

Government Orders

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Monique Vézina (Minister of State (Employment and Immigration) and Minister of State (Seniors)): Madam Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to take part in the debate on major amendments to the Immigration Act.

In his speech the Minister of Employment and Immigration made it clear that the proposed amendments will not satisfy those who want to slam the door and they will not satisfy those who want us to give away the store. These amendments will satisfy Canadians who understand there is a happy medium between these two extremes.

We are proposing these amendments because we believe it is possible to strike a balance between our needs as a country and Canada's humanitarian tradition.

For more than 125 years, immigration has played a major role in shaping the values that identify and unite Canadians. It has helped to strengthen our fundamental respect for diversity, our tolerance and our generosity and has also helped us to build a prosperous and competitive economy.

Immigration is the story of people who had a chance to start a new life in Canada and gave the entire country the benefit of their skills. It is the story of John Polanyi, the scientist who won the Nobel Prize for Canada, and of Lap-Chee-Tsui, whose discovery of the cystic fibrosis gene was a major step in fighting this disease.

It is also the story of Rey Pagtakhan and Otto Jelinek, of Phil Edmonston and Stanley Knowles, and of many other members of this House. However, the system Canada established to manage immigration and the integration of generations of newcomers is coming under increasing pressure, both nationally and internationally.

Countries like Canada must react to these population flows and the problems they create for our immigration programs. However, our ability to react effectively is restricted by the Immigration Act, which was drafted in the 1970s to manage the demands of a simpler time.

In the 1990s the challenge of immigration is more than the simple processing of applications of people who wish

to immigrate to Canada. It is also about Canada's ability to attract people with the skills we need. As Canada adjusts to the economy of the future, based on science and advanced technology, the demand for increasingly skilled workers will grow. However, in some cases, there are no Canadians with the skills required to fill specialized jobs.

Immigration helps find some of these skilled workers. Conversely, such immigrants fill jobs that help our economy remain competitive and thus, either directly or indirectly, they create more jobs. However, the present system for selecting qualified workers is too slow and is unable to meet the demands of Canadian industry.

Furthermore, immigration should contribute to regional economic development. Here again, the current legislative framework does not provide the means to encourage immigrants to locate in regions where their skills are most in demand.

Changes are necessary to maintain and improve a Canadian program that has helped us to become aware of our identity and has contributed to our prosperity for generations.

In 1976, we adopted the current Immigration Act which introduced the program's three fundamental objectives: reunite families, protect refugees and promote Canada's economic development. These objectives remain primordial in the bill before the House today.

Our current legislation requires the federal government to set annual levels of immigration. We set those levels after consultations with the provinces. However, although the federal government is responsible for setting annual immigration levels, we lack the means to actually deliver on those targets.

The proposed changes will give us the means to control our immigration program more effectively. The new management system will help us adapt the program to Canada's needs.

These changes will introduce greater certainty to our planning. Greater certainty means fewer delays, it means more predictable processing times and greater fairness for applicants. More specifically, we will be able to avoid the buildup of backlogs which are costly and a constant source of frustration.