

carefully and in some cases have said that if there are reasons and grounds for compassion, we would issue ministerial permits. In order to provide the member with some indication of what is involved, in 1979 before I became minister, close to 16,000 ministerial permits were given. I am pleased to report that the number this year will be substantially less. I do not want to make a direct correlation, but I suggest that perhaps we are not quite as loose with ministerial permits as the department was under my predecessor who was a member of the Conservative government. But I will not make that comparison; I will not say that that is why there were so many permits.

The particular case the member cited was not in itself unique. A number of similar cases are being judged all the time. It is just that that one had a highly emotive quality and I would suggest some political quality to it as well, caused by some of his friends and colleagues. As I have said before, I do not pretend to be infallible. Sometime we will make mistakes in judgment. If I err, I try to err with some degree of compassion, and I think I have tried to treat some members and their cases in that way.

I, too, have become concerned about the area of discretion. One of the first questions I asked when I became minister was whether there was any jurisprudence upon ministerial discretion, whether there was any precedent which I could use. Nothing had been codified, no one had sat down and said, "Here is the precedent which might be used to guide your decision". That is one of the reasons I set up the special task force—to develop some advice and recommendation on the area and orbit of ministerial discretion which we might use, that I would use to guide my actions.

Mr. Blenkarn: I thank the minister for that answer.

● (2240)

The second problem I face concerns the number of people who come from, or who have relatives in, pretty disorganized parts of the world. I refer to Guyana, Indonesia, Ireland and Iran. I remind the minister of a letter I received from him on December 1 with respect to Iran. The minister said in his letter that he did not think the Armenian people in Iran were being prejudiced against or were really true refugees. He went on to say:

In the new Iranian constitution, for example, Armenians along with other religious minorities have been guaranteed certain fundamental rights by the government of Iran.

The minister knows that those same fundamental rights are granted to people in Indonesia. They were certainly granted to people in Vietnam. They are certainly granted in Guyana and I am sure they are granted in Soviet Russia. Is the fact that written constitutions in countries like Iran guarantee religious minorities fundamental rights sufficient to make them non-refugees because of the nature of their constitutions?

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Chairman, I would like to answer the hon. member by pointing out that under our Immigration Act the definition of a refugee is taken from the United Nations Commission of Refugees, which says that in order to be a

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refugee one must be under threat of political persecution. We interpret that definition as broadly as we can. Anyone who feels directly threatened or in some danger within the regime of his or her own country can go to any one of our offices and apply for refugee status. They would have their application considered on those grounds, or on their merits. There may be cases of Armenians in Iran but our evidence thus far has not demonstrated they are a class or group that is being persecuted generally. I am certainly prepared to accept further evidence from the hon. member. They certainly have the right to make application as refugees. The difficulty presently in Iran is that we do not have an embassy, for reasons of which the hon. member is fully aware. This makes it far more difficult and I apologize for that. If there is something the hon. member would like to bring to my attention which would shed more light on this, I would be glad to consider it.

Mr. Blenkarn: I have also written to the minister in connection with our offices in other parts of the world. I find that our offices in New Delhi and Port of Spain are particularly difficult. The minister is aware of a number of cases I have had in which spouses of Canadian citizens have had to wait for more than a year and a half for their spouse to be able to enter Canada under the family class. That strikes me as unconscionable and ridiculous. I was wondering what the minister can do with respect to spousal applications for family or reunification in the offices of New Delhi and Port of Spain. The delays are interminable. It is not sufficient to say that there is not the staff there. Surely to goodness different classes of family applications can be considered in a better priority. Surely when a man is separated from his wife by the artificiality of an immigration law he should not have to wait nine months to a year and a half to finally get someone to look at the medical histories and approve that application. Will the minister tell me what he can do about that?

Mr. Axworthy: Mr. Chairman, while the act has not set any priorities between the class of relatives, it would be brought under the family class. As a matter of policy we try to give priority to spouses. There are often real delays, particularly in the two offices the member mentioned, New Delhi and Port of Spain. As I told the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock there are some reasons to explain this. There is the enormous backlog in applications. We must do very serious checking in those areas just to clarify documents. But we do have this task force which is looking at these procedures and trying to streamline them to see if there are ways of providing for some shading to give preference to those who have spouses. I expect to have that report very soon.

Mr. Blenkarn: The member for Surrey-White Rock brought up the problem with respect to immigration from the United Kingdom. As the minister knows, the type of family application there is essentially assisted-relative applications as opposed to family class applications. We have a number of situations where people could very easily adapt in Canada but are nevertheless refused entry. I could give the minister chapter and verse on a number of applications but I do not think it