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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are meeting on the study of employability in Canada.

I'd like to take a minute or so to welcome our witnesses. Thank you for appearing before us today, as we study this whole issue of employability in Canada.

I believe we have three groups of witnesses, and because we have a lot to cover, I think we'll allow about 10 minutes for each. You guys are going to present, so we'll get started, and then we'll have some questions for you.

So, fire away. Go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Shirley Seward (Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Labour and Business Centre): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure for me to be here today.

[English]

Mr. Allison, thank you very much for this invitation to appear before the committee today.

My name is Shirley Seward, and I'm the CEO of the Canadian Labour and Business Centre. I'd like to introduce my colleague Clarence Lochhead, who is a senior researcher at CLBC, as we call ourselves.

The Canadian Labour and Business Centre is an independent national organization, which is a centre for business-labour dialogue and consensus building. Our multipartite board of directors includes voting members from the business and labour communities, as well as non-voting representatives from the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, and colleges and universities. Our co-chairs are Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, and Ken Georgetti, president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

[Translation]

You have in front of you a list of members of the board of directors of the Canadian Labour and Business Centre.

[English]

The centre was established in 1984 and is the only pan-Canadian business and labour organization remaining in the country today. Its mission is to provide public policy advice on labour market skills and learning issues and to improve business and labour practices in Canada.

The CLBC has launched two major multi-stakeholder initiatives in the past year that I believe are of direct interest to this committee. The first is the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, launched in September 2005, and funded by the Canadian Council on Learning. The Work and Learning Knowledge Centre involves over 100 organizations, including business, labour, education, private training providers, sector counsels, think tanks, and community training organizations.

Just to show you, Mr. Allison, how well you organized your witnesses today, my organization is the lead organization for the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, and both the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and CPRN are members of our steering committee. I promise we didn't talk to each other in advance.

The knowledge centre has three objectives, all of which are related to your goals in looking at employability. The first is to improve the quantity and quality of work-related learning and training. The second is to improve access to work-related learning for particular groups, such as aboriginals, immigrants, and persons with disabilities. The third objective is to improve school-to-work and work-to-school transitions.

We know there is a wealth of knowledge in Canada about what can be done to make improvements in each of these areas, but it is not organized and is vastly underutilized. We need to do a much better job of getting the right information to the right people, in the right format and at the right time, so they can make better informed decisions about learning and training in the workplace.

CLBC's second new initiative is the Workplace Partners Panel, or WPP. This is a four-year project funded by the federal government. It was launched in October 2005. This initiative responds to labour and business concerns about the need for a collaborative approach to meet Canada's workplace skills and labour market needs. It is absolutely unique because it is not led by government or by a think tank; it is led by business leaders and labour leaders.

As part of the WPP initiative, we have carried out background research and conducted surveys of the business and labour communities and the general population. Most important, we have established regional task forces comprised of business and labour leaders. We are going across the country looking at these issues.

Our first two task forces are in the Atlantic provinces and Saskatchewan. The task force members—the business and labour leaders in Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan—have heard from hundreds of people in a deliberative dialogue context. These people include those in business and labour but also, much more broadly, education, community groups, immigrants groups, aboriginal groups, and governments at all levels, including municipal.

● (0910)

Issues of employability have been at the forefront of our work. We have provided background material, *en français et en anglais*, that will let you know more about these initiatives and some of the topics we are covering.

These two brand new initiatives, which started last fall, haven't been in the field very long. However, because we have met with hundreds of people, and because business and labour are taking the lead, we have learned a number of lessons about the issue of employability as it plays out differently in different regions and provinces of the country. I would like to share this with you today as you begin your very important work on employability issues. There are six issues I would like to share.

First, I want to stress the critical importance of addressing employability issues, particularly in the context of skill shortage challenges facing Canada. Over the past 10 years, skill shortage has emerged as a priority concern not only among business leaders, but also among labour leaders and government senior management.

Business is worried about skill shortages for very practical reasons. They are experiencing them firsthand. CLBC's latest leadership survey, conducted last year, shows that six out of ten managers, both public and private, and two-thirds of labour leaders are currently experiencing or anticipating skill shortages within their companies or their organizations: six out of ten, and two-thirds in the case of labour.

These are statistics, and we believe, as I know you do, that you have to get into the field. Our Workplace Partners Panel regional task forces have confirmed these survey results. In each of the five dialogue events that we held in the Atlantic provinces and Saskatchewan so far, hundreds of participants described skill shortage as a serious problem and believed it would worsen over the next five years.

It would be a mistake to believe that skill shortages are simply minor irritations or anomalies that we can afford to ignore. Nor should they be considered short-term problems with easy, quick-fix solutions. Skill shortages are rooted in demographic terms: declining fertility and an aging population. Social and economic policies can no longer take it for granted that an increasing supply of labour, especially skilled labour, will be available. In this new Canada, we must do a better job of utilizing the human resources at our disposal, providing opportunities for full participation, and investing in the development of skills of our current workforce.

Second, we must be clear about what we mean when we use the terms “employability” or “employability issues”. Most definitions of employability begin and end with a description of the personal attributes and abilities of an individual. These personal attributes include essential skills such as literacy and numeracy, technical skills, job search, and entrepreneurial skills. But employability issues move far beyond a discussion of personal characteristics and must consider and involve the roles and responsibilities of the many labour market and learning stakeholders. These include business people who hire workers, educators and trainers who prepare workers for the workforce, immigrant organizations that help recent arrivals to integrate into the labour market, and unions that often offer language training and literacy programs.

● (0915)

One of the clear messages we have received through our work is the need for stronger coordination and collaboration among the various learning and labour market stakeholders. There is recognition, which you will be very pleased to hear, that government cannot solve all the problems on its own, that these issues are not going to be fixed by any one player. But people want their governments to play a more constructive and collaborative role.

One role for the federal government is to continue to build and sustain collaborative forums to ensure that the voices of business, labour, and other community stakeholders, who are active participants in finding solutions, are heard.

The federal government should also facilitate knowledge exchange and the sharing of innovative practices to employability, especially in those areas where the federal government has accumulated considerable expertise, such as immigration, aboriginal issues, and literacy. We understand that jurisdictional issues need to be considered. The challenge for the federal government is to find the appropriate role that will be constructive, collaborative, and supportive.

Third, the federal government needs to be very aware of the unique regional, provincial, and community circumstances that define employability issues and solutions. One size does not fit all.

Our WPP regional task forces have shown that while skill shortage is viewed as a serious problem right across the country, the factors giving rise to the problem can be remarkably different from one region to the next.

Some regions are experiencing shortages in the context of near-full employment, and Alberta comes to mind. Others are experiencing shortages in the context of more elevated levels of unemployment, such as parts of Quebec and Atlantic Canada. Some regions are losing large numbers of their youth and young adults to other parts of the country. Some regions receive a large number of immigrants; others receive just a trickle. In some regions, an increasingly large and youthful aboriginal population characterizes the labour force. We have learned that effective employability solutions at the regional, provincial, and community levels must reflect these very different circumstances.

Fourth, there is a great need for more and better labour market information. LMI is essential for students, parents, employers, and educators. Those making learning and labour market decisions to enhance their employability cannot do it in an information vacuum. Labour market information must be more accessible and organized in a user-friendly way. Understanding the evolving character of Canada's workforce is perhaps the real starting point for constructive decision-making, and given the very real regional differences in our labour force, this challenge is all the more difficult. Clearly the federal government can play a vital role in the collection and sharing of labour market information.

Fifth, the federal government has an important role to play in addressing what we call disconnects on employability issues. One example is literacy. As you know, four in ten Canadians have literacy skills below the desired threshold for coping with the rapidly changing skill demands of a knowledge-based economy.

However, according to CLBC's 2005 leadership survey, employers do not think low levels of literacy are a serious problem facing the economy. Employers place low priority on improving literacy and numeracy skills. The federal government has a role to play in promoting the awareness of these employability disconnects and showcasing the best practices that can make a constructive difference.

• (0920)

Sixth and finally, keeping the skills of Canada's employed labour force current is an important aspect of maintaining employability and continuing competitiveness. Sustaining and enhancing our workplace learning effort, including encouraging employers to invest in workplace training, is a critical dimension in a skills development and employability agenda.

A number of fiscal and other measures exist in Canada and elsewhere in the world, and these seek to strengthen workplace training efforts. The federal government should explore these mechanisms as part of its overall approach to employability.

In conclusion, the CLBC welcomes the initiative of the committee and the opportunity to work with you, not only today but in the future, as the two major initiatives we have recently launched bear more fruit. We are also delighted that the business and labour leaders from our regional task forces in Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan will have an opportunity to present their own findings to your committee this fall. At that point, the Workplace Partners Panel will be active in Ontario and Manitoba, so we'd love to come back.

The skills and employability challenges in Canada are great, but not insurmountable. We are optimistic about the potential for solutions. This is because employability issues make sense for both social and economic reasons.

Employability issues, as we speak, are being discussed by business and labour leaders and other stakeholders in a constructive way in various parts of Canada. We look forward to continuing to meet with this committee as your work proceeds over the coming months.

Thank you very much.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Seward.

We'll move on to Ms. Singer.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer (President, Canadian Policy Research Networks): Thank you.

My name is Sharon Manson Singer, and I'm the president of the Canadian Policy Research Networks. Dr. Ron Saunders is with me today, and Ron is our director of the work network.

In the next seven to eight minutes, I'd like to tell you a little about our organization. I'd like to share with you some facts from our recent work on *Too Many Left Behind*. I'd then like to tell you a couple of stories about what it means to be left behind and how we solve our problems in Canada.

First of all, CPRN is an independent, non-profit policy research think tank. We think about what Canadians need, talk to Canadians about what Canadians want, and then share that information with governments at all levels. We're delighted to be here today and are very pleased that we were asked. We think we have some important things to share with you, and we are willing to help you as you proceed to do your work.

Our mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues that are important to Canadians. We do that by looking at areas that are very important to Canadians: work obviously is a central concern; family issues; health; and public involvement, or the whole area of democracy and how Canadians can become involved.

As Shirley already mentioned, the work network participates on the steering committee of the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, which is a partnership program.

Let me share with you some pretty shocking facts.

First of all, nine million Canadians of working age do not have basic levels of literacy; nine million Canadians of working age do not have basic levels of literacy in order to be productive and to live and work in today's society. It's a shocking statistic. Canada is far below other nations, as measured through the OECD. There are 3.7 million Canadians aged 25 to 64 who don't have high school diplomas or high school credentials. Without those credentials and without that basic level of literacy, they are condemned to low-wage jobs, jobs of lower status, and fewer learning opportunities.

We don't give Canadians who don't do it right the first time on a high school diploma a very good take on a second chance. It's very hard for them to break out of this difficult labour market position, where they do not have the opportunities that you would want for your children, your family members, and the mothers and fathers of our next generation.

Let me tell you what it looks like for a couple of people. Let me give you three kinds of case examples.

Let's talk about Pedro. Pedro is 29 years old. He's been working for the last eight years in a unionized manufacturing plant. He's had a good job and a good wage, and he's been safe and secure. He's also eligible for employment insurance. He has now learned that his job is gone. The plant is closed and they're packing up shop and moving out of Canada. What happens to Pedro, who is left behind?

He's actually in a pretty good position because he receives employment insurance. Because he's receiving employment insurance, he's eligible for many of the federal programs that will help him build skills or change his skill sets and move on to others, but he finds it difficult to access the services. There's no centralized hotline where he can find what he needs and get information about where he wants to go. It's hard for him, but he is going to be supported.

Let's look at Debbie. Debbie is 25 years old. She's in a minimum wage job in the retail industry. She's a service worker and has been working for the last four years. She has a seven-year-old daughter, and she's really worried about her future. Debbie would like to do better in life and she'd like to move ahead. She has a grade 11 education, and she's missing some of math and science courses. She'd think that she'd really like to do better. She'd like to become a medical technician or a nurse, and she'd like to move ahead.

She probably has a long road ahead of her because, in fact, her investment in her own human capital is pretty weak to start with and she doesn't have a high school education. She's going to have a long road ahead of her in terms of trying to support herself and her child while she tries to get into a professional degree-granting school where she can make a real contribution. As you know, we certainly need health care workers in this country. There's a chronic shortage of them. We would want Debbie to be encouraged to train and go forward with that kind of work.

• (0930)

How well is it going to work for her? Again, she is faced with the kinds of financial disincentives that make it really difficult for her to access the kind of support she's going to need to make sure that her daughter is safe and secure while she invests in her education. It looks like Debbie is probably going to be forced into a personal loan in order to make it forward. In a minimum-wage job, the risk factors

for her are significant if she wants to try to invest in her education. That is a hardship that is a barrier for this person who is trying to make a difference.

I'm going to tell you one more story, and then I'm going to talk a little about what access looks like across the country.

How about Nadja? Nadja is 33 years old. She's been unemployed, and right now she's on social assistance. She's been working as a cleaner and has a grade 10 education. She hasn't been in school, as you might guess, for some time. She's done nothing to invest in further education, and she hasn't been encouraged by the cleaning companies that she's worked with to upgrade her literacy skills or further her education. She left high school when she was 16, and she's been gone for a long time.

What does it look like for Nadja? How is she going to upgrade her skills and get some opportunities for herself through her own investment in human capital? Again, Nadja is looking at some support because she's on social assistance. Most provinces across the country will support persons on income assistance to take basic levels of literacy. In fact, Ontario mandates that persons on income assistance must move forward to raise their basic level of literacy, but it's a patchwork system, and it's inconsistent across the country. Also, unless her worker is dedicated in helping her find the resources she needs, it's going to be very difficult for Nadja to understand and navigate the adult learning system in any way that makes sense.

What we can say about what has happened in Canada to give these adult workers a second chance is that most provinces have launched important initiatives to improve their adult education systems. Adult education systems remain very complex, fragmented, and incomplete. Websites are the most frequently used method for obtaining information, and they're difficult and complex to navigate. In particular, we're talking about people with low levels of literacy, for whom information on websites is not easily accessible.

We see a lot of gaps. There are gaps in the coordination and the counselling services that are available to help guide our adult learners back into the education system. Certainly financial aid is very complex and difficult to obtain and, in some cases, truly not available through government sources, but only through private ones. Employer support and government investments have been low, particularly on the employer side. Canada, again, stands below average in terms of OECD countries with respect to our employer investment in worker training.

We know that when we lift the level of literacy of our adult workers up from the bottom, productivity greatly increases as a result of that push upwards. Lifting from below makes a real difference in terms of the productivity levels for Canada. That effort at the bottom lifts the entire level significantly, and it makes a bigger difference than does investing in more advanced training for our more highly skilled workers. Raising the bottom makes a big difference.

We'd like to recommend that you adopt a vision for an adult learning system, which would be that no one will leave school without a minimum set of employability skills. As adults, they'd have a decent second chance to both enhance their basic skills and to maintain, transform, and make a difference in them over a lifelong course.

● (0935)

We'd like to say that adults should have easy-to-access and easy-to-understand information about adult learning opportunities—it's hard to learn how to be better if you can't find out how to get there—that we would provide the supports and counselling that is necessary, and that the supports are coordinated. One-stop shopping is really a way to think about making it easier. We recommend that the skills development of workers, particularly our lower level workers, are considered important and worthwhile investments. If you think about it in terms of lifting the boat, we lift the productivity for all of Canada.

Now, how are we going to get there? I think one of the things we can talk about is beginning with a policy framework that's built around a right to learn. And if we think about the way we treat our elementary school system and our high school system, we have a basic right to education, but once you leave high school, and even if you leave high school without your diploma, there is never again a system in place that really offers truly a right to learn. What's Pedro going to do? How about Nadja? And what about Debbie? How are we going to support those people to make the kind of contribution that they should be making to Canadian society?

We need to look at our financial support programs, as they are now really built for children who are leaving home for the first time and entering post-secondary education. They are not built around the idea of adult learners with families who are going back to school. Most of the financial aid programs require that you diminish all of your assets—in other words, taking away those RESPs that you've saved for your child's education, the RRSPs that you've saved for your pension investment. Our financial aid system does not appreciate all the things that we in Canada encourage our workers to do, and it will actually tell people to diminish themselves rather than build them up.

Our government financial aid programs are opposite to the way we think about our private sector approaches. In the private sector, if you've got lots of assets, they're willing to give you lots of money. What we say to our people when we're telling them to apply for government financial aid is, diminish all of your assets and we'll finally give you something. So I think that in terms of adult learners making rational choices about investing in their own human capital, they're looking at the barriers that they have for their families, and that's a very significant barrier to making that kind of investment.

We think it's important that we invest in basic skills training and that government does that. We think that's a valuable and important investment in basic skills training.

Finally—and this is, I think, a plea from Nadja, Debbie, and Pedro—please can we have a coordinated approach, somewhere where it's easy for me to navigate and to make a difference.

We've left you some material, and there are certainly some charts and statistics in your packages this morning, but I really want to give you an opportunity to meet some of the Canadians who are affected by the lack of coordination and opportunities to access adult learning and to talk a little about what that means for us as a country.

I want to say thank you very much and also to say, as my friend and colleague Shirley has, that we're here to help you. If we can be of service to you as you proceed with your work, we will be delighted to give you whatever service we are able to, and particularly in our expertise around adult learning and other areas related to work and our policies there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Manson Singer.

Mr. Murphy.

Mr. Michael Murphy (Executive Vice-President, Policy, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure not only for me to be here today, but also my colleague Mr. McKinstry, who's a senior policy analyst with our organization.

I won't take a lot of time today. I'm just going to raise three or four points and focus a little bit on some recommendations to you, and I'll be happy to get into a discussion about those.

I also won't say too much about the Canadian Chamber. I think most of the folks around the table are quite familiar with our organization. We do represent about 170,000 businesses across the country. As you can appreciate, our members are employers, who have a direct interest in the range of employability issues, and I hope to touch on some of those today.

Given the current state of our economy and our good economic performance, resulting in a 32-year low in unemployment, which has presented the labour market with some new and interesting challenges, namely the need for greater productivity in the face of new global competition and the emergence of skills and labour shortages, the chamber is pleased that your committee is undertaking the effort to study issues pertaining to employability in Canada. Skills and labour shortages are becoming increasingly apparent in many industries and regions of the country, and if this situation persists, it will continue to constrain our economy's ability to grow and develop.

We will focus our comments today and some recommendations on issues regarding the need for increased mobility of workers. We will talk a bit about employment insurance and the system that we have today, and the need, in our view, for some enhancement there and some reform dealing with how it can discourage workforce attachment and labour mobility—two important points in terms of the study or the work you're doing.

We want to talk also about high marginal income taxes for low-income workers, an issue we've been dealing with through several budget cycles, and we'd like to put that point on the table today. One issue that I know many of you are familiar with is credentials recognition. And finally, we'll talk a bit about apprenticeship programs, another important component of our economic development.

First of all, let's talk a bit about mobility of the labour force. The mobility of labour within Canada is certainly essential to ensuring a well-functioning economy. Labour mobility refers to the ability of qualified workers to practise their occupations wherever opportunity exists. Currently, 15% to 20% of workers in Canada work in regulated occupations and trades. Most regulated occupations and trades are governed by regulatory bodies at the provincial level or by provincial governments themselves.

Chapter 7 of the 1994 Agreement on Internal Trade intended to enable any worker qualified for an occupation in one province or territory to be granted employment opportunities in that occupation in any other province or territory. Progress to fully implement chapter 7 of this agreement on trade has been unduly slow. For many occupations, licensing requirements vary significantly between provinces. Regulators of many professions are still grappling with issues such as legislative change, scope of practice, educational requirements, and assessment mechanisms. The chamber recommends that chapter 7 of the AIT be fully implemented.

Workers who cannot move freely and practise their occupation throughout the country will be limited in their ability to take advantage of opportunities for their career, and the extra costs and delays for those who are registering to practise their profession in another province represent a financial loss to the employee and an economic loss to society. Additionally, there is a loss of productivity and competitiveness if employers face delays in filling job openings when having to hire employees from out of province. This can have the secondary effect of detracting investment. As such, the chamber recommends that federal government encourage provincial and territorial governments, professional bodies, and trade unions to resolve outstanding rules and regulations that discourage the free movement of labour.

I'll deal for a moment with the employment insurance system.

Our current system, in our view, does not do nearly enough to encourage workforce attachment and labour mobility, and in some cases is a barrier to labour market participation. The primary purpose of our EI system, which is funded by both employers and employees, as you well know, is to provide temporary financial assistance to those who lose their job through no fault of their own. However, the manner in which the system is designed can discourage workforce attachment, labour market participation, and labour mobility. This is because individuals can remain in seasonal occupations—just to pick

one example, and I'll come back to that in a moment—as many in this country do, and collect EI benefits for the remainder of the year. In addition, there are no benefit sanctions built into the EI program. As such, repeat users of the system receive the same level of benefits as first-time or infrequent users.

• (0945)

I'd like to spend a minute on one recent program re-announced by the government that greatly concerned us and employers across the country, and that is the EI benefits pilot project, the so-called seasonal gappers program. This 18-month pilot project, offered to those who live in regions where unemployment exceeded 10% at the time—that's now been changed to 8%, which we can talk about—will increase EI income support by providing access to five additional weeks of benefits to EI claimants, up to a maximum of 45 weeks of benefits.

The Canadian Chamber believes this is counterproductive to addressing the labour and skills shortages that are prevalent throughout Canada. Further, the chamber recommends the re-establishment of EI as a true insurance program. That, I think, is the most significant issue we have to grapple with when it comes to talking about the employment insurance program—to get it back to what it was intended to be. This would enhance the efficiency of labour markets, stimulate productivity and economic growth, and therefore increase the standard of living of all Canadians over time.

High marginal income taxes for low-income workers: it sounds like a real disconnect, and it is. It's a really unfortunate one, and one that through several budget cycles, as I mentioned, we've been trying to address in Canada. Hopefully we will get there.

More needs to be done in terms of providing tax relief for low- and modest-income earners, especially families earning between \$25,000 and \$45,000 a year. For these families, whether a single earner or, say, a couple with two children, high marginal tax rates discourage work effort, because many of the public transfers they receive—for example, child tax benefit, GST and provincial sales tax credit, property tax credit, student financial assistance, and social welfare—end up being clawed back as income rises. Indeed, for many low- and modest-income families, the effective marginal tax rate, after factoring in income-tested benefits, is higher than 60% and higher than the rate facing Canada's top income earners. This is not only inequitable but it also sends a strong negative message about the merits of working, saving, and upgrading one's skills in the economy.

As such, the chamber has recommended that the federal government allocate most of the planning surplus to tax reduction, particularly for low- and modest-income families, because they face the highest marginal rates of all as a result of clawbacks of multiple benefits.

In terms of foreign credentials, each year Canada receives, as I think you well know, somewhere between 220,000 and 245,000 immigrants in total. I should point out that this number includes refugees, which is a significant component as well.

Many of these immigrants are highly skilled. Despite having a higher level of education, immigrants face an increasingly difficult time in the job market, and suffer economic loss because their education is not recognized. Statistics Canada reports that 70% of newcomers who tried to enter the labour force identified at least one problem with the process—for example, transferability of their foreign qualifications, lack of contacts, and language barriers.

Many skilled immigrants who come to Canada are finding it difficult to obtain employment in the profession or trade in which they hold credentials because such credentials are not recognized by employers or professional associations. This presents a significant obstacle to attracting immigrants and it undermines our competitiveness. No mistake should be made: immigration is a competitiveness issue, given our demographics in this country. Furthermore, faced with having to incur costs to repeat their studies or undertake additional training, some simply give up, resulting in a productivity loss to our economy.

The chamber believes the federal government has a role to play here, a fundamental role, in addressing the disconnect between the immigrant's application process and foreign credential recognition. As such, the federal government must work with provincial and territorial governments, professional and trade associations, educators, and immigrant service organizations to initiate development of a fast-track foreign credential assessment and recognition service for Canada that could be used to evaluate professional trade qualifications and certification in regulated and non-regulated occupations.

Just in the interest of time, Mr. Chair, I didn't get into a number of issues today in terms of what the recent budget did, but we fully recognize that there was also a focus on that very issue in the recent federal budget.

In terms of apprenticeship programs, Canada does not train enough apprentices to meet current and future demand. That's the statistic we deal with. Currently Canadian employers pay between 75% to 90% of the cost of apprenticeship programs that link training and employability. Apprenticeship training is provincially and territorially driven, but it requires the participation and commitment of the federal government as an overseer for national goals and standards, market orientation, and competitive positioning internationally.

Standards respecting the quality and relevance of the apprenticeship programs are lacking, and accessible information about jobs is missing, particularly for those needing to make career changes. Access to specific training without duplication is needed.

● (0950)

A broader range of competency, such as mathematics, science, business entrepreneurship, team building, and leadership development is required within the traditional curriculum. Skilled trades must attract an equitable representation of students, retain them in the industry, and recognize the value of their training and skills internationally.

Currently there is a gap between training that is provided and skills that are required. In order to bridge the gap, data needs to be collected to quantify and qualify specific needs for training people. The information could then be used by employers, government, post-secondary institutions, and industry associations as the basis for appropriate programming to meet the needs of industry.

The recent budget recognized this need for greater apprenticeship participation and provided some positive support measures to both employers and apprentices. However, a sustained effort is required by both government and business to ensure that there are adequate opportunities for individuals to enter into apprenticeship programs.

Those are our formal comments today, Mr. Chair. We appreciate the opportunity to make them and would be happy to elaborate on some of these points as we go along.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Murphy. I understand we asked you just recently, so thanks for being spontaneous and able to meet us here today.

We're going to go with our first round, of seven minutes.

Mr. Coderre.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): *Merci.* Michael is a fast learner, and we all know that. We should talk about adaptability, not employability.

[*Translation*]

Several questions have been raised.

Thank you for your presentations. They complement each other quite well this morning.

[*English*]

Let's talk about the fast track first. As a former minister of immigration, I was a privileged witness of the situation in the last five years, I would say. One of the major issues was one-stop shopping. I don't believe it's the government's fault, and I'll tell you why. We had all sorts of meetings and conferences with Nancy Hughes Anthony and others. Don't you think you should put pressure on the professional associations? There are some little kingdoms there, and they want to keep the pie for themselves.

This is the problem with foreign credentials right now. I think we can accommodate and facilitate one-stop shopping, because we have already had the support of the provinces. I remember a pilot project in Alberta; Manitoba is probably one of the greatest examples for the last five years; we have *l'entente Québec-Canada sur l'immigration*.

We all know it's the provincial association that's delivering the permits. How can you help make sure we put the pressure in the right place? You have all those names, and I see all those lists with all those famous actors. It's time to sing the same tune here.

Maybe Michael and Sharon can share this, and then I'll come back with other questions about mobility in the partnership.

Mr. Michael Murphy: This is a very good observation, and one we would fundamentally agree with at the chamber. In speaking to federal members of Parliament, and to the government in particular, we're always interested in making sure we share the message, so that even if it may not be the most intended target... I think it's a collaborative effort that's going to be required here; there's no question about that.

If I put it in the big picture... I started out talking a little bit today about the Agreement on Internal Trade. I did that for a very good reason: it's a very good framework document for getting a lot of things done at the "between governments" levels; let me put it that way. To be frank, I don't think there is a whole lot for the federal government to have to do today. I think the ball is really in the court of the provinces themselves.

The Council of the Federation has put in a significant work effort in the last two years, I would say, to address some of the issues, including chapter 7 on labour mobility, and understanding that within their own provincial boundaries the credentials issue will have to be solved.

We have a role to play in the business community. Of course, we're a federation as well at the Canadian Chamber: we have provincial chapters in every province and territory and we have local chambers. One thing we're trying to do is stay very close to our constituents within the provincial sphere to keep pushing hard on this message. What we encourage the federal government to do is create a new agency, and I think we saw in the most recent federal budget a desire for such an agency. I'm not quite sure how that agency would work; at this stage of the game we'll wait with great interest to hear more about it.

A voice: We need decision, not structures.

Mr. Michael Murphy: It's really a case of all those players working together, but fundamentally we have a decision to make inside provincial boundaries.

• (0955)

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Thank you very much.

I think one-stop shopping is not consistent across the country. In Quebec we probably have one of the best systems in terms of being able to funnel people in a single door, but the experience across the country is very sporadic, it is inconsistent, and it does not welcome those adult learners back into it.

With respect to prior learning assessment and the utility of turning it over to professional associations that may be provincially based, we may be impairing the mobility of people to move across the provinces. Again, we've seen this issue significantly because most of these professional credentials are held on a provincial basis. If those standards, credits, or prior learning assessments with respect to how an individual worker is assessed are not consistent across the country, we end up impairing their mobility across provinces.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: One of the major problems of mobility is that it can cause an exodus. Unfortunately, one of our colleagues has made a rather unfortunate remark when he said that we should empty one region to the benefit of another. This is totally unacceptable. Actually, we must find a solution to mobility as opposed to retention.

[English]

Given the employment and economic environment, my concern is that I feel nobody is considered a first-class citizen. We have to find ways to answer the shortage of skilled workers—in the next five years we'll have a shortage of something like one million—but at the same time we have nine million people who are illiterate. Also, we don't talk about the aboriginal condition. There are major issues that need the emphasis put not just on the money, but on self-esteem and on human resources. I'd like to see that in EI programs.

[Translation]

But I would not like people to be incited to become unemployed in order to learn to read. So we must find a way of offering incentives in the workplace. What kind of incentives should we put forward in order to help ourselves while still having adequate economic immigration policies to solve our problems? What should we be doing internally in this regard?

[English]

Ms. Shirley Seward: Before I talk about an internal plan, I'd like, with your permission, to reflect on a big disconnect we have on the immigration side. This is a particular challenge for business associations. We all know in this room that within six or seven years 100% of our net labour force growth will come from immigration. We know that. We know that in certain provinces and cities it's already over 100%, but when we did our latest viewpoint survey in 2005 and asked both public and private employers for solutions to skill shortages, the issue of immigration was right at the bottom of the list.

Furthermore, in a little study we did about the issue of foreign credential recognition, we found that employers really are not plugged into the issue itself, let alone how they can guide people in getting it.

The federal government has a very important role to play in providing exposure for this issue of immigration, shedding much more light on it so that the employers in the country—not just the business associations, who understand these issues from a public point of view—will see the very great value of immigration.

The same thing relates to aboriginal people. It's right on the bottom of the list. There are huge disconnects.

•(1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coderre.

We'll move to the next questioner, Ms. Bonsant, for seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): I have a question for Mr. Murphy concerning the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. I know that you represent all Chambers of Commerce in every province. I do not believe that emptying one province to the benefit of another would help training the next generation of workers. It would not help either in terms of skill development and other programs. We all know that when a person is leaving, he or she is not coming back.

In Canada, we have an opportunity to develop green energy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The role of the Chamber of Commerce is to encourage all provinces to develop this new initiative. Instead of buying credits left and right, I believe that we could be proactive as Canadians and develop this green energy. We have a wonderful opportunity to do so and we have people who are knowledgeable in this field. What is your position concerning green energy?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Murphy: Mr. Chair, I guess there are two questions there. I'll make a brief comment on the first. On the second, I guess I can say I'm a little surprised at this committee to get asked that question, but I'm happy to talk about climate change.

In terms of the issue...and I don't think I put it as emptying a province in favour of looking at employment solutions in other provinces, emptying one province to the benefit of another. What I am concerned about, though, is making sure we have a labour market that has the flexibility built into it, and an absence of government-sanctioned rigidity, so we can get people into the jobs they want to be in. We're not talking about forcing people to do this; we're talking about creating opportunity for people to do it, and not disincenning people from having the opportunity to go where work is.

This is not a new concept. Labour mobility is alive and well in Canada today. The question is, is there enough of it? It's alive and well in the United States. It's alive and well in many economies, and it's alive and well globally. We will rely, as Shirley just mentioned, on labour mobility from other countries, labour coming into our country to meet our labour needs over the next very few years, given the current demographic realities we face in Canada.

So our position, and my comment on the EI situation, is very much focused on the idea that what we can't have are two things. First, clearly we don't want a situation where we don't incent people to think about going where the work is today, where we have jobs begging in our own country. So rather than looking at provincial boundaries as barriers, you want to eliminate that. You want to eliminate it for credential reasons, you want to eliminate it for regulatory reasons, you want to eliminate all those boundaries that you possibly can.

What we don't do in EI is eliminate the barriers. So this pilot project I just mentioned is an example, and it's one example because

it's recent. It just happened earlier this month that this trial ended. I won't get into the details of it today, unless you want to pursue it, but from the standpoint of good public policy, I would not rate that very highly.

From the standpoint of dealing with climate change and the development of green energy solutions, if I could take a minute, Mr. Chair, I'll talk about that. The chamber is very much interested in the climate change file and has been for many years, because it's so vital, not only from an environmental standpoint, but also to the economy of Canada. I think that's been our position for many years.

In terms of buying foreign credits as one example of a potential solution, that's not something that from the standpoint of the chamber... It has been advocating for many years now that it doesn't make much sense to think about buying Russian hot air or other credits that are out there to meet our Kyoto obligations. I think what we have seen more recently is much more potential for a rational approach coming out of both the December meeting that occurred in Montreal, in terms of the most recent conference of the parties, and the follow-up to that. We're starting to think about climate change now in the right way.

I'll make two quick points.

One is that technology is the answer to deal with the issue. We need to incent more technology development in the economy.

The other is to get it right in terms of time. This is a global phenomenon that we're going to have to deal with, not just a problem that we can address in Canada. We don't have a system today under the Kyoto Protocol that allows for all the major emitters of greenhouse gas to play the significant role they're going to need to play. I think there's an opportunity with some of the new international developments that are occurring for us to participate in them from a Canadian perspective. I would look forward to our role in that.

I'll stop there, Mr. Chair.

•(1005)

The Chair: There are two minutes left.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): I will go on, Mr. Chairman.

I thank you all for coming here this morning to share your views with us.

My question is for Mr. Murphy. In terms of this debate that we are having presently, I find your approach to the issue of employment insurance somewhat surprising. You gave as an example the five additional weeks in the targeted regions. As we know, even with the prevailing unemployment rate, this is a deterrence to manpower mobility. When you said that you would deal with employment insurance, I expected you to talk about it as a program that allows workers to stay in their region and to build in each of these regions a pool of reliable employment.

A significant proportion of your members contribute to the employment insurance fund. As we know, almost \$50 billion have been spent for other means than those of the fund. This is why I expected you to share your views on this subject. We are aware of the impact of this problem on each of our regions. Because of the constraints that have been imposed, some of the unemployed workers cannot benefit from employment insurance. In the regions, employment insurance contributes to the regional economy and to the well-being of businesses, in terms of allowing people to continue spending money and thus contributing to the economic well-being of the country.

I expected you to have a larger view of this issue and not such a narrow vision. In my view, this adds a negative rather than a positive contribution to this debate.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Murphy, we need a quick response, because we're out of time.

Mr. Michael Murphy: There's a lot there to do a quick response to, Mr. Chair.

We have several major concerns with EI. I'll hold off, and if there's time, I'll tell you what my real problem is with this particular pilot program and why I'm so negative about it being extended. I think the target for the pilot was clearly not met, and yet we went ahead and extended the program.

My bigger issue with EI concerns the fact that we've taken a program that was fundamental for both employers and employees, who are the payers of the program, and we've changed the nature of it completely. We've turned it into a basic social policy grab bag, where we no longer focus only on unemployment insurance.

We now have a situation where roughly half of the premiums go to non-employment insurance reasons. We've used it as a way to package all kinds of other social programs that in and of themselves probably have significant merit in our economy. They should be judged that way, in terms of social policy. It should not be asking employers—and I should remind everybody, although I think you're well aware—who continue to pay 1.4 times the premium that employees pay, to dump more into EI.

The rationale was basically that 100% of the dollars paid out in EI benefits would be decided by employers who were deciding whether employees were going to continue to work. That's no longer the case. Those are only half the dollars that are now used by the system. That's a major concern to us, Mr. Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

We'll move along to Ms. Savoie.

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank each one of you for your presentations. I think that all three groups have clearly shown that the federal government has a key role to play, starting right from investment, to coordination, and better information to both workers and private sectors. It's really useful to get that kind of feedback.

I'd like to go back to something. Recently there's been a lot of discussion around changing pension arrangements for older-aged workers. Perhaps addressing older workers' needs is part of the package, but from what we've heard, for example, from the Senate—we've even heard some discussions about this at the recent OECD meetings—it clearly seems like a band-aid solution to a much broader problem.

I'm wondering, Ms. Seward, if you would address how you see that playing out in the broader issue of addressing some of the skill shortages. I have other questions, but I'd like to start with that one.

I know that through the workplace partners fund initiative you've had discussions with employers, labour, and many other stakeholders. Would you care to comment on that?

• (1010)

Ms. Shirley Seward: Thank you very much for your question.

This is another example of a disconnect. We have seen a number of recent policy statements by some governments that one of the ways to solve the skills shortage problem is to make people work longer. So we did three things to search out this issue. We had two active task forces in Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan, a survey of business and labour leaders, and a survey of the general population.

When we asked this specific question in all of those contexts, there was no appetite whatsoever on the part of the general population, business and labour leaders, or the hundreds of people involved in Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan, to use a lengthened working life as a solution to skills issues. What they wanted to do instead was make sure proper mentorship took place while older workers were in the workplace, so that younger workers gained from the experience of older workers.

If I can be so bold as to say this, national policy-making has incredible pitfalls when it comes to what actually happens in the regions. I want to use a provocative example of EI in Prince Edward Island, where we had very active task force activity.

Short of eliminating the fisheries industry in Atlantic Canada, there is no way to get around the problem of seasonal workers in the short run. It is not the fault of the workers that it is seasonal work. In the case of P.E.I., people wanted to continue to be fishers, but they wanted access to EI, not primarily to have income support but to get skills training and entrepreneurship training to open up small businesses and become involved in other enterprises.

It is absolutely critical for this committee to get out into different parts of the country, as I know it will. Similarly on the migration front, what is very good for some provinces looks very different in provinces like Atlantic Canada, Quebec to a certain extent, and Saskatchewan, where the biggest issue they raise, bar none, is the loss of young workers and what that does to the local economy. We have to be very careful—and I hope the committee will be in the regions—to listen to the perspectives of the regions, and not just make policy and take federal action from a central point.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Savoie.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Thank you.

I'd like to talk about accessibility of skills training, or lack of it. In my riding office I've heard from countless individuals who would like to take training, who are adults, and have families—some of the examples you gave, Ms. Seward. It is clearly a huge problem.

Going back to EI, we've been given the statistic that \$2 billion of revenue from premiums paid is just going back into general revenue. What do you think of using some of those funds to allow these adult workers to benefit from employment programs, entrepreneurship programs, whatever they might be, whether it's at the low level of literacy, right up? At the moment it seems they have to be either in a specific category of younger workers or receiving EI benefits. So we've created a whole number of barriers to receiving training. I have a number of cases in my riding that illustrate that.

I'm wondering if you would comment on that.

•(1015)

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Thank you very much.

First of all, we have to recognize that fewer than 50% of workers in Canada are covered by EI. That's another shocking statistic, and in some provinces it's less than that.

In the old days, it used to be that a job was your first form of income security, and then if you fell out of a job, you fell onto EI, and that was your next form of income security. And then, if you fell off EI, you fell onto welfare. But now that's switched. We have more people on welfare than we have on EI. So the access issue with respect to EI is very difficult for most workers, because they don't have it.

Using the funds that are there is really looking at less than half the workforce in Canada. It means that the way the program is designed doesn't match the way people are now working. We have a very different kind of work history and work pattern, especially for some of these vulnerable workers we've been talking about who are less educated, are in lower status jobs, and have more bouts of unemployment. They just don't have access to it. As we said about Pedro, who has EI, he's going to be one of the lucky ones because he's going to have access to adult skills building and training. But those people like Nadia and Debbie who are not covered by EI because of their work hours, because of their lack of work experience, do not have access to it.

Coming back to the expenditures issues and ways that we can build incentives, I think we need to look at other models, not just EI,

because it is not going to address the majority of our workers in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Manson Singer.

We'll move on to Ms. Yelich for the last question of this round for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Thank you.

I really appreciated all the presentations. I know we will have to have you back. I think you all are groups with solutions, and you are certainly going help us at this critical time we've reached.

I have a couple of questions. You spoke—I think it was Michael—about chapter 7 and the slowness of the implementation. Do you have any cost analysis of that? I'm thinking that it varies from province to province. Would you have what that costs our economy in dollars or in some means?

I'm going to ask them really quickly, and then I'll sit back.

The other comment made was about encouraging businesses.... I really don't want to bring this into the debate. I only want you to go home, think about it, and come back next fall and tell me what you think. Right now there are reports out that women aren't going into the workforce because they don't have child care. I'm of the mind that it is time for businesses to step up to the plate and bring in child care spaces for their companies or businesses. So you're not going to look for some central location in downtown Toronto, or downtown here; if you work at an auto dealership, if you work at an apartment or somewhere downtown, or anywhere, the child will be close to the parents.

I want you to think about that, about encouraging that. I think that's an encouragement for businesses. So I'd really like you to think about that, because I don't want to get into any sort of child care debate right now.

The cost analysis in chapter 7 would be enough, thanks.

•(1020)

Mr. Michael Murphy: I'll start my answer to the question with respect to the costs of that particular chapter of the Agreement on Internal Trade with a general comment that it's a question often asked.

I'll say two things. First, we did a study several years ago at the Canadian Chamber that tried to come up with a bit of a global impact in terms of what the barriers to internal trade and the movement of goods and people and services in the country were costing the economy at the time. So we have some old data on that.

I think it's fair to say—and my colleague Mr. McKinstry just recently appeared before the Senate banking committee on this issue—that I don't think we have anything specific today.

Rob, maybe you can add to the answer I've just provided.

Mr. Robert McKinstry (Senior Policy Analyst, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): That same question was posed to us when I appeared last week before the Senate Standing Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce, and my response to them at that time was to encourage the federal government or the provincial governments collectively to undertake such a study.

We believe the information would be incredibly important in terms of advancing the issue itself and in bringing more information in terms of the real costs to the economy. Right now we can simply provide examples, but I don't think that level of understanding will really move the yardstick in terms of governments taking action to resolve the existing internal trade barriers.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I wondered if you could alarm some provinces into considering it, as B.C. and Alberta have done, and Saskatchewan—and we can go on. When you cite Saskatchewan, I can see why you're doing studies there, because they are all crown corporations. There's not much of a business atmosphere there.

Mike.

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Mr. Murphy, I sense that you have more to say. Could please explain more specifically how you feel EI is being used in ways for which it was not designed?

Mr. Michael Murphy: Sure. Let me start with two or three important broad points. The first one, which I've already mentioned, is that the system has effectively been changed so much from its intended purpose. That's the biggest single difficulty with it today. We no longer have a true insurance program; we have a grab bag of social policies wrapped under this payroll tax program, which both employers and employees pay. So you start with that fundamental problem, and the numbers are now pretty staggering. Half the premiums collected go to pay for things that have nothing to do with regular benefits for employment loss.

So you start with that, and this is going to create all kinds of difficulties. I think Sharon just mentioned one of them. If you're thinking about good public policy in terms of social programs you want to develop, you're already cutting out a whole bunch of people who are not paying EI premiums, because they're not employed or not part of the program in some way. That's clearly an issue.

In terms of dealing with some of the specifics that exist, I mentioned the 1.4 times premium that employers continue to pay today. This is a decades-old decision. The world of work and the marketplace in Canada today are very different from the world at the time this rule was brought in. We don't think there's a rationale anymore to continue to ask employers to pay 1.4 times the employee premium. Our recommendation is to phase it out over a number of years—say, four years—and get it down to a level premium.

We're also very concerned about employer over-contributions to EI. In our view, this is a major issue in that employees with an over-contribution in a particular year will get that refunded through the tax system, but that's not true for employers. We have spent a lot of time trying to get moving on this issue. What we are told is that it would be administratively difficult to design a system in Canada's the tax program to track and refund employers who make the same overpayment as employees when they change positions during the year, and the payments are made again.

We've quantified the problem to the extent that we think this is not trivial. Perhaps it's in the several hundreds of millions of dollars a year of over-contributions by employers. So while there are some other issues under the broader framework, those are two specific ones we think should be addressed.

• (1025)

The Chair: Okay, that's it for time.

We're going to move on to our second round.

Mr. Regan, you have five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to thank our guests for joining us this morning.

Let me first ask a question to Ms. Manson Singer. You had some comments about literacy, which has been a big interest to me.

A couple of months ago I heard the new president of the Nova Scotia Community College, Joan McArthur-Blair, speak to the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. One of her comments was that the biggest challenge community colleges face is literacy. It wasn't exactly what I would have expected coming from her. You would have thought it was funding or something more related to their actual activity. But obviously, at the base of adult learning is literacy.

I'd like you to expand on this from the topic you started there. Also, are you aware that literacy funding by the federal government is under review, and that calls for proposals have not gone out since April 1?

Ms. Yelich can correct me if I'm wrong about that. We're still waiting for those. I know that literacy in Nova Scotia, for example, has had no funding since March 31.

Is it your view that the Government of Canada needs to invest more in literacy, the same amount, or less?

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Thank you very much.

I am very much aware of the issue with respect to literacy and colleges. CPRN recently hosted a national round table on quality in post-secondary education. We had several university presidents and presidents of colleges participate, about 40 people altogether.

Clearly the place that adult learners are most often attracted to, certainly the kind of adult learners that we're talking about in terms of these vulnerable workers, is the community college. That is often the place where basic adult education is offered as a place for them to go.

Again, though, the issue with respect to literacy and access to these literacy training programs is complicated by the fact that there is no one-stop shop, and for the most part, with respect to access, the websites that are there are very difficult to read. Imagine if you're a person who has a low level of literacy and your only access point is an Internet site that you can't read. It doesn't do much to help.

What we are seeing that is very beneficial is a kind of hotline approach, with trained counsellors on the other end who understand the specific needs of these adult learners, because of course, that's going to be the easiest way for them to access our system and make a big difference.

So with respect to raising the level of literacy in Canada, when we're talking about nine million working-age Canadians without basic levels of literacy, as an issue of productivity it is very important for us to invest in assuring that this population in particular is lifted up. It's a staggering figure, and we are far below OECD countries in terms of our investment in our adult learners.

One of the things that we think is important as we talk about these kinds of incentives is to really create a culture of a right to learn and an expectation in our society that we will continue to learn, and that adults too have a right to learn. So those are things that we can look at and put in place as part of our contribution to building literacy in our country, because building literacy builds productivity. It's a simple equation.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I hope I'll have another chance to talk about this idea of the right to literacy and to understand more your thoughts on what that right would mean, what its extent is, if there are the limits on the right, and so forth.

But let me move to another question—for Mr. Murphy—because I have only a limited amount of time.

One of the comments we heard today, I think from Ms. Manson Singer, was that employers don't think that low levels of literacy are an economic problem.

That was Ms. Seward. Thank you very much.

How significant a problem do you think it is that employers don't see this, and what is the role of your organization in trying to combat that misapprehension, if that's what you think it is?

We heard also that employers don't see immigration as key. That's very disturbing, and again, the same questions apply. How significant is that, and what's the role of the chamber in trying to inform businesses and make them see the importance of immigration?

Lastly, on seasonal industries, it was definitely Ms. Seward who talked about seasonal industries in, for instance, Prince Edward Island and your experience there. I would like to hear your response to her comments about the fact that there are coastal communities all over Atlantic Canada and Quebec, for example, that rely on the fishing industry, to which the fishing industry makes a very substantial contribution. There are other seasonal industries, such as tourism; sometimes forestry is seasonal, of course; fruit-picking; and a variety of others that play a role.

Some of those employers must be members of your organization. What do you say to them about how they can have employees if there isn't something to support seasonal workers? How would you address that?

• (1030)

The Chair: You're almost out of time. You have all these long questions with very short answers.

Mr. Michael Murphy: I've got three questions, and I'll try to be very brief.

Literacy is obviously a question of huge importance for the economy. We hear statistics about high school dropout rates, and the numbers are staggering in terms of the problem in the economy. Clearly, that's going to be a problem for all of us in business and the economy if you can't get the right kind of basic skill sets. I can't say that I have ever heard a member tell me that they didn't want me spending time on literacy. I get feedback, believe me, daily from members regarding how they want me to spend my time. There's no shortage of that input.

In terms of education, if I can use the broader term, we at the chamber have chosen to focus our energies on the post-secondary level. That's not to say that K to 12 and what we're doing or not doing in the educational system aren't important, but we have focused very much on the post-secondary side. There are a number of reasons for that, which I won't get into at the moment.

With regard to immigration, I manage our policy process at the chamber. We have our annual meeting every year in September; this year we're going to be in Saskatoon. I already have five different submissions from various local chambers across the country on immigration issues they want on the agenda of what we will be debating in Saskatoon. The interest level from my membership on the issue is certainly high. That's why I spend a fair amount of time on the issue. I think Mr. Coderre might be aware that the chamber, as a whole, has been very active on the immigration file for many years now. Certainly through the 2002 reform process, it played a major role.

On seasonal industries, you're darned right that these are our members as well. As opposed to what I'm telling them, some of the feedback I get from them is that they can't find workers. They can't find the people they need to get the job done. Part of the reason for that, I would submit, is that the incentive for them to go and do seasonal work isn't there. We hear frustrations from people who are in the fruit business and in others—Rob, I don't know if you've got other examples—and they are saying we've got to do something.

Those are very quick comments, Mr. Chair, and I appreciate they may have been a little faster than they should have been.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

We will move on to Mr. Lessard, for five minutes please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to refer very briefly to a statement made earlier by Mr. Murphy, namely that the number 6 pilot project has not proven to be of any value. It seems to me that this statement is incorrect and not consistent with the facts. In fact, it has been proven at the department that this project, aimed at helping the persons who were falling into a "black hole", had met its goals in 98 per cent of cases.

However, I partly agree with Mr. Murphy when he says — this is somewhat of a generalization — that employment insurance is mostly used for social programs. Obviously, this is not consistent with our wishes. As for Mr. Lake's question, there are no examples. There again, we are getting into general ideas. I understand that his main concern is that employers are paying one tenth of 4 per cent more than the employees.

I would like to address my next question to Ms. Manson Singer and Ms. Seward. As we know, one solution for eventually meeting the manpower shortages would consist in incentives given both to older workers and those who have quit or lost their job to encourage them to stay on the labour market. In fact, most of them would wish to do so, especially those whose retirement fund is not very substantial.

Let me give you the example of a worker from the Montmagny area who is 57 years old and who lost his job when he was 55. He spent two years in training and applied for 91 different jobs in the same year, including outside his region. This man is in good shape, physically and intellectually, but because he is 57 years old, he was called for an interview by only one employer. Yet he wants to work. I know his name and I know where he lives. However, I could give you dozens of other examples of this kind.

How can we address such a problem? We are wasting the talents of a qualified member of the labour force, a person who even took extra training in another area. Here we have a person who is in good shape, a person whose knowledge, skills and knowhow are at the society's disposal. Yet we are not able to benefit from all that or to find an appropriate job for this worker. How should we manage this issue? I suppose that you have already given some thought to this matter.

•(1035)

[English]

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Let me start by talking a little bit about the aging workforce.

CPRN now has a study under way, as part of our human capital adult learning and work segment, assessing the implications of an aging society for skill shortages. We're very directly looking at ways in which we might use our talented and skilled aging workers to make a difference in terms of helping with skill shortages.

One of the issues that I think you're describing in terms of the response of the employer to an older worker is one of simple discrimination. I think it's never simple when it is discrimination. Developing a flexible adaptive workplace also means that we need to have a way of viewing an older worker as a valuable resource, rather than someone who should be pushed out for those young workers who don't exist.

I think there are a number of simultaneous issues involved when we're talking about older workers. There's the relationship between

new income from employment and the effect it has on pensions. There are disincentive issues with respect to the tax levels on that new income. There's then the issue of a flexible, adaptive workplace that may not value those older workers in the way it should.

I think we have done a great deal of work in the past in this country on helping to change public attitudes towards workers. This is a new area for us, and one that we will have to adapt to because we have a shortage and we're going to have to find more ways to use people.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have for this round.

Ms. Savoie, five minutes.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Thank you very much.

It appears the more time that elapses when someone graduates or leaves high school for a working career, the higher the illiteracy rates are and the greater the lack of numeracy ability is. It speaks to me of the absence of a culture of learning in our society generally, on the one hand.

On the other hand, many of you have said that employment insurance is not doing the job and you're unhappy with it for different reasons. I believe, Ms. Singer, you said that we need to look at models other than EI.

Is it the way we're using EI? Is it indeed a different model? Is it both? If we have time, I'd like a response from all of you.

I don't think, Mr. Murphy, you're suggesting that employers should not contribute to training. I don't think that is what you were suggesting.

I'd like some clarification and some answers.

•(1040)

Ms. Shirley Seward: In addition to the use of EI for training, I think it's extremely important in Canada that we have a real commitment to upgrading skills at the pan-Canadian level.

There are programs in Canada, in the province of Quebec, for example. There are different fiscal measures and other measures in other countries that are designed to try to increase the amount of training that is provided to workers in the workforce. I think it would be extremely useful if this committee could look at that range of policies.

They're not only fiscal policies. There are programs in the U.K., for example, that assist employers in providing better training, as well as more training. Those are very important.

In terms of what we call the youth-to-school transition, you're absolutely right that the longer it takes for students to get into the workforce, the more they lose their skills. They lose all of their skills, and this is very serious.

I think we have to put a great deal of emphasis on helping young people get into the workforce, working with some of those very valuable older workers you were referring to in order to learn from their skills, and the transition will be easier. We can do it through collaborative arrangements between the school system and employers so that students know at a very early age what the possibilities are and can make the transition more smoothly.

It seems to me we need a pan-Canadian commitment to lifelong learning that does not stop after people come out of grades K to 12 or the post-secondary system; we need it throughout life.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: To add to that, I would say the learner pathways to this kind of adult education should be efficient, easy to follow, and short, so that they're not a maze of incomprehensible, uncoordinated approaches that have no financial support. We want people to be efficient; we want them to be productive. The learner pathways to adult education need to be well defined, efficient, and short so that we are supporting people to come back into learning in a way that is going to meet their needs.

As adults, we don't like to stand in lines, and we don't like to be told to go to the wrong place at the wrong time and not have the supports there that we expected to have. We want our life to be efficient, and so it should be. I think this is something we owe to Canadians: well-defined learner pathways, short, and efficient.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Mr. Michael Murphy: I'll just mention that the chamber has two focuses. When you think about all the things the federal government can spend money on, there's a great wide list, and the demand on government is ferocious from so many sources. Our focus is on productivity and the standard of living. We have been recommending that we start thinking about targeting spending a lot more than we have. The two things we've settled on—for a variety of reasons, but they're basically dealt with by talking about productivity and standard of living—are infrastructure and education.

Education has a great many components. We zeroed in a little on post-secondary education for some specific reasons related to what it can do for the economy, but education, nonetheless, made our “top two” list of things for government to do.

When you come to deciding how you're going to do this, my beef with EI, not to prolong the point, is to say that it is clearly not the only vehicle you should be thinking about here. That's a program that has a purpose. If you want to design a program—and I don't disagree with Shirley at all in thinking about something a bit more globally—education and training, if they're going to have the priority they should have, should be thought about other than as a quick add-on to some other program that has an entirely different purpose. That's the context within which I was coming at the issue.

The Chair: That's all the time. We'll move to Mr. Lake for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Lake: It's interesting that we're talking about literacy, which is obviously a very important issue in this country. My line of questioning concerns the language we're using in discussing this important issue.

Ms. Manson Singer, when you were talking about the 3.7 million Canadians aged 25 to 64 who do not have a high school diploma or higher credentials, you used the phrase, “condemned to lower-wage, lower-status jobs”. One question I would have is, can you define “lower-status” in this context?

• (1045)

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Lower-status jobs, when we're talking about this, are really jobs that fall into the area often referred to as the secondary labour market. In other words, they're jobs

without well-defined benefits, without well-defined work rules, without well-defined periods of work. These are not the nine to five bankers' jobs where you have a clear expectation about what they need. Often it's shift work, without necessarily much control over the shifts as they're given, and/or it's the quality and conditions of work. That's really what I'm talking about.

Mr. Mike Lake: What kinds of examples are there?

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Let's take, for example, a visiting kind of health care worker, who would be there to assist in helping an older person take medication. They work for an agency in the voluntary sector; sometimes they're trained and sometimes they're not, or have very limited training. They may have one shift one week and two the next week—a very unpredictable kind of workload. Also, there is unpredictable income. That would be one example.

Cleaners would be another example. They may be rotated into different work sites and not have much control over the conditions of the work site, or may face hazardous cleaning materials without proper equipment. Those would be examples of the kinds of low-status jobs where there's not good control over the workplace.

Mr. Mike Lake: You're actually talking about the job conditions more than the specific employment itself.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: It's the job conditions as well as the specific employment itself, with respect to work hours and their predictability, and therefore, of course, the kind of income you can expect to receive for the job.

Mr. Mike Lake: But some of those jobs would be pretty necessary and important to society still.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: Absolutely. And we need to have those jobs done, and this again speaks to the need to ensure that people are literate when they are in those jobs, so that they understand how to best protect themselves and also how to really negotiate better working conditions for themselves. Because if they can't read the employment standards act, they have very little recourse to understanding how they can change their current situation.

Mr. Mike Lake: Secondly, in referring to the nine million Canadians age 16 to 65, you say that they have literacy skills below the level considered as “necessary to live and work in today's society”. What does the phrase “necessary to live and work” mean? What do you consider that? It's pretty dramatic, that nine million people would fall into this category.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: It is very dramatic, and I think it is one we should all be concerned about, as people who are concerned about our country and the conditions and quality that we live in.

What we're talking about is the ability to participate in democratic processes, understanding how you vote and where you go to vote, understanding how to evaluate the choices that are in front of you, understanding how to navigate the health care system so that you can get the kinds of services and requirements that your physical and mental self need in order to do that. And we're also talking about basic kinds of numeracy skills, so that you can understand how to do your grocery shopping, how to plan your budget, whether or not it makes more sense for you to invest your money in an RESP or an RRSP. Those are the kinds of basic life tasks that we're talking about, and nine million Canadians do not have the required levels of literacy or numeracy to participate fully in our Canadian way of life.

Mr. Mike Lake: You say nine million Canadians age 16 to 65. Do you know what percentage of the population between 16 and 65 that would be?

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: I'm going to turn to Ron, who may have a quick statistic on that one. No?

Mr. Ron Saunders (Director, Work Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks): I don't know the number offhand, but it's big.

Mr. Mike Lake: But it's a pretty high percentage, obviously.

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: It's a very large percentage.

When we're trying to think about this, often when we're looking at problem areas in our country, we're looking at a narrow piece of the population. But this is not narrow. This is a wide-band group. It really is talking about a lot of people who are in the middle, and I think it's necessary to address it from a pan-Canadian perspective rather than a narrow targeted approach. Nine million people is almost a third of our country.

• (1050)

Mr. Mike Lake: Do you see the problem, then, being that the literacy is actually falling, or is the complexity of society increasing?

Ms. Sharon Manson Singer: I think the answer to your question is yes on both sides. Certainly the complexity of our society is increasing and it is more difficult to navigate the kind of life choices that are put in front of Canadians at every step of their lives, but at the same time we have wide bands of our population who are not completing their basic education. Even though we've seen some increase, the divide between the urban and rural is very high, the divide between the dominant culture and aboriginal is extremely high, and these are areas where we think we really need to make a difference.

Mr. Mike Lake: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur D'Amours, five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Murphy, I understood that you are of the opinion that the premiums paid by employers should be reduced. Do you assert that employers should stop contributing altogether?

[English]

Mr. Michael Murphy: I'll comment very briefly there, Mr. Chairman.

The issue is that today employers pay a premium of 40%, essentially 1.4 times what employees pay, and that's been going on for over 30 years. The rationale for that, as I mentioned earlier, in my view is no longer there. We would suggest that the appropriate level of payment is one where you drive that 1.4 number down over a series of years so that it becomes equal to what employees pay.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I would like to know your position and that of your organization regarding employment insurance and the whole range of pilot projects introduced by the government in the past. I would also like to know the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's position.

[English]

Mr. Michael Murphy: Thank you for the opportunity.

One issue I was concerned with is in terms of this particular pilot program. I'm using it as the latest example of a difficulty with the EI program as a whole. That's one. I think Mr. Lessard's comment earlier about the reference to a 98% success rate in terms of achieving the target is right, in terms of asking who the target audiences were.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I don't want to filibuster, Mr. Chairman, but this is a matter of principle: Mr. Murphy obviously wants to deliver a message, but it seems to me that his statements have nothing to do with the debate on labour force mobility, which is on the agenda today. If the issue is putting into question the premiums paid by employers and employees, I am of the view that we should put aside another day for holding such a debate.

[English]

The Chair: It's a question Mr. D'Amours has. I think it relates just about as much as the environmental question related. Let him continue, though. He has five minutes.

Mr. Michael Murphy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My difficulty was, and it's very specific, that while you had a target in terms of the economic regions—these 24 out of the 58 labour market regions in the country targeted by this two-year program—an unwanted effect occurred as a result of it as well. That too was pointed out by departmental officials in their preliminary evaluation of results. I think it's now been confirmed that roughly 100,000 regular EI users got about two and a half weeks' worth of extra benefits.

That was never intended to be part of the program. Remember we're talking about a program that was about \$100 million over two years, and it's now been renewed. It's been renewed at a lower threshold. It was at 10% unemployment regions before. In Canada obviously things have changed in two years in terms of that, so the threshold has been dropped to 8%. In dropping it to 8%, we would have had three regions drop out, which would have taken us down from 24 to 21. Basically, three have been added to that, so we're still at 24. It's going to run for another 18 months. There's no possibility to understand how we're going to avoid making the same mistake of again providing benefits to people who are not entitled to them under this pilot program.

I would say that when you run a pilot and the results come out that way, that's why a pilot is done—so that you can then say it's time to pull the plug on a program like that. That's what wasn't done. That was my comment.

● (1055)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Murphy, you have members in Atlantic Canada and in rural areas of Quebec. In some cases, the goals set by the company are not attainable because of the number of employees. If people have received these amounts, it is because they needed them. Sadly, this is reality.

These are often seasonal jobs. Are you able to tell your members that you will do anything necessary to make sure that their present employees will be able to work for the company the following year? Since this is meeting a need, why are these measures not offered to the general population in Canada? I'm talking about all those who are in need of this.

Mr. Murphy, I have always wondered who, among the persons who are present in this room, would derive any pleasure in thinking that he or she lacks two, four, five or six week of revenue to be able to make ends meet in his family budget. What is happening is not intended by people; it is the reality.

[English]

Mr. Michael Murphy: Can I comment?

The Chair: You can make a quick response to a long question.

Mr. Michael Murphy: Without repeating too much of what I said earlier, I think the real issue here is that although you're designing a program that has a target in mind and you succeed in achieving that target, you also provide benefits to people who were not intended to get additional benefits. No one else in other regions got those benefits, even though they well could have, so you're in a situation in which 100,000 people got benefits they weren't entitled to under this particular pilot program.

I recognize that this is one example; it's one we saw very recently. That's the nature of the concern I have about a specific program like that.

The Chair: Thank you and thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

We're almost out of time, but Mr. Storseth, it was your round. Just a couple of quick questions if you will.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try to keep it short.

We're very fortunate to have a very knowledgeable former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration on this committee who reminds us every week of how little his government actually accomplished on the file. Labour mobility from other countries is critically important to fulfilling some of our labour shortages. This puts great pressure on—

Hon. Denis Coderre: On a point of order, can you quote when I said we did so little in government?

Mr. Brian Storseth: No. I just actually—

Hon. Denis Coderre: Oh, it was a personal comment. Okay.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I didn't actually say that. Thank you.

This puts great pressure on our foreign credential recognition, on education as well. What are we doing to encourage immigrants to train in areas of need, such as skilled trades?

Ms. Shirley Seward: First, when they come, most of them are already trained. We benefit incredibly because they have been trained in their sending countries, and we assess immigrants on the basis of a point system, as you know, that gives points for their education, among other things.

Several decades ago, Canada could not have survived without apprentices, the construction workers who came from countries in southern Europe, and we are still reaping the benefits of those workers, although most of them are moving out of the workforce now because they are older. Special attention needs to be placed on apprenticeship, but we can't expect to be able to attract the same people we did, especially from southern Europe, because there are now many competitors for their skills, and they don't have the same motivation to leave.

In our point system we clearly need to put a lot more emphasis on apprentices as we move forward, but it's not going to solve all our problems. We also have to make sure that within Canada we put a major emphasis on trying to change attitudes with respect to apprenticeship— getting more kids into apprenticeship training and encouraging employers to create the spaces that are needed, so we have enough apprentices in the country.

● (1100)

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you very much.

Mr. Murphy, you talked about the 15% to 20% of the regulated occupations or trades that face serious restrictive interprovincial transfers of their credentials. I agree with you on this. I was wondering if you have any examples of a predominant occupation or trade that would be affected by this?

Mr. Michael Murphy: In the course of our work on the Agreement on Internal Trade, we put a little report together in the last year or two that gives very specific examples across the economy. We'd be happy to send that to the committee, if you would be interested in seeing it.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Please.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Murphy; we would appreciate it if you could send that to us. That would be great.

I do want to take the time to thank all the witnesses. I realize we could probably have each one of the organizations separately for more than the two hours we have allocated, so I do appreciate the time you have made to be here, ladies and gentlemen. Your presentations were excellent and also gave us a great framework to jump off from as we move forward on this study. So thank you once again for taking the time to be here with us this morning.

Ms. Shirley Seward: It was a pleasure, and good luck in your work.

The Chair: Thank you.

In terms of our committee work, I know Mr. Martin had a motion. Do we have time to deal with this motion as a group? If we do, then I'll get Mr. Martin to the table quickly.

Mr. Lessard.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, we had asked the Minister of Labour to come back to this committee before the House adjourns for the summer. Did we receive an answer?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, his office responded yesterday. I'm told to say that he was busy, so we will not be having a meeting on Thursday as we agreed to last time. However, he's indicated he'd be interested in coming back in the fall.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): I have two motions to table today that I hope the committee will be willing to consider.

The first—and we've spoken about this, and I've spoken to many of you individually—is a study of the social transfer that I think would be helpful to everybody concerned, those who receive support from the government, whether it's in education or housing or social services, who feel that the system as it has evolved over the last 10 to 13 years is not working anymore in today's context. Those who deliver the program have some concern that there's no accountability, there's no framework, there's no way of determining whether what we're doing is hitting the mark or delivering the results we want to have.

So I'm moving a motion that, at our first opportunity, we entertain a study of the social transfer that would be as comprehensive as the study on this very important employability issue.

The Chair: And understanding, as you just indicated, that we have work before the committee right now, so when we....

Is there any discussion on this? It's been moved by Mr. Martin.

Mr. Lessard, do you have a comment?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, we will vote against the motion. In fact, we will systematically oppose any motion having as an objective to regulate the use of funds that are the provinces'

money, in our case Quebec. In fact, this amounts to saying that this jurisdiction is recognized to us, providing we do what we are told to do.

[English]

The Chair: We will check the minutes on that.

The comment has been made that the work is before us, so this will have to be looked at after we've done our existing work.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: It's a fairly good idea to study it; however, I would like to first of all see the framework and where we could make a difference. We need to have Finance tell us exactly what we would be studying or what we should be studying. I find it's a little broad for what we could actually delve into, so I'm not sure if I want it to be an in-depth study.

But I certainly have no problem with having Finance appear to tell us what's within our limits and the context of how we could address the CST. This is a kind of social transfer issue.

• (1105)

The Chair: All right.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's certainly an important issue, but we could have motions at every meeting about more things to study. We seem to be doing a bit of that. The study before us is unfortunately extremely broad and a bit vague in its definition, but it's also taking up the schedule for the rest of this year.

We ought to try to get through it and then, as we get closer to the end of it, figure out what we will do next, rather than have a whole series of things we've agreed to study with no real intention of getting to them, or no real likelihood of getting to them any time soon.

The Chair: I think that is something we agreed to as a committee.

Mr. Martin, do you have any more comments on this?

Mr. Tony Martin: This isn't a new subject that I'm bringing forward. I talked about this in the last Parliament for almost a year. I'm back again to this Parliament to see if we can't study this.

As a government, we transfer \$100 billion a year to the provinces, and we don't know anymore whether it's relevant or not, whether it's being spent in the right places, or whether there's any way of measuring its effectiveness. As I said, there's a lot of critique out there about it. So I think it's something that is certainly in our area of responsibility.

I have been very cooperative up to this point in saying there are some other things we need to take a look at, and I was going to be patient in getting to this. I sent a notice to everybody last week about this. To be frank, I didn't think the employability study was going to be that large. I didn't think we were going to go that far into the fall. But somebody made the decision to do that and set up a schedule. I know we had some input into it, but we didn't talk as a subcommittee about that at all, and I'm concerned about that.

But this is something that I think is core and central to our committee in how we spend those moneys. Are we getting value for our dollar? Are we supporting our people as life evolves?

Mr. Lessard made a good point, and maybe it's something we'll discover as well. On the expectation and understanding from Quebec, what do we need to do?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin. I appreciate that.

It was the committee that decided we'd undertake this employability study, so once again we're at the will of the committee. If there's no more further discussion, I'll propose the vote.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Which motion is it?

The Chair: This is on the Canada social transfer.

You would like a recorded vote.

The motion is that the committee conducts a study of the Canada social transfer from a social policy perspective including in its study—

Mr. Mike Lake: There's no context to it.

The Chair: Once again, this is the motion we have before us.

(Motion negatived [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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