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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1620)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Hello, everyone.

[*English*]

Welcome to meeting number nine of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

[*English*]

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from health authorities as well as a directive of the Board of Internal Economy on Monday, February 14, 2022, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain two metres of physical distancing and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when seated. You can also maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizer provided in the room.

[*Translation*]

As the Chair I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting and I thank members in advance for their cooperation.

For those of you who are attending virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

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. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately—feel free to cut me off. We will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in the committee room.

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

A reminder that all comments by committee members should be addressed through the Chair. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

[*English*]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me. Please know that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure 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 continuing its study on francophone immigration to Canada and Quebec.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses who will be testifying during the first hour of the meeting.

Before going any further, I'd like to point out that although there are votes in the House, our extraordinary team made up of the analysts, the clerk, the technicians and the interpreters have managed to extend the meeting time. In my opinion, and if the committee consents, the meeting can be two hours long. We will see, but the team is available for a two-hour meeting.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask a question.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: We just learned that there will be a call for a vote at 4:49 p.m., and that the vote will take place at 5:20 p.m. That means your plan won't work.

I'd like us to have a plan for both panels. I, for one, am available to stay a little later, but my schedule unfortunately doesn't permit me to stay here for two more hours.

I'd like to check in with the other committee members.

The Chair: The meeting will adjourn at 6:15 p.m.; we're not asking that the meeting be two hours longer.

Mr. Joël Godin: The trouble is—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): What we could do—

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, when the bells ring, we can continue the meeting, if all members agree. It's only during the vote that we must vote.

Mr. Joël Godin: I certainly agree with you, Mr. Chair. The problem is that we're going to hear the first panel but maybe not the second.

I just want us to make a decision now, out of respect for our two panels. Do we want to shorten the time for the first panel to leave some time for the second panel?

I move that we agree to continue until 6 p.m., with the understanding that some members may have to leave us before then.

The Chair: In any event, our rules allow us to continue after that, for those who are able to stay.

Mr. Joël Godin: Unfortunately, I can't stay later than 6 p.m., and my colleague has to leave at 5:50 p.m. So let's aim for 6 p.m.

The Chair: All right. What I'm saying is that our rules still allow us to continue to hear testimony even if some people have to leave.

Mr. Joël Godin: Is that allowed even if we don't have a quorum?

The Chair: Yes, since there is no vote.

Without further ado, we will now proceed. We'll try to finish the first part of the meeting at about 5:15 p.m. and then continue with the second panel of witnesses.

I apologize to the witnesses. It's always messed up like this when there are votes.

I would now like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. In the first hour, we have, by videoconference, lawyer Stéphane Handfield with Handfield et Associés, and Honorine Ngountchoup, welcoming and integration services officer for international students at Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick. Both are appearing as individuals.

Finally, we welcome representatives from the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario: president Carol Jolin, executive director Peter Hominuk and policy analyst Bryan Michaud.

You will each have up to five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed to rounds of questions. I will let you know when you have one minute remaining.

Mr. Handfield, you have the floor.

• (1625)

Mr. Stéphane Handfield (Lawyer, Handfield et Associés, Avocats, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting me here today.

I've been a member of the Barreau du Québec since 1992. I was a member of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada for 11 years. From 2012 to 2015, I was a lecturer at the Saint-Laurent

CEGEP, teaching in the administrative techniques—immigration advisory program. I'm a member of the Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association and the Association des avocats de la défense de Montréal.

I practise immigration law exclusively at Handfield et Associés, Avocats. I also work as an inspector for the professional inspection service of the Barreau du Québec. I co-authored the book *Démantèlement tranquille*, published by Éditions Québec Amérique in 2018. I am the author of *Immigration et criminalité au Canada : Quand l'expulsion devient inévitable*, a book published by Wilson & Lafleur in 2020, and the book *Fatima : le parcours d'une réfugiée*, also published by Wilson & Lafleur, in 2021.

Over the past 30 years, I have often had to deal with the lack of respect for the French language in immigration matters in various forums. This has happened at the Immigration and Refugee Board, at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and at the Canada Border Services Agency. I have seen that this situation has been getting worse for a number of years. Let me give you a few examples.

At a refugee protection claimant's hearing, the Immigration and Refugee Board tried to prevent me from using the language of proceedings chosen by my client, in this case French. The Federal Court had to intervene to ensure that my client's choice was respected, which involved time and energy that could have been invested in a much better way.

It was impossible to communicate in French with registry officers of the Immigration and Refugee Board at the regional office in Toronto, even though several files of refugee protection claimants from Montreal had been transferred to that office.

Just yesterday, in the case of a refugee protection claimant in Montreal, while the language of the proceedings was French, it was impossible to use the services of a French-speaking interpreter to translate from French to the claimant's mother tongue. Only an English-speaking interpreter was assigned to the file.

It's not uncommon to receive a 12-line communication from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada containing no fewer than 17 errors in French.

Recently, I received written reasons from an Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada officer for a decision on an application for permanent residence with humanitarian and compassionate considerations. This communication was in English only, even though the application had been submitted in French and the language of correspondence chosen was French.

An officer's reasons for decision for a pre-removal risk assessment were sent in English only, even though the application and written submissions were submitted in French and the language of the procedures chosen by the client was French.

It's common to receive correspondence from an Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada officer in English only as part of a family reunification file, when the file was submitted in French and the language of correspondence chosen was also French.

Unfortunately, these don't seem to be exceptional or isolated cases, but rather a trend that is taking root. So we can advance the hypothesis that francophones are facing discrimination in immigration.

As I've been practising immigration law for 30 years, I could go on giving you examples of cases where the French language has been flouted by immigration authorities in Canada in favour of the English language.

So it seems to me that the government's intervention to ensure respect for the French language before the various immigration authorities is more urgent than ever.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Handfield. You managed to make your opening remarks in three and a half minutes. It was very brief.

I will now give the floor to Honorine Ngountchoup for five minutes.

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup (International Student Reception and Integration Support Officer, Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick , As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Honorine Ngountchoup. I'm from Cameroon, and I arrived in Canada in 2016.

As a francophone immigrant, I consider myself Canadian given my presence, community involvement and love for Canada.

I am a member of provincial, regional and local boards. I have a full-time job, and I'm a single mother of a Canadian-born boy. I created an initiative to encourage my region to discover my culture, to allow newcomers to rediscover some of what they've left behind by coming to Canada and to bring together all the francophones and francophiles in our beautiful country. Through my personality, my background, my vision and my entrepreneurship, I enrich the cultural content of my province. I have created many murals for the francophonie to strengthen people and their experiences.

I am part of the Festival international de Slam/Poésie en Acadie collective, and for the past four years, I have been hosting a program called Francophone à Sommet FM to promote the French language. This makes me an actor in the expansion of the French language. My contribution to my community and the province was considered exceptional. In 2009, I received the campus leadership award from the New Brunswick Community College, the NBCC, in Campbellton, and in 2020, I received the champion of cultural diversity award, individual category, from the New Brunswick Multicultural Council. I continue to be involved in community, artistic and literary projects in my province.

Lately, I've been hearing a lot about systemic racism. Am I experiencing it? That's the question. Would I be able to recognize it at

all times? I don't know, because it's a new concept for me. Do I feel that I'm being treated unfairly because of my immigration status? My answer is yes.

It's impossible for me to talk about my immigrant experience in five minutes, so I will sum it up in this slam:

Final decision

September 22, 2021

We regret to inform you that you do not meet the eligibility criteria. Please see the final decision below.

The news fell like a sledgehammer
Right on my head
Right in my heart
Which flutters with fear
In the face of the final hour
Which has now just rung

I want to know the reason for "we regret".
And then I click
I look and want it to be just a snag
Application Status: Refused
How can it be refused?
Who could have validated the refusal
When I slog away to earn
The status approved

Click on the letter of refusal
The page doesn't work
CIC online services sent an incorrect answer
Refresh 10, 20, 100 times
100 unfortunate wishes sent to the universe
Dreaming that a miracle will turn the verdict upside down

Because I'm tired
And feel exhausted
From completing forms
That one day, will offer me citizenship

Why are they merciless?
Why do they mute themselves?
Why do they ignore reality?
Do they doubt our willingness?

Don't they say that truth sets you free?
My truth did not clear me
Since my background is rich
It took me your days to fill in my forms
To experience trauma, but they don't care

Application refused can't be my outcome
Believe me
I am not guilty of the divide
I am not guilty despite the form
I am guilty of my desire to exist
Guilty of my willingness
Guilty of my thirst for freedom
Above all, guilty of my truth

The one I once nurtured
To want to see the day
In this country of "good days"

Message for the IRCC
In making the next final decision
Think that my son's future isn't trivial
Think that I haven't had any rest in a while
And think that here is already my home

One thing is certain
I have overcome migraines
I have suffered the height of my suffering
I have faith that at the end of my sorrows
I would emerge Queen

Final decision

Slam

To meet the 4.4% target, IRCC needs to clarify the French test issue. I failed a French test, and I had to pay again and redo the entire assessment before applying for residency. It was a hard blow because I was always told that my French was excellent. I grew up, studied and worked in French. Even if you pass that test, the two-year validity of that test is an additional stress.

Some IRCC services need to be decentralized, such as biometric registration and medical exams. Service Canada and hospitals in rural areas with increasing numbers of francophones can provide services and save us 8- to 10-hour trips for appointments that last between 5 and 40 minutes.

Affordability is also a barrier for enriching francophones who are involved and present on Canadian soil. Accessing the IRCC website is a matter of luck, and talking to an agent on the phone is a feat. All of these aspects put the mental health of immigrants at risk throughout this journey to permanent residence.

I look forward to concrete solutions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ngountchoup.

The president of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, Mr. Jolin, now has the floor.

Mr. Carol Jolin (President, Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

I would first like to thank you for inviting the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario to appear before you as part of your work on francophone immigration to Canada. As an organization, we represent nearly 744,000 Franco-Ontarians.

I would also like to mention that I'm accompanied today by the AFO's executive director, Peter Hominuk, and our policy analyst, Bryan Michaud.

We are pleased to see that the Government of Canada recognizes the importance of francophone immigration to Canada. The survival of the Franco-Ontarian community depends greatly on the immigration of French-speaking people.

In addition, I would like to highlight the progress proposed in Bill C-13. The legislation specifies that the policy must include a target and accountability measures. It would be worthwhile to amend it to clarify the specific objective of the new policy. The legislation doesn't do what the government says it will do on immigration.

In recent years, we have seen initiatives that have had a positive impact on welcoming and retaining newcomers. The reception for francophones at Pearson Airport, improvements to the Express Entry system and the designation of three welcoming francophone communities have had interesting effects in Ontario.

However, there is still work to be done. That's why we're taking this opportunity to highlight some of the challenges facing the Franco-Ontarian community, since francophone immigration targets have still not been met in Ontario and across the country. In addition, we see that study permits are being denied to international students, especially those from Africa.

A few weeks ago, our university presidents testified before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. They pointed out that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada refused nearly 70% of study permit applications to those wishing to study at French-language post-secondary institutions in Ontario. One of the reasons given by the officers who assess the applications is that they did not consider the fact that they wanted to study in French outside Quebec to be an acceptable path.

At a time when we are witnessing the implementation and transformation of francophone universities in Ontario, this type of argument is counterproductive to what we are trying to accomplish in our province. Our universities, in addition to serving francophones and francophiles here, are powerful recruitment tools for francophone immigration. The French-language post-secondary pathway in Ontario is valid, and recognized and endorsed by the governments of Canada and Ontario.

The argument made by IRCC officers is a slap in the face to our community and to all students attending our post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, it would appear that many students are being denied visas because they have expressed a desire to work in Canada after they complete their studies. Francophone immigration nourishes and enriches our communities, and increases the francophone labour pool.

We are currently experiencing a shortage of francophone workers in Ontario, exacerbated by the pandemic, and we believe that welcoming francophone international students to our institutions is an important part of the solution.

Francophone international students who attend our institutions receive Canadian expertise and strengthen our official language minority communities. The training offered in Ontario would ensure successful professional, economic, social and cultural integration should they decide to apply for permanent residence. Their success is a key element to the vitality of Ontario's francophone community and to the future of the province.

The current pandemic has taken a toll on immigration across the country. This situation is even more acute in the francophone minority context in Ontario. The province has set a francophone immigration target of 5%, and the federal government has set a target of 4.4% outside Quebec. It's clear that these two targets are far from being met.

In the third quarter of 2021, in the midst of a pandemic, Ontario welcomed just over 2% of francophone immigrants. This alarming statistic applies to Canada as a whole. However, Ontario had reached 4.09% in 2020, which was encouraging.

- (1640)

For some years, the province of Ontario has been selecting more than 5% of French-speaking immigrants through its single immi-

gration program, the Ontario immigrant nominee program. We are of the opinion that the federal government should give the Government of Ontario the power to select more immigrants through the Ontario immigrant nominee program. In return, the province should commit to continue selecting at least 5% of the French-speaking candidates.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jolin.

Mr. Carol Jolin: Thank you.

The Chair: We will start the first round of questions. Everyone will have six minutes for their questions.

We will start with our friend Joël Godin.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the witnesses for their patience in rather special circumstances, such as when we have votes in the House of Commons.

Mr. Handfield, you are on the front lines. You are privileged to deal directly with clients, with people who need help and support in the immigration process. You said that immigration authorities have no respect for the French language. You also talked about the involvement on the part of the Federal Court.

My question is simple: what do we have to do?

You experience it every day. All the data, all the indicators show it: there is no respect for French-speaking immigration, as you said.

Can you give us some possible solutions to this major problem, which, in my opinion, is increasing exponentially?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada is a quasi-judicial tribunal. I agree, therefore, that it is a little difficult for parliamentarians to become directly involved at that level. However, the problem I have been seeing in recent years is that we have little recourse through which we can insist on the client's choice of language. This applies in the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, IRCC, and in the Canada Border Services Agency. Other than complaining to the Commissioner of Official Languages, there is not a lot of recourse. That leads to my recommendation to you to make sure that CBSA or IRCC officers are accountable.

There are no consequences when we receive a decision in English only on a file that was submitted in French, and when the client is not at all comfortable in English, but is comfortable in French. Receiving a decision is a little concerning and stressful for a claimant. When the claim is accepted, the consequences are fewer, but, when the decision is a refusal and the claimant does not understand the decision at all, you can imagine the additional stress that comes with the decision.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Handfield, as I listened to you, I felt the need to ask you a very specific question about the situation before March 1 and after March 1. Yesterday, a bill to modernize the Official Languages Act was introduced. That bill contains a section on francophone immigration.

Have you had the time to become familiar with the bill?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: I have not today, I am sorry.

Mr. Joël Godin: Let me quote clause 44.1. I will go right to the content:

44.1(2) The policy shall include, among other things,

(a) objectives, targets and indicators; and

(b) a statement that the Government of Canada recognizes that immigration is one of the factors that contributes to maintaining or increasing the demographic weight of French linguistic minority communities in Canada.

I could keep reading, but do you feel that this could give you some tools and could allow your clients fair access to French as the language to be used in making their cases?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Unfortunately, given the little information you have just provided me, I must answer your question in the negative. A desire to have thresholds for francophone immigration and an attempt to achieve them through various mechanisms will not result, either within the department or before the tribunal, in any more respect for French in the services provided to those involved in the process, meaning those seeking to immigrate.

I believe that more concrete measures should be taken in order for French to be respected, once and for all. It's important to recall that my experience is not recent; the situation has been going on for many years. Sadly, it seems to be here for good.

As long as there are no more concrete measures than those you have just mentioned, the situation will not change.

• (1645)

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Handfield.

My next question is a quick one; it goes to Ms. Ngountchoup.

You must surely have noticed the reports, as I have, that currently, more than 80% of francophone immigrants from Africa are refused. In your testimony, you expressed the feeling that you were a victim of racism to some extent. Do you attribute that to your country of origin or to the language you speak?

The Chair: You have 40 seconds, Ms. Ngountchoup.

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: I would not be able to say whether it has to do with my country of origin or with the language I speak. However, I do know that I had the feeling that, for no reason, my application had been bungled and processed unreasonably.

Let me give you a concrete example. When I submitted my application for permanent residency, the officer who was handling my file asked me to provide additional documents. Shortly afterwards, she told me that my application had been rejected because I had not provided those documents. Clearly, she had not even taken the time to check whether I had provided the documents before she rejected my application. All of a sudden, it—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ngountchoup. That is six minutes exactly. I am sorry to interrupt you, and I am not trying to be im-

lite, but you will be able to continue your answer when you are asked other questions.

The next speaker on the list is Mr. Drouin, for six minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to let Ms. Ngountchoup finish her story.

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: Okay.

As soon as I submitted my application, I was asked to provide additional documents, which I did. The officer told me that my application had been rejected without checking whether I had provided the documents that had been requested. I pursued the matter and made a number of calls. I did everything necessary in order to submit my application again. Shortly thereafter, my application was refused once more, on the ground that I had not adequately demonstrated that I was working in the category of employment for which I was applying. I had the feeling that the officer handling my file had made no effort to call me or write to me to ask for the appropriate information. The worst of it is that there is no recourse.

Let me point out another injustice. My letter of refusal was not in my IRCC account, so I could not see the reasons for which my application had been refused. I pursued the matter and an officer sent me the letter of refusal. To this day, that letter is still not in my account.

Meanwhile, I submitted another application for permanent residency under a new program that had been launched. From the letter that the new officer sent by email, I realize that I made the same mistake.

There is no recourse. At that point, you have to call an officer. I must have called 50 times, perhaps even 100 times, not counting all the hours on hold, waiting. It really makes no sense.

Anyway, I would not be able to tell you whether my application was refused because of my origin or my language. However, one thing is for sure, in terms of language. When I called for an appointment to sit the medical exams, the person only spoke English and made no effort to speak French. I made an effort to communicate in English and I was forced to write my emails in English in order to get an appointment. I had to translate everything with Google Translate. I finally got my appointment and off I went.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much, Ms. Ngountchoup.

My question goes to you, Mr. Jolin. I want to make sure that I have the right statistics. According to your testimony, through the Ontario immigrant nominee program, the provincial government achieved 4.09% in 2020, although the objective was 5%. Did I understand you correctly?

Mr. Carol Jolin: The 4.09% was for francophone immigration as a whole. Through the Ontario immigrant nominee program, the Government of Ontario was able to select its candidates and meet its objectives. The 5% objective was even surpassed: they achieved 5.4% in 2018 and 7.3% in the following year. The Government of Ontario was able to select 8,350 people who wanted to settle in Ontario in 2021.

We are asking, as the Government of Ontario is also asking, for the government to be able to select 13,000 newcomers itself. The program gives every indication that it will achieve, and even surpass, the objective of 5%.

Given that the Government of Ontario has demonstrated that, through this program at least, it is able to meet its target for francophone immigration, the Government of Canada could it give it more power to select more immigrants.

• (1650)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I have no position for or against, but you make a very good argument.

It is calculated that we could accept about 400,000 immigrants by 2023—perhaps the figure is 450,000, I don't recall exactly. That is about 16,000 francophone immigrants, using the 4% target for 2023. Your solution for meeting that target would involve giving the provincial government the tools so that it could help the federal government out.

Mr. Carol Jolin: That is one factor.

We still have to find out whether the 4.4% target for francophones outside Quebec remains appropriate. The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, the FCFA, is just finishing a detailed study on the issue of targets. The study is based on Statistics Canada data and on the analysis model that the organization has set out. We are waiting for that study to be published before we express an official opinion on what must be done with the 4.4%. But we absolutely have to do better.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I do not remember the name of the professor from New Brunswick, who explained that it is very difficult to attract francophones. I'm not looking to point any fingers, but Quebec has a large booth for use at conferences and at places where immigrants may be recruited. Quebec has a large booth that says that they speak French and invites people to settle there. New Brunswick and Ontario have small booths that also say they speak French, but ask people not to forget them.

The Chair: Forgive me for interrupting you, Mr. Drouin, but you have 30 seconds left, and the bells are summoning us. Do we have unanimous consent to continue the questions until the vote?

I see that everyone agrees. Let's continue.

You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much.

This is what I want to get at: regardless of the legislation that will be passed, how are things going on the ground?

Do you have any evidence on how things are going in countries where we would normally like to recruit French-speaking students?

Mr. Carol Jolin: Francophone immigration involves a lot of people from Africa. In that regard, we have a terrible lack of visa offices—

The Chair: I am sorry for interrupting you, Mr. Jolin, but you will be able to continue as you answer other questions.

We will now give the floor to our second vice-chair, Mr. Beaulieu, who has six minutes.

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

My first question goes to Mr. Handfield.

You are telling us that the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has actually denied you the opportunity to make your case in French, despite it being at your client's request. It happened at an immigration hearing, in Montreal, in Quebec.

Surely, that's an exception? You seem to be saying that it happens quite frequently.

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: I would really like to be able to tell you that it is an exception, but unfortunately it is not. Situations like that certainly happen and attempts are made to prevent us from presenting cases in French.

I was talking about a case where we had to complain to the Federal Court, which had to intervene and bring the Refugee Protection Division panel back into line. It told the panel that it had to accommodate the language of proceedings chosen by the client, French in this case. If the client chooses to proceed in French, the proceedings must be conducted in that language.

In another case, I insisted on proceeding in French, although the panel wanted to proceed in English for its own reasons. So I insisted and brought up that good old Federal Court decision. I got a curt reply, in English, that the panel knew who I was and that I was a troublemaker. The panel then walked out and, subsequently, we were given a hearing in French.

Of course, as we all know, in Montreal, there are huge number of cases involving claims for refugee protection. Roxham Road, of course, got a lot of coverage in the media in Quebec. A number of cases were transferred to the regional office in Toronto. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to be able to discuss matters in French with a registry officer in that regional office. In one case, when we insisted on speaking with a registry officer in French, we were told that someone would call us back. Several months later, we are still waiting for that call to be returned.

Unfortunately, the trend seems actually to be on the way to becoming entrenched.

• (1655)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I find this situation to be quite incredible, even though I am familiar with it. I experienced this kind of situation in another life when I tried to exert pressure so that lawyers would have the right to make their cases in French.

How do we explain that, in Quebec, someone would refuse to proceed in French? In your opinion, how can that be explained?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: I cannot explain it, any more than I can explain that, in 2021 and 2022, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada advertised unilingual English positions for immigration officers in Montreal. The clear message seems to be that immigration files are processed in English, in Quebec or anywhere else in Canada. That's the only explanation I can see.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Incredible.

There was one explanation in the Federal Court ruling. At the outset, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada said that it was not necessary to proceed in French because no prejudice was caused. How did the Federal Court respond to that?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Actually, the Federal Court was clear. Neither the panel nor counsel for the ministers, whether for the Canada Border Services Agency or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, get to choose the language of proceedings. The choice belongs to the client, the claimant, who must choose whether to proceed in French or in English. The right to proceed in either of the two official languages belongs to the client and to no one else, certainly not to the panel.

As soon the client expresses the wish to proceed in French, the panel must accommodate that decision and provide services in French. Documents must therefore be submitted in French, and, if the claimant does not have a command of either of the two official languages and if everything must be translated into their first language, an interpreter speaking French and the client's first language must be assigned to the case. That, fortunately, was the Federal Court's ruling.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If the administration of the Immigration and Refugee Board had the political will to allow everyone to proceed in French, which is a right provided for in the Official Languages Act, but even more so in the Charter of the French Language, do you think it could be effective to remind immigration officers and board members to treat French with respect?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: I will divide your question into two.

With the Immigration and Refugee Board, there must be clear directives from the minister to the chairperson of the board, then to the members of the various divisions of the board, in order to ensure respect both for French and the choice of language of proceedings.

Then, within the department, there must be clear measures to ensure that immigration officers respect the language chosen by claimants, and are held accountable for doing so.

As I mentioned earlier, the only recourse available to a client is to file a complaint with the Commissioner of Official Languages, and we know what can happen then.

The Chair: Thank you, sir, that was really interesting.

The floor now goes to Niki Ashton from Manitoba, for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all the witnesses who are here with us today. I want to tell them that I find their testimony overwhelming. We are all aware of the topic and some of the issues, but what they have

shared with us is very concerning. On the one hand, Canada says it wants to welcome French-speaking immigrants, but on the other hand, it does not provide them with the services they need to come and stay here. We must act on what the witnesses are proposing today. My thanks to them for their messages.

My first questions are for Ms. Ngountchoup.

Ms. Ngountchoup, the demographic weight of francophones in Acadia and New Brunswick is declining, as it is in many places in Canada. Moncton has a francophone university...

• (1700)

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: Excuse me, I am hearing the English interpretation, I don't know why.

The Chair: One moment, Ms. Ngountchoup. We will check that.

Is that working?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: It's the same for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: When I am speaking, do you just hear me in French?

[English]

If I speak in English, do you hear it in French?

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: No, there's no interpretation in French.

The Chair: Okay.

I am told that the problem is solved.

You can continue, Ms. Ashton

Ms. Niki Ashton: Moncton has a francophone university. As we know, Canada has systematically refused to accept francophone immigrants from Africa. At the same time, Canada has missed its target of welcoming 4.4% of francophone immigrants. That target was set in 2003, almost 20 years ago.

Do you think that there is an inconsistency between the target set and the refusal to accept French-speaking students?

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: I feel that there is a great deal of inconsistency, especially considering that there are currently many francophones in Canada who are not permanent residents.

The way language tests are evaluated... You cannot apply for permanent residency if you have not passed the language tests. They are evaluated in France.

Personally, I felt that I had a higher level of French than the person who did my evaluation. But I failed the test, and I am not the only one. I know others who did not pass the language test, even though they have lived, grown up, studied and worked in French for many years. A lot of people can express themselves in French on a daily basis, and can champion French and the Francophonie, but they cannot apply for permanent residency. That creates a rift.

Many francophones live in remote areas, and it is difficult for them to access services in French. In winter, no one wants to risk their life by travelling to take a French test. I travelled during the winter and risked my life three times. I had a major traumatic experience after finishing the language test. I told myself that I was not alone in the situation. Many who speak French are already here in Canada, but they are not given permanent resident status. Imagine what it is like for those who are abroad.

Earlier, a committee member mentioned that, when you decide to come to Canada, you have to show that you intend to return to your country afterwards. That is correct. You have to show that you are not going to stay in Canada, yet Canada claims that it wants to welcome francophones.

To what extent are they going to remodel the service to be more consistent with the target, the objective? I have no idea.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for sharing your difficult personal experience with us.

You talked about having to pay to take exams and about the obstacles that international students face. But we need immigration to restore the demographic weight of francophone communities.

In your opinion, if the government removed those obstacles, would we get closer to those targets?

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: Yes, for sure.

I'm going to speak as a former student, because I can't speak professionally, on behalf of my colleague. The language barrier is a major one. Personally, I am still dealing with the aftermath of the trauma I experienced.

If we remove the language barrier, knowing that the person is French-speaking, it would be a great relief, not to mention that taking the French test is very expensive. Anyone failing the test has to pay to take it again. That is a major challenge.

Providing some relief in that area would make a very big difference for those who are already here and for those who want to come to Canada.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Ms. Ngountchoup, thank you for the work you are doing, even though you do not represent the organization you work for. Your work is obviously part of the solution.

My next question is for Mr. Jolin.

Mr. Jolin, a witness from the francophone community in Sarnia testified about the lack of French-language services for newcomers. Since they have to choose between English and French, most allophones choose English.

Should more be done in terms of exposing newcomers to French? Should courses be offered to learn both official languages?

• (1705)

Mr. Carol Jolin: Courses should definitely be offered in both official languages. It would allow people who want to learn French to do so. The courses must be offered to them.

We still have work to do in that regard. We have two official languages in this country and we need to make sure that people can

study in the language of their choice. If they want to learn the other official language, they have to be able to do so. We have actually been asking for that for quite some time.

It makes perfect sense to move in that direction.

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

In the next round of questions, I will give the floor to one member from each party. Since time is limited, the division will be as follows: four minutes, four minutes, two minutes and two minutes. That will take us to the time when we have to vote.

Mr. Gourde, you now have the floor for four minutes.

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

I will be brief.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here and for giving us their testimony.

I have been a member of Parliament for 16 years. For 16 years, my office has been helping people deal with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada. The stories I hear do not reassure me, because, to me, they prove how complicated the process is. My constituency is not the only one with problems; there are problems all over Canada. It saddens me greatly because we are dealing with human beings and we see broken lives among the people dealing with the department. It is really very sad.

My question is for Mr. Handfield.

Mr. Handfield, some people should really file a complaint, and I feel that they have few, if any, places where they can go. I find that disappointing. If you had one piece of advice to give us in this regard, what process could we put in place to make it possible for people who feel aggrieved to file a complaint?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Your question is very pertinent, Mr. Gourde. I actually ask myself the same question.

As I mentioned earlier, what could be done to ensure that these people have some recourse, apart from going to the Federal Court in certain cases, when the decision or the position comes from the panel? As I said, and I will say it again, the issue is accountability. There are no consequences for an officer of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada who renders a decision in a language other than the one the client chose. Other than filing a complaint with the Commissioner of Official Languages, there is no strong lever to reverse the trend.

Unfortunately, I do not have a miracle solution for you this afternoon. If I did, of course, I would already have stated it and shared it with a number of parliamentarians. I don't know if the other speakers have any concrete solutions to offer, but unfortunately, I have been asking myself the same question as you for a very long time.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I will give the other speakers a chance to answer that question. But first, I would like to ask Ms. Ngountchoup a question.

Ms. Ngountchoup, you talked about the French exam. I recognize that your French is impeccable. This is not the first time I have heard that the French exam seems to be very difficult. As a francophone from Quebec, I am not even sure I would pass it.

Is the difficulty level of the French exam really out of line? Are we using the exam too often to turn people away?

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: Personally, I found some of the questions to be very difficult. But the problem was in the marking. I know I did well on some of the questions and I don't understand why I failed them. Yes, it is very difficult for someone whose language level is not advanced enough. I can tell you that, when I read them, I realized that they were aimed at people with a lot of brainpower. But people can live and work in Canada with a reasonable level of French,

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Do you have any suggestions as to what people who feel they have been wronged by the department could do?

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: First of all, in order to avoid repeated emails, you could create a website to collect complaints from people who have had negative experiences. This would then allow you to provide recourse solutions right there. That would be a good start.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

• (1710)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left, Mr. Gourde.

Ms. Kayabaga is next, also for four minutes.

The floor is yours, Ms. Kayabaga.

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

I will start by thanking our witnesses today.

Ms. Ngountchoup, I want to let you know that it's okay if your son joins us for the discussion. He must be very interested.

My question is for Mr. Jolin and Ms. Ngountchoup.

Mr. Jolin, it is a pleasure to see you again at the committee.

Mr. Jolin and Ms. Ngountchoup, we already know that 60% of the world's francophones are in Africa. Although the government actually has ambitious plans for francophone immigration, what suggestions could you give them to increase the number of francophone immigrants, particularly from Africa? As someone who lives in a completely English-speaking city, I would love to see more francophones join me as Franco-Ontarians.

Can you give me two suggestions in your answer?

Mr. Carol Jolin: That's right, and the vast majority of francophone immigrants come from Africa.

At the moment, the federal government hardly has any presence in Africa, in terms of visa offices. For example, I know that one office in Senegal serves a dozen or so countries. It's very difficult for people to travel across several countries to get to a visa office. So we need a greater presence. We say we want francophone immigra-

tion to Canada, so we need to give ourselves the means to do so, and we can start by correcting that situation.

In sub-Saharan Africa, it is not uncommon for an applicant to have to travel through six countries to submit an application. This is absolutely ridiculous; it's a joke. It goes against what we are trying to do. We say that we want francophone immigration and that we are doing everything we can to achieve our goals. Yet the people who want to come are not able to join us. So this is an extremely important issue that we have to work on.

I mentioned Ontario selecting immigrants, and reaching its target of 5%. We are asking that Ontario be allowed to select more immigrants. The province selected 8,350 immigrants in 2021 and they want to select 13,000. Since Ontario is meeting and even surpassing the 5% target, that is the new target we have set ourselves.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you very much for your comment.

We also want these French-speaking immigrants to be able to go somewhere other than Quebec. For example, in London, we would like to continue to grow our francophone community.

Ms. Ngountchoup, could you take a few seconds to answer my question?

Ms. Honorine Ngountchoup: Yes, I have two suggestions.

The first would be to remove the note saying that you have to show that you want to return to your country after completing your studies. It's difficult for someone to demonstrate that they intend to return to their country, when they have all the skills and potential needed to be in the Canadian market. That would be a good step forward.

The second solution would be to target francophone institutions. We know that, in schools, from post-secondary or university level onwards, everyone who is there has a minimum level of knowledge in French. This could be seen as a confirmation that they have the basic level required here. Then, we should review the way in which knowledge of the French language is assessed. Is the level of assessment important? If you have attained a certain level of education in French, you necessarily have a certain level. So is a French test really needed to immigrate?

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you for your comment. I agree with you.

There is a labour shortage, so we must also use these francophone immigrants for—

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, you have two minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: There seems to be a systemic problem in the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship seems to have a systemic problem. We met with officials in the last meeting, and they were in some denial about the problem. They said that they didn't know what we were talking about. If they don't recognize the problem in the first place, it's very hard to believe that it will improve.

The Bloc Québécois is obviously asking that all possible powers in immigration be repatriated to Quebec. I wanted to know what the witnesses think about it. Mr. Jolin, you seem to be saying that Ontario should have more immigration powers as well. So, what do you think?

For Quebec, perhaps Mr. Handfield can answer, but shouldn't New Brunswick and Ontario also have more powers in immigration?

• (1715)

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Mr. Beaulieu, in the case of Quebec, I think it would be ideal because the delays in certain cases are exponential. This is because some applications must be processed by both MIFI, the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Of course, it would be ideal if all files were processed from start to finish by a single department, namely the Quebec ministry of immigration. There would be consistency in decision-making and, in addition, processing times would be greatly reduced. That would be a feasible solution. Furthermore, there would be no problem with respecting the language of the proceedings because, obviously, everything would be done in French.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Handfield.

We are going to have one final two-minute round of questions.

You have two minutes, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I have a question for you, Mr. Jolin. You confirmed that the 4.4% target was not met. A few days ago, we asked the people from the immigration department if they were going to set a catch-up target. We were told that the current target was still 4.4%.

If we want to protect the demographic weight of francophone communities in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada, should the government set a catch-up target?

Mr. Carol Jolin: The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario is in the process of completing a rigorous study on the issue of targets. The study is based on data from Statistics Canada, and the analysis model has been validated by the organization. We want to wait for the study to be published before officially deciding on a target, but it is clear that more needs to be done and it needs to be done better.

With a target of 4.4%, there is a lot of catching up to do. Our target in Ontario is 5%, and we have been a long way from meeting it for 10 years. Our demographic weight is greatly affected. Not only do we want to meet our 5% target, but we also need to exceed it. The federal target definitely needs to be increased.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Quickly, do you think the federal government should set up a francophone minority immigration program for the provinces, particularly for my province, Manitoba, Ontario and the others?

Mr. Carol Jolin: One of the important points in the bill tabled yesterday is the need to establish a francophone immigration policy. It talks about targets and accountability, but it doesn't talk about numbers.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That will be all.

Before closing, I would like to thank our witnesses. Ms. Ngountchoup and Ms. Handfield, this is the first time we have had you before the committee. Thank you for sharing your experience with us so clearly.

To our regulars, Mr. Jolin, Mr. Hominuk and Mr. Michaud, thank you once again. You have given good testimonies that are very enlightening.

I am suspending the meeting, and we will resume after the vote.

The witnesses for the second part of the meeting, those who are waiting, please stay there. We'll be back in 15 or 20 minutes, after the vote.

• (1715)

(Pause)

• (1735)

The Chair: We're back in session. Forgive us, but this is our great democracy. Sometimes we have to vote in Parliament.

We have with us—

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, excuse me for interrupting you.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Godin?

Mr. Joël Godin: I would like to have unanimous consent to table a motion on the operating budget for the study we are starting today. I think you have all received a document to that effect. I suggest that we approve this proposal.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent? I see that there is.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I'll pick up where I left off.

For the next hour, or what's left of it, we'll hear from the following witnesses. By videoconference, we have Moïse Zahoui, immigration services coordinator, from the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury, as well as Karl Blackburn and Denis Hamel, from the Quebec Council of Employers, whom we were fortunate enough to have before us not too long ago.

Mr. Zahoui, we'll begin with you. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. The floor is yours.

Mr. Moïse Zahoui (Immigration Services Coordinator, Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury): Good afternoon.

I am Moïse Zahoui, immigration services coordinator with the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury. Thank you for this opportunity to talk to you about our local reality.

The Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury is also the lead agent for the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative in Sudbury, in addition to being a service provider for newcomers.

Let's talk about targets first.

Before the pandemic, the City of Greater Sudbury, which, since May 2020, is one of 14 welcoming francophone communities, was receiving more and more francophone immigrants. Since the population is very transient, we do not have exact figures. However, when the pandemic was declared, the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury had more than 170 individuals or families identified as newcomers. That is a record number, and that's not counting all the international students, workers on temporary visas and refugee protection claimants.

Between 2018 and 2020, two studies were conducted on the status of the situation in Sudbury. What we found was that at the time, very few services for newcomers were available in French. The 177 francophone newcomers who participated in these studies were young, under 46 years of age. Fifty-seven percent were permanent residents, and 36% were international students from sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and the Caribbean. Eighty-three per cent came to Sudbury for their education, 10% for family reunification, and 7% for work.

According to our data, Sudbury was the top destination for international students, but it was a second migration destination for immigrants with permanent resident status from, mostly from Ontario and Quebec. Thirty-one percent of respondents came directly to Sudbury, 25% from Montreal, 14% from Toronto and 11% from Ottawa.

In general, the income of these newcomers was very low. Almost three-quarters of respondents had incomes below \$30,000 per year, and 75% of respondents were in school and combined it with part-time or full-time work. They had little or no English language skills. Often unaware of the services available, these newcomers often faced isolation, stress and discrimination.

How do these findings help us understand the failure to meet our targets? We don't have to look very far. Before the pandemic, we weren't able to meet our targets because newcomers to Greater Sudbury were not able to settle, find a job and live in French. As a result, they left for Ottawa, Toronto or Montreal.

The welcoming francophone communities and direct services projects have allowed us to hire a team of four people who focus specifically on the settlement needs and socio-economic integration challenges of the newcomers mentioned above.

These projects have also enabled us to strengthen the local presence of certain partners, such as the Société économique de l'Ontario and the Conseil de la coopération de l'Ontario. The only problem is that all these resources came at the height of the pandemic. During the pandemic, health restrictions and the closure of Canada's borders made it very difficult for newly established settlement services and welcoming community projects to work. So we turned to existing clients: permanent residents who had arrived in the last five years, international students, and temporary workers with closed or open visas.

How can the government work to maintain or increase the demographic weight of francophone minority communities? Since promoting francophone immigration is essential, we are asking the Government of Canada to take the following measures.

It should renew the projects launched at the beginning of the pandemic, so that they can prove their worth and demonstrate the impact of investments on francophone minority communities.

It should make it mandatory for francophone clients to be referred to francophone settlement services while respecting their choices.

It should anchor the 4.4% francophone target in all immigration programs.

It should adapt the Canadian government's international recruitment campaigns to the realities of francophone minority communities, particularly with regard to the jobs available and the language situation.

It should open offices and pre-departure and visa services in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, countries that represent a larger pool of francophone immigration.

It should establish strategies to shorten the processing time for applications for permanent residence, work permits and citizenship, which would provide greater stability for applicants.

It should restore immigration services in the regions, including the IRCC office in Sudbury.

There's one thing I didn't write down. The government should ensure that francophone service providers in Ontario have agents in the department who are francophone first, so that they can help francophone immigrants.

Thank you. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

● (1740)

The Chair: That's perfect, and you did it in less than five minutes, Mr. Zahoui.

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Blackburn or Mr. Hamel for five minutes.

Go ahead, gentlemen.

Mr. Karl Blackburn (President and Chief Executive Officer, Quebec Council of Employers): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Committee members, my name is Karl Blackburn, and I am the president and CEO of the Quebec Council of Employers. With me today is Denis Hamel, vice president of Workforce Development Policies.

Our organization, created in 1969, is a confederation of nearly 100 sectoral associations and several corporate members, representing the interests of over 70,000 employers, of all sizes and in all regions of Quebec, from the private and parapublic sectors.

This is the second time in recent months that I have had the pleasure of addressing this committee on the role that the Government of Canada should play in promoting French, but this time through immigration.

The immigration picture in general, and francophone economic immigration in particular, is a major concern for employers. As you know, our aging demographics will not allow us to fill all the vacancies over the next 10 years. Even if we succeed in increasing the labour market participation of unemployed people, experienced workers, and people from under-represented groups, the fact remains that about one-quarter of job vacancies, now and in the future, can only be filled through immigration.

In this regard, it is clear that the current situation is unsustainable. The number of vacant positions is at an all-time high. There are currently more jobs to fill than people receiving employment insurance benefits in Quebec. Immigration programs are slowing down, and employers and prospective immigrants are becoming increasingly frustrated by the unprecedented delays.

In April 1991, the governments of Canada and Quebec agreed to share jurisdiction over immigration in order to provide Quebec with new ways of preserving its demographic weight within Canada, while promoting the consolidation and enrichment of Canada's cultural and social heritage, given its federal and bilingual character. It is sad to note that, more than 30 years after the Canada-Quebec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens came into force, immigration has become a political issue that has distanced governments from their respective obligations.

This dual administration creates political friction. Departments are passing the buck in terms of who is responsible for the lengthy processing times. The finger is regularly pointed at Quebec, which is responsible for determining the number of permanent immigrants entering its territory, as the cause of the backlog of files on the desks of federal public servants. At the same time, the federal government recently admitted to voluntarily slowing down the processing of Quebec skilled worker applications, citing a large inventory of applications, while Quebec had also reduced its admission targets.

This inconsistency is strikingly—and I would say shockingly—evident in the case of foreign students. On the one hand, immigration officers routinely refuse study permit applications from francophone students, citing the Immigration Regulations, which stipulate that applicants must leave Canada at the end of their studies. At the same time, Quebec, through its Programme de l'expérience québécoise, the PEQ, encourages international students to apply for permanent status after graduation. How to make sense of it all?

● (1745)

What is especially troubling is that immigration officers seem to be overzealous when reviewing the applications of francophone students. Study permit applications are rejected at a rate of 60% in Quebec, but in the rest of Canada, that rate has never been above 45%. Quebec and Canada's francophone community are being penalized because the pools of francophone student candidates are located mainly in Africa. Algeria, Senegal and Cameroon are among the top six countries from which international students in Quebec hail, and applications from those countries met with a rejection rate of more than 80% in 2020 and 2021. In the other provinces, India accounts for a large share of the international student pool, but applications from Indian students are rejected at a much lower rate than those from students in French-speaking Africa. In fact, your

fellow members on the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration flagged the major discrepancy in their May report. They recommended that the government provide additional funding to visa processing centres in French-speaking African countries to increase staffing to speed up the processing of student biometrics and permits.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blackburn.

You will have an opportunity to say more during the question-and-answer portion.

Owing to time constraints, some of the members have to leave now to attend committee meetings. Time is also limited because of voting. It was agreed that each party would have six minutes in this round.

The committee's first vice-chair, Joël Godin, will go first.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin. You have six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for their patience. I apologize for the disruption and the fact that we are so tight on time. That's life in politics, Mr. Blackburn.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: Indeed.

Mr. Joël Godin: My questions are for the Quebec Employers Council representatives.

As Mr. Blackburn pointed out in his opening statement, there's something peculiar about immigration: Quebec is trying to retain French-speaking students while Canada is forcing them to leave. That is understandable when we have full employment, but we are in the midst of a labour shortage.

Mr. Blackburn, can you tell us what percentage of immigration is needed to address the labour shortage, and what percentage is necessary for training and education? I'm talking about immigration and francophone immigration.

Can you give us an overview of the potential solutions identified by the Quebec Employers Council and by Quebec's 70,000 employers? That would help the government provide better support to manufacturers.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: Here are some figures from the assessment done by Quebec's department of labour, employment and social solidarity in 2017. It conducted the assessment in response to the void resulting from the retirement of nearly 1.4 million workers. First, 50% of the replacement workforce would need to be drawn from the academic world. This meant people who either were in school or could use some training to enhance their skills. Second, 25% had a less direct connection to the job market. This meant members of first nations, persons with disabilities, women, seniors who wanted to continue working, individuals with a criminal record and so forth. Lastly, 2% to 3% would come from technological investment and robotics.

Nevertheless, immigrants accounted for nearly a quarter of the replacement workforce. In 2017, the number of immigrants needed was 64,000 annually. Unfortunately, the actual figure has always been well below 64,000 a year.

The Quebec government set clear targets, but the fact remains that we haven't been able to meet the targets set in 2017. The Canadian government just released the figures of its immigration levels plan for the next few years. Proportionally, that would mean nearly 98,000 immigrants coming to Quebec.

As you can see, we are nowhere near that.

• (1750)

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Blackburn, if I recall correctly, Quebec needs to take in between 40,000 and 46,000 immigrants.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: That's right, but the targets are a bit higher. In 2018, the figure was 44,000 immigrants. In 2019, the target was 31,000, and in 2020, the number was 21,000. The figures still hover around those levels.

This year, the applications of immigrants already in Quebec were processed on an expedited basis, so they aren't newcomers.

Mr. Joël Godin: What's peculiar is the fact that the figures are declining. You said that Quebec needed to take in 98,000 immigrants to meet its needs. It takes 26 to 27 months for an application to be processed. On top of that, we aren't bringing in enough francophones to address the declining population.

Is that right?

Mr. Karl Blackburn: That's exactly right.

Mr. Joël Godin: What solutions should we put in place to deal with the situation properly? On a human level, the situation is quite peculiar, especially for those from African countries. As you mentioned, the federal government isn't processing those applications as quickly. How can we force the federal government to do something?

We heard from officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, but I have to tell you that their remarks were rather disappointing. How can we resolve this? Give us ideas to include in our report, ideas the government can draw on to develop tools for the Quebec Employers Council and francophone immigration in Canada overall.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: I'm going to ask my colleague Denis Hamel to answer that, but before I do, I'm going to venture into more political territory.

I can see the political will exists, but unfortunately, that will doesn't translate into action at the bureaucratic level. The government needs to walk the talk.

I will now ask Mr. Hamel to give you some real examples of problems related to applications and the transfer of files. Fixing these problems would speed up the process considerably.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Joël Godin: Sorry, Mr. Hamel, but I'd like to continue speaking with Mr. Blackburn.

Mr. Blackburn, you said there was political will. I'm not sure whether you are aware, but an immigration bill was introduced yesterday. It doesn't really address the problem. While it does set out some measures, it doesn't include mechanisms and tools that would help the situation in the short term.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. Sorry, but I have to stop you there.

Next on the list is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Official Languages, Marc Serré.

Mr. Serré, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

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

My sincerest thanks to the witnesses for being with us today.

My first question is for Mr. Zahoui.

First, I want to commend you on the work you do at the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury. Your organization delivers health and education programs, as well as programs for the homeless in the downtown area. Thank you.

My questions are for you, Mr. Zahoui, because you went to Collège Boréal and you worked for the francophone immigration support network Réseau du Nord. You also worked in immigration at the community health centre. That makes you someone with not only student experience, but also work experience. I'd like to know what your recommendations for the federal government are when it comes to recruitment.

What can the federal government do to bring more francophones to Sudbury?

You talked about employment retention, but you also talked about socio-economic, housing, health and education supports, which fall under provincial jurisdiction. I'm interested in your specific recommendations. You mentioned visa offices. That's an important component.

Do you have other recommendations to support recruitment and retention?

• (1755)

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: These offices are very important.

In northern Ontario, many people come from sub-Saharan Africa. However, when they arrive here, they must go through an obstacle course, as there are no visa offices or pre-departure services in their respective countries. Sometimes, people from West Africa must travel to Senegal, where the only office is located. The situation is painful for them.

Northern Ontario has specific needs in terms of recruitment. Various regions of Ontario have their own needs, and it often happens that the recruited individuals do not meet the needs on the ground. That is the main issue. We would benefit from the government adopting a policy based on local needs. That would enable us to recruit people who directly meet our needs, and whom we could integrate directly.

Mr. Marc Serré: These are specific recommendations. One criterion that helps students come is their intention to return to their country. Do you think that is a barrier? Do you think the Government of Canada should remove that criterion?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: Absolutely.

We are indeed realizing that this is a barrier. Very interesting people come here, start to contribute to the development of our francophone community and become essential players. Those people give us hope, but unfortunately, once they earn their degree, they can no longer contribute to our community and bring that fresh perspective and that warmth. We get to know them and we lose them, which is unfortunate for us.

If we want to achieve the 4.4% target while in a deficit, we have to implement mechanisms that facilitate achieving the target.

Mr. Marc Serré: We are talking about northern Ontario. You mentioned that the IRCC office had closed in 2012, in Sudbury. But northern Ontario accounts for 90% of Ontario's total surface area.

Why is it important to have an immigration office in Sudbury?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: It is very important.

I usually say that Sudbury is the capital of the north. We are surrounded by a number of towns and we are working really hard to attract newcomers. We realize that the process international students seeking permanent residence have to follow forces them to drive for hours. When they arrive in the south, they must be able to pay for a hotel. It is complicated for them. We had a dramatic situation with a family of refugee claimants whose members unfortunately lost their lives.

We feel that those are very important aspects. If we had an office in our community, it would facilitate the task for those people who have to go through all those steps, and that would help them integrate more easily.

Mr. Marc Serré: One of the recommendations previously made by the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario was to have the federal government transfer immigration powers to the province of Ontario.

Do you have any relevant comments or suggestions?

What kind of interactions are you having with the provincial nominee program, PNP?

Would you have any comments on your interactions with the province of Ontario, recommendations involving things that are working well or measures the federal government could implement?

Do you think powers should be transferred to the province?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: That would be really good, but as part of [technical difficulties]. We have noted that we are really struggling. We are in a minority situation, and we would need referencing.

We are actually losing a lot of francophones we welcome here because our services may not be visible enough. If the province is to make progress, we will need to come to an agreement, establish communications to take all of our needs into consideration. We must have visibility so that anglophone organizations would refer

francophones to us. I am not saying this must be imposed, but that option must be given to people. That way, everyone will be able to receive the support they need in the language of their choice. Without that, we won't be able to achieve our goals.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I must interrupt you, Mr. Serré and Mr. Zahoui.

We will now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for four minutes.

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

I thank our two witnesses.

Mr. Blackburn, I thought your presentation was very good.

You are on the Conseil du patronat du Québec, the Quebec employers council, but as a manager, if your business or your employees do not achieve their objectives year after year, what will you do?

• (1800)

Mr. Karl Blackburn: We will change the process.

It is often said that, in an action plan, it is important to have objectives that can be targeted, quantified and measured. We often hear the expression, anything that can be measured can be controlled. So, in a context where we are unfortunately not achieving targets year after year, one of two things is to blame: either the targets are poorly set, or the internal process for achieving them is badly organized, and the process must absolutely be reviewed.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It seems to me there should be a way to send a message about fostering francophone immigration. So the criteria must be modified and something must be done.

In terms of temporary resident permits and study permits, as you said, the refusal rates are currently much higher in the countries of the francophonie, and especially in African countries. In addition, for the same countries of origin, the refusal rates are higher for students heading to francophone universities than for those going to anglophone universities.

So there is a problem somewhere. I think there is a lack of political will, and this is not just a matter of legislation. When you want employees to head in a certain direction, there is always a way to make that happen.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: Mr. Beaulieu, an issue seems to be negatively affecting francophone immigration.

You will remember that, a few weeks ago, when we met for the first time, I talked to you a lot about the will to develop the economic francophonie with our partners from a number of francophone countries. We were more than 27 francophone countries, in August 2021, in Paris, for the annual meeting of francophone entrepreneurs. We wanted to create and launch an organization that would help that economic francophonie thrive around the world.

I also told you that, in late March, we will officially launch a new global organization, which will aim to promote and prioritize the economic francophonie. The Conseil du patronat du Québec will play a key role in that new organization, and it will certainly be an important element for Canada, within that francophonie, to be able to not only play an important gateway role for all francophone entrepreneurs of the globe, but also to be usable as a springboard for those who want to develop the economic francophonie around the world. We are extremely happy about this new organization.

However—and you did well to mention this—if anything is currently not working in the federal public servants' offices, we must give power to—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Earlier, a witness, a lawyer, was saying that accountability was needed.

Mr. Karl Blackburn: That's right.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It makes no sense to go on like this. We have heard from immigration department representatives, but they were unable to bring up a single factor to explain the challenges the department is facing.

So there seems to be a lack of political will from senior officials. Something is blocking the process. We will see what will happen. The same goes for francophone immigration outside Quebec. There are francophone universities in Ontario, and the refusal rate is higher there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

The last questions will be asked by Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead for four minutes.

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

I also thank all the witnesses.

My question is for Mr. Zahoui.

We followed what happened to Laurentian University, and we were dismayed. We support the University of Sudbury and want post-secondary education in French to be available in northern Ontario, as well as in Canada's francophone regions.

Your testimony mentioned the role of students in the community. The Sudbury francophone community would welcome foreign students, for example.

What role should a post-secondary education institution like the University of Sudbury play?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: As you could see when I shared the numbers with you, people who come to Sudbury do so primarily for access to education.

That is a primary role for us because it is a tool that helps us attract international students and permanent residents. We are talking about relocation. People who come here end up mostly in large centres, such as Toronto or Montreal.

The loss of Laurentian University was a big blow to us. We feel that a project for establishing a francophone university is a crucial solution that will help us retain people at home, in Sudbury.

• (1805)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

That is a reality we are familiar with here. In Manitoba, more specifically in Winnipeg, we have the Université de Saint-Boniface. What you are saying applies to a number of communities.

My next question is about access to care services for francophones, which is a real problem. Francophone immigration could contribute to the recruitment of skilled staff in health, for instance, to provide all francophones with decent health care services.

What strategy do you have in mind for that area?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: Prior learning recognition is [*technical difficulties*], as we have been able to see here. I would not hesitate to say that people who come here are often poorly assessed, but there is still a concern as far as the assessment goes, especially when it comes to prior learning recognition and skill transfer.

Previous witnesses have said so, we must rethink the way immigrants are assessed. Those people bring us a lot, but the system does not give them a chance. That is what's painful. Let's use the pandemic as an example: those people have been a breath of fresh air, and their support has been essential.

What I am saying is that the machinery must really be rethought. The system must be made more flexible, and solid mechanisms that enable us to achieve our targets must be established.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

So what do you recommend the federal government do to provide newcomers with services, especially those who live far from urban centres?

Mr. Moïse Zahoui: The government must invest more, as there are not enough services in remote areas. We mentioned that we have no IRCC office, which is a problem. The communities must be given resources; they need them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zahoui.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Witnesses, your comments have been really useful. I thank you for your presentations.

Mr. Zahoui, I believe this was your first appearance before our committee. So I wish you welcome. It was really interesting.

Mr. Blackburn and Mr. Hamel, it was a pleasure to see you again.

If you ran out of time and think that other useful information should have been provided to the committee, please do not hesitate to send it to us, in writing, through our clerk. She will then pass the information on to all the committee members.

I thank all of you. I thank my colleagues. This was a very good meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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