



Presentation before the House of Commons Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank-you for the opportunity to provide some comments on the policies and procedures around the provision of “Temporary Resident Visas,” or as they are more commonly known, visitor visas. I am Daniel-Robert Gooch, president of the Canadian Airports Council.

I understand that there are three aspects of visas under consideration by the committee, including system integrity and appeals. I cannot speak to these two areas – for which there are undoubtedly more learned views available -- but will comment on how Canada’s visitor visa system could better facilitate trade and tourism and the opportunities for Canada that would result.

The CAC represents 46 members who operate airports throughout the country, including most of the major airports that you will be familiar with operating commercial passenger traffic.

At Canada’s airports, we have come to realize over the past few years that visas have a tremendous, but underappreciated impact not just on aviation, but also on Canada’s trade and tourism-dependent economy. Visas impact Canada’s competitiveness as a tourism destination, the attractiveness of our international airport hubs for connecting traffic, the viability of potential new international routes, and the capacity, traffic volume and competition on existing routes – both international and domestic. This is important not just for our international

gateways, but also for many smaller centers, which receive international students, visiting family members and business travellers from around the world.

At the Canadian Airports Council, we are broadly interested in visas in two ways: Making the process easier for travellers who need visas, and low risk ways to get legitimate visitors out of the need for a visa altogether for travel to or through Canada. This is increasingly relevant to Canada's aviation sector because some of this country's biggest opportunities for both tourism and trade are with countries whose residents require a visa to visit Canada.

I want to be clear on a couple of points. We appreciate that visas play an important role in Canadian security and controlling who comes to Canada. There are countries with tremendous tourism potential for Canada from which we currently require visas – countries like Brazil, China, Mexico, Turkey and India. In terms of trade and tourism growth, we would love to see visa-free travel from these countries, but we recognize that visa requirements are in place for valid reasons.

There is a balance involved. We believe the right balance is in place, but that through greater use of technology and international best practices, we can be even more precise in facilitating trade and tourism without sacrificing security and in a fiscally conservative manner.

It also is important to note that we do see progress being made today. 130 Visa Application Centers are being opened, bringing visa services closer to applicants and helping to reduce application errors in important markets like China. We now have ten-year multiple entry visas, visa requirements were just lifted for the Czech Republic. And while the introduction of a visa requirement for visitors from Mexico definitely had a negative impact on tourism, we are hopeful that enough progress has been made to mitigate risk in other areas that this requirement can be lifted soon also. Mexico alone could deliver more than 130,000 additional visitors a year.

The Electronic Travel Authorization requirement we understand to be coming into effect in 2015 will involve a new step for visitors from countries that currently require no visa today. This is a concern. That ETAs be low cost and low hassle is an imperative to soften its impact on travel demand, but ETAs also represent an opportunity if they are used as an intermediate screening tool that can allow for formal visa requirements to be lifted from some lower-risk markets.

So there are positive developments to report and we see this as an indication that the government is hearing what we and our partners in the air carrier and tourism sector have been saying over the past few years about the importance of improvements in visa policies and procedures.

But there are still ample opportunities for improvement. The current visa application process today is cumbersome. It asks for a lot of information, is paper based, often requires a traveler to surrender his or her passport, and may entail long distance travel for in person interviews. It also can take a long time, which is a big problem for business travellers in particular. Business travel often needs to be arranged within days – not weeks or months – and a visa delayed is essentially a visa denied. Surrendering of passports can be a non-starter for many travellers and it is important that alternatives be both available and well communicated.

We do hear stories from foreign airlines, governments and travelers themselves about how visas are impacting business and leisure travel, and Canada's reputation abroad. I personally encountered this recently when I tried to help a friend of mine come to Canada to visit our country for a week from Turkey. While he was able to very quickly get visas to visit the U.S. and the European Union, the process took months for Canada and his passport was held by Canadian officials while he waited. We have been advised by CIC officials that if the application is originated online, a passport is only required for issuance of the visa upon approval. But at Visa Application Centres, they are surrendered immediately. Apparently even there an official has some discretion, but this is not going to be known by the applicant, and surrendering a passport for weeks is a non-starter for frequent travellers.

All of this can leave a negative impression of Canada with anyone, but imagine the broader implications when a business traveler looking to trade with Canada experiences similar hurdles. Travelers will choose other markets, and instead of Canada, those markets will get the economic benefits and jobs that result.

Anecdotes may not be indicative of the bigger picture, but surely there are ways in which we could be doing this better. The Tourism Industry Association of Canada notes in its recent report that visa restrictions on travel are estimated to negatively impact inbound visits by up to 31%, which means about 250,000 fewer visitors each year from Brazil, China, India and Mexico alone. Considering the average long-haul visitor spends nearly \$1,600, this would mean an additional \$375 million in foreign spending in the Canadian economy from just these four countries, if we could significantly improve things on the visa front.

So we believe there are ways to improve visa processing, and support efforts by the government to do just that. Improvements should include increased reliance on electronic visa application processing and issuance, such as is in place in Australia and elsewhere, procedures that allow applicants to keep their documents, regardless of application method, and improved foreign language services.

We also consider taking a different approach to potential visitors who we have already screened or who have been screened by other countries. Visitors should be able to transfer Canadian visas to a new passport, for example. And while we appreciate that Canada evaluates potential visitors based on different risk factors than other countries, a visa to the U.S. or the European Union nevertheless demonstrates a certain amount of pre-screening, which should be a consideration for less complicated entry into Canada. How about individuals who have been granted long-term or permanent residency in a country from which we do not require visas – like the United States? Does it make sense to treat a Chinese student studying at Harvard who would like to visit Montreal for a weekend with the

same process that we would apply to a potential visitor who has never travelled outside of his or her country? I think not.

A second area of visa policy of interest to our sector is getting travellers out of the visa and border queues altogether. In particular, Transit Without Visa is a program in place today that allows travellers from certain Asian cities visiting the United States on certain airlines to transit through Canada without a visa. This program has been successful and with very few abuses or violations of the program. Its expansion and improvement have been areas in which we have seen some progress in our work with both Citizenship and Immigration and CBSA, but it is important that this progress continue as there are additional opportunities for Canada to take advantage of.

While it may not be obvious how a traveler who spends just a few hours at a Canadian airport connecting to somewhere else is good for Canada, Canadian airports and air carriers are direct beneficiaries of these passengers. These additional passengers make viable international routes that might not otherwise be viable. On existing routes, they grow demand, which can grow both capacity and competition. New routes, more capacity and greater competition, in turn, help bring more travellers who are destined for Canada, which delivers benefits throughout the economy.

In fact, a recent Conference Board of Canada study estimated that expansion of the existing Transit Without Visa program could have a \$270 million benefit in GDP and 3,200 jobs if Canada is able to attract just 5% of the connecting traffic between Asia and the United States. Canada's aviation sector isn't content to just stop there, however, there are tremendous opportunities available to flow travellers from Central and South America to Asia and Europe if we are able to expand Transit Without Visa to these travellers as well.

Other countries understand this, which is why we have seen countries in the Middle East grow their market share of traffic between the Americas and both Europe and

Asia exponentially in recent years – at the expense of North American hubs and airlines.

So in conclusion, Canada's airports see tremendous opportunities coming from reforms to Canada's visitor visa policies and procedures. There are ways in which we are doing better, with programs like Transit Without Visa, and these can be expanded and improved upon even more. While nobody suggests that visas will ever go away completely for travellers from every country, we believe there are readily achievable ways to improve the process for those legitimate visitors who do require visas to visit Canada.

There is tremendous upside for Canada to getting this right. It's important for the health of our tourism sector, for growing Canada's international trade, and even for Canada's reputation in the world.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. Thank-you again for your time and I welcome any questions you may have.