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CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Immigrant Settlement Services

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENT SERVICES

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, it was learned earlier this week that the federal government will cut funding to a highly successful immigration settlement program in Ontario, the province that welcomes the highest number of newcomers in Canada.

The Settlement Workers in Schools program is a no-cost, school-based settlement service that helps immigrant students adapt to a new life in Canada and connect their parents with community resources. Ms. Catherine Fife, President of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, has expressed publicly her worries about the \$43 million funding reduction in Ontario, citing that some school boards will have to close their community welcome centres, eliminate teachers and settlement workers, and reduce the operating costs of their settlement programs in the summer, which is a peak time when newcomers visit these facilities to enrol their children.

• (1420)

This is a question of justice and equity. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has no problem spending taxpayers' dollars to woo ethnic voters. In fact, spending in the minister's office has increased by 35 per cent since he has held that portfolio. However, when it comes to giving newcomers the tools they need to adapt and settle into our country, the minister is prepared to cut the necessary funding.

Why are settlement services not a priority for this Harper government?

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, let me correct the statement that the honourable senator made that the budget was increased by 35 per cent. That amount consisted of moving over a significant portion from the Minister of Canadian Heritage to Minister Kenney. This was the result of taking on more responsibilities and, obviously, the funding that went along with that moved with it.

With regard to settlement funding in Ontario, upon coming to office in 2006, our government cut the Right of Landing Fee in half, saving newcomers to Ontario approximately \$200 million. We also tripled funding for settlement services for newcomers across Canada, after it had been frozen by the previous government for over a decade.

I have answered this question before, honourable senators. I was interested to see an article in the paper a couple of days ago about the Premier of Nova Scotia lauding the Province of Manitoba for their successful campaign in attracting new immigrants to that province.

However, because there is a shift in where newcomers are settling, realigning funding across the country was the responsible thing to do. Of course, the government seeks out and values newcomers in Ontario and across Canada. These actions are simply a reflection of moving the funding and the dollars to where the immigrants are actually settling.

Senator Tardif: No matter if there has been a transfer of funds, it is still one department.

[Translation]

The immigrant population is very vulnerable. Educators across Ontario fear that these cuts will make children of immigrants fall even further behind their Canadian counterparts. Did the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration produce an impact study before making the decision to cut the program? If not, on what data and on what factors did he base his decision?

[English]

Senator LeBreton: First, honourable senators, a significant portion from the Department of Canadian Heritage was moved to Citizenship and Immigration under Minister Kenney. Therefore, the funding required to administer that program moved to him as well. It is incorrect to say that the budget was increased. Minister Kenney's responsibilities were increased and the funding that was previously with Canadian Heritage simply moved over to Citizenship and Immigration.

As much as the honourable senator tries to disseminate the story that we cut funding, the fact is that we did nothing of the sort. I answered this question the first time around. We tripled the amount of money for immigrant placement and we have simply moved the funds to accommodate the immigrants where they are actually settling. Just as in the situation where an office in one part of the country was funded because immigrants were there and now immigrants are no longer there, we have moved the funding to where immigrants are actually settling.

I want to ensure the record is clear. We have not cut the funding. We have tripled the amount of funding.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Senator Tardif: Honourable senators, I am puzzled, because the district school boards in Ontario are saying that their demands continue to grow. The fact is that the government is cutting there because it is giving money elsewhere. How can one explain to these school boards that the demand is not there, when the demand keeps growing in these areas? I cannot believe that Toronto's demand is not increasing. Is the leader saying that the government is not cutting interpretation and language services, community centres or teachers in these areas?

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, I am saying that the money that has been set aside, which we have tripled, is being targeted in the areas where the immigrants are now settling.

Programs are set up to deal with a specific situation. If the recipients of the programs are no longer in a position where they require these services, but the services are required 100 miles down the road, where immigrants are now settling, obviously that is where the money should be expended.

Is the honourable senator suggesting that when immigrants settle in Hamilton, the outskirts of Toronto, Nova Scotia or Manitoba, just because some organization in Toronto has received money since the beginning of a program, that somehow or other they should keep receiving money, even though the need is not there and other areas are denied funding? That is what the honourable senator is suggesting.