

Government Orders

Hon. Jean Corbeil (Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I would like to address this House today in support of the amendments that my colleague, the Minister of Employment and Immigration, recently proposed to the Immigration Act.

These are changes which will ensure that Canada continues to prosper from the skills and talents new Canadians have always brought to this land and benefit from their unifying spirit of commitment to Canada.

I believe that immigration is the cornerstone of our national heritage. It has made an invaluable contribution to Canada's social and economic well-being and to our success in nation building.

Three core objectives lie at the heart of our immigration policy. The reunification of families and the protection of refugees are central elements.

Equally important is the concern that immigration contribute to our national prosperity by attracting those with the particular skills and talents Canada requires. Balancing these three objectives is what effective management of our immigration program is all about.

Canadians—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. DeBlois): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member for a few moments, but I ask for the co-operation of both sides of the House so that those listening to us, and also the Chair, can follow the speeches attentively. I again recognize the hon. Minister of Transport.

Mr. Corbeil: Canadians are naturally drawn to an immigration system that balances our compassionate instincts as a people with our pragmatic requirements as a nation. However, much has changed in the 16 years since the Immigration Act was passed in 1976.

Global political and economic conditions are far from stable. Regional conflicts, environmental disasters, economic collapse have all spurred on unpredictable, large-scale movements of people. Some estimate that as many as 80 million people are on the move world-wide. This all adds up to ever increasing pressures and stresses on the immigration programs of virtually every industrialized nation.

How will the world community respond to the rising tide of migrants? How will Canada respond? Canada has not been standing still. A little over two years ago, the

federal government consulted widely with a broad cross-section of Canadians. Our discussions then were about what would be required to meet the challenge. We asked ourselves a number of questions.

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How many people does Canada need to meet its economic needs and its international obligations to refugees? Which individuals with which backgrounds, education and skills does Canada want to attract? What steps must be taken to ensure that the needs of new immigrants do not outstrip our ability to provide for them? What tools do we need to help immigrants integrate into our society?

The result of those consultations with different individuals was a five-year immigration plan. We are now in the second year of that plan, which has been approved by the great majority of Canadians. Today, Canada has the highest immigration rate per capita of any nation in the world. One in six Canadians was born outside Canada.

We now accept 250,000 immigrants and refugees each year, three times the number we accepted in 1984. The combined cost to deliver immigration programs across all federal government departments is about \$900 million per year; almost a billion dollars.

At the same time, we have maintained our strong commitment to the world's refugee community. Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board is a model of fairness and operational effectiveness that other countries come to study.

The Canadian acceptance rate for those claiming refugee status is the highest in the world. It is more than double the next most generous nation and ten times that of a country like Sweden. Even so, this combined immigration and refugee effort is not enough to satisfy a world awash in a sea of change. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions more would like to come to Canada, far more than we can possibly accommodate.

We have gone a long way with our planning but it is obvious today that new management tools are required. Our current legislative framework or the "rules and regulations" governing the Immigration Act were developed in 1976, in a world very different from today. The system was not designed to withstand the pressures exerted on it by the realities of the 1990s. Those