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• (1615)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (John Williamson (Saint John—St. Croix, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 33 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders, although I believe all members and witnesses are in the room today.

Thank you very much for that.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee commenced consideration of the report on international student program reforms, of the 2026 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada. The report was referred to the committee on Monday, March 23, 2026.

Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent—Akiawenhrahk, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would like to ask for clarification.

The Chair: Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As you know, we recently reported on the scandal involving the City of Laval having to pay one million dollars to the Canada Revenue Agency. We would like the Minister of Finance and National Revenue to testify here before the committee. We made a formal request to that effect nearly three weeks ago. I would like to know if Minister Champagne has responded and when he will be joining us.

The Chair: At this time, we still don't have a date for the Minister of Finance's appearance. It would be a good question to ask him during question period. We will continue to ask him when, before the summer, he can come here.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I'd like to welcome our witnesses so that we can get going.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, who is the auditor Auditor General of Canada, as well as Gabriel Lombardi and Erin Jellinek. From the Department of Citizenship

and Immigration, we have Ted Gallivan, deputy minister; Alexis Graham, acting assistant deputy minister of economic programs; and Tara Lang, director general of admissibility. From the Canada Border Services Agency, we have Aaron McCrorie, vice-president of intelligence and enforcement.

It's nice to see you all. I believe there are two opening statements.

Ms. Hogan, you can kick us off, please, for about five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss our report on reforms to the international student program, which was tabled in March of this year.

I would like to begin by recognizing that we are on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

In this audit, we looked at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's implementation of reforms to the international student program. These reforms were intended to manage growth and strengthen integrity controls.

Overall, we concluded that while the department reduced the number of new study permits issued, it fell short in other key areas. In 2024, the department issued just under 150,000 new study permits. This was well below the forecast of almost 350,000.

Some provinces, particularly those with smaller populations, were disproportionately affected. For example, Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan were both expected to see a 10% increase in approved new study permits compared to the previous year. Instead, both experienced a decrease of at least 59%.

• (1620)

[English]

The audit found critical weaknesses in the program's integrity controls. Although the department introduced a new tool to verify acceptance letters and had processes to identify potential fraud and student non-compliance, it did not effectively investigate or follow up when risks were flagged. For example, in 2023 and 2024, designated learning institutions identified over 153,000 potential cases of non-compliance with study permits, but the department investigated only about 4,000 of them. Most cases could not be closed because students did not respond to the department's requests for more information.

Further, the department's fraud detection activities identified 800 cases of fraud after permits were approved. No follow-up occurred on these cases. In most instances, individuals went on to apply for other immigration permits while in Canada. More than half of those applications have since been approved.

Our audit also identified an opportunity for better collaboration with the Canada Border Services Agency. We found that the immigration department did not collaborate with the agency to identify whether students with expired permits had left Canada. Using the immigration department's available data, we worked with the Canada Border Services Agency and found that only about 40% of the 39,500 students who were required to leave in 2024 had, in fact, left the country.

Ultimately, the department needs to act on the information it already has to address integrity concerns in the program, including collaborating with the Canada Border Services Agency. This is equally important once students are in Canada and applying for additional permits.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Next is Mr. Gallivan, who will make an opening statement of about five minutes.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Ted Gallivan (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I won't read the text in order to allow more time for questions and answers.

I just want to insist on the fact that the reviews of and the changes to the international student program were implemented by the government in 2023. It's a proactive initiative to incorporate more checks and balances in the program.

[English]

Second, the OAG found a number of areas of improvement, including the decrease in the number of students, which was the strategic objective, the implementation of a letter of verification process with educational institutions and, finally, the cancellation of the student direct stream. That program no longer exists.

[Translation]

I would say that we have an action plan. In my opinion, it is important that all action plans be completed by 2026 and that we take action at the appropriate time.

Second, we have committed to following up on all cases where there is a possibility of fraud. Then, when there is indeed a discrepancy or a violation of regulations, we take full responsibility for these cases.

Finally, we have taken responsibility for better managing the expiration of visas. When a visa expires, we take responsibility for following up.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, along with my team members, welcome questions from members.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We will begin our first round, which consists of three members with six minutes each.

Mr. Redekopp, welcome. You will kick us off, for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Auditor, thank you for that report. It was a great report. In it, you mentioned 51 cases of letters of acceptance fraud that you looked into and had been flagged, but the officers didn't follow procedures in 14 of those cases.

Is it fair to say that IRCC systems can detect fraud but then do not follow through and still let it pass?

Karen Hogan: We found many instances where the immigration department had information in its possession that it was not acting on. Its systems identified fraud or even flagged potential non-compliance with study permits, but it was that follow-through that is lacking in many of the cases we looked at.

• (1625)

Brad Redekopp: In 12 of these flagged cases, officers refused the applications for other reasons but didn't actually resolve the fraud question. That's what you pointed out in the report.

Mr. Gallivan, does that mean your department failed to make a finding of misrepresentation, failed to trigger a five-year ban and failed to alert the next officer who might review that specific file in another application scenario?

Ted Gallivan: The potential certainly exists. Without knowing the facts of the case, you can't say for sure, but I think the concern the OAG flagged is that without doing the homework and without documenting the file, it could have been the case.

Brad Redekopp: Ms. Hogan, it would be an unacceptable situation if that wasn't flagged, and that's what you pointed out in the report. Is that correct?

Karen Hogan: Absolutely, because those steps are meant to ensure that something is done if the person is found to have not followed the rules. It's putting up a flag so that you consider it during the next immigration status...or placing a ban. There are lots of tools in the tool kit at the immigration department, but if you don't take it to the end of the investigation, you can't use one of those tools.

Brad Redekopp: The study permit is one stream where there were problems with fraud. Did you have a chance to look at other streams to check for fraud as well?

Karen Hogan: No. This audit was focused solely on the international student program. We looked at the student direct stream, which had some concerns because certain countries that were in that stream were flagged as high risk for potentially using fraudulent documentation, yet they were in the student direct stream, which, by its nature, was meant to fast-track and be a bit of a light touch.

It would all have been linked to international students, whether it be in one instance or another, but it was on the international student program.

Brad Redekopp: You also investigated 800 cases where fraud was suspected and IRCC chose not to investigate any of them. You mentioned that.

As an auditor, would you be concerned that this pattern of not investigating fraud is present in other immigration streams as well?

Karen Hogan: That's really hard to say. It would depend on whether the individuals who are carrying out the procedures here are the same individuals, what the policies and procedures are and what kind of oversight was exercised. I think it would be wrong for me to extrapolate that, because in the international student program we saw the fact that there was information not being acted on, that would be extrapolatable to the rest of the department.

Brad Redekopp: The Globe and Mail had a story recently that showed that IRCC instructed its frontline officers to allow asylum claimants into the country, even if they suspected that the client was not being truthful. This was a story a couple of weeks ago.

Does this type of behaviour concern you, given what you found in the student program?

Karen Hogan: I don't know the article you're referring to. This is where I would expect that rigour be applied where rigour is meant to be applied. We saw that the immigration department has risk units that do a really good job of analyzing risk by country and

region. However, we saw inconsistencies with those risk assessments or the follow-through on information.

The department should care about the rigour of the immigration process, not just at the intake of an application but while individuals are in Canada, and when they should comply with the permits and leave. We found that the department really needs to do a better job at managing those risks throughout the rest of the process, not just in the application stream.

Brad Redekopp: Thanks.

Mr. Gallivan, your department's response to this particular issue said that you would add alerts to the files where fraud had been discovered. Will these capture concerns raised at the very front end, like the example I just mentioned that was found in the article?

If an agent doubts an original story, will that be noted in the file?

Ted Gallivan: The short answer is yes. The indicator is there for a reason. The IRCC will—through specialized compliance units, enhanced training and more clear direction—ensure those are populated. To the OAG's point, more importantly, we will ensure there's follow-up action on those indicators.

Brad Redekopp: Will you be revising the instructions given to the frontline officers to reflect that?

Ted Gallivan: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: Okay.

Given that the IRCC later removed the express entry job offer points, specifically to reduce the illegal buying and selling of LMIA's, are you concerned, Auditor, that the same pattern you found in the student stream, which were risks identified but with weak follow-through, may also exist in work permits and permanent resident streams?

Karen Hogan: Again, it's difficult for me to extrapolate. We saw that extensions of study permits or applications for other types of permits were done with what I'll call a light touch, because there was an assumption of rigour the first time through. We saw that wasn't always the case.

There is a concern there that now that risks have been identified, the immigration department will look at how it treats individuals who perhaps made it through under false pretenses or with fraudulent documentation. This is to make sure that you don't apply the typical light touch on an extension, and that you add rigour when rigour is needed.

We have flagged all these cases to the department. It's up to the department to handle the cases we've identified, but also to see if there are others within the student stream or other streams.

• (1630)

Brad Redekopp: Mr. Gallivan, have you found evidence of fraud in your first few weeks as deputy minister?

Ted Gallivan: There certainly was a practice of people falsely claiming to be students only to claim asylum. That's the kind of fraud that affected the student direct stream, and that's one of the key drivers to discontinue it.

The concern now is what we do with the people who came in while the program was in place. The commitment we've taken is to follow-through on all of those cases.

The Chair: Thank you. That is your time.

It's now over to Mr. McKinnon for six minutes, please.

Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

We welcome the Auditor General's report. Thank you. It's very favourable. It indicates that the intents of the program have been largely met, and certainly, strengthening the integrity of the system is a top priority.

One of the things I believe I heard from Mr. Gallivan's testimony was the difference in opinion relating to the amount of fraud cases that have been investigated. Is there a difference between how the Auditor General categorizes these and how the IRCC categorizes them?

If you'd each like to respond to that, I'd appreciate it.

Ted Gallivan: I don't think there's a difference of opinion. The Auditor General is correct. For example, the top line number of 150,000 as potential fraud is correct. The IRCC, at the time, hadn't done the homework to distill that to the number of actual fraud, so the Auditor General was 100% correct, there are potentially 153,000 cases.

We've subsequently done the homework and have brought the number down significantly. We now believe that 22% of those cases are potential fraud cases. We have more work to do to determine who, within that reduced population, has actually left the country. That's something we need to do more systematically going forward.

From my perspective, there's no daylight between the OAG's findings and ours. Had we documented and done the work that we've now done at the time, she would have had a different number, I believe.

Karen Hogan: I'll agree with the deputy minister. I don't believe there's a difference of opinion in what we're saying. There are two buckets that we're talking about around this table. There were 153,000 students who were flagged as potentially not complying with the requirements of their permits. Only 4,000 were investigated, so we didn't look into the approximate 150,000.

Out of those 4,000, about half were closed without going further. The students stopped communicating and the files were then closed. That is not determining whether or not the students are following up on their permits. There's no disagreement on that, and I can't speak to the work that the department has done since our audit.

The department identified 800 cases of fraud. Our concern is that the department did not consider any action on those 800 files when action should have been taken. We highlighted, in our report, where all of those files are now. The majority have applied for another immigration status, and about half have already received it. It's that kind of thing that I hope better controls will help prevent or make sure that those individuals really should have received another status.

There is no disagreement at all between the deputy minister and me on fraud.

Ron McKinnon: It sounds like the investigation of potential fraud has been very adequately and satisfactorily addressed. Do you believe that?

Ted Gallivan: From my perspective, once we implement the action plans that we have with the OAG and before this committee, I think they will be, but we're not there yet.

There were a number of improvements. If you take a step back, there was a four-year plan to bring the numbers under control and increase controls on the student direct program being abused for asylum seeking. Those top-line things were done and have happened. In 2025, the OAG saw that we weren't done that four-year voyage. I think a number of actions that IRCC has under way and that we've committed to by the end of this calendar year will be necessary before your statement would be true.

Karen Hogan: If I could add to that, there were hundreds of thousands of students who came through the student direct stream. I would expect that the department will now look at the rigour they applied to any of those students when they apply for any other immigration status, because the rigour wasn't there in the first place. You now have the chance to put in a control at the second application.

• (1635)

Ron McKinnon: That brings me to a more general question, Mr. Gallivan.

What is your department's response to the feedback shared by the Auditor General, and what steps will your department be taking going forward to address these concerns?

Ted Gallivan: The most important message is that all indicators need to be followed through on. Regarding these very large numbers that we're talking about—150,000 others—I think the Auditor General and Canadians would expect to see IRCC go through those files and come to a determination. It's not good enough to say most of them have an innocent explanation. We have to do the homework.

We've already started to set up teams. We have issued procedures. In fact, for those field directions that were asked for, we have committed in our management action plan to begin to do that by September 2026. Once we do it and we get to a smaller number of people who applied for a visa under false pretenses, then we need to follow through in terms of a flag in the system, and we need to follow through in terms of any renewal.

With your colleagues earlier this week, we talked about the five-year ban: If somebody doesn't leave the country when they ought to, they could be subject to a five-year prohibition against re-entry. We need to manage the immigration system with greater control so the legitimate travellers and the legitimate students, which the vast majority are, can come to this country and study, and those who are trying to abuse the system suffer consequences and are disincantized from doing it in the first place.

Ron McKinnon: I have a few seconds left. I'm interested in the numbers, which have fallen substantially in terms of approvals, but I understand the applications have fallen substantially as well and that the educational institutions have not been recruiting as vigorously.

Do you have any comment on that or explanation for that?

Ted Gallivan: There certainly has been a chill, so the perception may have been greater than the reality. There is an issue—and when we have time, we can come back to it—around the provincial allocations and unused spots. Right now, there are unused spots in terms of the seats allocated to the province. I would say internationally there was a message that Canada was being a little bit more rigorous, and I think it's a question of recalibrating that, because Canada benefits from high-impact, legitimate students. They're an asset to the country, so we have to make sure those students do continue to apply and come to Canada.

Ron McKinnon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Lemire for six minutes.

Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the Auditor General once again for her work and for the details she has provided on this issue.

Mr. Gallivan, there is one thing that astounds me—it may even be the most problematic aspect. The Auditor General wrote that the department did not know whether students with expired permits were leaving Canada. So the Auditor General worked with your colleagues at the Canada Border Services Agency to compile a list. Currently, we are focusing on a single program, the international student program, but this could be the case for many other programs.

Do you know how many people with expired permits left Canada?

Do you have figures for all programs that you could submit to the committee?

Ted Gallivan: No, we don't have exact numbers, and that's a problem. We have samples and projections. So we have a high-level picture, but we haven't managed the departures of visa holders in a systematic way.

Student programs are part of our first phase. We will establish a management framework within the system and procedures to properly manage departures. We intend to apply this to other visa programs as well. However, not everything is tied to information technology, or IT. That said, our IT team confirms that, in May of this year, we will have an indicator of who is in Canada for the first time.

This is an example, because the department had not previously considered managing departures. However, we are committed to doing so going forward.

Sébastien Lemire: According to figures from the Auditor General, there were 39,500 people unaccounted for. We do not know where the students are or whether they have left the country, but we should hear from them soon. It might be worthwhile, Mr. Chair, to hold another meeting to see where things stand with this follow-up.

I will now make the connection to the question my colleague, Mr. McKinnon, posed.

We are talking about the drop in approval rates, which is reportedly linked to the drop in application rates from universities. I think this might be related to stricter measures regarding these applications.

Is this indeed the case, or have relations with certain countries simply cooled, which would have caused a drop in their applications, as the statistics show?

• (1640)

Ted Gallivan: It is true that there are financial requirements. We have also cancelled the student direct stream. These are other factors, in addition to the environment.

I will now turn to my colleague so she can give you a more technical answer.

Alexis Graham (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Economic Programs, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I would say it's probably due to cooled relations.

[*English*]

In terms of approval rates, it's important to note that they are primarily a function of recruitment practices of provinces and designated learning institutions. IRCC can't approve an application that doesn't meet the requirements of the program, and those requirements did change, as we've all recognized.

There has been this transition period from a more facilitative approach to a more controlled and disciplined way of managing the program based on allocations and lower numbers. That has created some need for these institutions to look at student recruitment differently, so we are seeing those approval numbers being a little bit lower. However, we do anticipate them to rebound in the future as well.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: The Auditor General's figures speak for themselves. In 2023, nearly one in two students came from India under the student direct stream, which was established in 2018 and terminated in 2024. I still see a fairly direct link between this and the decline in applications.

Furthermore, the Auditor General stated that you identified integrity risks in 2022 and that no concrete action was taken thereafter.

Today, these students are still in the country. They will renew their study permits or apply for permanent residence. Currently, 94% to 95% of applications are approved, even though, according to the Auditor General's data, 12% of applications show indicators that some may be ineligible, the majority of which came from the student direct stream.

What measures have you put in place to address this?

Ted Gallivan: The plan of action is to focus on students who entered through the student direct stream and who are considered high-risk.

As mentioned by the Office of the Auditor General, we are looking to establish a procedure for processing renewal applications. We are committed to establishing a more rigorous and comprehensive procedure to address the lack of verification at the first level. We want to ensure that we thoroughly verify this and subject this group to a risk assessment that differs from the one applied to the group that followed the standard process.

Sébastien Lemire: In addition, 541 applicants who committed fraud obtained either permanent residence, an extension of their study permit, or filed an asylum claim.

How is it that, even though they committed fraud, these people got what they asked for?

Shouldn't addressing this problem be prioritized?

Ted Gallivan: I think we're starting to step on the toes of my colleague, Ms. Brassard, from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. I don't want to step on her toes, because she's the one who makes those decisions.

I would simply say that they are based on several factors and indicators. When someone is the subject of a decision regarding citizenship or permanent residence, our role is to reflect that. That said, the board is an independent body that takes all factors into consideration and makes the decisions it deems appropriate.

I now turn to Ms. Lang to clarify this.

[English]

Tara Lang (Director General, Admissibility, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I think what you said is completely accurate.

When we're considering cases and they're referred to the IRB, there are a number of reasons we might want to intervene. Misrepresentation might be one of them and likewise criminality, but officers have that discretion. In the case of somebody who overstayed a visa one time, it's hard to say if that officer would decide, on the

scale or balance of probabilities, that it might be worth an intervention to the IRB to interfere in an asylum claim.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I will now begin our second round, which will consist of five members, who will have various amounts of time.

[Translation]

Mr. Deltell for five minutes.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to my distinguished colleagues.

I welcome our witnesses to your Canadian Parliament and our parliamentary committee.

Before I start firing off questions, I'd like to remind everyone what we're talking about. We're not talking about paperwork, files, or anything like that. We're talking about human lives. When it comes to immigration, we're talking about men and women who dream of living here in Canada. I acknowledge my conflict of interest with honour and dignity. My parents arrived here on August 22, 1958, aboard the *Arosa Star*, at the port of Quebec City.

When we talk about 150,000 potential fraudsters, the number is huge, the headline is striking, and we imagine the worst. However, first and foremost, these are people who, for the most part, chose to come here in good faith and who expect their host country to live up to the exceptional reputation our country enjoys around the world.

Ms. Hogan, when you discovered that there were 150,000 people who, as soon as your report was published, would be suspected of something and become targets, how did you react?

Do you believe that Canada has welcomed these people, whom, I am sure, never came here with fraudulent intentions, but who, unfortunately, have not received a welcome that lives up to our country's reputation and, above all, our country's responsibility?

● (1645)

Karen Hogan: I recognize that most of the students who come here through the program are genuine students. They are here to study and thrive. One day, they will have to decide whether they want to stay in Canada or return to their home countries.

As for the 153,000 people in question, these are cases where educational institutions had noticed that these individuals might not be studying full-time. They might not have been meeting the criteria or requirements specific to their permits. They should be given the chance to prove they are students, but it is unacceptable not to contact them.

As for the 800 cases where the individual used fraudulent documents or made false statements, that must be taken into account. This demonstrates a lack of integrity on the part of these individuals. Every case is unique.

Gérard Deltell: In your opinion, is there a network of people working together to defraud the system, or are these, on the contrary, isolated incidents that seem to pop up out of nowhere, with no connection between them?

Karen Hogan: It's difficult to answer that question.

As for the 800 cases where fraudulent documents were used, more than 700 individuals provided the name of an institution that did not exist. So, it's quite clear that this is an issue that needs to be examined more closely. The department should take steps to do that in these 800 cases.

Gérard Deltell: Mr. Gallivan, do you have something to say about this situation?

Ted Gallivan: Yes.

I agree with the view that these are people first and foremost. That is why I spoke about reaching out to the people on the list. Earlier this week, I talked about informing people initially and explaining the rules going forward. When we talk about expired visas, we need to remind people of the rules and make sure they're accurate. I believe our department's approach is to emphasize training and clear communication.

Yes, there is a threat. I'll turn to my colleague at the end so he can tell you about this small number of cases.

You asked a direct question about networks. They do represent a small percentage of cases. Organized crime will encourage members to slip into the international student program, but we're talking about five, 10, or 15 cases a year. That's not the majority of cases.

Gérard Deltell: Mr. McCrorie, you work for the Canada Border Services Agency. I'm looking at this from the outside, and I think to myself that there are the universities, obviously, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and the Canada Border Services Agency.

Is it possible that everyone is working in silos and that there is a lack of collaboration?

Aaron McCrorie (Vice-President, Intelligence and Enforcement, Canada Border Services Agency): I thank the member for his question.

[*English*]

I think we each have roles to play in the immigration system, along with the Immigration and Refugee Board. In fact, in my experience, we actually work very closely with IRCC, for example—

Gérard Deltell: The results are not there. Even if you work together really well, the result is not there.

Aaron McCrorie: I can give you the example from about 2023, when we identified an individual who had been providing students with fraudulent letters. We worked with IRCC to work through the students who were affected by that, some of whom were genuine students who we allowed to stay in the country, and others who

weren't and who we removed from the country. That was a great collaborative effort between IRCC and the CBSA.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Welcome, Mr. Danko. Thank you for joining us today.

Mr. Danko, just so you know, you have five minutes, and if you get your last question in within that five minutes, I do allow the witnesses to respond over your time, but if you interrupt them, their time ends.

[*Translation*]

John-Paul Danko (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I represent a riding that has three post-secondary institutions: McMaster University, Mohawk College and Redeemer University. This is an issue that is very top of mind locally.

Mr. Deltell started on an important point. A lot of the international students we were bringing in were, in my opinion, very much exploited. They end up here thinking they're going to get this great Canadian education, this pathway to citizenship and a job and a life in Canada, and they end up in very substandard housing and in crowded conditions. They end up in a strip mall and a poor education system and are not receiving what they were promised.

My experience is largely in Ontario, where the provincial government basically created this system, this scheme, whereby the post-secondary institutions were almost forced to rely on international students as a source of revenue. The extreme example of that is Conestoga College, which at one point had 30,000 international students each year in their system. That is the student population of McMaster, which is a historic, very well known and internationally recognized university. It was just a ridiculous level of abuse.

As part of that, the province created the system, but some of those unscrupulous institutions were recruiting overseas, making these promises, bringing people in and not delivering.

My question, through you, Chair, is perhaps for the Auditor General. Did we consider what role the provincial governments and also the institutions themselves had in the abuse of these programs?

Karen Hogan: I can't look at the role that the provincial government or the learning institutions played, but I would point the member to exhibit 5 in our report, where we break down how the federal government interacts with the learning institutions.

The learning institutions are allocated a certain number of spots—or at least the provinces are—and the province decides which learning institutions get those spots. They can accept or not accept an individual or make an offer for them to come to the school, but then that person needs to apply to the immigration department. They need to pass through two things: being admissible for immigration but then also meeting the criteria of the program.

There is a lot of interdependency, and that's why I do believe that a better collaboration with the learning institutions, the provinces and the immigration department is needed to see why the intent was a lot sharper. The results of these reforms were a lot sharper than intended. Some provinces were meant to see an increase and saw large decreases.

There might be some adjustment that's needed, but it's clear that there's a relationship between what the provinces do with the spaces they are allocated and who a learning institution makes an offer to, and then how that person passes through immigration and program admissibility.

I hope I've captured that well. To me, it can't be done without collaborating.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you.

I'll extend that question to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration as well.

Another example from Ontario—that's my experience and what I'm familiar with—is that of the system of colleges licensing their diplomas to third parties, which are then basically packing strip malls full of international students. They would graduate with an actual Ontario college diploma, even though the college was simply licensing that.

Could the department comment further, please?

Ted Gallivan: I have two points. First, the increased rigour in financial requirements and the increased threshold will help mitigate that and protect vulnerable students from being exploited in the manner you described. Second, the CIMM committee itself produced a report with a much broader scope than that of the OAG's review. There were 10 findings, and then an additional Liberal finding and an additional Conservative finding.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

I don't know if the Bloc Québécois has produced one. In any case, it's a good report. I think it addresses the issues you mentioned. We will review this report, and we intend to table a government response within the prescribed time frame.

[*English*]

John-Paul Danko: Thank you.

I have a final question—I understand we might be talking about this a bit more—on the timelines for security screenings.

Now that we've limited the number of international students, the final frustration I'm hearing about from post-secondary institutions is around timelines for security screenings, which don't necessarily

line up with their admissions requirements. Could you comment on that, please?

Ted Gallivan: I'll start.

From an IRCC perspective, we triage those and hand them off to security partners.

We are taking a look to make sure we're really managing risk properly. We have some categories where 100% are referrals. We have road maps, journeys and criteria that we give our officers to get referrals. One place we're starting from is making sure those are effective, using a feedback loop from decisions in order to make sure we're not needlessly tying up the intelligence community on cases that really ought not to be referred to them. On the other hand, where there is a national security threat or a threat to the health and safety of Canadians, cases are referred.

That is one part of the pipeline. I will turn to my colleague Mr. McCrorie for the next part in the processing chain.

Aaron McCrorie: We co-manage the program with IRCC and CSIS.

One thing we've struggled with is how to balance efficiency and effectiveness. We want to make sure we can make timely decisions. Some take too long, but we also need to be effective in terms of ensuring national security. Part of the challenge we face, as I said, is some decisions taking too long.

The other challenge we face, quite frankly, is the volume. We've gone from about 50,000 people in our inventory, around 2022 and 2023, to about 183,000. At the same time, our decision-making has gone up. We made 106,000 decisions last year, but we haven't kept up with the volumes coming in. We are looking at how we can become more effective in terms of working through them. We can do simple stage-one applications in a maximum of two days. Other, more complex ones can take 14 days or more, but we need to get our hands on them. That means getting the inventory down.

We have two large pools. One is visa applicants, and those come to us based on referrals from IRCC. We also do 100% of in-Canada asylum seekers. What we're moving to is a more risk-based approach, similar to what we do with visa applicants. We're looking at how we can use indicators. Based on country profiles and our assessment of risk—working with CSIS—how can we more rapidly say, “This file doesn't need the full-blown review,” so we'll move it on and come to a decision more quickly? By making those decisions more quickly, we can then turn our attention to files that require more work. We're optimistic that we can put a significant dent in our asylum numbers this fiscal year, which will allow us, then, to put more energy into all the files we have before us.

In terms of the students themselves, last year we had about 180,000 in our inventory. We had about 1,800 files referred to us as students and made 1,200 decisions over that same period. It's not where we want to be, but we recognize that we need to do more in this space.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gallivan, according to the figures, 153,000 students do not meet the criteria for their study permits. What are the consequences for these individuals?

Apparently, you have funding to investigate only about 2,000 cases per year. In my view, what is becoming unacceptable is the absence of these students, who simply have to suddenly cut off all contact with you. By not responding to you, there are no consequences.

Exactly why wouldn't a permit be suspended immediately?

Is there a procedure in place when a student or worker no longer has a valid study or work permit?

What will happen to that individual? Can you tell them that, since they didn't respond to you and don't meet the criteria, their permit is no longer valid? Does that happen?

Ted Gallivan: Right now, it doesn't exist in the way you describe it. That's why we submitted an action plan to properly document the cases. It's also why we made a commitment to accountability and to implementing that plan.

With regard to the 153,000 students, after doing the review, which hadn't been done when the Auditor General's office came to see us, we found out that they had changed schools. These are not instances of fraud; they're paperwork issues. That has been corrected. Their status changed. They got a work permit, and there's no problem. However, in a significant number of cases, there is a problem.

We didn't know how many cases needed to be reviewed, so the department allocated funds for about 2,000 cases.

We are committed to investigating all cases that have no reasonable explanation and that are actually problematic, such as someone

who stays in the country when they shouldn't, who isn't studying, who isn't working, and so on.

We are committed to finding them and contacting them. You're absolutely right that, when someone doesn't answer, we should try to contact them again several times, not close their file. That's essentially what it says in the detailed action plan that IRCC submitted to the committee.

• (1700)

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

I appreciate your forthrightness and, of course, your willingness to respond to the concerns raised by the Auditor General.

Mr. McCrorie, I have a question about a case that happened in my riding of Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

If a student committed a crime and lost the right to be in Canada, what steps would have to be taken for that person to leave the country?

How long would it take from the time that person is released from prison until they are removed from the country?

Aaron McCrorie: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

I'll have to speak in generalities because it's a hypothetical case.

As a general rule, we allow the criminal justice system to take precedence over the immigration system. Depending on the nature of the crime, there may be serious criminal consequences, and we'll allow the criminal justice system to take place. We'll be ready at the end of that to begin removal processes. In some instances, we'll work with local law enforcement, depending on the nature of the crime, and we'll say that we can do removal quicker than they can in working through the criminal justice system.

Think of extortion, for example, and the cases that we've seen in British Columbia, Edmonton, Winnipeg and the Toronto area. We've been using our immigration tools to take individuals who have been involved in extortion and have removed them from the country. We've removed them fairly quickly.

It's hard to say though, in terms of the average time, because a lot depends on the circumstances. Are they going to apply for a pre-removal risk assessment? Will they ask for a delay for health reasons? Will they appeal our decision to the courts? Do they have a travel document? Is there an administrative deferral for removal in terms of where we take them?

There's no hard and fast rule, but I would say that we have a legal obligation to remove people as quickly as possible, and we do. We did about 23,000 removals last year. We prioritize those who are involved in criminality or what we call serious inadmissibilities. Our second tier is those who are failed refugee claimants, and then the third tier is everybody else.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Up next we have Mr. Kuruc for five minutes.

Ned Kuruc (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, CPC): Thank you to all the witnesses for coming here today. I'll start with the new deputy minister.

It was brought to my attention that you just started four weeks ago. Is that correct? I'll take your nodding as a yes.

The IRCC gave testimony on Monday. I don't want to say there were a lot of excuses, but the words “funding” and “budget” were used repeatedly. My thoughts and questions today will come from the public accounts perspective of protecting taxpayer money or acting for the taxpayer. There are some numbers here that I'd like to share with the committee and the witnesses.

The funding for the IRCC has gone from \$3.16 billion to \$6.5 billion in about five years. That includes doubling the labour force from about 6,300 to 14,000, between 2015 and 2023. Those are big numbers. The budget for IRCC is massive. We started to investigate, after testimony by the Auditor General, which I found great but concerning.

The Office of the Auditor General's funding is about \$127.5 million a year. They were able to help find the 39,500 individuals who were not supposed to be here. Their office did that with the help of all the other offices, and they took it upon themselves to find those numbers. What's concerning is that their budget is very small, and IRCC's very big. Obviously, IRCC does a lot more than just that, so I'm not going to dwell on that. However, that's why I wanted to start with figuring out the dollars.

A few things came up today. My colleague from Hamilton raised some great concerns and valid questions. The member from the Bloc Québécois also raised some interesting questions. We also heard from the vice-president of CBSA. One thing I want to touch on is fraud, which leads to screening and communication between agencies. The gentleman said that they are figuring out how to balance efficiency and time, and manage bigger volumes. These are all valid issues.

As a member of the public accounts committee, I would now like to move a motion, if that's okay.

● (1705)

The Chair: You certainly have the right to state your motion. I'll have to decide if it's in order, Mr. Kuruc.

Have you've submitted it in both official languages to the clerk?

Ned Kuruc: Yes. Can I read my motion?

The Chair: If it's all right with you, I'm going to have the clerk distribute it. That way we can keep on track.

Go ahead, Mr. Kuruc. You may read your motion.

Ned Kuruc: I'm moving this motion because I think we need to look—

The Chair: Mr. Kuruc, please just give us the motion.

Ned Kuruc: I move:

That, in light of the findings in the 2026 Report of the Auditor General of Canada entitled “International Student Program Reforms,” and given the additional concerns identified regarding oversight, enforcement, and integrity within the international student visa system, the committee write to the Auditor General to request that she expand the scope of her International Student Program Reforms performance audit to include:

- (a) the processes and effectiveness of coordination between the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and the Canada Border Services Agency in tracking international students with expired visas, including data collection, information sharing, assessment for removal, and actual removals from Canada;
- (b) the extent of non-compliance by designated learning institutions, including failure to report on student compliance, the identification of repeat offenders, and the application and effectiveness of enforcement measures;
- (c) the adequacy of procedures for verifying financial documentation submitted by applicants, including the detection, flagging, and subsequent use of fraud indicators across immigration applications;
- (d) the extent to which processing officers fail to act on or record indicators of potential fraud identified by learning institutions, and the implications for reapplication and enforcement measures;
- (e) the effectiveness and integrity of risk assessment processes across all international student application streams, including the identification and mitigation of risks prior to and following permit approval;
- (f) the handling of confirmed fraudulent cases identified by risk assessment units, including the absence of file flagging, enforcement actions taken or not taken, and the approval of subsequent immigration applications;
- (g) the approval practices for study permit extensions, including the use of a “light touch” approach and the extent to which prior risk indicators or concerns are reassessed; and
- (h) the scale of non-compliance among international students, including the adequacy of departmental resources for investigations, the thoroughness of those investigations, and the effectiveness of follow-up actions;

And that the committee further write to the Auditor General to undertake an additional audit into the overall, holistic security screening processes across all program streams and how the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Canada Border Services Agency, and the Immigration and Refugee Board share information, interact with each other, and follow up on all cases of misrepresentation, fraud, serious criminality, terrorism, illegal border crossings, and all other reasons to deny permit approval from application and port of entry to final approval of permanent residency status or citizenship including possible claims of asylum, expired permits, removal orders, detentions, pre-risk removal assessments, judicial proceedings, and all other steps inherent in the processes;

And that the committee report this request to the House.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

The motion's been distributed. It is a “matter at hand” issue. It is in order. I'm going to go back to Mr. Kuruc, because I did cut him off during his intro. He does have that right, but I wanted to keep him in his time. I didn't actually know that it would be quite that long, so I'm glad I did that.

Then I'll come right after to you, Ms. Yip.

Mr. Kuruc, do you have a brief statement to go along with it? If you don't, that's fine. We can move things along.

We'll go back to you, and then I'll recognize Ms. Yip.

Ned Kuruc: I moved this motion in the spirit of true non-partisanship that this committee represents. I do believe that we've heard many questions across the board and valid concerns from everyone around this table. I believe this motion, and the further reporting that this motion requests, is going to be very important information for the deputy minister, who is brand new, to help him do his job better and to help us help him.

That's my intent. Thank you.

The Chair: Before I recognize Ms. Yip, I will just let everyone know what I do in these situations. I'm just going to take the temperature. I'm going to see if this is something that committee members will resolve relatively quickly, or if it's going to go on for a while, at which point I will make a decision about what to do with our witnesses.

Ms. Yip, you have the floor.

Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): I'd like to suspend. There is a lot of information in Mr. Kuruc's motion, and I would just like to discuss—

The Chair: I'm open to doing that in a second.

Jean Yip: Okay.

The Chair: I'd like to do one round, though.

I saw Mr. Lemire, and I'll come back to Mr. Osborne. Then I will look to suspend, Ms. Yip—for a couple of minutes at least—for discussion. Let's just do a quick round here first.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think Parliament needs more people like Mr. Kuruc to put forward motions in a spirit of collaboration with the intent of getting to the bottom of things and making our studies more authoritative.

For that reason, the Bloc Québécois will support the motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Osborne.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I always take the approach that if you act in haste, you repent at leisure. I think this is a rather lengthy motion. I agree with my colleague to not just suspend but give us some time to analyze this motion.

The other thing that I would ask and request is this: We have witnesses here. Are we able to continue with the witnesses and deal with this after we're done?

The Chair: Those are all good questions.

I don't have, on my own, the authority to suspend a motion. It's now before the committee. I will suspend for three to five minutes, and I'll actually join the discussion about the witnesses. However, the opposition member does have the right to proceed with this, should he choose to do that.

I'll just state that up front. You have to yield that to the committee.

I'll suspend for five minutes.

Witnesses, you can get up and stretch your legs, but I would ask you to come back, though, in five minutes.

We'll have a discussion to see where we're going to go. This meeting is suspended.

● (1710)

(Pause)

● (1725)

The Chair: I'll bring our meeting back to order.

That was a little longer than five minutes. I apologize for that, but there were some helpful discussions.

Mr. Osborne, I'll note that the member is going to proceed with his motion.

I'm sensing some broad possible goodwill here. Since we're still well within the two hours, I'm going to ask the witnesses to hang tight, and we'll see how it goes. If we can resolve this in the next little bit, we'll come back to you. I know that many members would like to get through their questions. Some of them have not had the chance to do so yet. That would be easier than having you come back at a later date.

There is no speaking list. I assume we don't want to go right to a vote. Is there anyone who would like to speak to the motion or make any amendments?

Go ahead, Mr. McKinnon.

Ron McKinnon: I think it's a very interesting motion. It's something I could get behind, but I have some issues.

One concern I have is about the independence of the Auditor General. We cannot be seen to be directing her to do anything. I have no problem making a request of her to take action. I would move to amend this motion in a paragraph that says, "and the committee further write to the Auditor General to undertake". I think it would be clearer if we change that "undertake" to "request".

Second, at the end, it says, "and the committee report this request to the House". I would move to drop that line .

The Chair: I'm going to break those in two. I'm going to give you the floor. We're going to deal with that.

On the first one, I'm going to make a friendly amendment. Could we make it that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts "request"? I don't need to write "the Auditor General" right here. The Auditor General's team watches everything this committee does, and we will, of course, send the motion over. You'll clear out my inbox a little bit if we have, in the first paragraph, that the Standing Committee on Public Accounts "request" that the Auditor General expand the scope, and then, in that paragraph you mentioned, that the committee "request" the Auditor General....

I have to work on this.

• (1730)

Tom Osborne: Mr. Chair....

The Chair: Hold on for one second.

That second paragraph could read, "And that the committee further request that the Auditor General undertake an additional audit".

Ron McKinnon: I have a problem with "undertake".

The Chair: Okay. Let's say, "that the committee further request an additional audit".

Ron McKinnon: I'll accept that.

The Chair: Mr. Osborne, do you want to speak to that? Could I just get a remit on that, and then we can move to Mr.—

Tom Osborne: I was going to suggest the wording we just arrived at.

The Chair: Okay. That's great.

Could I have a show of hands if you agree to that change?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McKinnon, now you have a second amendment, which is to remove "and that the committee report this request to the House."

[Translation]

In French, "*et que le Comité fasse rapport de cette demande à la Chambre.*"

[English]

That amendment is on the table. Would anyone like to speak to that?

Go ahead, Mr. Danko.

John-Paul Danko: To be consistent with the various other committees, we want to keep committee work in committee and House work in the House. We have a fairly substantial, full House calendar. We want to make sure that we don't inadvertently bring committee business to the House. This is consistent with the other committees. It speaks to the efficiency of government that we want to keep the committee discussions at the committee level.

The Chair: Thank you.

First, I have Mr. Stevenson.

William Stevenson (Yellowhead, CPC): I'll let Mr. Redekopp go.

Brad Redekopp: The only thing that I would suggest to the committee is that, in this particular case, the Auditor General has indicated that she prioritizes her work based on where the requests come from. When they come from committee, they have a certain amount of weight, and when they come from the House, they have more weight. In this case, it has a practical application in terms of getting the attention of the Auditor General and the priorities she might set. I just wanted to make that point.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Osborne, I think you are first, and then it's Mr. McKinnon, at least according to the clerk. You're welcome to swap up, if you like.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To the last point made, I agree that committee work should stay at committee. This doesn't stop individuals from asking questions in the House or putting forward a motion in the House. Let's not be presumptuous about what the response of the Auditor General will be. I think we can remove this. If we don't get a response from the Auditor General that is favourable for the committee, there can be a motion in the House to do the same thing as this.

Committee work should stay at the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. McKinnon.

Ron McKinnon: I was just going to say that I don't think the Auditor General needs something to catch her attention on this. I agree with my colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Stevenson.

William Stevenson: I will just emphasize that, in the past, the Auditor General has stated to us that her priorities are always weighted by the House versus what the committees say.

The public accounts committee is not exactly like some of the other committees, but I would say that it's still important for us to keep that in there—to have that value and to emphasize its importance for the Auditor General.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will call the roll on this amendment.

[*Translation*]

It's to remove the following sentence: "and that the committee report this request to the House."

• (1735)

[*English*]

You're voting yes if you would like to have it removed, and no if you would like to maintain the motion as is.

The Clerk of the Committee (Natalie Jeanneault): It is a tie. You have the casting vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: It is four to four. I will cast a vote to maintain the motion as it is. I vote no.

(Amendment negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: We will now vote on the motion as amended.

It is four votes to four. I will vote in favour of the motion.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: I will now return to the rounds of questioning. We are just at the end of the second round.

Mr. Osborne, you have the floor for five minutes.

Tom Osborne: Thank you. Let me gather my thoughts for a moment.

I guess this is for IRCC.

For a small province like Newfoundland and Labrador... The Auditor General has pointed out that they were disproportionately impacted by the decision of IRCC. I was a member of the provincial legislature when this transpired.

Can you speak to what has been done to rectify this difference, where Newfoundland and Labrador should have seen an increase but instead saw a decrease?

Ted Gullivan: I'll make a couple of quick points, and then turn to colleagues to detail this.

Starting in January 2025, changes were made to the provincial allocations. That wasn't in time to be picked up by the OAG's report. That proactive adjustment process had started already.

This spring, we are engaging with provinces to understand how we can tweak the allocation model and customize it in order to help address the concern you're expressing. We've also committed to giving them better data and better information so they can plan within their jurisdictions. This is very respectful of their responsibility for education—giving them data.

Finally, we've committed to another round of tweaking this fall.

Alexis, I don't know whether you want to detail some of that for the members.

Alexis Graham: Yes, I'm happy to provide additional details.

I think we completely understand and agree that attraction in smaller centres is a challenge and that the changes have had impacts across the country and in smaller jurisdictions.

We have embarked on a fairly detailed and robust engagement plan with provinces and territories to better understand what is causing approval versus refusal rates. We have also adjusted the allocation formula to take into account the approval rates of certain jurisdictions. In practice, that means we will give more allocations to those where we are seeing higher refusals, so that they can add more students and they don't get penalized.

In general, these are conversations that are happening through multiple layers, starting with the minister and going down to working groups to really unpack that, share information, generate more complementarity between the programming and really understand what is at the root of this, so that DLIs and recruitment efforts can focus on the students who are going to be successful.

Tom Osborne: Thank you. I appreciate the answer.

How do both agencies, I would think, balance the reduction in new arrivals with the need to attract and retain skilled workers, especially in areas where we have skilled labour shortages such as medical health professionals, for example?

• (1740)

Ted Gullivan: Again, I'll make a brief start and then turn it over to Alexis.

There were two prongs to the strategy initiated in 2023. It was to get both the numbers and the integrity under control, but also to increase the quality. In terms of the definition of that, it was working with jurisdictions to make sure world-class students who really make a difference in terms of the Canadian educational landscape are there.

Alexis, do you want to comment a bit on the quality aspect?

Alexis Graham: In terms of the volumes and just the composition, we do see that there is a shift. For example, the proportion of university-bound students is back to prepandemic volumes of about 40%. It has shifted away from colleges and back into that university space. We also see that top research universities are leading the new study permit recipients and are welcoming more students in STEM. For example, that's up 3.6% from 2024 to 2025, and there are fewer in those oversubscribed business programs. We are seeing some adjustments already and some changes in those behaviours and outcomes.

I would also note that doctoral students applying to study in Canada and their family members now also benefit from 14-day processing. We've really tried to speed that up for that particular cohort, and IRCC is meeting that commitment.

Tom Osborne: Thank you.

I will commend the Auditor General for bringing some of these concerns to light. I commend IRCC and the Canada Border Services Agency as well for how you've reacted to those recommendations.

I want to ask both agencies if you could expand on some of the improvements that have been put in place as a result of the findings of the Auditor General, including the fact that last year you reviewed 100% of the potential fraud cases. What brought you to be able to do that? For example, what measures were put in place? What other improvements were in place as a result of the recommendations?

Ted Gallivan: Maybe I'll start, Mr. Chair.

It was unfortunately the Auditor General who shone the spotlight on the discrepancy letters, the 153,000. It wasn't, in fairness, until the OAG report arrived that we started looking at those in detail. The letter process was new. I think there was a sense within the IRCC that the number would come down naturally as people got used to the process and there would be fewer mistakes, and that after several years, it would be a good time to kind of pounce and start looking in detail.

What I would describe is a process of weeding down that list, but we're not done. There is work ahead of us in terms of confirming whether the people without status have effectively left the country or not. I don't want to leave this committee with the impression that the work is done. We have narrowed down the list to people who don't have valid status in Canada, but we have yet to fully confirm whether they have actually left the country or not. Finally, on the hard work—the people who ought to have left the country and who haven't—that's going to be tough work, and that work is ahead of us.

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

To begin our third round, I'm going to go to Mr. Stevenson for five minutes.

William Stevenson: I have several questions. Most of them have been partially answered, so I'll try to be succinct on these.

The first one will be for the Auditor General.

When you found those fraudulent cases in your audit, did you see any pattern within those cases that linked them to specific institutions?

Karen Hogan: I think you're talking about the 800 cases.

William Stevenson: Yes.

Karen Hogan: Those were identified by the immigration department. What we did notice as a pattern in them is that a little over 700 of them claimed that they had attended an educational institution that did not exist.

William Stevenson: Was it all the same one, or were there different names that were...?

Karen Hogan: I'm going to have to ask if someone across the table from me has that answer.

I don't think we have that answer, but it just shows that the majority of them had that fraudulent documentation. That would have been an alert—something that the immigration department should have seen.

● (1745)

William Stevenson: With those numbers, was there any indication of an agency or an individual who was promoting this to say, "Come to Canada through this student path"? Is there no real link between the individual cases?

Karen Hogan: We didn't go that far into each of those individual cases. The pattern we did notice was that over 700 of them had this one fraudulent letter or claim of an institution. About 68% of those 800 were approved through the student direct stream. We were, again, connecting to a bucket that came through on a "light touch", faster process. This just raises other flags around.... Having a control is good, but the control is only as effective as the enforcement and the follow-through.

William Stevenson: I'll go to Mr. Gallivan or Ms. Graham.

On the "light touch", is that part of your, as you said, plan of action that's to be completed in 2026? Is the light touch being addressed, as maybe that it's not a good process going forward?

Ted Gallivan: There are two parts. The program itself, which was a lighter touch, was discontinued. That's happened.

Now we have the students who were ingested during that lighter-touch period. They are still in Canada and have transferred. That's where we've taken a commitment in 100% of the cases to take into account that they received less scrutiny. If they're renewing their student visa, there's extra scrutiny. It's managing the population that came in while the program was live.

William Stevenson: We had discussed earlier that there was a doubling of the number of people in your department. By the sound of things, it's not that you needed more staff for your plan of action, because now you're doing the 100% follow-ups on those, but you didn't do it before.

Was that a choice by the department, or was that indicated before? Was it that they'd save some money and this is how they planned on doing it?

Ted Gallivan: In the first instance, this idea of letters was a new process. Let me say this bluntly. The number of suspected fraud cases should drive the allocation of resources, rather than a fixed budget that management decided. The commitment we're trying to make is that we have sufficient resources—although 14,000 is a little generous; we're not quite that large. We have sufficient resources, so we ought to reallocate resources to deal with the risk.

William Stevenson: If you have numbers—and if you don't, you can get back to us later—can you tell me, as a percentage, how many people in your department and in your process are actually focused on just investigating the claims versus the administration of the rest of your program?

Ted Gallivan: I've asked the same question. Part of the challenge is that we have visa officers who are both facilitators and compliance officers. They get a visa application and it depends on the veracity of the claim. That wasn't a very satisfying answer to me, but that's where I am right now.

We have very few full-time compliance officers. All of our officers, when they look at a visa, are thinking about compliance and service. It's really the nature of the application and the facts of the file that dictate whether they're facilitative or not.

William Stevenson: When you get to the bottom of those and you find somebody who should fail the system and get kicked out, are you doing a data dump to the other departments to say, "Here are all the individuals"? Is that part of your action plan?

Ted Gallivan: Part of the action plan is to have dedicated compliance teams. That would be the second tier, so for the visa officer, if we have a problem, or in a program we have a problem, we are striking dedicated compliance teams. I'll have a better answer in terms of how many people work full-time on compliance going forward.

We want to take the first cut before it goes over the wall to the CBSA. Again, sometimes somebody has merely failed to inform us of changing educational institutions. That's not okay, and we have to enforce it, but I think it's premature to initiate a forced removal until we ascertain that's the circumstance.

The Chair: That is your time, Mr. Stevenson.

Ms. Yip, you have five minutes, please.

Jean Yip: Thank you.

Thank you for staying longer.

Ms. Hogan, I believe Mr. Osborne touched on his province. In the report, it says, "The reduction in new study permits disproportionately affected smaller provinces." Why is that?

• (1750)

Karen Hogan: I think there was a compounding effect there. The first allocation model assumed an approval rate of all applications received at about 60% when each province had a very different pattern. As was already mentioned by the deputy minister, that got adjusted as they fixed the allocation model. I think the drop in actual applications, and then the application of an approval rate that was not an accurate one for the province, had a bit of a compounding effect on the province. That's why in April of 2024, I believe, there was a top-up done, but that top-up still hasn't compensated for the disproportionate impact.

Jean Yip: Mr. Gallivan or Ms. Graham, do you want to comment further on that?

Alexis Graham: Thank you for the question.

It is clear that the change and the transition with caps and the new requirements did have an effect. As part of the action plan, you

will see that we do plan on undertaking multiple touchpoints with provinces and territories in support of maximizing the utilization of those allocations. We have a series of meetings that will be taking place in terms of sharing data and understanding the reason behind refusals so that those behaviours can change and recruitment patterns can change as well, hopefully transitioning to a more ample use of those allocations. Then we'll have a tracking, of course, throughout that to see if we are actually achieving that objective. We'll course correct as necessary with them as essential partners in this particular objective.

Jean Yip: As well, approximately 40% of cases were not closed "because students did not respond to requests for more information."

How can you compel students to respond in order to close the cases?

Ted Gallivan: It's interesting, because at committee just Monday, there was a bit of a conversation in a sidebar between CBSA's president and me on this very question. To show that we're focused and prioritization is important, we were talking about an indicator in the border system. If that student who is not talking to us travels out of the country and then back into the country, there should be an indicator to CBSA that says, "We're looking for Ted."

I think it's really about designing a compliance framework around that. For IRCC, there has been a lot of focus on the front end. There's been a lot of focus on helping refugees and helping facilitate, but we need that same energy to be applied to the back end. An example of how to find a student is to put an indicator in the border system. If that person ever crosses the border back and forth, then we're able to force a conversation.

That's just one example of how we need to think through a compliance framework that puts some teeth into the process.

Jean Yip: Yes. I did wonder. I often find it hard to track my own kids.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Jean Yip: How else is CBSA collaborating with IRCC?

Aaron McCrorie: In this particular instance, we're deeply implicated in MRAP, the management response action plan. We will be working with our colleagues at IRCC in fulfilling the commitments in that action plan. I would say we work together on a daily basis. As I alluded to earlier, I think of it as a continuum of activities when somebody comes into the country. When somebody gets a visa, it starts with IRCC, but then they send some of the visa applicants to us for security screening. Then we send the recommendation back. When somebody arrives, we do the processing at the border. They're doing the integrity checks for the student program in-country. Not all our systems are automated. None of our things are perfectly aligned from a communication point of view, but I think the staff and the people are constantly working together on a daily basis.

Going back to the question of our security screening program, for example, we have an ADM committee that governs that program. All three agencies are involved. We collaborate every day on these issues.

Jean Yip: This is not the time to work in silos.

I had a question about the student direct stream and how IRCC was slower to respond to the integrity concerns. What is being done to rectify that in regard to the student direct stream?

Ted Gallivan: If we go back to our earlier testimony, that program was discontinued, so that is positive going forward. However, we are left with the legacy of a cohort that was subject to less rigour than we would normally apply. To go back to the risk of fraud and what we are worried about, in some cases, the risk was asylum claims. They might have claimed asylum already, but the new risk is working through that population as they seek new visas or seek renewals to make sure extra rigour is applied, because it was not applied in the first instance, and then managing it as a population around something like the departure date. When your visa expires, you really ought to leave the country, so we will lead with education and compassion. Then turn up the heat to make sure people follow the rules.

• (1755)

The Chair: Time is up.

[*Translation*]

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to ask a question about documents that I would like to obtain in writing. I'll be brief. Then I'll reintroduce the motion that you've already seen.

Mr. Gallivan, you talked about a new computer program launching in May to track permit expiration, essentially.

Can you tell us the program's objectives, the estimated cost and the actual cost so far?

I would also like to see the total estimate, current expenditures and, if possible, the expenditures broken down by phase for the digital platform modernization.

Can you send that information in writing to the committee? I'm very interested in government IT contracts. I would also like to understand the mechanism for awarding these contracts.

I see you nodding your head. Thank you for agreeing to this request. For parliamentary publications, please say "yes" into the microphone.

Ted Gallivan: Yes, I'm sorry.

If I understand correctly, there are two parts to the question.

I really appreciate the fact that it will be provided in writing. That will make it easier to understand. I will undertake to provide that information as soon as we receive it.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I'm moving another motion related to IT contracts. There was a debate in the House on this. During that debate, Mr. Lamoureux, the parliamentary secretary, brought up the fact that parliamentary committees were the right place to shed light on government programs and reports, so I take that at face value.

The motion you received reads as follows:

That, in light of the government's response and the additional information provided in Report 1: The Benefits Delivery Modernization Programme, published by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and the payment delays for 60,000 seniors, the committee undertake a follow-up study.

That the committee request the Department of Employment and Families, the Department of Government Transformation, Public Works and Procurement, the Privy Council, and the Prime Minister's Office to provide the clerk of the committee, within 30 days of the adoption of this motion, with all reports, correspondence, emails, and documents relating to the management of the Modernization of Benefit Payments since January 1, 2017;

That the departments and the Prime Minister's Office responsible for producing the documents apply redactions, in accordance with the legal obligations set out in the Privacy Act and the Access to Information Act.

That the committee hold the first meeting on this study one week after receiving the documents; and

That senior officials from Employment and Social Development Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada, Shared Services Canada and the Treasury Board, that Cliff Groen, former Associate Deputy Minister and Business Lead, Benefits Delivery Modernization, and John Ostrander, former Technical Lead, Benefits Delivery Modernization, be summoned.

I think amendments will be proposed, Mr. Chair, but that's the motion as moved.

The Chair: I think you're right.

[*English*]

This is going to be very quick, because we are running up against the clock. I am going to suspend for two minutes. I am going to take the temperature of the room very quickly, and then we will come back to Mr. Lemire and we can see what amendments we have.

It will be just a two-minute suspension, please.

• (1755)

(Pause)

• (1800)

The Chair: I'll bring us back into order very quickly.

I'm going to thank our witnesses for their testimony and participation in relation to the report "International Student Program Reforms" of the 2026 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada. Thank you for coming in. I'll excuse you now.

I'm going to suspend again for five minutes and come right back.

• (1803) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1810)

The Chair: I bring this meeting back to order.

I'm going to take things relatively slowly. I know there will be some amendments here. I'm looking for a speaker, I suspect from the government side, to propose some amendments, because I'm sure the government does not want this to collapse into a vote right away. Could I see someone's hand to speak to the Bloc motion?

Jean, why don't you hold the floor until your amendments come? I know there's a lot here, and I called you back unexpectedly.

• (1815)

Tom Osborne: Mr. Chair, I wouldn't mind having another 60 seconds with Mr. Lemire to see whether we can resolve this before we put amendments through.

The Chair: As in privately, off-line...?

Tom Osborne: Yes.

The Chair: All right.

[*Translation*]

Is 60 seconds okay, Mr. Lemire?

Sébastien Lemire: Yes.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll suspend for another minute.

• (1815) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1830)

The Chair: We're back.

I would ask members to take their seats. I know discussions in the hallway can be beneficial, but I also know that, sometimes, you have to hash these things out in public at the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, do you have any comments or would you like me to give a government member the floor now?

Sébastien Lemire: First, I feel like I'm at a bit of an impasse right now in that I think a good-faith exchange is taking place, all things considered, but I'm still having a hard time grasping the scope of the workload being requested. If we're talking about a million documents, which I'll take on trust, we still need to talk about how to streamline certain aspects, such as those related to correspondence or email. To me, those things are essential. We have to be able to determine when people became aware of this, what potential solutions were considered and, above all, when measures were taken to address the shortcomings.

Of course, we're still talking about Cúram and the skyrocketing costs. The estimates turned out to be completely unrealistic. I'll recap the timeline: It started at \$1.7 billion, then rose to about \$2.4 billion, then to \$3.5 billion, then I believe to \$4.4 billion, and now it's at \$6.6 billion or thereabouts. Costs jumped significantly four times. I believe this is a matter of public interest.

I'm also trying to understand how the contracts evolved. How were firms like Deloitte, Accenture and IBM able to secure these contracts? What mandates were they given? We've already received some information, and we need to dig deeper. Those companies were also the ones implementing the solutions.

Apparently, if a company makes mistakes, it is paid to correct them, and taxpayers have to foot the exorbitant bill. We also need to establish accountability, given that the Prime Minister of the day was notified by the Clerk of the Privy Council, Ms. Charette, in May.

Was there any other correspondence like that, which would have made the Prime Minister aware of how far off course things had gone? Were measures taken and made public? We haven't seen any.

These are important questions. At this point in time, based on the negotiations, I see nothing to suggest that a favourable amendment could be included in my motion.

This is not just about how the modernization program is being managed; it is also about the cost overruns and the new money they've asked for. It's also about how it was assessed under the circumstances.

I am open to clarifying the details of this motion a little. However, I think we need to understand the mistakes that were made so they will never be made again. That means we need to know what happened, obviously.

• (1835)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Osborne, go ahead, please.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank Mr. Lemire, as well, for the discussions we've had. We may still be at a stalemate. I'm hoping we can find a way to resolve this.

The challenge, Mr. Chair, is the amendment as it's written. It is absolutely 100%, without argument, impossible to fulfill that time frame under ATIP rules—the 30 days. We're literally talking about millions of documents and millions of dollars to produce those documents. We're trying to work with Mr. Lemire to find a way of getting a realistic ask that will provide him with the information he's looking for.

If the committee were to adopt this motion as it is, we will be putting forward something that I think we know will fail, which is not a realistic expectation for this committee.

If we can't resolve something, we should come back Monday and deal with this motion. Maybe we can continue to work with Mr. Lemire so that, in good faith, we can try to get him the information he's looking for. However, in good conscience, we know that if this motion passes on the floor, it cannot be fulfilled. Then it looks like the motion wasn't fulfilled, but we all know, in good conscience, that we cannot produce millions of documents in 30 days.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Bittle.

Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): If there's no one on the list, I'm happy to start talking. This wasn't on my bingo card today, but welcome to the committee....

It's unsurprising what we hear today and what I see, this motion that's before us. The Bloc comes down and pretends to care about the plight of seniors. Perhaps there's some genuine concern behind this, but instead of doing something meaningful, instead of doing something that will actually help those seniors, we're seeing a motion in which the Bloc is looking for millions of documents. They can pretend, "Oh, I'll find that needle in the haystack, don't you worry." It's nonsense. It's pure nonsense what we're seeing here today.

The theory behind this—and my colleague Mr. Osborne talks about it—is that it's impossible to comply with this. That's what the Bloc is counting on. It's not to help seniors but to attempt to bring a contempt motion down the road. That's what they want. They want the dog-and-pony show of doing that, rather than actually finding what's wrong.

I expected a little better from Monsieur Lemire, but here we are with this in front of us. What do we expect, at the end of the day? Thirty days after this, Mr. Lemire will rise in the House and say, "Mr. Speaker, the government has failed to comply."

I'm sure Mr. Lemire would be happy to make translators and interpreters suffer over millions of documents so he can find that needle in the haystack, that smoking gun. He knows that's not the case. He knows that what he's asking for is absolutely preposterous, but he still carries on. He says that everyone's negotiating in good faith, but at the same time, there's no genuine good faith in this document in front of us. All we see is an attempt to drag this out.

Millions of documents...I'm genuinely interested in hearing from the member how he's going to go through them. He and his assistant, who's sitting behind him, are going to go through document after document and they're going to find it, and they expect that the government.... I know the Government of Canada is big. It's a G7 country. However, at the end of the day, it's a lot to ask for millions of documents from any department.

What are we going to see? We're not going to see benefit. Are we going to see the benefit to seniors? No. If the government drops the truckload of boxes off at his office and says, "Here you go," and complies with it, which we've said we can't.... This is what he's asking for: "Back up that 18-wheeler to my office. Dump off these documents. I'm going to go through them document by document." It's going to take him years to go through it. In this hypothetical situation that he's created in which he genuinely thinks...that is, if he's genuine in this, which I don't know that he is.

What we're seeing is preposterous. If he gets this 18-wheeler at his office, and he's going through things page by page, how many years do we think it will take for him to get through this? We'll be multiple elections down the road before Monsieur Lemire says, "I found it. I found the smoking gun, this needle in the haystack."

I'm hoping that he can be realistic. I'm hoping that the members of the committee can be realistic in terms of what they're looking at. I haven't been privy to these discussions. There's a genuine concern in the middle of this, but the solution that's been brought forward isn't meeting that.

● (1840)

Is he going to get an army of seniors in his riding to help him shovel through those documents, go page by page, make sure they're properly translated and ensure that he has that? This is just unbelievable. Well, it's not unbelievable. That's a stretch. It's fully believable, having been here long enough to see what we're going through. Where's the genuine desire to help those seniors?

I was sitting here while colleagues were discussing it. I heard some genuine interest to get to the bottom of this, but I don't know what those solutions are. I don't want to say them; they were said in confidence between the parties. The opposition members know they have the votes this week, and they're going to see what they can get: Get that vote. Be able to go to the Speaker, be able to rise on a question of privilege and say, "The government hasn't done the impossible thing that I asked them to do. Where's my 18-wheeler full of documents? I demand the 18-wheeler full of documents that will help Quebec seniors." I doubt that.

I look to my colleagues. I don't want to hog it. I'm just a brief temporary member of this committee.

Mr. Chair, is there anyone else on the list?

Then I will cede my time. I hope we have some productive discussion going forward in the brief time that I'm here.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm out of practice. I normally don't reveal the speaking list, but you caught me at a moment of weakness.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

How interesting. The only Liberal member who didn't take part in the negotiations is the one who's now lecturing me about intentions I didn't have. This is a far cry from good faith. Under the circumstances, all Quebecers, especially seniors, are quite naturally wondering what the Liberals have to hide.

You know the procedure, Mr. Chair. A motion was moved. Obviously, when you make a request like that, you don't know how many documents it entails. If they tell me it could be a million documents, obviously, I'll act in good faith, and there will be discussions. There have been discussions with a number of government representatives over the past three days. However, I can't move an amendment to my own motion. That would have to come from the government, and no concrete solution has been put forward about what could be removed from this motion to make it realistic.

They're lecturing me again about how it's a million documents even though I've been open to the idea of excluding correspondence and emails, which might be too many documents to process in the time allotted. I thought we would be able to get other documents and hold committee meetings to ask those in charge about cost overruns amounting to billions of taxpayer dollars. That's what we're talking about.

The point is, they said it would be a million documents because of the correspondence and emails. I was open to the idea of leaving those out, and I was told that it would still be a million documents.

So who is lacking in good faith here? In my opinion, this shows that negotiating with the government and acting in good faith aren't productive.

• (1845)

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

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The fact that Mr. Bittle is here tonight shows that this is a very important and sensitive topic for the government. We're honoured to welcome this parliamentary veteran, a man well versed in parliamentary strategies of all sorts, particularly in committee, where people can talk for hours without saying a thing. That's actually what we've seen in recent weeks during meetings of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, where the Minister of Finance was asked to testify about Alto, which was perfectly legitimate. However, there was systematic obstruction for nearly 20 hours. People kept talking about anything but the topic. What was the end result? Common sense won out, and the Minister of Finance will testify before the committee.

I think Mr. Lemire summed the situation up very well. No 18-wheeler is going to show up in front of the constituency office of every member of this committee. Mr. Bittle knows full well that he was being dramatic. That's not realistic.

What is realistic is the constitutional duty our constituents entrusted to us almost a year ago. We have a duty to hold the government to account. That's why we have parliamentary committees and adopt motions to get to the bottom of things. Even if getting to the bottom of things leads to the production of hundreds of thousands of pages of documents, it is still our duty. It's not about the burden; it's about responsibility.

The issue of seniors is indeed essential. The management of public funds is even more so. We have a government that recently passed a budget with a deficit of almost \$80 billion. That's money we do not have. We're passing that bill on to our children. We also know full well that the aging population means that the burden, the reality and the needs of seniors will impact all levels of government.

Mr. Lemire's motion will enable us to address this issue, so we support it because we want to get to the bottom of this.

So let's set aside the theatrics. I would like this motion to be adopted.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. McKinnon, go ahead, please.

Ron McKinnon: If it's okay, I'd like to cede my time to Mr. Osborne.

The Chair: It doesn't quite work like that.

I have a list here so we'll get to Mr. Osborne soon.

Ron McKinnon: I'll—

The Chair: I can remove you and put you back on the bottom of the list if you like.

Ron McKinnon: No, that's okay.

First of all, our colleague is here because Professor Derksen wasn't, not because it indicates any ulterior motive of the government.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, there is no French interpretation at the moment.

[*English*]

Ron McKinnon: Mr. Lemire mentioned that we want to toe the line and keep costs in order and so forth, and we don't want to waste taxpayer money. That's exactly the point of what we're trying to negotiate with Mr. Lemire. We're trying to keep the number of documents to a manageable level and to a time frame that is reasonable and responsible.

In that respect, I'd like to submit an amendment. In the second paragraph of this motion in English, I'd like to change the word "management" where it says "relating to the management of the Modernization of Benefit Payments", to say, "estimates and costs". That would be my amendment at this point.

• (1850)

The Chair: I have an amendment on the floor to change the word “management” in paragraph two to “estimates and costs”.

[*Translation*]

In French, the word “*gestion*” would be replaced by “*prévisions et coûts*”.

Thank you very much, Mr. Deltell.

[*English*]

We are now debating the amendment to the motion.

Are there any speakers?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Sébastien Lemire: I would like some clarification.

Do the estimates and costs reflect every cost increase? The initial estimate was for \$1.7 billion. Of course, that went up to \$2.4 billion and then to \$3.5 billion and then to \$4.4 billion, which is what the Auditor General's report was based on. Then there was another request for a new cost estimate.

Does this include all of those stages? The idea is to find out how much management costs have gone up since 2017 and to understand what happened at each of those stages. Essentially, if their costs doubled, tripled, quadrupled or quintupled the bill, it seems to me that is because they were unable to deliver the program, to put it politely.

[*English*]

The Chair: Does anyone want to reply to Mr. Lemire?

[*Translation*]

I can't.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Osborne.

Tom Osborne: Again, I'm hoping to lower the temperature in the room because, at the end of the day, we want to deal with this motion and the amendments.

I'll just speak to this. It is a good-faith amendment. I would suggest to Mr. Lemire—and all members of the committee—that we are trying to get him the information he's looking for, but we're trying to do it in a way so that he's not buried in millions of documents.

I would urge all members of the committee to vote for this amendment. It's not meant to distract from what he's trying to accomplish but rather to help him achieve what he's trying to accomplish.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: My question is specific, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Would you like to go first? It was kind of a tie, Mr. McKinnon, unless you want to hear from Mr. Lemire first. It's up to you.

You have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Then, I will give the floor to Mr. Lemire.

[*English*]

Ron McKinnon: I just want to emphasize that the point here is to keep this to a manageable request and a doable thing. Mr. Lemire mentioned his concern about wasting taxpayer money. If we issue a request for these documents—a massive data dump—it could cost millions of dollars. It could take weeks and weeks.

I want to keep this reasonable and manageable. This is, as Mr. Osborne mentioned, a good-faith attempt to do so.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Sébastien Lemire: I acknowledge that this was proposed in good faith, but my question was also asked in good faith. I was trying to find out if it included each of the stages and some form of justification.

Why was a new estimate requested, and why were the projected costs insufficient? Do we have this information at each stage where there is a cost increase?

That is simply the point of my question, Mr. Chair, and I believe I am asking it in good faith.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Yip.

Jean Yip: By putting “estimates and costs” in place of “management”, you're narrowing the scope so that they can answer the member's inquiries better and faster. It's too broad. One of his goals is getting an answer. If it's narrower in scope, it would help.

• (1855)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Lemire, you have the floor.

Sébastien Lemire: I'm going to ask my question again.

What we're talking about here is a proposal I made in which I used the terms “cost overruns” and “new funds”. We're changing the words to convey a different meaning. I'm perfectly fine with that.

I'm just wondering if, by using those words, it includes every stage where we requested a cost increase and a justification explaining why those amounts weren't high enough. We went from about \$1.7 billion to nearly \$2.5 billion, then to \$3.3 billion or \$3.5 billion, then to \$4.4 billion, and finally to \$6.6 billion.

When requesting the estimates and costs, do we also have what was planned for those stages? We have that information for the stage where we reached \$6.6 billion. Was the information collected at each stage?

That was the point of my question, and it is asked in good faith. You may repeat more or less the same thing to me each time, but I hope we will reach a consensus.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. McKinnon.

Ron McKinnon: Drilling down into what exactly “estimates and costs” entail is very technical. I don’t think we want to get into the level of defining legal terms and so forth, but it’s much more specific than “management”. “Management”, broadly speaking, is a very general saying.

Can we focus this on estimates and costs, as we go forward? If that’s not the kind of information Mr. Lemire wants, we can modify it later on. For now, keep this request reasonable. Keep it manageable and doable, because we certainly want to get the information that it needs before this committee.

I think that’s an appropriate change at this time.

The Chair: Mr. Osborne, you have the floor.

Ms. Yip, I had you on the list, but we’ve moved to debate. Do you want a chance later? If you do, just put your hand up.

I’ll go to Mr. Osborne, since he’s ready.

Tom Osborne: Mr. Lemire has something to add.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: I find the wording interesting. Obviously, I would have added the words “estimate and cost management” and I would have mentioned cost overruns, but I’m open to the wording. I just want to make sure it’s inclusive, meaning it covers instances where there were new estimates and new costs.

Do we have a timeline of how the contracts have evolved? Obviously, the motion mentions “since January 1, 2017.” I expect the next step will be to challenge that date. I want to know if we can get information on each of the stages for which a cost estimate was requested.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Osborne, go ahead.

Tom Osborne: The attempt of officials and members on this side is to get you the information. At the end of the day, you may say that there wasn’t enough information. I don’t know. We are attempting to.... With this wording, that attempt is there. That’s all I can say.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Yip, I had you on the list before. I think I turned my back.

If you have something to say—

Jean Yip: No, my hand wasn’t up then.

The Chair: That’s fine.

Jean Yip: Kristina had her hand up.

The Chair: Pardon me.

Hello, Ms. Tesser Derksen.

Kristina Tesser Derksen (Milton East—Halton Hills South, Lib.): Thank you.

I’m sorry. I thought my name was on the list. I apologize for coming in so late. I appreciate everyone’s patience while I had colleagues fill in for me.

I was just up in the House delivering a speech on MP Aboultaif’s bill for the living donor award. I have to say, Mr. Chair, coming out of that speech, we were talking about people who are facing life-and-death circumstances and need organs donated, and it put into perspective for me what we’re talking about around this committee table.

There’s no doubt that what my colleagues have presented is extremely important—we’ve said that—and I agree with them on all of their points. I think my colleague Monsieur Lemire’s efforts are very noble. I said in the last meeting as well that I acknowledge, as we all do, that where there is room for improvement for government to acknowledge and improve its services, that’s what this committee is here for. We’re here in a non-partisan way to make taxpayer dollars go further and have the most impact.

However, there’s a balance there as well, and I have to admit that when I read the motion, I was puzzled by my honourable colleague’s presumption that it was in any way realistic to produce this in a reasonable amount of time. From what I understand, we could potentially be looking at millions of documents. I’m not sure if my colleague even has a proposal for who would go through all those documents. I presume, given that we are a bilingual society, that all of those would need to be translated, and translated well, to ensure that the understanding of both francophone and anglophone readers was honoured. That’s going to take I don’t even know how much time, how much expense and how much translation and interpretation expertise. It would be considerable.

It’s particularly ironic that we’re looking at a motion that is meant to honour the integrity of taxpayer dollars being spent in government services. At the same time, the scope of this motion would cost, I can presume, a tremendous number of taxpayer dollars. Given the amount of time it would take to produce and translate so many documents, and then review and redact them, I don’t believe the cost would weigh out in the result.

I would support the points my colleagues have made and that I've heard since walking into the meeting at this point. The motion is asking for the production of all reports, correspondence, emails and documents over, I believe, an eight- or nine-year window, and that is tremendous, especially given that the program involves multiple federal departments. Employment and Social Development Canada, I believe, would be the lead on that, and the motion mentions Treasury Board Secretariat, Shared Services Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada. As well, particularly, the motion specifically names the PMO as a department from which documents are to be produced. I'm not sure if I've ever heard of a motion that contemplates such a huge scope of material.

I would like to take all these elements in turn. I know I just walked in and I'm hoarding a bunch of time, but if the committee will indulge me, I want to address the breadth of this. If we're talking about January 1, 2017, to the present, that's the full life of the program, from what I understand. When it was launched by ESDC in 2017, I understand that the estimated cost was \$1.7 billion, and that number's been revised twice. I understand it will probably change again. Over those eight years, this program has generated, as I said, an enormous volume of internal government correspondence and technical reports, procurement documents, government reviews, risk assessments and ministerial briefings.

My colleague's request for production is for "all" of that material. It's not targeted. It's not a targeted audit inquiry in any sense. It's really more of a dragnet used to catch everything it possibly could in a very haphazard manner that basically eviscerates and eludes all of the practices of transparency, accountability and privacy that we value as parliamentarians and as Canadians.

I understand that there are circumstances in which a dragnet of this nature is appropriate. If this committee had evidence of specific wrongdoing—for example, if we had reason to believe that documents were being concealed, the Auditor General's access had been impeded or testimony given before this committee had been deliberately misleading—then I suppose that, yes, a broad production order might be justified.

However, the Auditor General's report alleges none of those serious findings. They're findings that the department has acknowledged and accepted. When the deputy minister appeared before this committee—it would have been back in December 2023, before my time as an elected official—ESDC stated that the government welcomed the report and its recommendations. There's no dispute over that. The departments agreed. The Treasury Board president agreed. That's all on the record.

• (1900)

If the departments have accepted the Auditor General's recommendations, what additional evidentiary purpose is served by demanding every email exchanged since 2017? The answer, I would submit, is that the purpose is not evidentiary. That's, I think, the logical conclusion that we would have to reach. The purpose appears to be more political. While that may be a legitimate exercise in some committees, I don't believe that's what this committee is for.

The second is the inclusion of the PMO. This deserves particular attention. The PMO is not a department. It does not have opera-

tional responsibility for the BDM program. ESDC has that responsibility. Treasury Board Secretariat has oversight responsibility. Shared Services Canada has infrastructure responsibility, and Public Services and Procurement Canada has procurement responsibility. These are the organizations that the Auditor General audited. These are the organizations whose conduct this committee has the mandate to review. The PMO is included in this motion not because there's any evidence that the PMO was operationally involved in managing the BDM program but because including it, I can only presume, raises the political stakes of the document production. It signals that the motion's logical purpose or main purpose—I think any logical person would arrive at this conclusion—is not audit follow-through but rather an attempt to implicate the political executive in the management failings of a public service program. That is a legitimate political objective, perhaps, in question period, but I don't think it's the mandate of this committee.

Now, I anticipate that my colleagues will ask, "What if there is PMO involvement? What if there are documents that show political direction to ESDC that contributed to the program's delays?" I would say that's a hypothesis. You have to show me evidence that supports the hypothesis, and I'll be among the first to call for targeted document production. However, a hypothesis is not a reason to issue a blanket production order. Evidence-based scrutiny means starting with evidence, not going on a fishing expedition for it.

Third—and this is a concern I want to spend some time on—is the question of what this committee intends to do with the documents if they are produced. The motion calls for documents to be produced with redactions applied in accordance with the Privacy Act and with ATIP obligations. That's entirely appropriate, but it raises the question of what happens next. As I said, who reviews these documents? What's the committee's analytical framework for sorting through years, nearly a decade, of internal correspondence from multiple federal departments? What witnesses will be called to contextualize what the documents show? What is the study plan? A production order without a study plan is not scrutiny; it's just document accumulation. I've seen through modern political history how document accumulation can work, how the spectacle of a large production order becomes the point, and how the actual analysis of the documents produced becomes secondary or forgotten entirely. I believe that's a risk that we take with this motion, and that's not what this committee should be doing.

I do want to address the question of relevance to seniors and vulnerable Canadians because I genuinely believe that my colleague cares very deeply for seniors and vulnerable Canadians. I think we all do. I think that's safe to say. My colleague has spoken at length numerous times around this committee table, as well as in the House, about his concern for seniors. He speaks about the 60,000 seniors who have been referenced in the motion before us.

I've been droning on for a long time, Mr. Chair. Perhaps I'll allow someone else to speak.

• (1905)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Tesser Derksen.

Mr. Kuruc, you are next on the list.

Ned Kuruc: I just want to touch on a couple of points here. I understand that the government is using words like “noble” and “good faith”. They've proposed an amendment, but I don't think it fully reaches what my colleague is trying to put here. I have concerns about using words like “cost”, “time”, “unrealistic”. These are pre-disposed outcomes when we actually don't know what they are going to be. I do believe we are the public accounts committee, so I do believe.... I mean, I just find that a bit difficult. I think my colleague has simply asked to add dates to the government's amendment—we can leave that for both of you to figure out—or dates to each step of every cost overrun, and I think he has a valid point there.

Simply stating that we're doing this in good faith doesn't get my colleague closer to his goal. A statement that this is political I find hard to digest. We are the public accounts committee. There have been massive cost overruns on this, so I think it is an issue that the public accounts committee can take a look at with an apolitical approach or a non-partisan approach. I just hope the government and my colleague can find a better amendment.

Thank you.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thank you.

Tom Osborne: Can we call the vote on this?

The Chair: I can't until the debate....

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Lemire. Perhaps he could tell us whether he supports this amendment. I remind you that this is the amendment regarding estimates and costs.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am in favour of this amendment. That said, I would like to make a comment. This is the second time that someone who did not participate in the process has lectured us and summarized what was not done during the negotiations.

We will therefore continue along the lines of the negotiations to reach a result today. I believe we are capable of doing so. I support this amendment, but I reiterate that, in my view, it is important for each step to be specified, because we will want to have the estimates and current costs not just for the final stage, but for each of the steps as well.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right. Let's call the vote then. It's the easiest way. We'll get a roll call on this amendment on “estimates and costs” to replace “management”.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 8, nays 0)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Osborne.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to put forward a second amendment.

The Chair: Can I stop you?

No, I'll hear it. Go ahead.

Tom Osborne: Mr. Chair, with respect, if you have something to say, I'm happy to....

The Chair: At a certain point, resources begin to become unavailable.

Why don't you share your amendment briefly and then give the floor back to me.

I will go back to you, if necessary.

Tom Osborne: Thank you.

The second amendment is to strike out “within 30 days of the adoption of this motion”. Again, the volume of paper is not possible in 30 days, so this is again a good-faith amendment. It would be replaced in the second paragraph with “before the start of the fall session”. I think that gives officials and government and everybody the ability to provide the volumes of documents that are being requested. Even if it were 30 days, the session is going to be closed. Before the start of the next session, this gives you the paperwork to go in guns blazing if that's what you need to do.

The Chair: Okay.

I have to end things. We are out of resources.

I'm going to say a couple of points. I actually think that's a very friendly and reasonable amendment to the motion, but that is for Mr. Lemire and other members to decide.

Mr. Lemire, I'm going to end this meeting, but to focus minds in the next couple of days I need you to talk. I recognize the government will soon have a majority on committee, so I don't want to leave you stranded. This is an oversight committee and I'll do everything I can to move this forward, but you all need to move forward as well. I think what I've heard today, in my experience, are good-faith amendments and I'm going to urge you to keep on it for the next couple of days.

I'm not going to call the committee back tomorrow or Friday, but on Monday be prepared to sit for a long time into next week, because I do recognize that you will soon have extraordinary powers, and those powers don't exist right now. I'm not trying to jam you, but I do want to see, Mr. Lemire, this work come to fruition here.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm looking for the same thing. I'm focused on trying to collaborate here.

May I make one suggestion? If members want to debate this, we'll put it off. If members feel that this is a good-faith amendment and want to vote on it, we can get this one out of the way today in the name of progress.

The Chair: I wish I could, but around here, when you run out of resources, it's not just this room I have to worry about. It's interpretation and also the virtual. Even though there's no one on it, I have to respect that.

I'm going to say this one last time. I appreciate what you're saying. I'm being unusually blunt because I actually think this can be resolved. You are trying to meet Mr. Lemire halfway. I will signal that I will be scheduling extra time next week. I don't want to interrupt as we've put off the first nations study for so long now. I'm not

going to move that one, but I will begin to move us into extra time if necessary. I'll be speaking with your side in the next couple of days to see where we're at then.

This meeting is adjourned.

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