

*Government Orders*

[English]

At home Canadians are concerned about the growing costs of immigration and about backlogs in applications which result in extended delays and increased frustrations. They are concerned about the fairness of the program for applicants tangled in backlogs. They want to be assured that immigration is being managed to bring the greatest possible social and economic benefits to Canada. They want to know that the laws which govern the program will be enforced, that we will deal firmly with those who have used our generosity.

All this adds up to increasing pressures on a legislative framework built to manage the demands of a simpler time.

The world is awash in a sea of change, but Canada has not been standing still waiting for events to overtake us. Since 1984 this government has pursued an approach of steady growth and adjustment of our immigration program. That approach is based on the recognition of immigration as an integral element of Canada's economic and social agenda.

The annual level of immigration has increased gradually over the last eight years. This year Canada will welcome 250,000 immigrants, almost three times the number we welcomed in 1983.

During those eight years we have either reinforced existing programs or established new programs to help immigrants adjust to life in Canada. From language training to community relations programs which breach barriers between newcomers and native born Canadians, work goes on to introduce new immigrants to their rights and responsibilities as new citizens.

In 1988 Parliament passed Bill C-55 creating the Immigration and Refugee Board. This was a response to the unprecedented level of refugee applications which had choked and overwhelmed the previous management structure.

Today the IRB and my department have virtually eliminated the enormous case backlog which built up in the late 1980s. The board is now processing and making decisions on all claims it receives annually.

• (1550)

We introduced the five-year plan for immigration in December of 1990. The plan was the result of more than a year of extensive consultations with governments and interested parties across Canada. We reached broad consensus on the numbers and categories of immigrants Canada requires in the coming years. Our objective was also to introduce a level of certainty to our collective planning to improve our management of immigrant and refugee programs.

Today we are taking another step in meeting the challenges posed for Canada by a changing world environment. The amendments we have proposed will give us the tools to adapt our immigration program to the realities of the 1990s and ensure that we have a program that is fair, balanced and effective.

The changes we have proposed involve improvements in three general areas. They will give us the means to more effectively select and process those who come to Canada by improving the way in which we manage the categories and numbers of immigrants and by improving the service we provide to them. They will give us the means to better protect Canadian society by tightening up enforcement and control measures to defend the integrity of the system and protect Canadians from those who abuse our generosity and break our laws. We will further streamline the refugee determination system in order to improve the effectiveness of an excellent program with fair decisions rendered quickly.

What about effective selection? To be effective Canada's immigration policy must balance our compassionate character as a people with our pragmatic requirements as a nation. This balance is reflected in the three fundamental policy objectives which underpin the program. We have a social obligation to reunite families, a humanitarian responsibility to protect refugees and an economic requirement to attract newcomers whose particular skills and talents contribute to our prosperity. The proposed changes will help ensure that we maintain a constructive balance between these three policy pillars.