were 143.

Costas Menegakis: There were 143. Wow.

Mehmet Tohti: Those are the individuals arriving.

Costas Menegakis: Do you believe that the Liberal government has made this a priority?

Mehmet Tohti: Uyghurs around the world were extremely pleased when Parliament passed the motion. We shed tears, and many of them did so. They found hope. For the first time, one country opened its arms to accept 10,000 vulnerable refugees.

Over the years, it took some time for IRCC to report back to Parliament and also to develop a program and implementation steps. The program was kick-started officially on January 1, 2024. Now, it is almost the end of 2025. This process speaks for itself. It is slow. We have enough applicants in our system to be uploaded, and as I mentioned in my testimony, because of the slow process, even in the total referrals there are 700-plus people still waiting to be processed.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you for that.

I understand there must be some frustration, obviously, over that.

Parliaments and governments can make announcements and can pass things, and people can get some hope out of that, but at the end of that equation, there are real people. In your case, there are 36 family members, and five of them have passed away. Potentially, they could have been saved by having arrived here in Canada.

How many people helped by Europe have actually come to Canada?

Mehmet Tohti: We are their referral partner. We are the front face of this program, just to communicate with the applicant. We interview them. We gather information, and we help them to fill out all the necessary forms. We upload eligible applicants, determined on the basis of the Geneva Convention and relevant Canadian immigration regulations. We upload those files to the system.

Costas Menegakis: What have you seen in processing times, in the time you engage in helping someone come over? What's the processing time before you actually see them here?

Mehmet Tohti: It doesn't take 10 years, compared to some other applicants who are potentially waiting. For one applicant, for example, IRCC really did a good job, and it took just 40 days to bring that applicant to Canada from the host country. Some applicants finished their interviews in August of last year. Now, in October, after more than 14 months, they are still waiting.

It depends on the case, I guess. I don't know if there are enough resources, human resources or other resources, but it is slow.

Costas Menegakis: That begs the question: Why do you think the Liberal government has not made this a priority?

It's not 10 years, but it will have been four years since 2022 in just a few months. There are people at the other end. Can you shed some light on the conditions in which those people are living, waiting to come to Canada?

Mehmet Tohti: Yes, as I said, Uyghurs face transnational oppression by China, the second most powerful country. China has launched a Uyghur hunt program, and whoever travels to some places....

Many countries, in order to get some concessions from China, or some economic benefits, sell Uyghurs. They use Uyghur refugees as a commodity. Thailand, for example, deported 40 Uyghurs back to China. After one week, China announced that it was investing \$8 billion in Thailand.

• (1655)

Costas Menegakis: We're talking about people undergoing mass detention, torture and abuse, forced assimilation, forced labour, forced sterilization and separation from their families. The Government of Canada has been so helpful that it has made an announcement that we're going to take in 10,000 people, and we've allowed 143, while these people, real people, are suffering and waiting to come—people who were given some hope in 2022 that, hey, someone is going to help us.

Four years later, they're still waiting. They're not getting help. They're dying in these situations, and five of them are members of your family, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Menegakis. That is your time.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tohti.

Next, we have six minutes with Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you to both witnesses for being here today and for the bravery of what you're doing.

I'm going to focus my questions on Mr. Tohti, given my work on Uyghur advocacy.

I want to pick up on the first theme. You mentioned that over 140 men, women and children have come to Canada from dire and trying situations. Can you share with us what their sentiment is? How are they feeling now that they're here in Canada?

Mehmet Tohti: I remember the last time. It was three weeks ago. We went to the GTA just to visit a number of new arrivals. You witnessed the people's feelings. For the first time, they expressed that they truly understand the meaning of safety: "At least

we go to bed and we know that we can wake up in the morning without any police raids or any detention to the deportation centres." That is the general feeling of the people.

Also, on immigration and other stuff, the step-by-step planning and the arrangements really touched their hearts. They feel for the first time that humanity is alive, so they have a mixed message of being grateful and, at the same time, feeling a kind of relief and, at the same time, finding hope. I'm saying this especially for the new arrivals.

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly. You made reference to the fact that you and I have actually both met.... I have personally met about four dozen of the arrivals. The dominant sentiment was deep gratitude to Canadians and tasting safety and security for the first time, whereas they had never tasted it before, and a great relief, as you said. Would you say that is a dominant sentiment?

Mehmet Tohti: Yes.

Sameer Zuberi: I remember that in conversation with the four dozen, many were highly skilled and highly educated. For either of the two witnesses from the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, would you like to speak about this set of people and their skill sets as professionals and educated people? Can you describe that a bit for us?

Mehmet Tohti: If you really want an occupation in China, you have to compete, and you have to have much more skill than the ordinary Chinese in order to get a job. Most of the Uyghurs' situations reflect exactly that. They worked really hard, and they got the necessary skills, but they couldn't live in peace in their homeland.

In those arrivals, as you remember, there are engineers, journalists, writers and house-care professionals. Most of them are university graduates and successful business persons. They are highly skilled immigrants. Some of them already have jobs, just within a couple of months, and some of them have already started to operate their small businesses.

I think that when they see such a place that comforts them, they put in all their efforts to contribute to the society that made them safe. That gratitude and appreciation now translate into their efforts in terms of how they become better Canadians and how they can contribute to this wonderful society.

Sameer Zuberi: On Tuesday we heard from the deputy minister. He said that in addition to the over 140 who are here today in safety and security, there are over 740 applications that have been processed.

What are you hoping to see with those 740 applications that have been processed? How quickly are you hoping to see people arrive in Canada? What needs to be done for that to happen?

• (1700)

Mehmet Tohti: I check that email system at least 10 times a day, hoping to see at least one announcement or some information about one approved applicant. It is a process that people in host countries are waiting for and, at the same time, that we are waiting for here.

Most importantly, the people at immigration should take in this message: We have enough vulnerable candidates in our system. We can upload, in a single day, more than 3,000 people to our system. We've already collected all their information. We evaluated their situations. The 700 applications have been referred to IRCC for processing since July of last year.

This is in their possession, and I hope they process it as soon as possible.

Sameer Zuberi: You mentioned that you have, in addition to what the deputy minister of IRCC testified to, 140-plus arrivals and 740-plus who have been processed.

You mentioned that you also have others who are deeply vulnerable and who fit within the 10,000 approved by our Parliament here in Canada. You have others who are deeply vulnerable and have been identified, and they are ready to reach safety and security.

Is that correct?

Mehmet Tohti: Yes.

Sameer Zuberi: I think my six minutes are done.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Zuberi, for being timely.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I apologize Ms. Al Khatib, but I will continue the discussion with Mr. Tohti and come back to you later. I also did a lot of work on motion M-62, and I'm very happy to welcome my friend as a witness today.

If you don't mind, I'd like you to confirm a few facts.

If I understand correctly, thanks to the refugee resettlement program, Canada has welcomed 143 Uyghurs. Is that correct?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: Yes.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Currently, 740 applications are being processed or are about to be processed. Is that correct?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: That is the number we referred to IRCC. They should be getting processed, but we don't know whether or not they are. At least we know we already referred those numbers to IRCC.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The program deadline is December 31, 2025, is it not?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: Yes, that is a concern, because the program, according to the parliamentary motion, should start in January 2024 and end by the end of 2025. It's a two-year program. We have a month and a half left. I don't know how many they can process.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Not to be pessimistic, but I can't deny that the government's promised target of 10,000 Uyghur refugees won't be met.

We are here to work together and meet that target, but, obviously, that won't be possible by the deadline.

Would you recommend that the government extend the program and push back the deadline until it meets the 10,000 refugee target? Would that be a good recommendation for the committee to make?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: Yes, that is the only option we have right now, because there's a month and a half left. That 10,000 number was referred by immigration in the beginning, when we discussed the motion. Our recommended numbers were much higher. This 10,000 came from the Minister of Immigration's office at the time.

Let's do something achievable. The 10,000 is achievable. We agreed. Now I'm saddened to see that the IRCC minister is not upholding Parliament's own promise.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I understand is that, during the discussions about the implementation of the program, they convinced you to lower your expectations, saying that a target of 10,000 refugees was achievable. Unfortunately, though, here we are a month and a half away from the deadline, and we've taken in only 143 of the 10,000 refugees we were planning to help.

You told us earlier how those refugees felt when they arrived in Canada. That was nice to hear. For the first time in their life, they felt safe.

You are also in contact with people outside Canada waiting to be added to the list. Could you tell us how they're feeling? We'd like to hear what they have to say.

• (1705)

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: I receive at least 100 messages from WhatsApp, email or Facebook Messenger all the time—every day. They ask whether the program has stopped.

Every day we also receive messages about court orders to deport Uyghurs back to China. Three days ago, I received such a court order from one country. Also during this process, six Uyghurs whose applications were in the middle of being processed were deported to third countries. We shared some of the information with IRCC immediately.

Now that Chinese influence has grown in central Asia, the Balkans and other areas, in order to get some sort of incentives from China, countries are deporting Uyghur refugees to please China or to attract some investment. It is official human trafficking or human bargaining that is happening right now.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your conversations with IRCC public servants, do you get the feeling the government would be open to pushing back the deadline, or are you not getting any answer from the government?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: They're nice people and, most importantly, I don't think they're the ones who make these decisions. They implement the decisions made by some other, higher authorities. Our contacts are mostly high-level or mid-level bureaucrats who are managing this program, and the professional people.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What you're saying is you have yet to hear anything from the new Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship or her parliamentary secretary regarding this program.

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: I haven't heard anything yet.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We can ask them to give you an answer. Coincidentally, the parliamentary secretary sits on the committee.

Finally, Mr. Tohti, I'd like to thank you once again for joining us. I have one more question for you.

Has the government explained what the holdup is and why its promised target of 10,000 Uyghur refugees has not been met?

[English]

Mehmet Tohti: It is about the prioritization of Canada's immigration intake. I have been advocating for diversification of our immigration policy. Instead of concentrating on certain groups, creating a big—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tohti. I'm sorry to cut you off, but I think it's time right now.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Mr. Tohti.

Because we have to have a shortened round simply because we have to break at 5:15 to discuss committee business, with the remaining time we'll have three minutes for the Conservatives, three minutes for the Liberals and one and a half minutes for the Bloc Québécois.

I believe we have Mr. Davies for the Conservatives, please.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Tohti, I just want to confirm this. Did you tell me that there have been Uyghurs who were in the queue here in Canada who have been deported?

Mehmet Tohti: It was not from Canada.

Fred Davies: There have been no applicants who have gone through the process who have had to leave the country.

Mehmet Tohti: I was referring to applicants who already were uploaded to IRCC's system, but during that period of time they were deported. For those 50 persons, I'm not going to mention the specific country they were deported from, but I can share that information privately.

Fred Davies: With the commitment for 10,000 people to come to Canada, we're looking right now at about 700 in the queue. I think that's what you said.

Mehmet Tohti: Yes. Our uploading process continues. Those 770 plus are already—

Fred Davies: I'm sorry to interrupt. Do you believe those are the ones who have been approved so far?

Mehmet Tohti: I don't know. We did not receive that information.

Fred Davies: Do you have any exact information on the number of applicants who are in IRCC processes and waiting now?

Mehmet Tohti: Those 770 plus are already in their system, and 143 already arrived. Every day, people are still uploading files.

Fred Davies: I don't have a whole lot of time. I'm sorry.

Less than 10% of the overall objective has been achieved by the end, likely, of this program.

• (1710)

Mehmet Tohti: It's maybe 5% or 6%.

Fred Davies: I know you're trying to walk a fine line here to not be too critical of the government. On a scale of one to 10, how would you rate the government's performance on this policy?

Mehmet Tohti: The passage of the motion was parliamentary work. All parties and all MPs worked together. That is the solidarity of all political parties. For the government, and especially for the implementation, immigration is a huge issue for Canada and the government as well.

I am frustrated and disappointed.

Fred Davies: Then you wouldn't really say that this program has been a successful one for Canadian government policy.

Mehmet Tohti: It was a big promise. Actually, when M-62 was passed in Parliament, all international media—the BBC and all western media—reported that it was huge news for international communities. They were praising Canada for how it reacted against China and for standing up for oppressed people. Now we've forgotten that momentum.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Davies.

We'll now turn to Mr. Fragiskatos for three minutes.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

In light of the fact that the motion that led to what we're discussing today is largely Mr. Zuberi's, I'm giving him the time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Tohti, are you familiar with the Wilson Center report entitled "Great Wall of Steel: China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs"? Are you aware that from 1997 to January 2002, it noted there were 1,574 known documented cases of Uyghurs who were refouled back to China from third countries? The vast and overwhelming majority ended up in concentration and forced labour camps.

Mehmet Tohti: I'm aware. That was the number until 2021.

Bradley Jardine, the author of that report, who is my good friend, actually, also shared some information about that with the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you. We have only two minutes.

The next thing I'd like to know from you is regarding your advocacy. Are the concentration camps still ongoing? Are people still in danger of being refouled from third countries back to China and into forced labour, resulting in serious crimes against humanity?

Mehmet Tohti: It is ongoing. That's the reason China's government does not allow any independent journalists into the region. Instead, it creates a Potemkin village and tells journalists to just go there and see.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Based upon this, would you recommend that IRCC, as a result of that, expedite the existing 740 applications, due to the grave and serious human rights concerns that each and every one of these applicants is going through right now in terms of potential refoulement back to China, to concentration camps?

Do you believe they should be expedited?

Mehmet Tohti: It should do that. If IRCC forgets, it should read the preamble of the M-62 motion. There are three lines, and they're still relevant.

Mehmet Tohti:

Sameer Zuberi: Secondly, do you recommend that IRCC open up the portal? It's currently closed. Do you recommend that the portal be opened, so that the remaining applications you have in hand of equally vulnerable people who are at risk of refoulement to con-

centration camps, torture and other crimes against humanity...? Should that be reopened by IRCC?

Mehmet Tohti: The portal is open, but there is an annual quota. If there were no quota, we could upload those files.

Sameer Zuberi: I thought you.... The portal's open, but there's a quota.

Do you recommend that the quota be lifted to reach the 10,000 in question?

Mehmet Tohti: Of course, immediately, the quota should be lifted.

Sameer Zuberi: I have a last question in my remaining few seconds.

Do you require resources in order to make this happen?

As an official referral partner from the Government of Canada, do you require increased resources to fulfill your mission mandate regarding the 10,000?

Mehmet Tohti: We have to recall some of the fired employees just to expedite uploading the remaining files.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tohti.

We have one and a half minutes for Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Al Khatib, I haven't asked you any questions. I'd like to give you the minute and a half I have left, so you can get your message across.

Rabab Al Khatib: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I want to use this minute and a half in a smart way. We acknowledge that the immigration system in Canada is under a lot of stress. It's really hard to figure out how to make it better.

We keep reminding the Government of Canada that the partnership, like the one, for example, between the GAR and Rainbow Railroad, is one that is globally cherished. It's one way to let asylum seekers, people in need of protection and vulnerable groups like LGBTQ+ people find safety.

I cannot stress enough how much LGBT people around the world who come to Canada are grateful. They're grateful for the opportunities Canada provides, and the system in Canada that allows them to be themselves and live in peace. Yes, there are many things we can do together in partnership with civil society.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Rabab Al khatib: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Don't mention it.

Madam Chair, we can remind the witness that, if she didn't have enough time to say what she wanted, she can always send us a brief.

[*English*]

The Chair: Absolutely.

Ms. Al Khatib, thank you for this. Thank you, Mr. Tohti. Thank you as well to our third witness, Ms. Dilimulati. I know you didn't have any questions, but I know you were with us in spirit.

Zaimira Dilimulati: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. It was excellent testimony. I just want to say a huge thanks to both of you and to everyone for their excellent questions.

We're now going to suspend for three minutes, so witnesses can leave and we can move to in camera discussion.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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