

Private Members' Business

This type of haphazard tearing down is inefficient and uncalled for. It is also typical of the style of argument which members opposite advocate. They are always trying to tear down but are never willing to build up. This kind of negativity does not accomplish anything. Instead of saying there are some things we do not like so let us destroy it, why not say there are some very good things about the system, now let us make it better.

• (1825)

Since coming to Ottawa the Reform Party has tried to discredit an immigration program which has made Canada what is it today. They have made a practice of fearmongering and creating the impression that immigrants and refugees come to this country to take advantage of our social programs and wreak havoc on our justice system.

I wish to state for the record that these accusations and insinuations are an insult to the immigrants that have built this country, including myself. Canada's refugee determination system is renowned the world over. Countries ask for our advice based on our experience and leadership in the refugee determination system. However, I suppose the hon. members are not looking at that at all. The hon. member prefers to focus on the sensationalist cases that hit the front pages of the newspapers and serve to justify his reasons for dismantling the IRB.

The government believes in upholding the institutions that distinguish Canada from other countries and we will continue to do just that.

[Translation]

There were excellent reasons to justify the existence of the Immigration and Refugee Board.

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that the charter of rights and freedoms guarantees refugee claimants the right to a hearing. Consequently, we need an authority that is in a position to hear claims for refugee status in a manner that is fair and balanced.

When it was proposed to create this authority several years ago, Parliament opted for setting up a tribunal that would operate at arm's length from the government. The aim was to put in place a professional body that would not be influenced by political or ideological considerations.

To guarantee the objectivity and impartiality of the hearing process, it is necessary to have a tribunal that is impervious to political partisanship.

Furthermore, appointees to the board must be professionals with the requisite training to grasp all the nuances and particular circumstances that are a factor in refugee cases. We have already said that determining refugee status is one of the most difficult forms of arbitration. This is a task that is emotionally extremely

demanding and which requires an overriding concern for justice and fairness on the part of the appointee.

IRB commissioners are selected on the basis of the qualifications they will need to carry out this important and often demanding task. Each commissioner brings to his or her job a different perspective and a special knowledge of the international community.

In the past, the process for appointing commissioners has raised a number of concerns. Aware of this, the government has decided to form an independent advisory committee that will check the qualifications of all aspiring commissioners.

Mr. Gordon Fairweather will chair this advisory committee, whose members are to ensure that only qualified candidates are presented to the government. Furthermore, committee members will have to ensure that they strike a balance between the objective criteria of the commission and increasingly strong public pressures for increased political responsibility.

Another recent event which the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration announced on March 1 this year was the decision to drop one of the two commissioners at hearings for refugee status.

The reduction in the number of employees at the Refugee Status Section, from 175 to 112, will represent annual savings of \$5.7 million. The money saved will be used to assist refugees.

These are only a few examples of our government's commitment to improving a system that has already produced good results. Unlike our critics, we believe that past successes should be considered when seeking solutions to today's problems, instead of complaining and taking drastic measures.

[English]

In order to maintain its relevance and efficiency, the board continually assesses its performance and examines ways to improve. The IRB has willingly undertaken an ongoing process of critical self-examination of policies, practices and procedures.

• (1830)

Contrary to what the hon. member would like us to believe, the IRB is an accountable organization and strives to improve its operations in order to meet its goals. In recent years the board has concentrated on developing and identifying best practices.

An example of the best practices is the adjudication division's use of video conferencing in certain cases. Another example of this positive development was the introduction of guidelines to examine claims from women refugees fearing gender related persecution. Canada was the first country in the world to undertake such an initiative. This reinforces our image as a world leader in upholding the rights of women.