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Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1615)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. We now go to the public portion of our meeting. Before we begin, however, I have a few reminders. For those participating virtually, I would like to outline the following rules.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either "Floor", "English" or "French". Please inform me immediately if interpretation is lost, and I will ensure that it is promptly restored before resuming the proceedings.

Members participating in person may proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are participating in the meeting via videoconference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For the members in the room, your microphone will be controlled, as usual, by the proceedings and verification officer.

We remind you that all comments by members should be addressed through the chair.

I thank you in advance for speaking slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone must be on mute.

Regarding the speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain an order of speaking that is fair for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

[*English*]

Should any technical challengeS arise, please advise me. Please note that we may need to suspend a few minutes to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of francophone immigration to Quebec and Canada.

I would first like to welcome Alain Rayes, the member for Richmond—Arthabaska, who has joined us as a permanent member of the official languages committee.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have, via videoconference, Corinne Prince, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Settlement and Integration; Alexandra Hiles, Director General, Domestic Network; and Michèle Kingsley, Director General, Immigration Branch.

You will have a maximum of 10 minutes for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with a series of questions. I will inform you verbally when you have one minute left, and you will be encouraged to use that final minute to wrap up your presentation.

I now invite Ms. Prince to make her opening remarks.

Ms. Prince, you have the floor.

Ms. Corinne Prince (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Settlement and Integration, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. I would like to note that I am joining you from the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

I am here this afternoon with Michèle Kingsley, Director General, Immigration Branch, and Alexandra Hiles, Director General, Domestic Network.

[*English*]

Immigration has been crucial in shaping Canada into the diverse and prosperous nation it is today. Through Canada's managed approach to migration, there are pathways for foreign nationals to study, work, and live in Canada, including access to citizenship.

Under the Constitution Act, 1867, immigration is a shared federal, provincial and territorial responsibility. Immigration, therefore, requires close and frequent engagement and collaboration with provincial and territorial counterparts.

Canada's approach to migration is intended to maximize Canada's economic and social well-being, while protecting the safety and security of Canadians. The department creates legal pathways for people to come to Canada on a temporary or permanent basis, and plans the number of new immigrants and the balance between permanent resident categories in advance.

However, immigration does much more than facilitating the movement of people. It brings people with skills, talent and social connections, thereby contributing to Canada's economic development and recovery, as well as enriching its diversity.

IRCC establishes annually the immigration levels plan. The latest plan released on February 14, 2022, describes the levels plan for 2022-24. It specifies the government's intention to welcome a significant number of new permanent residents: 431,645 in 2022; 447,055 in 2023; and 451,000 in 2024.

With the 2021-23 levels plan, IRCC started indicating the number of permanent resident admissions needed to meet the 4.4% francophone immigration target to be reached by 2023. This number is based on ranges, but specifically outside of the province of Quebec.

- (1620)

[*Translation*]

There are two major pathways to citizenship for immigrants wishing to stay or live in Canada: permanent residence, the basic facts of which are outlined in the levels plan I just described, and temporary residence, for temporary workers, international students and other visitors.

Today, I'll be focusing more on permanent residence, which concerns two main categories of immigrants: economic and non-economic. The latter are identified based on objectives associated with family reunification and social and humanitarian considerations.

Skilled workers are the first economic permanent residents. IRCC offers a range of economic programs, most of which are governed by the express entry electronic application processing system. That system facilitates the identification and selection of candidates with certain characteristics or basic human capital factors. For example, points are awarded to applicants who have a job offer based on their level of education, work experience or proficiency in one of the two official languages.

Then there is the applicant's nomination by a province or territory. Every province and territory has its own programs that may target international students residing in Canada, skilled workers or business people.

Lastly, the Canadian system provides refugee protection through two main programs: the refugee and humanitarian resettlement program, for persons seeking protection outside Canada, and the in-Canada asylum program, for people filing refugee protection claims within Canada.

[*English*]

The visual diagram shared with you shows you the steps, starting from the submission of the request and its reception, to the decision-making process and the communication of the decision to the requester. In the latter step, the client receives the visa or residence permit.

The duration of the immigration process varies from one file to another, but it is understood that it can take from six months to two years for an immigrant of the economic class to settle permanently in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Now I'm going to discuss francophone immigration. It can be said that francophone immigration to Canada operates along two distinct lines: francophone immigration to Quebec and francophone immigration outside Quebec. Under the Canada-Québec Accord, reached in 1991, Quebec is the only province that publishes its immigration objectives and targets annually. However, Canada is required to establish the total number of permanent residents for the country as a whole, taking into consideration Quebec's advice on the number of immigrants that it wishes to receive in all categories.

IRCC works with our Quebec government counterpart, the ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, in a manner consistent with the two orders of government defined under the Canada-Québec Accord. For the purposes of my presentation, I would like to focus on francophone immigration outside Quebec. But, first of all, a few basic facts.

The government acknowledges that francophone immigration strengthens the social fabric of Canada and plays a key role in maintaining its bilingual character. Immigration is one of the factors that assists in maintaining francophones' demographic weight in Canada but is only one of many levers. Immigration cannot be considered the only solution. Francophone immigration assists francophone minority communities in developing economically, socially and culturally.

- (1625)

[*English*]

The particular focus of the government on francophone immigration dates back to 2003, which is when the 4.4% target for French-speaking immigrants outside Quebec was jointly established with the francophone community. More recently, and to streamline our approach, in 2019, the minister of IRCC announced the "Meeting Our Objectives: Francophone Immigration Strategy", which reaffirmed the goal of achieving the target of 4.4% of French-speaking immigrants outside Quebec by 2023.

IRCC has put in place numerous activities to deepen the strategy, including additional points for strong French language skills of bilingual candidates introduced first under the express entry system in 2017 and then increased in 2020.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Pardon me, Ms. Prince, but I just want to inform you that you have one minute left. Thank you.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you.

[English]

In 2020 and 2021, in response to the pandemic, the department implemented a number of measures to facilitate the transition of temporary residents to permanent residency.

IRCC continues to explore innovative ways to support francophone immigration with the shift to more visual promotional activities, particularly the 17th edition of Destination Canada mobility forum, held virtually in November 2021.

[Translation]

We acknowledge the progress that all these actions have achieved but also how important it is to continue and support new initiatives through cooperative efforts in the spirit of "by and for francophones".

We will now be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Prince.

We will now begin our questions with Mr. Dalton, of the Conservative Party, for six minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much for your comments.

As of February 8 last, more than 36 complaints had been filed with the Commissioner of Official Languages concerning the announcement that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Shaun Fraser, made in English only during a press conference.

Why wasn't the minister informed that this would be a problem? What will you do to prevent it from happening again?

Has the Treasury Board asked you to rectify the situation?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Is your question for Ms. Prince, Mr. Dalton?

Mr. Marc Dalton: It's for the Department of Citizenship and Immigration people.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Which of the three departmental witnesses wishes to answer Mr. Dalton's question?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask my colleague Ms. Kingsley to provide a more detailed answer.

• (1630)

Ms. Michèle Kingsley (Director General, Immigration Branch, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're aware of the complaints filed against the department concerning official languages, and we take them very seriously. We assess them on a case-by-case basis. The quality of French is a major concern of ours. It's important that we be able to communicate with our clients in both official languages, and in high-quality, error-free French. We will make sure that all future communications reflect that commitment.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

Historically, the Canadian government has never met the 4.4% francophone immigration target it set for itself. How does your minister explain that failure?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Chair.

Yes, a 4.4% francophone immigration target was set for outside Quebec in 2003, with the cooperation of community stakeholders, as I indicated in my remarks.

I would just emphasize that the target is supposed to be reached by the end of 2023 and that this is only 2022. So we have 18 more months in which to hit it. Developments in the COVID-19 situation have had an impact on the number of francophone admissions and on the percentage of those immigrants, since most applicants come from outside Canada. However, we've already put several measures in place to meet our target.

We've taken many initiatives, such as awarding additional points to francophone and bilingual applicants under the express entry system. French-speaking residents admitted to Canada through the express entry system represented 43% of all francophones outside Quebec from January to December 2021.

In 2021, the department also introduced components for francophone and bilingual candidates under the temporary resident to permanent resident pathway program for essential workers and students...

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much, Ms. Prince. I have only four minutes left.

Thank you for that information. Please forward any further comments you might have to us.

This target has been around for nearly 20 years, since 2003. As we've said, it's 4.4% of francophone immigration within the francophone minority community.

Have you conducted any studies to determine whether the target can help slow the decline in Canada's francophone population? That's my first question. Second, have you conducted any studies to determine whether those targets are enough to increase the percentage of francophones in the country?

These are important questions. Do you have any internal studies on this target?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 30 seconds to answer.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Yes, we set up a task force to examine the target in May 2021. It was established in support of IRCC's mandate to review the target and consider what must be done to meet it now and beyond 2023.

• (1635)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Prince.

Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

We now give the floor to Angelo Iacono for six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Greetings to the entire delegation from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and thank you for being here today.

Ms. Prince, awarding additional points to francophone and bilingual applicants is a good initiative. Once selected applicants have arrived, how does IRCC assist in their long-term settlement in francophone communities?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Chair.

Yes, long-term settlement is very important. In March 2019, IRCC implemented the meeting our objectives: francophone immigration strategy.

The purpose of that strategy is to achieve the three main objectives for supporting the vitality of francophone communities: to increase francophone immigration to Canada and outside Quebec, to support the integration and retention of French-speaking newcomers and, lastly, to strengthen the capacity of francophone communities.

Consequently, we also have a francophone integration pathway to retain newcomers to Canada and have increased its budget from \$40 million in 2019-2020 to \$61 million in 2021-2022.

These measures include French-language one-stop and pre-departure services to ensure that immigrants know what to expect when they arrive in Canada.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Ms. Prince.

Are there any figures or data on the 4.4% target you want to meet by 2023 that would indicate whether these new pathways to permanent residence are successful?

Ms. Corinne Prince: As regards the present target, francophones admitted in 2020 represented 3.6%...

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do you have any figures for us on that?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Do you mean the number of newcomers?

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Yes, but also the target you want to hit by 2023. You're looking at the figures for all years. Do you have any figures you can submit to us through the chair?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Yes, we could forward them to the committee following the meeting.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: How will IRCC's welcoming francophone communities initiative be implemented?

Ms. Corinne Prince: We introduced the welcoming francophone communities initiative in close cooperation with the francophone communities. This is the first time I've seen such a targeted process. The communities themselves suggested 14 welcoming francophone communities to the department, and we accepted the suggestions of each of those communities in every province and territory.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Please explain to us what IRCC's francophone integration pathway is.

• (1640)

Ms. Corinne Prince: The francophone integration pathway was launched in 2018 and offers newcomers the most comprehensive

French-language pathway possible in order to forge ties with francophone communities across the country based on the “by and for” concept. The ultimate goal is to ensure the vitality and sustainability of these communities.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 30 seconds left.

Ms. Corinne Prince: I'd like to add something. The “by and for” concept is very interesting. We're talking about integration services provided “by” francophone suppliers, and they are “for” francophone newcomers. Sometimes I add the word “with” because it's all done with the Canadian government.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you for that addition, Ms. Prince.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Earlier my colleague asked you why you've never met your francophone immigration percentage targets. With all due respect, I'd like to remind you that you've never stated a single one, but you must have a clear idea. Is it because it's hard to recruit immigrants in francophone countries? Can you at least cite a single reason why you've never hit your targets?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for that question.

Canada's efforts to reach the 4.4% target were recently complicated by one factor: the global COVID-19 pandemic. That really...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That definitely doesn't explain why you haven't met them because that's very recent.

Here's a factor that has had a major impact: the high refusal rate for students from African countries, most of which are francophone countries. We know the rate's the same for anglophone and francophone African countries, but, since African countries constitute a larger portion of the francophone immigration pool, it's very hard to reach the targets if there's a high refusal rate.

Then why do we deny temporary permits to so many students from those countries?

We're told that's related more to GDP. It's definitely hard to recruit more francophone immigrants if we can't solve that problem.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thanks to the member for his question.

Yes, the department has seen a slightly higher rate of refusal of applications from African students.

I'm going to turn the floor over to my colleague Ms. Kingsley, who can provide a few more details.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thanks to the member for his question on refusal rates associated with foreign students.

First of all, I would repeat that foreign students are a priority for the department for many reasons...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: My question wasn't about foreign students.

Ms. Prince said the refusal rate was slightly higher, but when it's 80% or 95% in certain African countries, you can say it's very high.

Why do we refuse so many African students, both anglophone and francophone?

Since we know they form a francophone immigration pool, why systematically reject African students?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: When we review the study permit applications submitted by students from Africa and elsewhere, each one is assessed individually based on the same criteria. Those criteria are a letter of acceptance from a designated learning institution, financial support...

• (1645)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Excuse me. You're talking about criteria, but that doesn't answer my question. There must be a criterion that systematically disqualifies African students.

One reason we repeatedly see on the ground—because temporary permits are denied in many cases involving African students—is the fear that those students may want to settle in Quebec, not just study there. At the same time, we have an international education strategy to double the number of foreign students by telling them they're eligible for permanent residence.

On the one hand, we advertise the fact that students can study in our colleges and acquire permanent residence—we see a lot of that at anglophone colleges in Quebec—while, on the other hand, we say we don't want francophone students to settle here.

There's a double standard here.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thanks to the member for his question.

Yes, intention to leave the country at the end of the authorized stay is the third criterion. It's all right to have a dual intention, to apply for temporary residence and then permanent residence. However, there's no guarantee that permanent residence will be granted to a non-citizen seeking it.

The department must ensure that students intend, and are able, to return to their country of origin if, for any reason, they're denied permanent residence.

I don't want to seem overly technical here, but applicants are allowed to have two concurrent intentions because, under a controlled immigration model, we want to encourage certain students to stay permanently, but that isn't guaranteed for everyone. In the event students are unable to stay permanently, we have to ensure they can return home.

However, a student's declaration of a dual intention isn't a reason for refusal.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Yet that's what many immigration officers on the ground tell us. There's a problem...

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. Time is up.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'll continue in the next round

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): We will continue with Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks as well to our witnesses today.

I'll begin with a question on the targets that my colleagues previously discussed.

You discussed a 4.4% target, but that's the old target for francophone immigrants. The government has failed to meet that target over the past 20 years. We have to do more than just continue with it. We need a remedial target.

Are you planning to adopt a new remedial target to erase the government's decades of failure.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, thanks to the member for her question.

The current target for 2023 is 4.4%.

As I told another committee member, we've already established a task force that will, first, explore ways to meet the current target and, second, set a new target for 2023 and subsequent years.

So we're working closely with the francophone communities outside Quebec. We're looking at how we can catch up. We're also trying to set another, post-2023 target that will help increase the demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec.

We've also worked closely with our colleagues from the Department of Canadian Heritage. In February 2021, Minister Joly released a white paper stating that immigration was one of the factors involved in increasing the demographic weight of francophones in future both in and outside Quebec.

• (1650)

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to ask a question that's been previously addressed in committee.

The Commissioner of Official Languages told the committee that there's a systemic problem within the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, particularly with respect to foreign student recruitment.

The Commissioner confirmed that study permit applications submitted by students from certain countries, African countries in particular, were systematically denied. That's a fact of tremendous concern to us and would be to all Canadians aware of it.

How can you explain that to us?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for that question, Mr. Chair.

The applications of students from all countries around the world are very important to the department.

I'm going to hand off to my colleague Ms. Kingsley, who will provide you with more details.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

The acceptance rate for study permit applications varies widely from year to year and country to country. Sometimes we see discrepancies. Our analysis shows that the discrepancies have been quite minor to date, if you compare certain African countries.

However, the idea that there might [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] discrimination or unconscious bias is an important matter for the department, and it is taking measures to address racism, discrimination and unconscious bias in all its areas of activity.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for that answer.

I have a final question.

We hope to see a change on the department's part regarding this potential systemic discrimination.

I also want to emphasize that I cited the commissioner's words in my question. This is a serious issue.

Lastly, my final question concerns the shortage of francophone immigration personnel.

I've previously spoken in this committee about francophone child care facilities and educational institutions experiencing acute staff shortages. French-language services are deficient in many regions, including my own, and the lack of educators hurts francophone communities. This is where immigration could really change the situation.

How will the Department of Citizenship and Immigration assist the communities in providing those services, by, for example, facilitating recruitment of qualified francophone educators?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 20 seconds for your answer.

[*English*]

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, I'd be pleased to take that question.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your question, Ms. Ashton.

[*English*]

Yes, the department has been working with its missions overseas, particularly our mission in Paris, which is in charge of selection from all francophone countries, to encourage French teachers, French immersion teachers, early childhood educators and health workers—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Ms. Prince, I must unfortunately interrupt you. Perhaps someone else will ask you the same question later on.

I now give the floor to Mr. Gourde for five minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being with us today.

I've been a member for 16 years. In my early years, 2006 and 2007, we had to handle 50 to 60 immigration cases in the riding every year. Today there are between 500 and 700. That's more than 10 to 12 cases a week. People deal with problems every day. Members' offices have become service points of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, but we don't have the staff we need. Helping you takes up 60% to 80% of my employees' time. It's very frustrating. My employees are exhausted.

What do you intend to do to help us? People try to reach your department by telephone to see where their cases stand, but they never get an answer. So they go through their MPs' offices. However, we're very limited in what we can do. We try to follow up their files and locate bottlenecks in the process. Then we call your department. We used to have direct lines and could get an answer in 24 hours. Now it can take up to two weeks in some cases. We aren't allowed to inquire about more than seven cases at a time. These days it takes two months to provide people on the waiting list with the information they've requested. It makes no sense.

What measures can you take to help us?

• (1655)

Ms. Corinne Prince: I'd like to thank Mr. Gourde for his question.

The department does in fact work closely on an everyday basis with members' offices to answer any questions received...

Mr. Jacques Gourde: More people need to be available. We can't wait two weeks for an answer to a question. It now takes two to three weeks. In 2007, 2008 and 2009, we would get an answer in 24 hours. And now we're talking about three weeks. In the long run, it will take a month or a month and a half. That's too long.

Do you, or do you not have a staffing problem?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for that question.

In every immigration levels plan, IRCC increased the number of employees available to answer questions from citizens.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: How many employees do you have available to answer questions from the 338 members of Parliament who, day after day, call upon the services of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, I don't have the exact number at hand. We could provide it to the committee after today's meeting. However, I can tell you that we've set up a call centre...

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Excuse me, but your call centre doesn't work. The wait times have got considerably longer. This service is really very disappointing.

At our end, we get discouraged people in tears. Some have paid a fortune to lawyers to immigrate to Canada. In many instances, services could have been provided free, but the department refused to answer their questions. These people give up on settling in Canada because it's too expensive. I've seen horror stories, amounts from \$50,000 to \$60,000 that very poor people obtained by mortgaging everything they had. They had borrowed money from their family to come to Canada, but couldn't get an answer. Their file was not moving. I've seen people wait four or four and a half years only to be told in the end that their application was being refused.

Would it not be possible to provide more services, more quickly. Otherwise, it will become a national scandal.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned earlier, the department has continued over a period of many years to provide services to MPs, Canadians and those who have submitted an application to the department.

Perhaps I can give the floor to...

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Excuse me. Did the government ask you to speed up or to be more efficient in processing all the applications that have been held up for so long?

Have you been directed to work more quickly?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, I can clearly state that our employees are working hard, particularly given the crises around the world, in Afghanistan and in Ukraine. We have set up a call centre that operates 18 hours a day, and on weekends.

Honestly, it's an outstanding service. There are not many countries around the world that operate a call centre on weekends and for extended hours every day.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Excuse me, I have a final question.

I've been told that many people start out working at your department and use it as a springboard to move on to other departments, and that you have a lot of employees who don't stay because they find it too difficult to work at IRCC.

Is that part of the problem? Are there employees who only stay for five months and then find a job in another department?

[English]

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair—

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Briefly please, Ms. Prince.

[English]

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, I can tell you that I have worked with this department since December 2008, and when I arrived at IRCC I found employees and colleagues who have worked at this department their entire career. I would say that it's a department that is an exciting place to work, and we get to work on issues that are important not only for Canadians but internationally as well.

• (1700)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Prince.

I am now going to give the floor to Ms. Lattanzio for five minutes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

My questions are going to be centring around the Canada-Quebec accord. I'd like to ask either Ms. Prince or whoever can answer the question as to what are the Quebec government's immigration priorities today, in 2022.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, thank you very much for the question.

I honestly think it would be best if you asked our colleagues in the province of Quebec in the immigration department to appear before the committee to share with you their priorities. I could tell you about federal priorities.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Can you tell me your priorities vis-à-vis the Quebec-Canada accord?

Ms. Corinne Prince: The federal government entered into the Canada-Quebec accord in 1991 and has worked closely with the Province of Quebec to ensure the entrance of francophone newcomers to the province. Under the accord, the federal government provides an annual grant to the Province of Quebec to cover the cost of settlement services provided within the province.

We work with our colleagues in Quebec every year to do a comparative study looking at the services provided by the Province of Quebec in comparison to the services that the federal government provides to all newcomers outside of Quebec. It has been a very positive relationship over the years and continues to be.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I understand that in your preliminary remarks you stated that the Quebec government issues an annual report. Has the annual report changed much in its priorities? Or what have you noticed has changed in the last 10 years?

[Translation]

Ms. Corinne Prince: I'd like to thank the member for her question.

[English]

The level [Technical difficulty—Editor] of Quebec has grown over the past 10 years. Frankly, the mix has become more diverse, with more international students, Operation Syria refugees and, more recently, the Afghanistan initiative and a higher number of refugees through the humanitarian class.

This, coupled with the recent global pandemic, has forced not only the province of Quebec, but our colleagues in other provinces and our global partners to pivot to offer settlement services virtually and online. This has been done very quickly.

Given the future of the pandemic, we would expect there to be a very significant number of services that will continue in a virtual format for the coming years. In fact, the province has implemented a number of those programs online. Recently, the province of Quebec, as well as other provinces, has gone back to a hybrid approach of both in-person and virtual services.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I'm going to read something to you, Ms. Prince, with regards to the presentation you gave, and then I'm going to end it with a question.

You said in your presentation that the Canada-Quebec accord on immigration stipulates the following:

Québec undertakes to pursue an immigration policy that has as an objective the reception by Québec of a percentage of the total number of immigrants received in Canada equal to the percentage of Québec's population compared with the population of Canada.

Furthermore, it reads:

...Québec undertakes to receive, out of the total number of refugees and persons in similar situations received by Canada, a percentage at least equal to the percentage of immigrants that it undertakes to accept.

Do these commitments run contrary to the objective of preserving the province's francophone character?

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for the question.

In fact, in 2019, Quebec's share of immigrants represented approximately half of its demographic weight in Canada, which was 23%. According to the estimate [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 48% of asylum-seekers in Canada, 18% of temporary workers and 14% of foreign students.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Prince and Ms. Lattanzio.

We will now move on to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, why is the refusal rate for temporary permit applications so much higher when students want to come to Quebec compared to elsewhere in Canada?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thanks for the question Mr. Beaulieu.

I'm going to ask Ms. Kingsley to answer.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: The refusal rate for study permits fluctuates from year to year and from country to country, and it does this for several reasons.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I am looking at a table. We asked an Order Paper question and received an answer. It shows that since 2015, the gap has grown steadily. The most recent data show that in 2021, the refusal rate in the rest of Canada was approximately 32%, whereas in Quebec it was 50% and even as high as 52%.

Am I to understand that you are unfamiliar with these data and unable to explain them?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I'd have to be able to consult the document in question.

Every study permit application is assessed individually in accordance with the same criteria. I explained these three criteria earlier...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Excuse me for interrupting, but you're not answering my question at all.

You are repeating the criteria. What I'm asking is why things are the way they are.

Not only that, but the acceptance rate for temporary study permit applications is much higher for anglophone universities than francophone universities.

Once again, you won't have an answer to my question. My view is that if we invite people here to question them, we should be able to get answers.

I'm not blaming you, because I think that those are the instructions you were given.

Are you able to give a partial answer to my question? I have figures that clearly reflect a refusal rate that is much higher for francophone than anglophone universities.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thanks for the question, Mr. Beaulieu.

I don't have the figures you're talking about in front of me at the moment, but I'd like to reiterate the fact that refusals and approvals fluctuate from year to year. Sometimes there is a higher approval rate at some universities compared to others, with the opposite occurring the following year.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Kingsley.

In connection with Mr. Beaulieu's comments, I would add that if you have any documents, information or tables you could provide in response to our questions, please give them to the clerk, because after all, as a committee, we do expect to receive answers.

We will now continue with Mr. Boulerice for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

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

I'd like to return to discrimination against African immigrants and the abnormally high refusal rate for them.

Ms. Kingsley, you have been focusing your discussion on three criteria, among others, but is there institutional prejudice in the software or the algorithm, or anything like that?

Why is this happening for them, when it's not the case for other developing countries, whether in Asia or South America?

Why has Africa been treated differently from other countries in recent months?

• (1710)

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for your question, Mr. Boulerice.

I will get Ms. Kingsley to answer, so that she can provide more details about the refusal rates for certain countries and the reasons for them.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The department takes all matters related to discrimination and racism very seriously.

With respect to the review of study permit applications from Africa, some specially-designed training programs to combat racism and prejudice have been made available to decision-makers. My colleague Ms. Hiles could provide further details.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Ms. Kingsley. I'm hoping there will be lots of training.

I'm going to pick up where my colleague Jacques Gourde left off. We rarely agree about anything, but I share his frustration and exasperation. Our offices are bursting with immigration files from people living in despair and uncertainty. These are people who want to settle in Montreal, in Quebec, and whose files remain unanswered for 24 or even 36 months with no reply. These are people who have started businesses, SMEs, who are not getting a reply. They are desperate. They are having to pay for a second medical examination because the deadlines have been exceeded by so much that their initial examinations are no longer valid and they have to redo them. That costs them hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

Can you promise that this disastrous situation will be improved and that you are planning to introduce measures to process files within time periods that make sense?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Mr. Boulerice, your speaking time is up. I'm not sure whether Ms. Prince can provide an answer in 15 seconds. If not, we'll move on to the next person.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for your question, Mr. Boulerice.

I would like Ms. Hiles to speak to that one.

[*English*]

Ms. Alexandra Hiles (Director General, Domestic Network, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I would simply add that the levels plans that have been tabled in Parliament are funded levels plans. The department is aware of processing times and backlogs [*Inaudible—Editor*] and we do have plans in place—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Excuse me, Ms. Hiles. Unfortunately, notwithstanding my respect for your testimony, I am going to have to interrupt you because time is up.

Ms. Alexandra Hiles: All right.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You'll have an opportunity to answer in another round of questions.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton: I would like to follow up on what Mr. Boulerice and Mr. Gourde were saying.

It's becoming increasingly difficult to help people in our riding offices. It's taking hours, weeks and even months of waiting. It's

definitely affecting francophone immigrants too. This has to be dealt with.

We are being told that the problems are caused by COVID-19, but that's been two years now. Today, we're talking about Ukraine and Afghanistan. There are always crises somewhere in the world. This situation is unacceptable not only for us, the MPs, but for all Canadians. I know that you are spokespersons and are not personally responsible, but it's important for you to transmit this message so that something can be done about it.

On February 9, the Commissioner of Official Languages stated that:

[...] we're supposed to reach the 4.4% target by 2023, but obviously we're not going to get there. This means that over 75,000 francophone immigrants who we could have welcomed to Canada, outside of Quebec, will not be coming.

Are you in agreement with this figure with respect to the number of immigrants we could have received and who will now not be coming?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for that question.

We have continued to add a number of initiatives to ensure—I must say that economic considerations are more promising for...

Mr. Marc Dalton: Ms. Prince, my question is a simple one: do you agree, yes or no, with the Official Languages Commissioner, when he mentioned 75,000 people?

• (1715)

Ms. Corinne Prince: Mr. Chair, I would like the member to remind us of the context in which the Commissioner of Official Languages mentioned 75,000 people.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Perhaps you could answer my question later. I will now move on to another question.

The media have been reporting that immigration applications from francophone Africans had been refused. We have discussed this topic already.

Is there a structural problem at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration?

How are you going to resolve the African immigrants problem?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for the question, Mr. Dalton.

I'll let Ms. Kingsley answer this one.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: As I said earlier, there are many reasons why a study permit for someone from Africa might be refused. We take allegations of unconscious prejudice very seriously. Decision-makers are given very specific training in order to be able to determine whether the presence of unconscious prejudices has influenced decisions. We also look at ways that might lead to enhanced diversity in the applications approved.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: We are trying to see...

Mr. Marc Dalton: I don't want to be rude, but I have more than one question to ask and there's not much time available to me.

I'd like to talk about British Columbia, where I am a member of Parliament.

In the report entitled “English and French: Towards a substantive equality of official languages in Canada,” it was established that immigration was a priority for the development of francophone minority communities.

Can you tell us how many francophone immigrants were admitted to Canada, and more specifically in British Columbia, over the past five years? Do you have these figures at hand, or could you have them sent to us?

Ms. Corinne Prince: No, I don't have the figures for the number of francophone immigrants admitted to British Columbia over the past five years at hand.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

Each province has a 4.4% target to meet for francophone immigration, with a view to enhancing the vitality of the French language everywhere in Canada. That's very important. I'm looking...

Ms. Corinne Prince: We can send you...

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

Ms. Prince, I think you were on the point of telling us that you were going to have this information sent to the clerk.

Ms. Corinne Prince: That's right.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you.

I am now going to move on to your colleague, Mr. Serré, for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses with us today.

My question is for you, Ms. Prince. I would like a yes or no answer.

Can you inform the committee about the number of francophones, by province, that have immigrated to Canada since 2003? The targets have never been met.

Can you, yes or no, provide us with this information?

I see that your answer is affirmative. All we want is for you to send us a table.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Yes, we can do that.

Mr. Marc Serré: Okay.

Could you send us a table showing the number of employees at the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, by year since 2003, as well as the number of newcomers? There were 400,000 last year, a record.

I am asking for statistics by province on the number of employees by year since 2003, and the number of newcomers to Canada.

I see that you are nodding. Thank you.

My next question is non-partisan. In fact, I think that our committee functions extremely well. When we talk about targets since 2003, we are talking about targets over a 20-year period. This year, we have a Liberal government. Before that it was another party, and

the targets were never met. My question is therefore not really partisan.

I would like to have statistics on francophones by province. Based on the provincial applicant programs, there were 7,600 newcomers in Ontario, very few of whom were francophone.

Ms. Prince, you began your presentation by saying that immigration was a shared federal-provincial jurisdiction. What would the federal government and the provinces have to do to reach these numbers?

There are 400,000 newcomers, but very few francophones. How is the jurisdiction shared between the federal government and the provinces? I know that in Ontario, there are very few francophone newcomers. Is it the role of the province or the federal government? Is it a shared role?

Could you come up with any recommendations or solutions for us?

• (1720)

[English]

Ms. Corinne Prince: As the member has indicated, immigration is a shared jurisdiction to achieve not only the federal target of 4.4% by 2023...and at least five provinces and territories also have provincial targets. The Province of Ontario has a 5% target.

I mentioned earlier in this committee that the best way to bring in francophone newcomers is through economic programs. That is not only the federal economic program but also the provincial nominee program that the member mentioned. The Province of Ontario has prioritized francophone immigration and added several PNP streams with a view to attaining the 5% target for the province.

As the member noted as well, we have not yet—and we still have more than 18 months to go—reached the 4.4% target federally, but we work in close collaboration with our provincial and territorial partners.

In fact, in 2018 we created a federal, provincial, and territorial action plan to try to find the best way to work collaboratively and to ensure that we were using our missions overseas to promote francophone immigration to source countries.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Prince, could you tell us, in 30 seconds, about coordination with the province?

Our committee is indeed looking for solutions. So if there is a coordination table with the province, it's not only the federal government that plays a role.

Can you tell us about any recommendations made by this table, or any joint efforts by the two levels of government?

Ms. Corinne Prince: As I previously mentioned, we developed an action plan with the provinces and territories, and we can send a copy of it to the committee as the work proceeds.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you Ms. Prince and Mr. Serré.

I'm going to invoke my privilege as chair to ask two questions.

My question is for Ms. Kingsley. Earlier, you said that the applications submitted by African students were individual applications. I'd like to know whether it might be possible to provide coaching to those submitting these applications from individuals who, I infer, appear to be completing them badly.

In fact, many individual applications have been refused. Could the problem be attributable to how difficult it is to complete these applications properly and answer the questions appropriately? Should there be some promotion to provide support to these African applicants, because they represent a large pool of francophone immigrants? I think this might be an option worth exploring to solve the problem and ensure that more francophone immigrants come to Canada.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you for that question.

The applications are in fact individual, but then so is each review. Every single application is evaluated separately. We do some coaching and awareness training abroad to ensure that the applications are properly completed by our clients.

I'll give the floor to Ms. Hiles, who can provide more details about this.

• (1725)

[*English*]

Ms. Alexandra Hiles: Absolutely.

I would point out that you are quite right. There is work to do on promotion and recruitment and counselling applicants in how to submit their completed applications. In 2021, for example, we had 20 webinars where we took time to meet with students and explain the requirements to be issued a study permit to Canada, the common reasons for refusal and how to successfully complete an application.

Thank you for the excellent question. As Madam Kingsley mentioned, we are putting a fair amount of effort towards that.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Hiles.

Mr. Beaulieu has a point of order.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As there are still five minutes left, are we going to continue asking questions to the very end?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): The problem, Mr. Beaulieu, is that I can't break down the speaking time equitably among the four groups.

Nevertheless, I'm going to ask a second question, as I mentioned in my introduction. A chair can always invoke privilege. I want to go back to Mr. Serré's question and address the IRCC team.

There's been talk of applications from Afghanistan, and now Ukraine. In crisis situations like these, are special teams chosen from among members of the regular team, or are they new teams?

In other words, are we robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you very much for your question, Mr. Chair.

When there's a crisis like the one in Afghanistan and the one emerging now in Ukraine, we at IRCC work together.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Ms. Prince, excuse me for interrupting. I just want to know whether these are special teams or if you simply draw upon people from the regular teams to deal with specific cases like the Afghanistan crisis.

Ms. Corinne Prince: The answer is that we are currently putting together teams to process applications from Ukraine on a priority basis. They are existing IRCC employees.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you, Ms. Prince.

If everyone is in agreement, I'm going to give the final minute to my colleague Mr. Beaulieu so that he can ask a quick question.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'll be very brief.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): There are no objections, so you have the floor now, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Marc Serré: Sixty seconds.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Otherwise, we could allow the NDP to ask a final question.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Go ahead, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I think that you got onto something useful when you said that you had been conducting studies to see whether there might be a form of unconscious racism or discrimination, because I have experienced it. Recently, there were unilingual English positions to be filled at IRCC offices in Montreal. I've already argued on behalf of allowing a lawyer to plead in French before the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Nothing unconscious about that.

So it's essential to look into that to see whether there is some form of francophobia or something else that's not working at IRCC.

Ms. Corinne Prince: Thank you for that question.

I will now give the floor to Ms. Kingsley.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): You have 20 seconds left.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you.

Yes. Absolutely. Combatting all forms of discrimination, whether based on language or anything else, is a priority at the department. We have a zero-tolerance policy against any discrimination, and that applies to the corporate culture, the workforce, the teams, the programs, the policies and the decision-making. It therefore applies to the entire continuum of activity sectors, but also to the culture and employees.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Joël Godin): Thank you very much, Ms. Kingsley.

I'd like to thank the three representatives from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Ms. Corinne Prince, Ms. Alexandra Hiles and Ms. Michèle Kingsley, for having answered questions from the committee members. We're looking forward to receiving from you the documents requested by the committee members.

I would now like to mention that the next meeting will be held on Wednesday, and that it will be on the same subject, namely francophone immigration to Canada and Quebec.

I'd like to conclude by thanking the technical staff, the clerk and the interpreters.

I would also like to thank all the committee members. I hope that your acting chair was up to the task.

The meeting is adjourned.

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