



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 025

Monday, March 23, 2026

Chair: Julie Dzerowicz



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• (1100)

[*English*]

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

I warmly welcome everyone to meeting 25 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. We have one hour with the minister and two hours—which includes the first hour—with officials, so I will be very strict with time, because I know there are going to be a lot of questions.

I want to make a few comments for the benefit of our witnesses and members. You're all very experienced, so this is all just a reminder to everyone.

For our minister, who has five minutes to speak at the onset, I will let you know when you have one minute left.

For all members, I will let you know when you have one minute left. In terms of your questions and answers, kindly, as always, wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

I remind everyone to please not speak over each other. It is very hard for our interpreters to interpret, and it makes their job difficult when we do so. Of course, please ensure that all of your comments are addressed through the chair.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best as we can. I know that today, we are going to proceed with a respectful and very productive meeting, so I want to thank everyone in advance for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 23, 2026, the committee is commencing its study on the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C), 2025-26. All votes were referred to the House on Thursday, March 12, so the committee can only study the subject matter of the supplementary (C)s and should not report to the House.

Before I introduce the witnesses, we have a quick budget to adopt for this study. The budget is \$500.

Can I please get agreement on that, maybe with just a thumbs-up?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for today's meeting.

We have with us the Honourable Lena Metlege Diab, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. Welcome to you, Minister.

We also have from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Scott Harris, associate deputy minister; Jean-Marc Gionet, acting assistant deputy minister, protection and family programs sector; Annie Rémillard, acting chief financial officer; and Bronwyn May, director general, international students branch. Welcome to you all.

Minister Diab, I now invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes, after which we will proceed to rounds of questions.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the invitation to appear.

I'm happy to outline how our government is taking back control over the immigration system and bringing immigration back to sustainable levels. We're doing this by prioritizing newcomers with the skills that the country needs and by attracting the best and brightest from around the world.

Both the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recent report and Statistics Canada's quarterly population update confirmed that our plan is working. New arrivals of temporary workers and international students dropped by 53% in 2025. As a result, we're on track to achieve our objective. We want non-permanent residents to make up less than 5% of the population by the end of 2027.

[*English*]

We're focused on filling critical labour gaps in industries where we don't have enough domestic talent. We're basing priorities on labour market data as well as input from employers, communities and our provincial and territorial counterparts, to understand their needs. We're seeking qualified workers through the international talent attraction strategy, and prioritizing skilled workers to complement our domestic workforce.

I recently announced our 2026 categories under the express entry system for inviting candidates with the skills and experience needed to fill critical labour gaps in key sectors and occupations, including tradespeople to build homes and infrastructure, doctors and nurses to strengthen health care, and pilots, mechanics and other transportation workers to strengthen our supply chains.

[*Translation*]

These priorities align with the labour market needs and the expectations of our partners. They also help to support other government initiatives.

Prioritizing researchers supports our national strategy for world-leading research and innovation.

Prioritizing skilled military recruits and cybersecurity experts supports our defence industrial strategy.

Since I was invited to speak about supplementary estimates (C), I would now like to outline how they will support our priorities.

[*English*]

First, it includes funds to the City of Toronto to help refugees and asylum claimants find housing and enter the workforce and to prevent shifting the burden onto local social services.

Second, funds will support the ongoing modernization of our services, with digital systems and tools.

Third, the funding will fortify resources for the passport program to improve accessibility and convenience for Canadians, with on-line passport renewals, allowing eligible Canadians to renew their passports from the comfort of their homes, and with faster decision-making while upholding the integrity of these highly secure travel documents. Starting on April 1, we will guarantee that passport applications will be processed within 30 business days or they'll be free.

On the supplementary estimates (C), I have, on my right, the very good guidance of the persons who do the budgeting and accounting from the department.

To conclude my opening remarks, we have a plan that's working to restore control, bring sustainability to our immigration system and refocus on attracting the best talent. We're listening and making necessary and sometimes tough decisions to restore the balance, and we're seeing early signs that public confidence is improving, because Canadians see a plan that makes sense and is being delivered. Discipline is vital to maintaining momentum.

[*Translation*]

We're keeping the immigration policy sustainable, responsive and able to meet the country's economic and labour force needs.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

We are going to turn to the first round of questions, which is for six minutes.

I have Mr. Redekopp up first for six minutes, please.

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

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

Minister, Bill C-3 became law in December, and it seems that immigration lawyers have been celebrating it as almost a Christmas present. CTV said that Bill C-3 "has led to a spike in applications from those south of the border". Your government news agency, the CBC, had a headline saying, "Millions of Americans can now claim Canadian citizenship by descent".

Of course, we warned you about this at committee. We spoke about all the different ways that this could go wrong. You ignored us.

Can you tell me how many people have applied for proof of citizenship since December 15?

• (1110)

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I can. I've seen some of the ads myself. Some of them are not realistic, frankly, and some of them could be fraudulent.

The number of applications that have been approved, related to proof of processing, between December 15, 2025, and January 31, 2026, is approximately 1,301.

Brad Redekopp: Are those proof of citizenship applications, or are those citizenship received—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: They're proof of applications processed.

Brad Redekopp: Okay.

How many people have received citizenship because of Bill C-3 since that time?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That would be 1,301 between December 15, when it came into force, and January 31, 2026, which is the data I have.

Brad Redekopp: Have you seen a spike in people requesting proof of citizenship?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We have not.

Brad Redekopp: I want to talk about the file review process. As you know, it's a system used at the Immigration and Refugee Board that automatically approves asylum seekers from certain countries without interviewing them.

I spoke with the chair of IRB a few weeks ago. She defended that file review process and gave us the data that 15% of their decisions were processed that way, mainly to speed things up, which of course it does when you don't actually interview people. I asked the chair if she takes direction from you, Minister, and she basically said no, that she's independent and she does what she wants to do.

You are the minister responsible for the IRB, and we all know that. Have you directed the IRB to stop the file review process?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm the minister of IRCC, and the IRB is an independent body relative to that, but protecting the integrity of the asylum system is critical to all of us as Canadians and parliamentarians—

Brad Redekopp: I'm sorry. I'm just going to interrupt.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Can I speak to you about what officers do, though?

Brad Redekopp: I have very limited time.

Did you just say that you're not responsible for the IRB?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: No. I said that it's an independent adjudicative body.

Brad Redekopp: Okay. You have no authority to tell them to do anything is what you're saying.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I do meet with the chair, and officers do review each and every claim before they reach the Immigration and Refugee Board—

Brad Redekopp: The simple question is this: Have you directed them to stop the file review process, or are you okay with the file review process?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Nobody can claim asylum in Canada without being questioned. There's no doubt about that—

Brad Redekopp: I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt you again—

Peter Fragiskatos (London Centre, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: There's no rubber-stamping of any claims.

The Chair: On a point of order, I have Mr. Fragiskatos.

Peter Fragiskatos: Questions are being asked. We just need the minister to put on record the answer. We're not hearing the answer.

Brad Redekopp: On a point of order, Madam Chair, she's going in different directions with my questions. It is my time, and I would like her to answer the questions I've asked.

The Chair: Okay. Let's give enough time for the minister to answer the question.

Brad Redekopp: Can I re-ask the question?

The Chair: Yes, please, Mr. Redekopp.

Brad Redekopp: Did you direct the IRB to stop the file review process, or are you supportive of the file review process?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: All files are reviewed at the front end by IRCC—

Brad Redekopp: We understand—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —and officers review them each—

Brad Redekopp: We understand how it works. We spent a whole meeting on this the last time, and we don't need to talk about that.

I'm going to take that as a “no”, which means you are supportive of—

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): On a point of order, Chair, the minister was mid-sentence in her first sentence. I didn't hear a completion of that first sentence in the answer.

The Chair: We'll add a little extra time for Mr. Redekopp, but let's allow the minister to respond.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, to be clear, there's no rubber-stamping—

Brad Redekopp: I'm just going to stop you there.

Madam Chair...

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —of any claims. Each file is assessed individually—

The Chair: Your time is going, so you can do whatever you like, Mr. Redekopp.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —on its merits by highly trained decision-makers.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): On a point of order, Chair, I would like to redirect this back toward my colleague. Thank you.

Brad Redekopp: I'm going to ask a different question, because I think we know the answers. File review is something that the minister is appreciative of.

I've seen evidence of IRGC agents in Saskatoon using very threatening tactics on Iranians—right in Saskatoon. Given the war in Iran, have you talked to the public safety minister about strategies to prevent IRGC officials from receiving asylum in Canada?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Canada has listed the IRGC as a terrorist entity. I think all parliamentarians and Canadians know that. IRGC members are not admissible to Canada.

Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair...

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: They have their visas cancelled. They lose their status—

Brad Redekopp: Excuse me—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —and are being removed—

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp, she's trying to answer the question.

● (1115)

Brad Redekopp: She's not, actually. The question was, has she talked to the public safety minister about strategies to prevent IRGC members from getting asylum in Canada? That was the question.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We speak in government about all kinds of issues—

Brad Redekopp: Yes, so you have talked to the public safety minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We all have, and we are all concerned about the Iranian Canadian community—

Brad Redekopp: I have one more question related to that.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —and we are here to ensure that our system is kept safe.

Brad Redekopp: Minister, my last question on this is, given the war in Iran, have you asked the IRB to institute more careful screening of Iranian claims?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, each file is scrutinized individually on its merits.

Brad Redekopp: So no. Okay. Thank you.

I'm going to pass the rest of my time to Mr. Davies.

The Chair: You have a minute and 45 seconds, Mr. Davies.

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

Minister, one of the express entry objectives was to bring 5,000 doctors into Canada to help fill the gap in the health care system, but you've said that these doctors are already working in Canada on a temporary basis, helping patients and contributing to our health care system.

The Canadian Healthcare Network estimates that there are up to 13,000 internationally trained doctors who are already in Canada and stuck in a bureaucratic bottleneck, whether it's federal or provincial. Does it not make better sense to you to focus on doctors who are already here driving Ubers and taxis, and to put them to work in the health care system?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We tackle that on all directions. What I did with the 5,000 works with every other measure being taken federally, but also provincially and with licensing bodies. There's all kinds of work going on across the country—

Fred Davies: I'm sorry, Minister, but I have limited time.

If there are over 13,000 doctors sitting in Canada now looking for residencies and accreditation and looking to go through this re-certification process, and you now want to bring 5,000 doctors more into Canada, does that not add to the backlog and bottleneck of actually getting doctors? I have a need for 100 doctors in Niagara right now. If I could send a message to all those people waiting, let me know who you are, because I want to deal directly with you to try to find pathways for doctors to fill spots that are available in Niagara.

How are you going to fix that problem?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, Minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I would love it if you used it. I would point you to an article that was in the paper two days after I announced it, with a Toronto doctor—who has all these patients who have been waiting—who just got pulled into express entry. These are doctors who are already in Canada who are practising and are here on temporary residence.

The measures are working, and I look forward to—

Fred Davies: These aren't doctors who are working.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: They are working.

Fred Davies: No, they're not.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Thank you, Minister.

Now we have six minutes for Ms. Sodhi.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today.

Minister, in your opening remarks, you talked about how the funding in these budget supplements reinforces the government's priorities on immigration. Can you please tell the committee more about what these priorities are and what progress we have seen on them?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Certainly. Thank you for your question. I'll be a bit repetitive, so forgive me, but I feel it's important for Canadians, and members of this committee as well, to hear this.

In case people forget, Canadians gave our government a mandate to restore sustainability to immigration and to reduce pressure on housing and services. That's exactly what we are doing.

Under our plan, Canada is stabilizing the permanent resident population. We're reducing temporary residents to up to 5% of our population by the end of 2027. We're reaching the highest proportion of economic migrants in decades under our tabled plan, and we're attracting the top talent that Canada needs. Reducing international student numbers is essential to lowering the share of non-permanent residents to below 5% of Canada's population.

Five reports have just come out, with recent analysis from the Parliamentary Budget Officer, TD Bank, Rentals.ca, Statistics Canada and CMHC. All confirm that Canada is on track and that our reforms are already helping ease pressure on housing and the labour market.

In 2025, temporary resident arrivals were down by more than half. Asylum claims were down by more than a third. Our population stopped growing and dipped slightly. Since 2024, the international student population alone has fallen by a third. In the fourth quarter of 2025, the population of non-permanent residents fell by 171,296, a fifth consecutive quarter of non-permanent resident reductions, which has brought this group to 6.5% of Canada's population as of January 1, 2026. Asking rents have dropped for 17 consecutive months. Statistics Canada reports that housing inflation is the lowest it has been in nearly five years.

Last year, we met each and every one of our immigration ranges for the first time in at least a decade. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has confirmed that we are on track to fulfilling the commitments we made to Canadians.

Canadians can see that their new government does not just have targets; we are meeting targets. Unlike other parties, which, quite frankly, have a script on immigration—that's fine; that's them—we have a plan. Our plan is working. It is to ensure that we have a sustainable immigration system for the future, and it is to deliver results for Canadians.

• (1120)

Amandeep Sodhi: Perfect. Thank you so much for your very detailed answer. You're right; it is important for Canadians, and especially for members of this committee, to hear what you're saying.

You mentioned a bit about the asylum system in your previous answer. I'd like to turn to some of the broader discussions we've been hearing about with Canada's asylum system.

You were right when you said that our government has been clear that the system must strike the right balance, offering protection to those who truly need it while maintaining fairness and sustainability for Canadians. Can you begin by explaining how the current system ensures that asylum protection is reserved for individuals who meet Canada's legal definition of a refugee rather than serving as an alternative pathway to immigration?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I think last time, or one of the times I was here—I've been here a couple of times—we talked a lot about Bill C-12, the strengthening Canada's immigration system and borders act. I'm happy to see that it's now passed through the Senate.

The asylum numbers have gone down by a third. We are seeing signs that they are continuously dropping from previous years, when they were high. That's a good thing. We've also strengthened our integrity system quite a bit by really focusing on dealing with claims. We've enhanced the integrity and fairness of the system.

We are addressing challenges faced by the in-Canada asylum system through the introduction of system-wide efficiencies and enhancements that improve all stages of the asylum application process, from the initial application through to decision-making and the post-decision stage. Creating the new ineligibilities for asylum claims will prevent misuse and will reduce pressures from potential surges.

Even though it has not gone into law yet—it will soon, I hope—we are already seeing positive results, because it is working. People are recognizing that if they want to immigrate to Canada and if they want to stay in Canada, they had better do it the legal way.

We want to maintain the integrity of our immigration system. The asylum system is here for specific reasons.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Sodhi.

[Translation]

Mr. Deschênes, you now have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Lis-tuguj, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, Minister.

A few minutes ago, the Auditor General of Canada tabled in the House of Commons a rather scathing report on your department's work to ensure the integrity of the international student program. The report shows that educational institutions flagged for the department 150,000 cases of students who potentially failed to comply with the terms of their study permits. Your department investigated only 4,000 of these 150,000 cases. Moreover, 40% of these 4,000 investigations weren't completed because you simply didn't hear back from the applicants.

Another element is quite striking. The Auditor General carried out random audits. She looked at three reports, which showed that 800 foreign students used fraudulent documents. They claimed to come from either a non-existent CEGEP or a diploma mill. Your department had no plans to take any action regarding the 800 study permits already approved.

Ms. Diab, are you satisfied with your department's work?

• (1125)

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you for this question, which covers many aspects.

First, I had a short meeting with the Auditor General, but I haven't read the report yet. I would like to thank the Office of the Auditor General for this report.

Also, the report covers 18 months. I was a minister for four of those months. However, the upcoming changes will take place over four or five years.

Alexis Deschênes: Yet the Auditor General said that 800 study permit applications were based on fraudulent documents, but that your department didn't take any action.

Ms. Diab, as the minister in office, are you satisfied with the work carried out?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We would like to thank the auditor for her report. We'll do more than what she asked for. She acknowledged the progress already made to strengthen the program.

Alexis Deschênes: She spoke about critical weaknesses in the program's integrity controls. She spoke about serious issues, Minister.

I'll ask you my question again. Are you satisfied with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration's work regarding foreign students?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: May I respond in English?

[English]

First of all, the report covers 18 months over a four-year period when the program was happening. We accept the report recommendations, and we will be working with the provinces and territories—

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: What are your thoughts on this report? Minister, aren't you concerned about the fact that your department investigated only 4,000 of the 150,000 possible problem cases?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Yes, absolutely. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration has the funding to carry out 2,000 investigations a year. We accept the Auditor General's recommendations and we'll work on them.

[English]

As I said, we will continue to strengthen the international student program and we will take concrete steps to address the general recommendations.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: I'm pleased to hear that you're concerned about this. I'm concerned about this. I don't understand. The department was asked to follow up and the colleges and universities were asked to send reports. However, no one was available to analyze them. Ultimately, only 4,000 of the 150,000 cases were investigated. How is this possible? Furthermore, 40% of these 4,000 investigations were unsuccessful. People didn't respond and nothing else happened.

Isn't your department's total lack of integrity control cause for deep concern?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As I said, we'll be working with the provinces on the allocation formula. We'll be looking more closely at people's applications to extend their permits. We'll be following up more effectively and systematically on potential cases of non-compliance or fraud. We'll also be working with—

Alexis Deschênes: You touched briefly on the finance issue. Are you telling us today that your department needs more financial resources to ensure the integrity of the system?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That probably isn't a bad idea. We also work with the Canada Border Services Agency.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes and Minister Diab.

• (1130)

[English]

That's six minutes.

Next we have a second round of questions, with five minutes for Mr. Menegakis, please.

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

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being with us today.

Minister, do you believe the names of known IRGC operatives and those in other terrorist organizations should be immediately released once known?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I believe you're referring to an earlier committee where that was posed. I believe there was a name that had been—

Costas Menegakis: No. What I'm referring to—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —already reported in the papers.

Costas Menegakis: I'm referring—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm not privy to such information.

Costas Menegakis: My question is, do you believe that once we know who they are, their names should be immediately released?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: The CBSA works on those investigations and on those deportations and removals.

Costas Menegakis: Do you believe the names should be released, yes or no?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'll leave it to the CBSA to answer that question.

Costas Menegakis: You're deflecting it over to the CBSA.

Is the Liberal government's position that the IRB should withhold the names in the future of known terrorists your department let into the country?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: For public safety, there are many times when names are released for exactly that reason, but it's not something I would be privy to as the minister.

Costas Menegakis: The IRB is under your purview, Minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As I said, it's an adjudicative body that is independent of government.

Costas Menegakis: It is, but on your site, the IRB reports to Parliament through the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and that's you, so you can't deflect over to them. The CBSA found—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I don't sit in hearings. That wouldn't be appropriate.

Costas Menegakis: I'm not talking about hearings. You're here reporting as a minister of the Crown, and this is under your purview, so these are fair questions, I believe.

The CBSA found Afshin Pirnoon, a 22-year official in the Islamic regime in Iran with the title of director general. The IRB declined to deport him. Do you support that decision?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, I'm going to have to refer you to the makers of those decisions.

Costas Menegakis: Did you appeal that decision?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm not familiar with the decision. I'm sorry.

Costas Menegakis: You're not familiar with it.

Liberal minister after Liberal immigration minister has allowed IRGC officials into our country. Reports say that about 700 of them at least, if not more, are in the country. CBSA officials have testified before us that IRCC officials can and do on occasion overrule the CBSA and issue permits, even though the CBSA has given a negative assessment. Why?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As I said, the IRB is a quasi-judicial organization. When a claimant is before the IRB—

Costas Menegakis: No, this is about the CBSA.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm sorry?

Costas Menegakis: The question is on the CBSA. Your department overrules the CBSA on occasion. Why?

The CBSA is a law enforcement agency. It deems somebody inadmissible to the country. On occasion, your department has overruled the decision of the people on the ground who have deemed somebody inadmissible—not the IRB but the CBSA. Why?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: If an individual is inadmissible based on immigration laws, then they are inadmissible, and they are deported.

Costas Menegakis: There's been one person deported since 2022, Minister—one.

Do you think it's appropriate for immigration officers to override national security findings from the agency responsible for border security?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: National security and border security fall within the purview of Public Safety.

Costas Menegakis: We know that, Minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Public safety is paramount in Canada, and those decisions are made in the public interest of Canadians.

Costas Menegakis: It's your department that overrules CBSA officials. That's my point. Do you think it's appropriate for your department to overrule CBSA officials?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, public safety is paramount.

Costas Menegakis: Minister—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Public Safety officers and the department make those decisions.

Costas Menegakis: Do you speak with your colleagues, Minister—not only your staff. There seems to be a lot of deflection. We're not playing hockey here, with deflect here and deflect there, hoping to get a goal.

We can't have the IRB saying that it's independent—it's supposed to be reporting through you—and saying that it doesn't really care what the CBSA is saying and that it's going to overrule the CBSA. We can't keep passing the buck.

At the end of the day, these are people being allowed into the country by your department who are in our communities and who have terrorist backgrounds. There are 700 of them. I represent a riding called Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, and many of them are in my riding.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: If these people are inadmissible, they will be deported, and their visas will be cancelled by IRCC.

• (1135)

Costas Menegakis: When will they be deported, Minister?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: The CBSA will deport them.

Costas Menegakis: When?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Menegakis.

Thank you, Minister.

That is five minutes.

Next we have Mr. Zuberi for five minutes.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank the minister for joining us today.

[*English*]

Thank you to the officials for being here.

We just had the Auditor General's report issued. We have yet to hear, Madam Minister, a commentary from you on it.

I'd like to give you time to speak to the Auditor General's report, if you have some feedback. I understand that it was just released, so what you're saying right now is very preliminary, but if you have any initial feedback on that report, I'd like to hear it.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi. I appreciate that.

I haven't read the report, but I have been given high-level information on it, and I also had, at the end of last week, an opportunity to speak virtually with the writer of the report. I thank her for her work. It's very important that these audits happen.

What I want to stress is that this is a preliminary look at the international student program. It covers 18 months of reforms out of a four-plus-year reform that IRCC has initiated, and for four months of that 18 months, I've been a minister.

We need to remember the context of these changes to the program. I know some of you were around in 2022. I was around, but I was not a member of this committee. You studied the international student program very intensely in 2022 and made several recommendations. My understanding is that you're doing that again this year, and we will welcome whatever recommendations you're going to come up with after the study here as well.

The context, though, is really important. Prior to the 2025 immigration levels plan, Canada did not have annual targets for temporary residents. That was under the Liberal government and the Conservative government. Those were the two political parties that would have been in power in the last decades.

In the postpandemic years, we saw a rapid, demand-driven increase in international students that quickly became unsustainable. We realized—the previous government, parliamentarians, Canadians, everybody—that could not go on, so beginning in 2024, the government made quick and significant changes, because Canadians told us it had to happen.

There were some big, disruptive pivots to reduce the numbers and strengthen integrity, and we're seeing results and seeing that it's worked. The international student population has dropped by a third since 2024. Student arrivals in 2025 dropped over 60% from 2024, and that trend continues in 2026. Pressure on housing and services has been reduced, and asking rents, as I said in the previous response, have dropped.

Following the first phase of the government reform, the sector responded with a plea for predictability. In fact, I held many meetings as the minister with many in the sector who said, "Please, the 2024 changes were so hard on us. We need predictability. We need to know what is happening." I heard that, and I believe I have delivered a stable student target for 2026-28 in the levels plan.

The early audit cannot offer a complete picture of these reforms. It can inform, though, what we do on a go-forward basis, as can the report that you will be putting out. In the report, the Auditor General recognizes the progress we are making to reduce the student numbers, to diversify the student population and to improve the integrity of the program.

We agree with most of her recommendations, and if you'd like, I can tell you what we are doing to ensure what our actions are.

Sameer Zuberi: I'm sure we'll be hearing more about this throughout the day.

In the last moment we have, can you talk about how confidence has been reinstilled in the system given the changes you personally and your ministry have been making?

• (1140)

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We have seen confidence being restored in the immigration system not just because of the international student changes that have been made, but also because of the asylum numbers and many other things. With the tabling of our levels plan, we have a stable, transparent, sustainable and predictable plan so that Canadians know what their government will be following and people coming to Canada will also know.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, I would like to talk about the distribution of asylum seekers across Canada. As you know, Quebec takes in 37% of all asylum seekers, even though Quebecers amount to 22% of the population.

Why should we accept this situation? Why not change it to ensure that each province takes in a fair share of the asylum seekers entering the country?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you for your question. I'll answer it in English, if I may.

[*English*]

When I came in as minister, in my federal-provincial-territorial meetings, we discussed asylum claims. We discussed the fact that Quebec and Ontario have substantially a lot more than other parts of the country. Before I became a minister, the previous ministers had requested other provinces to take asylum numbers, and I am very much aware that New Brunswick and Newfoundland took the ministers up on that.

There are numbers there. I don't have them with me, but they have taken some number of—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: For Newfoundland and Labrador, it's 59.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: It's a bit more than 59.

Alexis Deschênes: There are currently 190,000 asylum seekers in Quebec. In comparison, 59 isn't much.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I know that it's more than 59. I've spoken with the ministers from New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador. It's a two-year plan. I think that this is the first year. It's more than 59. I can give you the figures.

Alexis Deschênes: What will be done about the other provinces that aren't pulling their weight?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Fortunately, the number has dropped considerably since 2024. We'll keep working on it.

Alexis Deschênes: What steps will you take?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We'll lower the number even more.

Alexis Deschênes: Okay, but what will be done about the distribution?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As I said, two provinces agreed to take in asylum seekers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes and Minister Diab.

[*English*]

Now we have five minutes for Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, the Supreme Court recently ruled in Kanyinda that pending asylum claimants in Quebec, many of whom illegally crossed the border at Roxham Road with your government's blessing, have the constitutional right to taxpayer-funded day care. Do you affirm Quebec's right to use the notwithstanding clause in this specific case, should it choose to do so?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I know that the government and the Minister of Justice are seized with that particular case, and they will have more to say on that. It's certainly not in my purview as the immigration minister.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It is, though. I mean, experts are saying that the ruling is likely to overturn your copay for luxury health benefits for failed asylum claimants. Have you told the justice minister that he should probably get on this?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I believe what we have introduced, with the copay and the changes we're making, is fair, sustainable and done with the best intention of protecting the people who really need health care, but also protecting—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The CBC reported that you don't talk to your colleagues, so did you tell the justice minister that this was a problem?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, the justice department and the justice minister are seized with legal cases and constitutional cases.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did you say, "Hey, Sean, this is a problem"? Have you talked to him yet?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, the changes we proposed—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll take that as a no.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —to the system, we believe, are fair and balanced.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I know you don't answer questions and like salad. We established that the last time.

The CBC reported that there are 2.1 million temporary residents—

• (1145)

Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Hold the time.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead on a point of order.

Peter Fragiskatos: We need to hear the answers, and there's a decorum that we all should abide by.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: For the record, I would like to put it on the record that it was, in fact, the minister who introduced tabbouleh at this committee before. She introduced it. That is fair game.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

We want to maintain decorum and order.

Ms. Rempel Garner, continue with your questions.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Minister, the CBC reported that about 2.1 million temporary residents will be left in Canada with expired or expiring visas by the end of this year. There are probably about 500,000 undocumented

persons on top of that. However, even with the Auditor General's findings, you're going to issue another 215,000 foreign work permits of one sort or another this year. Why are you doing that, even though we know that most of these millions of citizens won't leave the country voluntarily? That seems crazy to me. Why are you bringing in 200,000 more people, when we have a really big youth jobs crisis, to fill jobs with low-skilled foreign labour?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We are aware of the number of temporary resident documents that are scheduled to expire each year. There are couple of things. Some individuals with expiring documents might hold multiple permits. They could be for study or for work. Clearly, though, people who have expired permits are expected to leave. Even your leader said that last week, so I think—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Yes, but the problem is that you're not letting—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: No one should stay here longer than—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You're bringing in more people while—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: —legally allowed.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: No.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You guys keep censoring me in this committee. This is my time.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, no one is censoring you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You are.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, at the beginning, I said to please not talk over each other. It's very hard for our interpreters to interpret two people at the same time. Kindly allow the answer to happen.

Yes, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The witness is obfuscating. She's trying to run out the clock because she doesn't have answers to why she's letting her colleague Patty kowtow to Tim Hortons workers.

The Chair: That's not a point of order, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

On that point—

Sameer Zuberi: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, go ahead on a point of order.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you for giving space to all of us to raise points of order and to the witness for giving the time.

On a number of occasions—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: This is not a point of order. This is debate, and he's taking my time.

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, that's not a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Enough of this.

Sameer Zuberi: Do I have the floor, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, that's not a point of order.

Sameer Zuberi: I was about to get to my point of order.

The Chair: Okay. Please get to your point of order, Mr. Zuberi.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: No, this is my time, and this is now debate.

The Chair: Your clock is stopped, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: On more than one occasion in this round, the witness was not able to complete her answer and her sentence. She was interrupted mid-sentence, and I hope we can actually hear what she is—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: This is not a point of order. I have a point of order about my privilege.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The Liberals on this committee continue—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Every member of this committee... Because the minister is weak, the CBC reported that—

The Chair: That is not a point of order. Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: My privilege is being violated here—

The Chair: That is not a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: —because you guys keep censoring me.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Why don't you let her fail, as you guys talked to the CBC about?

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, thank you. I want to maintain order and decorum.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It's so embarrassing, on behalf of the Liberals.

The Chair: You are not being censored. I'm going to start the clock now if you want to continue with your questions.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did you tell your colleague Patty to take a flying leap when she said that Tim Hortons should get more temporary foreign workers after the job numbers came out last week? Why aren't those jobs going to Canadian workers, and why are you guys kowtowing to Tim Hortons?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That was a lovely performance, as usual. Thank you for the question.

We have a letter from many Conservative members who have written to me, to Minister Hajdu and to another minister requesting those changes. In fact, they were pleading that those changes be required in their province.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That's right. They were pleading to end the temporary foreign worker program and replace it with a stand-alone program for agriculture.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That's absolutely not the case.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It is, and I know that for a fact.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That's absolutely not the case. You were not copied on those letters. We have them.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Actually, I was, and I saw them, and now you're misleading the committee.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Well—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would you like me to read that to you, or would you like to say that was a performance too?

I get it. Your colleagues have to cover for you. They go to the CBC to say they can't talk to you. You don't talk to your colleagues and the ministers about serious issues like this. That's a problem.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm going to ask you this. You were supposed to be here for two hours today. Why are you leaving at the one-hour mark? Is it because you can't handle basic questions like this? Why aren't you fighting for Canadian kids' jobs?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That's exactly what we do day in, day out.

• (1150)

Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I fight for them as the minister. The government is fighting for them.

The Chair: On a point of order, I have Mr. Fragiskatos.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have a point of order. He is now—

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: It's best that you start fighting for them as well.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Hold on, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I understand that my colleague wants the minister's job, but he's talking over her now. Oh my God.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, please calm down.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead on a point of order.

Peter Fragiskatos: Members have time to ask questions. Of course I respect that, but let's focus on policy.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: He talked over the minister.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, please allow the point of order.

Peter Fragiskatos: We should focus, of course, on policy and not turn this into personal issues.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: This is not a point of order. These are Liberal ministers trying to—

The Chair: That is not a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: No, you guys are eating my time up—

The Chair: We have actually stopped your time.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: —because this woman can't answer basic questions on her file.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, please calm down. We have stopped your time.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Don't tell a woman to calm down. That's very sexist. It's ridiculous.

The Chair: Would you like to finish? You have 39 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I will just say this—

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, did you want to continue with your questions?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Yes, I'm on it.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I understand why your colleagues, Lena, went to the CBC and said that you don't take questions and they don't like you and think you're doing a bad job. It's because you need people to interject over top of you to answer basic questions.

You should do better. You should tell Patty not to kowtow to Tim Hortons. You should tell Sean not to allow judges to give leniency to non-citizen criminals. That's your job, and you're not doing it. You are a bad minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We are doing our job, and you're a bad performer. Perhaps you should go back to performances.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Thank you, Minister.

Next we have five minutes for Ms. Zahid.

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for appearing before the committee.

Minister, being that I'm a member of Parliament from Toronto and am seeing funding of nearly \$63 million related to supporting asylum claimants in Toronto, could you please talk about this funding and how we are working with the City of Toronto to transition people into stable, long-term housing and reduce the strain on Toronto's shelter system?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: In the supplementary estimates (C), there is an amount for the transitioning of people for the City of Toronto, and not just for asylum. It's also for others who are using the system. It is a temporary measure to transition people.

I'm proud to say that under my watch, there are no asylum claimants in any hotels. The government department is not in that. That has been transitioned out in the last year.

We are also helping various cities build centres. The City of Peel is a great example. Funding was given to the City of Peel to build a welcoming centre for people and transition them into permanent housing. We are encouraging the City of Toronto to do exactly that as well. Being in the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead on your point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I notice that the meeting requirement.... The motion that was passed by committee was to have the minister here for two hours, yet she's staying for only one hour. I'm just wondering why she's in violation of the meeting minutes. Does she have something to hide?

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, I think that is the time the minister has—one hour—so let's continue with this one hour.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Well, it was for two hours. Maybe she can stay for two.

The Chair: I think it's not unusual for ministers to be invited for two hours and stay for one hour.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Bok-bok-bok-bok-bok....

The Chair: That is not unusual, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Let's not waste any more time. We have only a few more minutes with the minister.

Minister, do you want to continue with your response, please?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you.

For the record, my understanding is that I'm here for the one hour, because I have other commitments.

As I was saying, IRCC supports the housing needs of asylum claimants through IHAP.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have a point of order on decorum. The minister just laughed.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Since 2017, we have supported the program—

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, that's not a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It's a point of decorum.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, decorum is not—

Salma Zahid: I have a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: No. I'd like to finish mine on decorum.

The minister just chuckled, flying in the face of a committee meeting motion. She's supposed to be here for two hours and she said, "I have other commitments, ha ha", so decorum—

Sameer Zuberi: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I have points of order from Ms. Zahid and Mr. Fragiskatos.

Salma Zahid: I asked the minister a question and I'm trying to get an answer. I think members should please not interrupt—

• (1155)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It kind of sucks when the shoe is on the other foot, huh?

Salma Zahid: —and allow the minister to answer the question.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, do you still have a—

Peter Fragiskatos: It's Mr. Zuberi.

The Chair: Oh, it's Mr. Zuberi. I can't tell your voices apart.

Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: I'm good. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, do you want to continue with your answer?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: Yes. Thank you.

As I was saying, budget 2024 had provided \$1.1 billion to extend IHAP for three years, starting in 2024-25, with a renewed focus to help partners move away from emergency measures, such as hotels, and develop more sustainable and cost-effective housing solutions for asylum claimants across Canada.

The program funding flowed solely on a cost-shared reimbursement basis in response to costs incurred by jurisdictions. As of 2025, IHAP recipients, including Toronto, were to employ more sustainable and cost-effective housing solutions for asylum claimants.

I talked about a specific one that I am familiar with. In Peel, they have a reception centre and transitional housing. That was in line with our updated conditions.

Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: We will continue to do our best. I think the good news is that the asylum numbers are going down. We know that costs are going to be high when you have high volumes, but with the introductions we have made and with the Bill C-12 measures that will be coming, we are continuing to see asylum numbers going down. Therefore, those numbers should be going down.

Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

I also note the funding for the digital platform modernization program. Much of the casework in our offices in the constituencies is from people requesting updates. Those should be available to them online. Could you please speak about this modernization

project and how the government is working to improve customer service for Canadians and others accessing the immigration system?

The Chair: You have one minute, Minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: That's an excellent question.

As we all know, IRCC operates a vast service delivery network, and it engages with millions of clients across Canada and around the globe. To deliver modern client-centric services that are more efficient and transparent, we are looking at a strong, digitally enabled immigration system because it's critical.

There are new digital technologies that will transform IRCC services by simplifying the online application process. People have just seen how the passport one has started. It will enhance client access to real-time application status by increasing efficiency. It will also strengthen our integrity and border protections.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

We only have a couple of minutes left, so I'll give one minute to the Conservatives and one minute to the Liberals.

Mr. Ho, you have one minute.

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): Minister, if someone were to say that they don't think international students are taking jobs away from Canadians, given the labour shortages that are happening today, would you agree with that statement?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: It's funny. I just came from Sudbury, and I met with many different groups.

International students are here, first and foremost, to study. Second, they are allowed to work 24 hours in the week. They are filling some labour gaps that some of the rural and other communities desperately need. We recognize the importance of international students, and we thank them for that.

Vincent Ho: The former immigration minister, Marc Miller, said, "I don't think [international] students are taking jobs away from other people, given the labour shortages that are happening [today]". Do you agree with that statement? Is he wrong?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm sorry. Could you say that again?

Vincent Ho: He said, "I don't think [international] students are taking jobs away from other people, given the labour shortages that are happening [today]". Is he wrong to say that?

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: I'm not sure who said that.

Vincent Ho: It was Marc Miller, the former Liberal immigration minister.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As I said, international students are here to get a good education from our post-secondary institutions. That's why we've strengthened the master's and Ph.D. levels.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ho.

We have one minute for Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to ask you about the relationship between you, as minister, and the IRB, because a line of questioning has created confusion about that relationship.

Do you actually direct the IRB, precisely? You talked a bit about its independence.

Hon. Lena Metlege Diab: As a lawyer, I practised law for 22 years before going into politics. Quite frankly, I did some administrative law, but I also sat as an adjudicator and an arbitrator on some smaller, provincial kind of...whatever.

There's a line to be drawn here. I respect the role of that independent quasi-judicial body, as I believe Canadians do. It has a role to play. It is doing the best it can. We, as a government and as a ministry, also have a role to play. Parliamentarians have a role to play.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

I want to thank the minister for her time today and for being patient in answering all of our questions.

I would like to now suspend for a few minutes so the minister can leave, and then we can continue with the officials.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back.

We are going to continue with the rounds of questions that we began in the first hour. We're now starting our third round, which is five minutes.

We'll begin with Mr. Ho for five minutes.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions are primarily to do with international students, so Ms. May, from the international students branch, might want to pitch in.

After a decade of costly Liberal policies, Canadians are dealing with a homegrown cost of living crisis. We're seeing rising unemployment. Today, the unemployment rate for students is at 18%, and millions of Canadians are relying on food banks just to survive.

Earlier this month, in March, the Liberal government announced millions of dollars for scholarships for hundreds of students from India to study in Canada, along with hundreds of researcher positions. At a time of rising deficits and rising costs, why can this government find room to announce support for non-Canadian students but not to properly support Canadian students?

Scott Harris (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I will turn to Ms. May if there's additional detail there.

I believe the program you're speaking to is a program to recruit graduate students and those in higher-level education in the pursuit of bringing talent to Canada, with an interest in ensuring that we have the skills to build the future and that we remain competitive in attracting top talent to Canada.

Vincent Ho: Do we not have enough top talent here in Canada?

Scott Harris: We want to build on that, obviously, to ensure the best opportunities for the future.

Vincent Ho: Did your department provide advice on this policy at all?

Scott Harris: We would have provided advice in terms of how it might operate from an immigration perspective, such as the tools that would be in place to support that program.

Vincent Ho: Is that a yes, and you did provide advice?

Scott Harris: It was advice in terms of how we would issue permits and what requirements would be needed from an immigration perspective.

Vincent Ho: Were you consulted by any of the Liberal ministers specifically?

Scott Harris: Well, we work with our colleagues. It was our colleagues in ISED who would have led this initiative.

Vincent Ho: This policy is especially damning because the Liberal budget last year announced that they were restricting student grants for Canadians pursuing education at private institutions. We're essentially taking money away from Canadian students and giving it to foreign students. Does that seem fair to you?

Scott Harris: I can't speak to the changes that were made in either of those programs specifically, as they're not in our program mandate. I'm—

Vincent Ho: Your department would be issuing the international student permits. Is that right?

Scott Harris: We would issue the permits that are associated with those—

Vincent Ho: It is still a policy that would fall under the purview of your department, partially. What kind of message do you think that sends to Canadian students?

Scott Harris: I can't speculate on what message it sends to students, but I would say that it's part of the suite of...continuing to grow the skills that Canada needs for the future, both domestically and internationally. I would encourage you to discuss some of these questions with those—

Vincent Ho: A recent report from the federal department of employment admitted for the first time that an 18% jobless rate for Canadian students was due to “large numbers” of foreign students. As a senior immigration department official overseeing international students, do you agree with the statement from the department of employment and jobs?

• (1210)

Scott Harris: I haven't seen that report, but I do know that we have tightened up access to employment for students in response to some of the changing economic dynamics in Canada. As you know, we've reduced the number of hours that students can work while they're studying and we've reduced access to postgraduate work permits—

Vincent Ho: You made those announcements. Was that because of the large number of foreign students who are perhaps taking those jobs away from Canadian students?

Scott Harris: I think it's to bring program clarity to ensure that people who come to study are here to study and not to work. That's the principal focus of our policy suite. It's to ensure that—

Vincent Ho: You disagree with the report, then, because you're saying that most students are coming just to study and then they're going to leave, but the report quotes that part of the reason for the 18% jobless rate we see with Canadian students is the large number of foreign students.

Scott Harris: As I said earlier, we want to make sure that the program is fit for purpose. As you know, we've been reducing the number of students coming to Canada, in part because of the changing economic circumstances in Canada.

Vincent Ho: The former Liberal immigration minister, Marc Miller, said in 2023, “I don't think [international] students are taking jobs away from other people, given the labour shortages that are happening [today].” Do you agree with that statement?

Scott Harris: I can't speak to Minister Miller's statements at the time. If it was the context of 2023—

Vincent Ho: If it was said today, would you agree with that statement, yes or no?

Scott Harris: I think the context is different today. We have far fewer students in Canada than we did in 2023, by far. That said, I think—

Vincent Ho: It's tied to jobs—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ho and Mr. Harris.

Now we have five minutes for Ms. Sodhi.

Your time starts now.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

In the last hour, the minister discussed Canada's asylum system. More broadly, can you tell the committee how the government works with the provinces and territories to ensure that supports for asylum claimants are managed in a way that is both responsible and aligned with capacity on the ground?

That's to whoever wishes to answer.

Scott Harris: We have very close working relationships with the provinces and territories. Most often they are positive, but obvious-

ly there are tensions between the systems. Supports for asylum seekers tend to fall between the federal and provincial governments in terms of coordinating.

The rise of asylum seekers in the last number of years—up until the current period, in which we're seeing declines—has strained the resources for some municipalities and some provinces. Through the Forum of Ministers Responsible for Immigration, we continue to coordinate our efforts to try to align those resources.

As the minister spoke about earlier, we have provided funding to various municipalities and some provinces to support their infrastructure. We work to coordinate not just how we provide relief in the moment, but how we work together to reduce reliance on those systems as quickly as possible as people progress through the system. A lot of the resources we've invested have been directed at building capacity in recent years.

Amandeep Sodhi: On enforcement, there have been claims that individuals who do not have a legal right to remain in Canada are not being removed in a timely manner. Can you outline the processes in place to ensure that decisions are being enforced and how the system maintains credibility through fair hearings and an appropriate follow-through process?

Scott Harris: Obviously, removals are the purview of the CBSA, so I'm sure they would be able to offer more detail on that.

What I can say about the removal process itself is that from the time someone is deemed to be required to be removed, they have access first to the IRB and then to the courts after that, should they feel that their circumstances warrant a review from an outside body. Once they've exhausted those options, the CBSA would work with international partners, in some cases, to ensure that we have the capacity to then remove them to their country of origin.

Amandeep Sodhi: Given some of the concerns and misinformation we've heard, what would you want Canadians to understand about how the asylum system is functioning today and how it ensures that it remains compassionate and well managed?

Scott Harris: Canada has a long tradition of offering humanitarian compassion to people who need protection. That's a reputation that Canada has fought hard to preserve.

I think we all recognize that the system is under strain, though, so we have taken significant steps to address some of the causes of the strains. We're seeing that now in the significant reductions in the last year and a half of asylum claimants coming to Canada, while not sacrificing access to due process and the entitlements that people have.

Obviously, as you all know, Bill C-12 introduces some additional measures that will strengthen our ability to ensure that the limited resources we have for asylum are focused on the cases that most require them and that we continue to evolve the system so that it's targeting the people who absolutely need Canada's protection.

• (1215)

Amandeep Sodhi: As you know, budget 2025 included a one-time initiative to convert protected persons in Canada to permanent residents, in addition to the levels plan allocations. Could you clarify why this measure was introduced and what it means for Canadians?

Scott Harris: Protected persons in Canada are people who've already been deemed, by either the IRB or another process, to warrant Canada's protection. Their cases have been reviewed and they've been determined to warrant our protection.

Because of the limited space we have in the levels plan, converting people from that category—the protected persons in Canada category—to permanent residents takes a long time. This one-time initiative will basically offer the opportunity to address the backlog of people who are waiting for PR in that specific category and bring a resolution to their situation in a more expedited way.

Amandeep Sodhi: That's perfect. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Thank you, Ms. Sodhi.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Deschênes: I would take more like five or six minutes, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have only two and a half minutes. Sorry.

Alexis Deschênes: Is this the case even with a new panel?

The Chair: We aren't starting again. We're continuing.

Alexis Deschênes: So that's how you do things here. Things move quickly.

The Chair: Yes. Sorry.

Alexis Deschênes: I have a question for you, Ms. May. You're the director general of the international students branch at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

How do you account for the 800 problem cases where study permit applications were based on fraudulent documents? In a number of cases, people submitted diplomas issued by non-existent educational institutions, but your department didn't do anything to follow up.

Scott Harris: I would like to answer that question. Ms. May is responsible for the program and its management. However, the integrity measures are managed in other parts of the department.

The figure that you provided this morning from the Auditor General's report constitutes a somewhat vague number. In other words, it's an initial indicator. We centralized our process for auditing these cases, and we're working with our partners in—

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Harris, I'm not talking about centralization. I'm saying that there are 800 cases, and probably many more.

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Alexis Deschênes: The Auditor General was able to identify 800 cases of permits issued based on fraudulent documents, and no action was taken.

Scott Harris: Yes. However, I believe that the report states that these constitute potential cases of fraudulent documents, or—

Alexis Deschênes: The report says that the people “had either used fraudulent documentation or misrepresented information to gain entry into Canada.”

Scott Harris: That's right.

Alexis Deschênes: The Auditor General says that it's a serious issue. However, you didn't consider taking action to address even one of these 800 cases.

Scott Harris: Yes. However, that's why we created a centralized process to follow up on these cases. As you know, the measures that we introduced to improve the entry processes are new. Initially, our priority was to prevent the entry of these people in the first place. We're now working with our partners to handle cases of people already in Canada, in order to resolve these issues.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris and Mr. Deschênes.

[*English*]

Mr. Redekopp, you have five minutes.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Mr. Harris, your department made big noise about getting out of the hotel business. The government had been spending hundreds of millions of dollars—I think close to \$1 billion—paying for hotels for asylum seekers. You got out of that business with great fanfare.

Recently you provided funding for the City of Ottawa, \$40 million, to buy a hotel and continue the funding. Isn't this just shuffling money around?

• (1220)

Scott Harris: I wouldn't describe it as shuffling money around. We've been working with municipalities to ensure they have the infrastructure they need to support the population. We've moved out of the business of housing, which was a direct provision of service and did not build capacity. It basically solved the problem for a day. Our work with the cities is designed to help them build capacity in their systems for the long term.

Brad Redekopp: Essentially, you are fooling Canadians, though, because you're saying that we're not spending money on this, yet you're spending millions of dollars buying infrastructure. You're not renting hotels, but you're buying infrastructure. I get it. It's really the same thing.

I want to switch over to the—

Scott Harris: [*Inaudible—Editor*] disingenuous, to be clear.

Brad Redekopp: I'm sorry; I want to switch over to the Auditor General's report from this morning.

There was a mention of 150,000-plus cases of potential fraud. That gets back to what the minister just told us: that the department can investigate only 2,000 cases. Can you confirm that? Is that correct?

Scott Harris: I wouldn't want to put up an approximation. We have to prioritize our resources. Obviously, we can't follow up on every signal there is. I will say that the 150,000 number is a very large number that does not reflect necessarily equal degrees of seriousness and can reflect some misreporting from institutions.

Brad Redekopp: That's fair. I'm not really concerned so much about... I mean, I'm concerned about that number, but the one that really struck me was the 2,000. Your department has had, I think, close to six billion dollars' worth of resources in the last year and the year before. I believe it was somewhere around that magnitude.

Basically, you're saying that however many thousands of potentially fraudulent cases there are, we're capped at 2,000 because of all these other billions of dollars we're spending on all these other priorities. That's essentially what you're saying. It doesn't matter if there's more fraud. You're not going to allocate resources to that because 2,000 is the cap.

Is that a fair assessment of what's happened in the department?

Scott Harris: No, I wouldn't describe it as fair.

Brad Redekopp: It's more than 2,000, then.

Scott Harris: I would say that, first of all, in the division of responsibilities, CBSA is responsible for inland enforcement. Our integrity measures supplement the work they do. That's an important distinction. They have the enforcement officer capacity in Canada.

The 2,000 number is a best guess in terms of the current investigation processes. We have unrolled a whole suite of new risk tools that will allow us to take advantage of new technologies, to identify trends and to intervene more quickly in cases going forward. That number is not written in stone. It's about capacity.

Brad Redekopp: The minister did say it.

Scott Harris: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: From what you're telling me, more resources could have been allocated to investigate more because of the thousands of potential fraud cases, but there weren't. That's the reality of what's happened in the last couple of years. That's what's been reported and what's been said by the minister.

On Bill C-3, the minister was confused again, as she always is. I think what you whispered in her ear was that 1,501 people have received Canadian citizenship since December 15. Am I correct on that?

Scott Harris: It's 1,301.

Brad Redekopp: It's 1,301. Thank you.

What I was trying to get at, which she didn't understand, was the requests for proof of citizenship, which is a different thing. Do you have any records? Do you know how many people have applied for proof of citizenship since December 15?

Scott Harris: I don't have them with me today. We can provide those. I haven't seen a rise. We haven't seen a trend line that has been identified as a significant change in that number.

Brad Redekopp: If you could provide that to the committee, that would be helpful.

Scott Harris: I will follow up.

Brad Redekopp: My next question is on the IRB.

Given the war that's going on in Iran right now, have there been discussions between your department and the IRB about finding ways of being more careful in the screening of Iranian claims for asylum?

Scott Harris: The IRB isn't involved, necessarily, in screening. If you're talking about security screening, that's between the CBSA, CSIS and IRCC.

Brad Redekopp: I'm not necessarily talking about screening, but about carefully looking at these cases in terms of whether they should be approved or not, particularly given that we know that IRGC officials are in Canada, have gotten through our system and are, I'm sure, working very hard to try to get into Canada right now, given the war that's going on.

Scott Harris: Since the regimes were designated in 2022 and the IRGC was listed as an entity for terrorism, we've had significant conversations with the IRB, the CBSA and others to ensure that we're addressing the cases of those seeking to come to Canada—and we are preventing cases from coming to Canada—and also addressing any cases of those who may be in Canada and may have become inadmissible as a result of those changes.

Brad Redekopp: So since the war, you haven't increased that. It's going on at the same level of discussion.

Scott Harris: Obviously, the current war elevates the number of conversations that are happening at various levels.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Thank you, Mr. Redekopp.

Next we have five minutes for Ms. Zahid.

Salma Zahid: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is with regard to the supplementary estimates. They include funding for the passport program of over \$52 million. Could you please tell us about the department's efforts to improve the speed of delivery of the passport program and the progress that has been made already?

Scott Harris: We work with Service Canada, which is the service delivery arm for getting passports to Canadians. We're exceeding our service delivery standards and have been for a number of years.

A couple of initiatives have happened, such as the online passport applications for adult renewals. We are continuing to move forward with that, and it is showing great progress in making it both easier for people to get their passport and speedier, given that it's directly online.

The other thing I would say is that the resources in the supplementary estimates are meant to address a lingering fiscal concern in the revolving fund for passports as a result of the drop in applications that occurred during the pandemic. There was a significant decline in the revenue coming in on passports while expenses, obviously, were still being incurred in terms of delivering the service. This will situate the fund in a position going forward that will enable us to continue to assure that we can meet service standards going forward.

Salma Zahid: I also see that IRCC is requesting \$14.5 million for the 2025-27 immigration levels plan transition. Can you please explain what purpose this funding will serve?

Scott Harris: You'll know that the levels plan identified is the first levels plan that saw a reduction in the number of people coming into Canada. Our funding is tied to the number of people who come into Canada. As a result of that, we had a significant fiscal reduction in the previous fiscal year—so heading into 2025-26—and we had to reduce our workforce. That money was specifically identified in that earlier budget as being for workforce adjustment costs to reduce the workforce as a result of having to process fewer cases.

Salma Zahid: My next question is with regard to the impacts you are seeing on the housing market, especially for a city like Toronto, with the reduction in international students. What effects have you seen? What impact is the reduction of international students having on the housing market?

Scott Harris: I wouldn't be able to specifically say whether it's international students exclusively who are affecting the housing markets in any jurisdiction. I will say, as the minister mentioned, that several reports have identified that the reductions in immigration more broadly have eased tension on rental prices in some locations and on housing prices as well. This is easing some of the pressure, particularly in the most populous cities, for people accessing housing going forward, but the degree to which I can attribute that to international students versus other populations...I can't do that.

Salma Zahid: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute and 45 seconds.

Salma Zahid: With regard to the modernization program for which you have requested money in these estimates, what exactly are you doing, and how would that modernization be beneficial to Canadians? Are there any major items that you will work on in the modernization project?

Scott Harris: Modernization is not just an IT project. It's a transformation of how we do business. It moves IRCC from being an application-based department to being a client-based department,

which will enable us to serve clients better through the course of their immigration journey.

It will be enabled by IT platforms, and we're already seeing the early benefits of that. For example, visa applicants and some passport applicants today can create an online account, which is the first step, obviously, in being able to monitor your own case and track your case through the immigration process.

We have run a pilot project with e-visas for the first time, which will be transformative for Canada when we are enabled to roll that out. Foreign nationals will not have to submit their passports and have visas applied. We have already launched our client support service module, which enables our client support staff to better respond to the needs of people seeking information about their file.

As we move forward, these tools will continue to roll out in a gradual way to ensure we're improving every business line we work through.

Salma Zahid: Thank you.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Next we have five minutes for Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Harris, welcome.

Scott Harris: Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Earlier, my colleague asked you a question in relation to a quote that Minister Fraser had given in the past, where he said that large numbers of international students were good for the economy. You said the context is different today. What's different?

Scott Harris: I think it was Minister Miller he was quoting—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It was both of them.

Scott Harris: Obviously, since 2023, the government has committed to reducing the number of people coming to Canada, to get to sustainable levels. That speaks specifically to a growing awareness about challenges with housing, health care and access to services more broadly, not just for Canadians, but for foreign nationals as well. That context has shifted dramatically, obviously, since 2023.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That was probably because in roughly two years, over a million students were brought in.

Scott Harris: There was significant growth postpandemic.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I call it the Fraser bulge, but nonetheless....

The context has changed. We have the Fraser bulge. With the Fraser bulge, those millions of people are on expiring and expired permits. You're about to bring in roughly 155,000 new permits. Are you assuming that all the people with expired permits will leave?

Scott Harris: It's our expectation that they would leave.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Scott Harris: Now, do we assume that they leave? Obviously not. That's why we have integrity measures and why we work with our partners to take steps to do what we can to monitor.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Just to be clear, you've set the 155,000 new student permit levels assuming that all of those expiring visa permit holders will leave on their own, magically.

Scott Harris: No. The calculation that you see, the 155,000, is new permits, as you know.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Right.

Scott Harris: There are also extensions and transitions to other statuses, work permits, etc. We factor in all of those considerations.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You said the context has changed. There's a pretty big youth jobs crisis. You've just testified to committee that you guys don't have the resources to look at more than 2,000 cases of fraud, even though the Auditor General found potentially 150,000 cases of fraud.

We have millions of people on expired work permits and a youth jobs crisis, yet you're still issuing 155,000 new foreign student permits this year. Why?

Scott Harris: Just to clarify, my testimony wasn't that we could only do the 2,000. I know that was the question. My—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That's what the minister said. Are you contradicting her?

Scott Harris: My point was that we will use our resources to the greatest effect.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Just to be clear—

Scott Harris: If we can improve our tools, we will be able to work with our partners to address even more cases.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Are you contradicting what your minister said? She said that you guys only have—

Scott Harris: I think the minister was speaking about the current level of resources and how they've been allocated. What I'm talking about is the capacity for us to evolve our investigations.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How many cases could you do at warp speed—at warp nine?

Scott Harris: That would depend on the tools we can embrace. Obviously, I don't want to talk about the tools themselves here for—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How many cases can you look at?

Scott Harris: I wouldn't want to approximate that at this point.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I think you should. This is a major news story right now. How many cases is it?

Scott Harris: I'm not going to speculate.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm going to take that—as a legislator who's here to allocate money to your department—as you don't know. Would that be correct?

Scott Harris: Well, I would say in any enforcement space, you are obligated to prioritize the use of your resources to the most concerning cases.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do you think spending \$40 million on a hotel for failed asylum claimants is a priority use over, say, allocating resources to look at international student permit fraud?

Scott Harris: I think those are competing policy priorities.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Which one is greater?

Scott Harris: That would be up to parliamentarians to—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: No, your department keeps adding more money than the mains to the supplementaries.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You're asking us to validate your priority, so I want to know, Mr. Harris, as the new DM, what is your priority? You've asked us for \$40 million for an asylum claimant hotel to be bought, and you're saying we don't have the bandwidth for more than 2,000 cases of fraud to be prosecuted, while you're bringing in 155,000 more people.

If I were the minister, we'd be having this conversation. It seems a little bananas to me.

Scott Harris: The supplementary estimates are brought forward by ministers as well. These are government priorities.

I should clarify that I'm not the new deputy minister.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would you advise the minister today that perhaps there should be greater priority and emphasis on litigating fraud and/or that we shouldn't be bringing in more international student permits until there's a removal plan for the millions of permits that have already expired?

• (1235)

Scott Harris: I believe we need to balance our priorities off. We need to—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: What does “balance” mean?

Scott Harris: Well, we continue to need to bring people to Canada to grow—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: What about the kids who don't have jobs?

Scott Harris: We need to make that a priority as well.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Why aren't we focusing on labour mobility strategies? This is wild to me. It's wild. You know that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner, and thank you, Mr. Harris. That's five minutes.

Next we'll move to Mr. Zuberi for five minutes.

Your five minutes start now.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'll continue with you, Mr. Harris, along the same lines of questioning we were just hearing about. I know there was a lot of back-and-forth. I was trying to listen to what your answer was. I couldn't get it because of interruptions.

In terms of the hotel, the IRCC and all of that theme, do you want to add anything before I go into my other lines of questioning?

Scott Harris: As you know, we stood down our hotel program, the interim lodging strategy. We are continuing to work with provinces and our municipal partners to ensure they have the capacity to deal with the needs in their communities with respect to homelessness and housing. That's been the focus. The focus in 2017 was to work with jurisdictions to build their capacity to deal with any pressures they faced. That has remained the strategy.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you. I appreciate that clarification for the record and for the benefit of all Canadians.

I want to shift gears for a moment and talk about what's also on the minds of many Canadians. We're in an unfortunate part of world history when there are so many conflicts happening. So many Canadians have loved ones in conflict zones. A number of programs speak to our humanitarian spirit as Canadians, and as we always have, we're looking out for one another and looking out for humanity. There are a few programs I want to highlight and ask you about.

First, Canadians have loved ones, direct family members, in Gaza. Our government did bring forth an important program, which is similar to other programs, about reunification for Gaza. Can you give us an update on where we are with respect to that? What is the prospectus for the future of that program?

Scott Harris: I'm happy to speak to that.

The program you're speaking about was the commitment to 5,000...through a temporary resident public policy that allowed for reunification. We've received applications against that program. The total number is 6,350 applications. So far we've approved 1,325 of those applications, and 970 people have arrived in Canada specifically through the program. We also continue to receive applications outside the program, so at the same time, we've approved another 610 outside the policy program, for a total of 1,390 people who have arrived in Canada to date from the conflict.

Sameer Zuberi: I've met a number of these people who are fleeing horror, essentially—the horrors of war. They've had complete devastation, with homes completely razed, family members and dear ones killed, and serious injuries, such as amputations.

With respect to those I've met, they've said they're having a challenging time getting their feet settled here in Canada. What types of services and supports are you offering those who are arriving here from that war zone?

Scott Harris: Obviously, it's a family reunification process. Normally, under such processes, we count on families to be a first base of support. We have provided nominal supports on arrival. They then have access to our settlement services, so they can continue to benefit from the existing network of resources.

Sameer Zuberi: In the next minute I have, I'd like to focus on the M-62 Uyghur program, which is also welcoming those who are deeply vulnerable, but not for the same reasons. I want to applaud your department for welcoming refugees who are deeply vulnerable and who have faced persecution.

What is the prospectus for this program? How are we doing so far with respect to welcoming Uyghurs who are fleeing persecution?

Scott Harris: I know that you know this program very well. To date, we've received 860 applications, and about 265 arrivals have occurred.

As you know, it's a very difficult population to serve, to reach and to ensure that we can provide the necessary protections to along the pathway without putting them at additional risk. We're working with our community partners to make sure we're doing this work in a very sensitive way. Progress is continuing to address that.

• (1240)

Sameer Zuberi: I would like to register that I would appreciate it if we could pick up the pace on this.

Thank you for what you've done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Harris, let's continue the discussion on the investigations carried out when you receive semi-annual reports that raise issues such as international students failing to comply with their terms.

We can see today that, of the 153,000 students likely failing to comply with their terms, only 4,000 were investigated in 2023-24. Will this improve?

Scott Harris: There has already been an improvement. In 2025, we had concerns about only 35,000 cases. We're currently assessing each of these cases. Some circumstances aren't cause for concern, such as—

Alexis Deschênes: I know that. However, the investigations should be carried out. I want to know whether the rate of 2,000 investigations a year is increasing.

Scott Harris: That's what I was saying. We need to find ways to follow up differently in certain cases.

Alexis Deschênes: Are you carrying out more investigations in 2025-26 than you did in 2023-24?

Scott Harris: Probably, yes.

Alexis Deschênes: Why "probably"?

Scott Harris: I'm hesitating a bit because an investigation is quite formal. Often, for us, it's just a follow-up.

Alexis Deschênes: Audits are carried out, and certain cases may be easily audited. The Auditor General says that only 2,000 investigations are carried out each year.

Scott Harris: Yes, that's the number of investigations for 2023-24.

Alexis Deschênes: Now you're saying that we have fewer international students, so things will get better. However, that isn't the issue. I'm trying to find out whether you have the capacity to carry out more audits or investigations than in 2023-24.

Scott Harris: Yes, but—

Alexis Deschênes: Do you have the capacity to carry out more?

Scott Harris: Yes, because we have better tools.

Alexis Deschênes: What's the capacity per year? How many investigations do you carry out?

Scott Harris: I can't give you the number right now.

Alexis Deschênes: What makes you say that you're carrying out more investigations?

Scott Harris: The reason is that we have better tools. We can work more directly with certain institutions to confirm information more quickly. If we can resolve cases more quickly, it's easier to resolve them completely. It's much more difficult when we need to carry out a lengthy study for each case.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris and Mr. Deschênes.

Mr. Davies, you have the floor.

[English]

Your five minutes start now.

Fred Davies: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The announcement today in the news, the Auditor General's report and the questions around the table today are very critical to the entire topic we've been talking about all day.

I need to return to my earlier questions about the express entry program.

The crisis in our medical system across Canada is as equally important as all of the issues we're talking about today. We need to find ways forward for the doctors who are waiting for residency, accreditation and review by provincial authorities. My information tells me that only about 2% of the existing backlog of physicians have been successful through the express entry program.

Mr. Harris, you said that you and the department have a good relationship with provincial partners and private sector partners. Where is the pain point, if we have over 13,000 doctors in Canada who can't get residency or a licence to practise?

I want to juxtapose this against the target of another 5,000 people who may actually end up in a greater backlog. How do we fix that?

Scott Harris: I have two points of clarification. Thank you for the opportunity to clarify.

The first problem you're talking about is, as you're rightly citing, a problem with foreign credential recognition. Those numbers are people who are not available to work in that workforce today because they are not recognized. Their credentials are not recognized and their experience is not recognized.

Fred Davies: These are people who are already in Canada.

Scott Harris: Right.

Fred Davies: These are people with medical degrees whom we have stalled in the system because we can't get the paperwork verified. Is that correct?

• (1245)

Scott Harris: It's verified or equivalized. I'm not an expert in foreign credential recognition. The colleges in each of the provinces deal with foreign credential recognition. We are partnering with our Health Canada colleagues, our provincial colleagues and others to find ways to streamline this. Some provinces have been incredibly creative in fast-tracking.

Fred Davies: This sort of goes to the heart of all the interprovincial trade barriers. In everything we do in Canada, we seem to have barriers as we go down through jurisdictional levels.

I have two hospitals in my riding that are closing because we can't find primary care doctors, yet we have between 13,000 and 18,000 doctors sitting in Canada waiting to go through that process. With great fanfare, the minister has announced that she wants to add another 5,000. It sounds great, but what about the 13,000, 15,000 or 18,000 who are already sitting here? Is there not a way you can coordinate better with your partners in the industry to fast-track the critical care doctors who mean so much to my region in Niagara?

Scott Harris: We're working with our partners. We don't have any authorities or anything that we can use to force colleges to recognize people.

Fred Davies: Okay, but you allowed them in the country because they were doctors.

Scott Harris: Well, they may have come in for a variety of different reasons. They may not have come in to practise their medicine. They may have come in for family reunification processes.

Fred Davies: But not 18,000.

Scott Harris: Over the course of a long time, that number could accumulate.

Fred Davies: That's what we're looking at now—the gap of people who are in Canada wanting to practise medicine, wanting to come to Niagara and wanting to help me save the two hospitals that are closing, but we can't get them through the system. This is highly critical.

Do you have any thoughts on how we can fix this and make it faster so that these doctors can actually get to work in Canada?

Scott Harris: There are some best practices emerging in some of the provinces in Canada. For example, in one case I was familiar with about three years ago, an asylum claimant who was a medical doctor came to Canada and went to Alberta. Alberta had a program at the time—I don't know if it's still in place—where they could intern under the supervision of another person and get fast-tracked in order to serve the northern communities. We would advocate for anything that can be done to streamline that.

On the 5,000, we are making it a priority for in-Canada doctors to be converted to permanent residents. The 5,000 aren't just new people coming into the country. They're also people already here who haven't secured permanent residency but can become permanent residents in Canada.

Fred Davies: Is that in addition to the many thousands who are still waiting to get through that residency process?

Scott Harris: It depends on what your number is based on.

Fred Davies: About 1,000 Canadian international medical students were turned away last year for residencies. Is part of the problem that hospital capacity is not there to give jobs to these doctors?

Scott Harris: I can't speak to that.

Fred Davies: This is pretty low-hanging fruit. You have internationally trained doctors and graduates, some of whom are Canadian, who can't get residencies here. As they go through the application process, are these issues not identified? Why would they be turned away?

Scott Harris: Again, I can't speak to that. These programs are regulated by the provinces and territories.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris, and thank you, Mr. Davies. These are very important questions.

Ms. Sodhi, you have five minutes.

Amandeep Sodhi: I think it's Ms. Zahid.

The Chair: No, I have you next, Ms. Sodhi.

Amandeep Sodhi: Oh. Okay. Perfect.

The Chair: I know you guys want to battle it out, but we'll go over to you, Ms. Sodhi.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Amandeep Sodhi: Perfect. I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: That's okay.

Amandeep Sodhi: I want to talk a little more about the immigration system in general.

Are you able to walk us through how stakeholders and Canadians were consulted during the preparation of the 2026-28 levels plan and how their input shaped this year's plan?

Scott Harris: We have established a fairly rigorous consultation process, and we talked to over 800 organizations and stakeholders directly. We also received submissions from tens of thousands of Canadians who made representations on their views in terms of how the plan is shaped.

Amandeep Sodhi: That's perfect.

The department and minister have spoken quite a bit about restoring stability to the immigration system. Are you able to explain what that stability looks like in practice and how Canadians will notice it in their day-to-day lives?

Scott Harris: For us, the measures of stability have been well defined. They're about ensuring that by 2027, permanent residents are no more than 1% of the population in total and temporary residents represent no more than 5% of the Canadian population. Those are the primary indicators of sustainability. That is what the programs are designed to achieve, and that's what we're working towards.

● (1250)

Amandeep Sodhi: One of the main goals of the department is to reduce Canada's non-permanent resident population to under 5% by 2027. Are you able to update the committee on progress so far and how this year's plan helps to achieve that target?

Scott Harris: I would turn to the Stats Canada report that came out last week. It shows that we're at 6.5% from a high of 7.6%. That's well within the track that we anticipate will achieve that 5%.

Amandeep Sodhi: The new levels plan that was introduced adjusts allocations for foreign labour programs. How is IRCC balancing national sustainability with regional labour needs, particularly in rural and remote areas?

Scott Harris: As has been spoken about, we have tailored our recruitment strategies or our programming to address different needs.

Obviously, the labour market is very different in certain sectors. We've spoken about how health care is one area where it's particularly strained, but we also know that trades and other spaces are strained, and we know those strains can be amplified, particularly in more rural and remote areas.

We are looking at designing our programs or refining our programs to ensure that where we are offering access to employment immigration or economic immigration, it speaks not just to the overall number for Canada, but also to the regional and sectoral needs we have. For example, we are looking with ESDC at ways we can adjust programs, with the consent of provinces and territories, to address how they apply the temporary foreign worker program for rural areas, which would be different from areas that are not rural.

In addition, you may be aware that they introduced the change that if you live in an area where there's more than a 6% unemployment rate, you don't have access to some temporary foreign workers you might have access to in areas that have a much greater strain for labour.

It's about trying to ensure that we build differentiating programs that allow us to target needs in various parts of the country and, as I said, across various sectors.

Amandeep Sodhi: Budget 2025 invests in attracting global talent to Canadian universities and research institutions. Are you able to briefly explain what role IRCC is playing in facilitating this strategy? How does it tie into, once again, the levels plan?

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Amandeep Sodhi: Answer very briefly.

Scott Harris: As I said earlier, we provided advice in terms of how the immigration system could work to support the objective of recruiting top talent to Canada in that space. For us, that involves fast-tracking processing where possible and ensuring that we're supporting a faster movement of people in that academic space.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you.

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

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

We have a bit of time remaining, so we're going to give two minutes to Mr. Menegakis and then two minutes to Ms. Zahid.

Mr. Menegakis, your two minutes start now.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Mr. Harris, how many more hotels have you helped to purchase with municipalities, other than the \$40-million one you've already testified to?

Scott Harris: I can't speak to how each municipality has used those resources.

The Ottawa purchase is—

Costas Menegakis: It's not about how they use them. How many have you funded?

Scott Harris: We provided the funding to municipalities, which then made decisions to do that.

Whether they've purchased old buildings.... They're often hotels, but they've purchased other buildings and retrofitted them into shelter capacity.

Costas Menegakis: How did you budget for this? Did you just put a hotel line in your budget of \$6 billion?

Scott Harris: We don't have a hotel line. We have an interim housing assistance program, which has been in place since 2017.

That goes to provinces, in most cases, but in Ontario it goes directly to municipalities.

Costas Menegakis: You basically shifted money from paying for hotels to giving money to municipalities so they can buy properties to house these people. It becomes less transparent.

Scott Harris: Those are two separate programs. As I said, IHAP, the interim housing assistance program, which goes to the provinces and municipalities, existed before the interim lodging strategy. It was in place for hotels that dealt with the postpandemic border reopening pressure we felt before we closed the ports part of the STCA.

Costas Menegakis: How did you prioritize Ottawa over, say, Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver? Why was Ottawa such a hotbed that it got a whopping \$40 million?

• (1255)

Scott Harris: We didn't prioritize it. The municipalities self-identified and reported experiencing pressure due to the arrival of asylum claimants.

Costas Menegakis: Will you share with the committee which municipalities and how much money they got for this?

Scott Harris: We can provide that.

Costas Menegakis: Will you undertake to provide that, please? That's important information.

Scott Harris: Yes.

Costas Menegakis: I don't know how much time I have left.

The Chair: You have nine seconds.

Costas Menegakis: Well, thanks for coming, Mr. Harris.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Scott Harris: Thank you for having me.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Menegakis.

Costas Menegakis: Please provide us with that information.

The Chair: Next I have Ms. Zahid for two minutes, please.

Salma Zahid: My question is for Mr. Harris.

There is a lot of casework coming to my constituency office. Delays occur when staff inquire about security screening.

Is your department working with the public safety department to bring more transparency to security screening processes? There are a lot of delays in spousal applications, in TRVs—in every category.

Scott Harris: We have an ongoing working relationship with CBSA and CSIS. They are our primary partners in the security screening space. They have been working on strategies to reduce timelines where appropriate. Obviously, we don't want to introduce security risks to the country, so we want to make sure we continue to have rigour in the system. It's about making sure we can clear out cases that aren't a concern as quickly as possible. There are discussions going on to that effect to try to determine that.

Salma Zahid: In regard to the levels plan and the consultations you conduct, how do you work with the provinces and territories in regard to immigration levels?

Scott Harris: We consult with the provinces and territories. We have a regular ongoing engagement with them. They identify their requests to us. We factor as much of those requests as possible into the planning process.

For example, the provinces and territories own the provincial nominee program spaces. We work with them to try to allocate them in the best interests of what the provinces and territories are seeking, while protecting the federal economic space, to ensure we have the capacity to bring people into the country at a talent level.

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

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

I want to thank all the witnesses for their important testimony and for their time. Thank you for being here for two hours. I think the questions and answers over the last hour have been very helpful.

For colleagues, on Wednesday, we will resume our study on Canada's immigration system. We will have two full panels. To begin, for about five minutes right at the front end, we will do the final bits we have to do for our international student study. There are a few things we have to pass. As a reminder, all dissenting reports have to be in by this Wednesday at 5 p.m.

With that, thanks very much. Have a good day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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