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Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to this meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages is represented by Ghislaine Saikaley, the acting commissioner, Pascale Giguère, director and general counsel, Mary Donaghy, assistant commissioner, and Jean Marleau, acting assistant commissioner.

This morning we will be considering the 2016-17 annual report of the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages.

You have the floor, Madam Commissioner.

As usual, you will have the floor to start off the first hour, and we will then move on to questions and comments from committee members.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley (Interim Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Honourable members of the committee, good morning.

[*Translation*]

This year, the annual report is divided into three chapters. The first chapter looks at the 150th anniversary of Confederation, which we have the pleasure of celebrating this year. The second chapter addresses a number of topics related to new opportunities for official languages. And the third chapter deals with leadership in the public service. Let's look at these subjects one by one.

[*English*]

First, in the months leading up to the 150th anniversary of Confederation, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages made a significant effort to ensure that federal departments and organizations would take linguistic duality fully into account in their activities and in the services to be provided to the public during this high-profile Canadian event.

We will also be taking part in the celebrations, using this opportunity to better promote the fundamental role that linguistic duality has played in Canada's history and its importance for the future.

The celebrations will not be limited to 2017, because in two years we will be celebrating another important milestone in Canadian

history. In 2019, the Official Languages Act will turn 50. This would be a good time to conduct a review of the federal language policy, given how much Canadian society has changed since the last revision of the act in 1988.

This evolving context, including technological developments, means that it is time to think about amending the act. The government should address this situation and assess the relevance of updating the act. That is certainly what we plan to do at the office of the commissioner, in consultation with official language minority communities. It may be the only recommendation in this annual report, but many other recommendations were made in various files during 2016 and 2017.

[*Translation*]

Throughout the year, advances in some of our files have brought new perspectives to key areas, such as support for early childhood development.

On October 3, 2016, Commissioner Graham Fraser released his report entitled, "Early Childhood: Fostering the Vitality of Francophone Minority Communities". This report revealed that, in francophone minority communities, early childhood development is hindered by a lack of resources, a shortage of staff at early childhood centres, and fragmentation of services.

It also confirmed that the lack of funding earmarked specifically for early childhood in the "Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-2018: Education, Immigration, Communities", has made these communities vulnerable and often unable to meet their own needs.

[*English*]

Over the past 12 months, the office of the commissioner has participated in consultations conducted by Canadian Heritage that will help to develop the next official languages plan, which will be released shortly. We noted that the groups that were consulted focused on the promotion of linguistic duality, the vitality of official language minority communities, and the active role of the federal government.

With regard to access to justice, on October 20, 2016, the federal government announced changes to the appointment process for superior court judges. These changes responded to the recommendations made by Commissioner Fraser and his counterparts in Ontario and New Brunswick in their 2013 joint study, "Access to Justice in Both Official Languages: Improving the Bilingual Capacity of the Superior Court Judiciary".

•(1110)

Many of the office of the commissioner's interventions in 2016-17 were intended to support the leadership demonstrated by certain institutions and to encourage others to do the same.

The office of the commissioner supported the efforts of those who worked to implement the act within their jurisdiction. We also encouraged the use of more strategic approaches to find solutions to systemic problems and produced tools to help institutions better comply with the spirit and letter of the act.

[*Translation*]

Despite all of these encouraging signs, there is still a lot of work to do in terms of respect for official languages, as demonstrated by this annual report, which indicates that the Office of the Commissioner received a total of 1,018 admissible complaints in 2016-2017. We have not seen such a high volume of complaints since 2009-2010, when we received 876 complaints against CBC/Radio-Canada regarding the CBEF radio station in Windsor, Ontario. As usual, the majority of the complaints, 565 of them, pertained to communications with the public.

In March 2017, the Office of the Commissioner completed its investigation into complaints about the lack of service in French on Parliament Hill. Since the complaints on this issue were filed in 2015, responsibility for security on Parliament Hill has been transferred to the Parliamentary Protective Service, which has established a number of operational procedures, including reminders and training programs, to ensure that all of its employees are aware of the requirements under the act and comply with them at all times.

A total of 183 complaints dealt with Part V of the act, regarding language of work. This issue remains a cause for concern.

We have also noted a significant increase in the number of complaints filed under section 91 of the act, with 192 complaints pertaining to the language requirements of positions. This high number is also worrisome.

[*English*]

It is in this context that the commissioner wrote to the President of the Treasury Board in May 2016, asking him to amend the directive on official languages for people management in order to address his recommendation concerning the linguistic profile of supervisory positions, which appeared in the commissioner's 2010-11 annual report. We have begun a dialogue with the Treasury Board Secretariat to examine this matter more closely.

Changes are already taking place at some federal institutions with respect to the language skills required for supervisory positions in regions designated bilingual for the purposes of language of work. In 2016-17, Shared Services Canada, Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency, and the National Gallery of Canada endorsed the office of the commissioner's position on the required language level.

This year, instead of carrying out a report card evaluation of federal institutions, we conducted our own consultations with several official language minority communities and federal departments to gather their comments on the effectiveness of our interventions, specifically our work with federal institutions, our studies, and our

promotion of linguistic duality. The results are encouraging. The people we consulted appreciate the office of the commissioner's work and want us to do more. You received a letter today with more information on the results of this consultation.

•(1115)

[*Translation*]

It is important to celebrate victories, but I am also aware that significant challenges remain nationwide. According to projections recently published by Statistics Canada, the number of francophones in the country will steadily decrease between now and 2036.

This projection demonstrates the importance of current efforts to assist francophone minority communities across the country in becoming host societies.

Even if we are rightfully concerned that the status of the French language is threatened by demographics, the public opinion of the majority appears to be constantly improving.

In a Nielsen survey commissioned by the Office of the Commissioner in early 2016, 88% of respondents said they support the objectives of the act. Another interesting statistic is that 96% of respondents stated that Canadians should be able to receive federal government services in the official language of their choice.

I wanted to end on a positive note, in keeping with the beautiful weather that has finally arrived!

Thank you for your attention.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation, Madam Commissioner.

We will now proceed immediately to the comment and question period.

Please go ahead, Ms. Boucher.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello, Madam Commissioner.

Thank you all for being here today.

I read your report carefully and have trouble understanding why the number of complaints rose by more than 40% in 2016-17. That does not really make sense, to my mind. With all the official languages reports that have been published in the past, how can it be that, in 2016-17, francophones outside Quebec still have trouble being served in their preferred language? Have you taken steps to reduce the number of complaints?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: The number of complaints fluctuates from year to year. For a number of years, they were decreasing. Since 2012, they have been increasing. It is always difficult to explain these trends.

This year we have seen an increase in two sectors in particular, including services to the public. As you said, it seems that Canadians have complained more often about not receiving services in their preferred language. So there were more complaints of that type.

There has also been a big increase, as I said, in complaints involving the linguistic profile of positions in the public service. It seems that public servants are more aware of their obligations, which is not a bad thing in itself, and that might also explain the increase in complaints about services to the public. Are Canadians more aware of their rights and are they increasingly demanding that those rights be respected, leading to an increase in the number of complaints?

As to our efforts to reduce the number of complaints, I think all the Commissioner's activities that are part of his role of influencing federal institutions are having an effect. All the presentations given by our staff, all the tools we develop, all the reports we write—whether investigation reports that include recommendations, audit reports or others—are all tools specifically intended to improve the performance of federal institutions. These various methods are expected to have a positive effect in reducing the number of complaints.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yet this is not the first year that these same findings have been reported. It is always the same thing, report after report. Perhaps people are more aware and are complaining more often, which is a good thing. Your role is becoming increasingly difficult, however, because even though you are receiving more complaints and are trying to resolve more problems, the complaints keep piling up.

I would like to talk about something else. In your report, which I read in great detail, you talked about early childhood and about anglophones in Quebec. You reported—I worked in Quebec so I already knew this—that the anglophones of Quebec are not recognized as a minority by their own provincial government.

You made some recommendations about early childhood in particular. How can we help the anglophone community of Quebec, knowing full well that it is not even recognized by the province? What kind of challenge does that pose for you?

• (1120)

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: As you know, we published a study last year on early childhood development. When we began that study, we quickly realized that the needs in Quebec were quite different. That is why the study looked at early childhood outside Quebec.

Moreover, as the annual report indicates, we are now looking into the situation of anglophones in Quebec to see what role the federal government could play to support the anglophone minority there.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: You must also know that the situation in Quebec is unique, since Bill M-30 prevents the federal government from acting in areas under Quebec's jurisdiction. That is the reality you have to deal with, as do we. That is why I am asking what we can do, together, to encourage reflection about this, not only in the rest of Canada, but also in Quebec, so the Quebec government recognizes the anglophone minority in the province. If we want to help that minority, we have to go through Quebec. Other approaches can be taken elsewhere, but that is not possible in Quebec. Your approach to this must be therefore be even more targeted.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Absolutely. Our approach must reflect those problems and specific characteristics.

As to recommendations, it is certainly possible to recommend that the federal government work jointly with the province, for instance. We can assert our influence in the recommendations we make.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lefebvre, you have the floor.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Madam Commissioner, thank you very much for being here to present your report. I think the timing is good.

You said it is time to think about overhauling or revising the Official Language Act, which is nearly 50 years old. The last time Parliament revised the act was in 1988. I agree with you. I hope the committee will consider this in the fall. I know the Senate has also done some work on this.

You would like to begin a study of a potential reform of the Official Languages Act. I would like to know how you would proceed. What are your objectives for that study?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: First of all, we would directly consult the communities affected, which means francophone and anglophone official language minority communities.

We would review the information we have gathered over many years as regards the challenges in the application of the Official Languages Act. There are of course new ways of offering services since the advent of the Internet and social media. We appeared before Parliament with regard to a matter relating to court administrative services, specifically as regards the publication of decisions on the Internet.

That is how we would conduct our study and come to a position that would also reflect our consultations. We do of course expect to be invited to appear during the study that the Senate committee has begun. We hope that would also further our study. Generally speaking, that is how we would proceed.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Thank you.

Your report indicates a record number of complaints. It just keeps going. How would this revision of the Official Languages Act help reduce the number of complaints by ensuring that better services are provided as stipulated by the new act? I would like to hear your thoughts on that. How would a revision of the act support your services and promote greater compliance with the Official Languages Act by the federal government and thereby reduce the number of complaints?

• (1125)

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Perhaps the wording of certain sections of the Official Languages Act needs to be clarified to ensure that federal institutions fully understand their obligations. For example, we have to make sure they fully understand what constitutes active offer. That might involve education.

The act could be worded more clearly. We have to make sure that federal institutions fully understand their obligations and perform better, which will probably reduce the number of complaints.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: I completely agree with you.

Thank you very much.

I will give the floor to my colleague Ms. Lapointe.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here with us today.

I would like to pick up on my colleague Ms. Boucher's question about access to early childhood services in Quebec. I would like us to be clear about something. School boards in Quebec are either anglophone or francophone, but I do not think early childhood centres are subject to that same requirement.

If I open a home-based daycare, does it have to be francophone or may I offer services in other languages? I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: I do not have any information on that, unfortunately. I am not sure if some of my colleagues might.

Mrs. Mary Donaghy (Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Ms. Saikaley.

Ms. Lapointe, thank you for the question.

Together with the Quebec Community Groups Network, or QCGN, we have started looking into these matters in detail in Quebec. We are seeing how Quebec differs from the other provinces that have a francophone minority population. You already saw this in the report that Mr. Fraser tabled last November. In francophone communities outside Quebec, early childhood is important to a young child's francophone identity. It is a way to connect young children to the francophone community, in the hope that they will continue to be educated in the French-language system, deepen their knowledge of French, and acquire a francophone identity.

As to the situation in Quebec, the dynamics are completely different. Identity issues are neither fundamental nor a priority. In the education sector, the situation is different in Quebec.

We have started to understand, however, that there is a link between language and health and well-being in the case of young anglophone children in Quebec. In smaller anglophone communities—I am not referring to Montreal—there is socio-economic pressure. The discussion of early childhood must reflect that context.

That is the work we have begun. We have not determined exactly when we will publish a study or a report. That remains to be determined, but we will definitely finish in the next 12 to 18 months. I expect we will come back here to talk about our findings and recommendations.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you for that clarification. There is indeed a difference and it is important to talk about it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here with us and for presenting their very important annual report, although it is more an account of what has been happening for some time, touching on aspects we are still working on or that require further work.

In particular, you mentioned a great increase in the number of complaints related to section 91 of the act, as regards the linguistic classification of positions.

In this regard, the Radio-Canada journalist Catherine Lanthier wrote an article about French being in decline in the federal public service. Roughly translated, it says:

The current situation in the public service is causing dissatisfaction at all levels, including the highest levels, according to an internal report obtained by Radio-Canada under the Access to Information Act.

Moreover, the article quotes the following remark that was heard in the public service:

Not a word of French is spoken at certain deputy ministers' committees.

The article also quotes the following report excerpt:

A new deputy minister arrived who spoke only English. From one day to the next, all the assistant deputy ministers stopped speaking French, even the francophones.

This is not a new concern. Even Mr. Fraser mentioned it. He sent a letter to the prime minister. He said that something had to be done, that it was urgent, and that he was getting a lot of complaints about this. Yet we still see this problem today.

I know there is a working group, headed up by Mr. Borbey and Mr. Mendelsohn, that is examining the language of work issue. I see differences, however, between your position, which is similar to mine, and the government's position. This is worrisome. The government said that people must be able to speak their preferred language only in regions designated bilingual, whereas in my opinion, the act very clearly stipulates what the Commissioner's office pointed out, namely, that the act “gives the right to every employee in these regions, regardless of the linguistic requirements of their position”.

Can you clarify your position? What will you do to convince the government that each employee must be able to work in their preferred official language?

• (1130)

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: You already mentioned the Mendelsohn-Borbey report, which we are expecting very soon. We are very eager to read its findings, the recommendations or good practices it suggests, and to see how the government will respond.

As to section 91 of the act, as I said, last spring, in view of the increasing number of complaints in this regard, Mr. Fraser wrote to the President of Treasury Board to reiterate the need to change the directive informing public servants that positions should be at least BBB in regions designated bilingual. Our position is that they should be at the CBC level.

A working group was then created. The members are still meeting and are making progress...

Mr. François Choquette: What is the name of that working group? Does it have a name?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: No. It is made up of employees from Treasury Board and from our offices who meet regularly to discuss these issues in order to arrive at a position.

Mr. François Choquette: What is there to discuss? The current competency level is BBB and that requirement has to be increased. It could be CBC. The objective is to have higher linguistic requirements. Just so everyone understands, a BBB profile is an average competency level. For your part, you would like to see higher competency levels for management positions.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: The discussions can be about that, but no doubt about other matters as well. For example, do certain categories of employees need that kind of profile? Would another profile be preferable? Perhaps the BBC profile? Those are the kinds of things they have to discuss.

Mr. François Choquette: Is the working group making progress? Will the report be ready soon? You play an active role in the working group. Will you make joint recommendations with Treasury Board? How will you proceed?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: There might not be joint proposals, but the Office of the Commissioner will certainly be in a better position to take a stand after these meetings.

As I said, we are waiting for the results of the report by Mr. Mendelsohn and Mr. Borbey, who were tasked with evaluating the issue. They consulted a number of senior officials and supervisors during their study. This report will no doubt offer some interesting ideas to pursue, in my opinion.

Mr. François Choquette: Time is running out quickly, unfortunately, and I would have liked to talk about Parks Canada in relation to the 150th anniversary of Confederation. It is incredible that there will be free admission to the parks while just two of the nine recommendations have been implemented to ensure that park officials can effectively serve the public in both official languages.

Personally, I asked some questions about this in the House of Commons a few months ago, or perhaps a few years ago, but nothing has been done. I do not know how you manage, but I would be discouraged in your shoes.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Before we all get discouraged, I will turn it over to Mr. Vandal.

Mr. Dan Vandal (Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for their presentation.

You mentioned something that is worrisome. According to Statistics Canada projections, the proportion of francophones in Canada will continue to decrease by 2036.

That is very worrisome to me personally, as the member for Saint-Boniface—Saint-Vital, a francophone minority community.

Do you have any suggestions on how to counter this troubling trend?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: The results presented by Statistics Canada should sound the alarm and make us realize how important it is to act now on various fronts.

We have talked for a long time about francophone immigration and the importance of welcoming immigrants to francophone regions outside Quebec. Before immigrants leave their country, they need to know that there are francophone communities here. They must be welcomed in French when they arrive in these communities and have access to infrastructure to help them, including schools and community centres. Immigration is not just one factor among many; it is a key factor.

Early childhood is another issue. We have talked about early childhood development. We must support early childhood development and minority language education. Education is a continuum from early childhood to university.

There are also programs that support bilingualism among the majority, namely, French as a second language and immersion programs. There are many ways to support bilingualism.

We hope that the official languages action plan will provide support in a number of these areas in order to reverse the trends.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Thank you.

Your report mentions the difficulties with access to French language tests and their cost to immigrants living in our communities. Can you elaborate on that problem?

After that, I will give the floor to Mr. Samson.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: We received complaints about that, and we are going to investigate. Those concerned received a copy of our final report. We made recommendations and will follow up in 2018. Since it pertains to an investigation, I can't comment further, but I can tell you that we have addressed the matter. It was determined that the complaints were founded, and we made recommendations to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to rectify the problem.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): I, too, want to thank you for being with us today. It's always a pleasure to have you here, whether individually or as a group. Thank you for helping us gain a clearer understanding of our responsibilities as a government and as Canadians.

I am going to focus on chapter two of your report.

Let me say first how critical it was to impose a moratorium as far as services to the community are concerned, to allow time for a proper review of the regulations. I'm very glad you pointed that out in your report.

As you said, if the trend continues, Canada's francophone population will decline. What's more, we are not on track to meet our target for francophone immigration. We've had some very tough years and lost a lot of ground, which we need to make up quickly.

The moratorium at least gives us an opportunity to study the issue and determine which criteria should be added to ensure the development of minority language communities. Ensuring the vitality and sustainability of these communities is key, so I'm very glad you mentioned it in your report. It's important that people all over the country speak out on this urgent issue.

Early childhood development is another crucial factor, as you mentioned. It's an area where resources and services are lacking. This is a crucial aspect that requires swift action to fix the problem. It's a straightforward equation: if children in francophone official language minority communities attend anglophone day care, they will end up going to anglophone schools.

Francophone immigration is decreasing, and fewer services are available. Early childhood development services are non-existent. Fewer students attend francophone schools. That's another major problem, and I could go on. Things are critical, and the moratorium is helpful.

Social infrastructure is another area in need of attention. Again, that's something you should study further. It's important to make sure these new initiatives will provide official language minority communities with opportunities to thrive. Not sufficiently investing in infrastructure and giving the provinces funding without any assurance that it will benefit official language minority communities will simply lead to an even worse state of affairs 10 years down the road.

I would like you to tell us where things stand with—

● (1140)

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you'll have to try to get an answer to that later.

It is now over to René Arseneault, from New Brunswick.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Fine.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your question, Mr. Samson.

Ms. Saikaley, as you were giving your presentation, I was reading your brief with great interest. I was reading and listening at the same time, which was doubly painful, not because of you, but because of your findings.

Allow me to read a passage from your brief:

This report revealed that, in Francophone minority communities, early childhood development is hindered by a lack of resources, a shortage of staff at early childhood centres and a fragmentation of services.

It also confirmed that the lack of funding earmarked specifically for early childhood in the *Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-2018: Education, Immigration, Communities* has made these communities vulnerable and often unable to meet their own needs.

Over the past 12 months, the Office of the Commissioner has participated in consultations conducted by Canadian Heritage that will help to develop the next official languages action plan, which will be released shortly. We noted that the groups that were consulted focused on the promotion of linguistic duality....

Against this backdrop, one question is top of mind. Given the quagmire around federal and provincial jurisdiction, how can we achieve our early childhood development objective? What can we

do, federally, to identify the needs and provide resources, in light of the infamous turf war between the federal and provincial governments? Do you have any solutions to suggest?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: The two sides have to share or, at least, agree on the same issues. They have to pay more attention to the issues than to their areas of jurisdiction, and they have to learn to work together for the good of the communities. Is it possible to establish agreements with the provinces? Can the federal government sit down with the provinces to determine what it can do, in its own domain, to support and advance early childhood development?

The two levels of government first have to agree on the importance of the issue so that they can then work together to put agreements in place. They have to move past their turf war, as you call it. There aren't endless ways to get there. If the two sides don't work together, it will no doubt be a tough road.

Sustained funding over the long term is also needed. If one government provides funding, and the following government takes it away, communities will certainly have a hard time maintaining services. Yesterday, Minister Duclos made a very encouraging announcement, supporting some of the recommendations from our report on early childhood development. The government appears to have signed an agreement on early childhood development with certain provinces, and that's very encouraging news.

I think the way forward is through bilateral agreements, which will subsequently be negotiated. Willingness by the provinces and federal government to work together will lead to concrete results on this issue.

● (1145)

Mr. René Arseneault: Hypothetically speaking, if some provinces were recalcitrant despite the good faith of the federal government—keep in mind, I did say “hypothetically”—do you think it would be possible to find solutions?

I know some provinces would gladly tell the federal government to cover the cost of francophone schools or happily build them if the federal government were to foot the bill.

In a situation where the federal government is very much open to starting a dialogue but a province is recalcitrant, do you think there are ways to force, or strongly encourage, provinces to cover their fair share of the work and funding?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: I would say the pressure also has to come from the communities affected by these decisions. They absolutely have to have a voice at the provincial level. If the federal government is willing to contribute to an agreement but a province refuses, the communities need to apply pressure on the province in order to convey their needs when it comes to these programs.

Will the roadmap afford opportunities for these kinds of agreements with provincial governments? We, on our end, can try to influence decision-making through our studies, regular meetings with community representatives, and field evaluations. We can try to influence the decision-making process, to make the federal and provincial governments understand the importance of their partnership.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

I have two other quick questions for you and only about 30 seconds left.

During our studies, we've met with community members. The popular saying "by and for the communities" clearly carries a lot of weight. In other words, the communities know best what they need to administer resources and achieve their objectives.

In your soon-to-be-released report, do you address that dimension of the official language minority community reality?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Are you referring to our second report, pertaining to early childhood development in Quebec?

Mr. René Arseneault: Among others, yes.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: We'll have to take that into consideration. It's been duly noted. We are still in the exploratory stages.

In Minister Duclos's announcement yesterday, I read that the communities had also been consulted on the national framework. That's certainly a positive approach, a step in the right direction.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

It is now over to Mr. Généreux, who, if I understand correctly, will be sharing his time with Mr. Nater.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Possibly.

The Chair: Mr. Généreux, please go ahead.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Good morning, Ms. Saikaley. Thank you for being here today, along with all of your colleagues.

It is my belief that we have an opportunity to modernize the Official Languages Act. You talk about it in your report, in fact.

How should we make sure we fully understand all of the issues associated with the act and its renewal or, rather, its improvement or modernization? Do you have any suggestions for us, in terms of how we should proceed?

I'd like to discuss the context and content of the updated act, beginning with context. Do you have any suggestions as to the witnesses we should invite? Would you be an important witness in the context of a modernization of the act?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Yes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Do you have any other suggestions?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: We could certainly provide you with a list of potential witnesses. It goes without saying that community representatives would be key players.

In addition, the Senate committee is currently hearing from young Canadians to find out what they think of the Official Languages Act, how they see themselves as Canadians, and what it means to them.

The committee should also seriously consider inviting experts in various sectors, including social media, machine translation, and, of course, legal stakeholders. Ultimately, many experts could cover a wide array of issues. We could get a list to you.

● (1150)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You mentioned social media. Clearly, when the act was introduced a half-century ago, there was no such thing as the Internet. We live in a vastly different time.

I'm going to play the committee spokesperson for a moment and ask you whether you could provide us with some sort of work plan, so that we don't neglect to examine all the aspects of the act we should. You strike me as the right person to give us a work plan we could build on.

I'd also like to ask you whether certain aspects of the act merit special attention to make sure we move it in the right direction. You mentioned social media, but do any other specific areas come to mind?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Part III of the act, which deals with the administration of justice, definitely stands out. You probably remember we tabled a report before Parliament on the publication of court decisions online.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: That consideration has to be taken into account, in our view.

At the same time, it's important to revisit the exclusion in that same part of the act exempting Supreme Court judges from having to be bilingual.

On the service front, our office and Canada's airport authorities disagree. In their eyes, their role is limited to providing service to the travelling public. As we see it, however, they have a duty to the general public.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Is that the kind of issue you could help us address by including it in your submission to the committee? It could be said that you deal with the application of the Official Languages Act on a daily basis, so you are no doubt well-suited to shed light on the different possible interpretations of the act. We could invite witnesses on both sides of the issue. It could be quite useful.

I'm curious as to whether you think the updated version of the Official Languages Act should have more teeth, more enforcement powers, for example? Air Canada and other institutions have trouble meeting the requirements of the act. In previous reports, the former commissioner, Mr. Fraser, said that the act wasn't strong enough, that it lacked the teeth to impose fines or enforcement measures.

Should the updated act go as far as to include powers that would meet your needs as commissioner?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: That's something we will certainly be looking at as part of our study. Some officers of Parliament have the kinds of powers you're referring to and can impose penalties or fines, while others do not. That could be something the committee may wish to explore.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Could the commissioner's authority be something that the updated act addresses?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Yes, that is something that could be included in the updated act. It would be up to Parliament to decide whether the commissioner needs more authority, given the feedback you will have received.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Very good.

Lastly, I'd like you to provide us with the names of potential witnesses, as well as possible interpretations of the act in various fields, to help us make sure we propel the act in the right direction.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: All right.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Généreux.

Ms. Lapointe and Mr. Samson will be sharing their speaking time.

We'll begin with Ms. Lapointe to make sure we have some time left for Mr. Samson.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: That's right. Otherwise, my colleague tends to monopolize the speaking time.

What type of approach does the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages take in measuring official languages results? Is it a horizontal approach, where you compare results, or do you treat the institution as a separate organization that should be responsible for official languages?

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

• (1155)

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Are you talking about governance?

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I'm talking about governance and results. Is there a particular approach that makes it easier to achieve official languages objectives?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: I don't know whether it's a better approach or just a way of working, but I believe in a horizontal approach. Every institution that is responsible for a part of the current Official Languages Act has acquired expertise in that area. If they all worked together horizontally, they could certainly produce results. Coordination and different positions are sometimes challenges, but as long as a dialogue and cooperation exist, very positive results can be achieved.

I don't prefer one particular approach. I tend to focus on the different players and their objectives; that is what matters. If they have a common objective, they should be able to achieve meaningful results.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you.

I have time for another question before I turn the floor over to my colleague.

In your opening remarks, you called the results encouraging, and said that the people you consulted appreciated the work of the commissioner's office and wanted you to do more. What do you mean by "more"?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: It can mean many things. Generally speaking, people like our tools. We have held consultations on four aspects: our audits and audit follow-ups, our annual reports, our promotional tools, and our performance report cards and observation exercises, which we usually do, but not this year. People had positive things to say about all these tools.

When I talk about doing more, I'm thinking of making these products more widely known. Communities were very unaware of our audit reports. How could they use them to advance their cause? We make recommendations, and the federal institutions are committed to implementing them. They can also use our tools. What I meant by "more" is that our tools could be more visible and more widely used.

Of course, the more tools we put in place, the more the communities and institutions will benefit.

Institutions often ask us for tools to help them do their jobs. We have developed a few in the last year. What I mean by "doing more" is everything that can help them meet their obligations.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you very much.

I will turn things over to my colleague Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

I have two quick questions for you. I provided good context on my last turn. It will help you answer the question.

Earlier, my colleague from New Brunswick read an excerpt from your brief. I would like to quote quickly from your report:

It confirmed that the lack of funding ... in the *Roadmap 2013-2018* has left Francophone minority communities vulnerable and often unable to meet their own needs.

Could you speak more to that?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: As I said earlier, in these conditions, it is difficult for such organizations to recruit and retain competent staff.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You're saying here that there is a lack of funding and that the roadmap hasn't helped to solve the problem.

How could we improve things the next time?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: We need to ensure that the funding remains constant, stable and timely. Contributions often arrive very late in the year.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Based on your response, I'd like to hear more about the agreements.

You say that it would be desirable for the federal government to negotiate in terms of early childhood, social infrastructure, or something else. For example, the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones could seek accountability and have an influence on school board priorities.

You mentioned agreements. I'd like you to clarify your thinking, because I think it's really interesting.

• (1200)

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: Again, we must work together toward a common goal. If all these stakeholders were committed to the vitality of the communities they represent—

Mr. Darrell Samson: You're talking about agreements, but what do you say to the governments that say it's provincial and can't be addressed?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: That's what they're saying, but was there a dialogue first with the provinces? Was there discussions first about whether people are really holding to their positions and don't want to interfere in their jurisdictions, or whether they would be willing to contribute, under certain conditions, for example if their jurisdictions are respected?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

We are now going to hear two interventions, from Mr. Nater and Mr. Choquette.

[English]

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be brief. I want to follow up on some of the questions from Mr. Choquette about language of work. You referenced that the Mendelsohn-Borbey working group ought to be publishing soon. Do you know when that might be published, and whether that will be made available to this committee or publicly? I wonder if you have any thoughts on why this is being chaired by a PCO official, someone who is not that directly related to language of work; Mr. Mendelsohn is in results and delivery.

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: First, I'll answer your second question because the report was asked for by the clerk, and the clerk, being in charge of the public service, wanted to have a sense of the present situation in the public service as far as language of work is concerned. He asked Mr. Borbey, who I think was an associate deputy minister at Canadian Heritage at the time, who was very concerned as well, very preoccupied with what he was seeing. We mentioned committees where senior officials of the government only speak English at those meetings. He offered Patrick Borbey the chance to get on that committee. Mr. Mendelsohn with his portfolio of delivery, which is a way of getting better results, was also asked to be on the committee.

As far as the report is concerned, the last time we spoke with PCO they mentioned it was imminent, so probably this summer. They had progress reports. We haven't seen the report yet. I asked to see the report before it gets published. We'll see if they accept that. When we receive the report we will definitely analyze the results.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nater.

We will end with François Choquette.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Recommendation 10 of your last report on the action plan for official languages concerns immigration and asks Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to “implement an official immigration policy to increase the demographic weight of official language minority communities”. It's an important aspect that many of my colleagues have also talked about. I want to speak to this because the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship will be with us tomorrow.

What action strategies could you suggest he implement to encourage immigration in a minority environment, which is a fiasco at the moment? I am thinking, for instance, of the complaints you received about Syrian immigrants and the fact that official language

minority communities weren't consulted on how to integrate these immigrants into their regions. What can we do? What action strategies could we suggest to the minister tomorrow?

Ms. Ghislaine Saikaley: First of all, I think he should be commended for his efforts to re-establish the express entry system and Mobilité francophone program, two excellent tools that will surely help to improve the situation.

As I said earlier, it is important that immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada are aware that there are two official language communities here and that there are francophone communities across the country. They need to know that and be welcomed by organizations funded to do that. Next, they must have access to the infrastructures and support needed to integrate and acquire an identity within these communities. All these aspects are important. Support services to immigrants must be well funded, and we hope there will be something in the roadmap.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings an end to your presentation and our questions.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you very much for appearing here, Madam Commissioner, Madam and Mr. Assistant Commissioner, and Madam General Counsel of the Office of the Commissioner.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

Please note that the second part of the meeting won't be televised.

• (1205)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1220)

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

We are now moving on to committee business.

First, I have to say, for the record, that members of the committee have informed me that they have no comments to make on a letter to be sent, the content of which we determined together. I will sign and send it. It is relative to our study on nursing science.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Chair, I would like to start with the motion concerning the QCGN and the FCFA. I don't know whether we have it on hand. If not, I have it in my files.

The clerk will distribute the motion.

The Chair: I can read it to you; I have it here:

That the Committee recommend to the Prime Minister that he meet with the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadiennes du Canada and the Quebec Community Groups Network in order to include them in the process for selecting the next Commissioner of Official Languages; and that the Chair report this to the House.

Mr. François Choquette: Exactly.

I know that John Nater has an amendment, which I will support.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

[English]

Mr. John Nater: I want to make a slight amendment. We spoke beforehand with Mr. Choquette about it. I'll just read the change. It's just to change it more to consult rather than to include, just to make it more reflective of it. It would read as follows:

That the Committee recommend to the Prime Minister that he meet with the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada and the Quebec Community Groups Network in order to consult them regarding the process for selecting the next Commissioner of Official Languages.

I think that more reflects the consultation rather than being more involved. I think it would be more appropriate.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nater.

First, I will give you the floor to speak to the amendment.

François Choquette has the floor.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to mention that I support the amendment.

Why is this amendment important? Because it reflects the will of the FCFA and the QCGN.

In fact, this motion isn't François Choquette's motion. If it were possible, we would even call it the QCGN and FCFA motion because they are the ones asking to meet with the Prime Minister and to be consulted before any action is taken regarding the appointment of a commissioner.

I have a letter here that every member of the committee received. I'll take the time to talk about it because I want all Canadians to be aware that, as I mentioned, this isn't my motion. It's really a motion by the groups concerned.

The letter is from James Shea, president of the Quebec Community Groups Network. I will read it to you:

[English]

The QCGN has been contacted by M. François Choquette about the motion he intends to introduce to the House Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG) during its meeting on June 13, 2017. The motion makes a recommendation to the Prime Minister to meet with the FCFA and QCGN stakeholders, with a view to consulting our organization in the process for selecting the next Commissioner of Official Languages.

The QCGN strongly supports this motion. We were disappointed that the process that led to Mme. Meilleur's nomination for Commissioner of Official Languages did not involve input from Canada's English and French linguistic minority communities, and have asked to meet with the Prime Minister regarding this matter. We are aware that s. 49(1) of the Official Languages Act requires the Governor in Council to only consult with leaders of every recognized party in the Senate and House of Commons in the nomination of a Commissioner, however, the foundational nature of language rights, and the national importance of official language minority communities in our view must include Canada's French and English linguistic minority communities.

We urge you to support M. Choquette's motion next Thursday.

•(1225)

[Translation]

It's signed by James Shea, president of the QCGN.

That's why I would like to rename the motion the QCGN and FCFA motion, symbolically, of course, because we can't do it

concretely. In fact, I don't think a group can table a motion before the committee. That said, I just wanted to mention that it wasn't my motion or the NDP's motion, but the motion of the QCGN and the FCFA. For those reasons, everyone should support it.

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, I just want to mention to you that we are currently studying the amendment. You're talking about the amendment, right?

Mr. François Choquette: Of course; I'm talking about the amendment that was made to the motion.

The Chair: The motion hasn't been amended yet.

Mr. François Choquette: No, but I think everyone will agree to amend it.

I'd like to mention one thing about this. When Sylviane Lanthier was president of the FCFA, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, she had asked to meet with the Prime Minister of Canada about this. Last weekend, the FCFA held an election, and Jean Johnson was elected president. The FCFA recently tweeted that Jean Johnson had reiterated this request to meet with the Prime Minister of Canada about this process.

We have all witnessed the controversy, you might say, about the appointment of the Commissioner of Official Languages. What the communities that represent the FCFA and the QCGN want is to avoid any controversy and eliminate partisanship. Admittedly, we all fought in a somewhat partisan way about this. Let's remove all of this and make sure that there will be no more squabbling about the appointment of the next Commissioner of Official Languages. Let's make sure that all members of the committee, all political parties, and all members of the FCFA and the QCGN will agree that they are adopting this process and that they will accept the next person appointed to the position of Commissioner of Official Languages.

The motion asks, like those organizations, that they meet with the Prime Minister. Given what has happened, this request is fair and respectful to them. It would give them the opportunity to share their views and put that forward.

Let me repeat: this motion isn't mine, but that of these organizations. Therefore, I hope that everyone will adopt it as it amended by John Nater.

The Chair: In that case, I will proceed immediately to the vote on the amendment.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: One moment, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You want to speak to the amendment, Mrs. Boucher?

I'm listening.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I fully agree with my colleague Mr. Nater, who is proposing that the word “consult” be used instead, and for a very simple reason. I also agree with what François Choquette has just said, which is that this should not be applied only to the present government, but to all subsequent governments. In so doing, partisanship is removed from both the current government party and our party, which may one day form the government. This clarifies some things. From now on, when making the appointments as important as that of the Commissioner of Official Languages, the groups themselves on the ground must be consulted.

That's why I'm asking my Liberal colleagues to accept Mr. Nater's amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Are there other committee members who would like to comment on the amendment? If not, I will immediately put the amendment to a vote.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Chair, I am requesting a recorded vote.

The Chair: Right. The clerk will now proceed to the taking of the recorded vote on the amendment.

(The amendment was negated on division, with 5 nays and 4 yeas.)

•(1230)

The Chair: We are returning to the main motion.

Who wants to speak to the motion?

Mrs. Boucher, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I'm asking people to cut the official language communities some slack and to accept Mr. Choquette's motion.

I find it distressing to see, after all the controversy raised by Ms. Meilleur's appointment that we are still at loggerheads with the current government. The goal is not to protect MPs or political parties. Here, we are throwing a monkey wrench into the system that is meant to protect linguistic minorities. I find it distressing. I dare hope that somebody on the government side is going to have a brilliant idea, because it's starting to be enough.

The Chair: Any other comments?

Mr. Généreux, you seem to want to say something.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'll agree with my colleague Mrs. Boucher.

The controversy the government has faced in Ms. Meilleur's appointment should have left traces. At the very least, notes should have been taken. What is being asked isn't too complicated. Moreover, as Mr. Choquette said, he doesn't personally want to meet with the Prime Minister. He is speaking for the two largest associations in the country that represent anglophones and francophones in minority situations and who want to meet with the Prime Minister to discuss the process with him. I don't know what threat the government is seeing there. After what has just happened, it seems to me that this should have been a matter of course. We should have at least opened the door to the idea of

receiving these people, if only out of minimal respect for them. I find that unfortunate.

The Chair: I would just like to say that I think this was debated in the House before. In fact, the Minister of Canadian Heritage said that she was ready to receive them, or something along those lines.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: She did receive them, but they were not looking to meet with her.

The Chair: Anyway, I just want to say that this was previously addressed in the House. I think the minister answered questions about it.

I didn't say that the motion was not in order. It is, we are dealing with it.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: We are going to vote. At any rate—

The Chair: Everyone is free to express themselves.

So we will go ahead and vote.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I call for a recorded vote.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, a recorded vote has been called.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: By the way, Mr. Chair, it is just a motion.

The Chair: I'm sorry?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: It's just a motion, meaning that the government will handle it however it wants afterwards.

However, if the committee rejects the motion, there will be a kind of firewall between the government and the communities. In so doing, although your role is to represent those organizations, you are using your place on the Standing Committee on Official Languages to prevent those people from having access to the Prime Minister to simply discuss with him the way they see the appointment of the next commissioner. Honestly, that is, in a way, in line with the denial and the insults in committee over the past few weeks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lefebvre, the floor is yours.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Mr. Chair, I completely disagree with Mr. Généreux.

The motion before us is asking that those stakeholders be able to talk to the Prime Minister, but they have already made a request to the Prime Minister's Office. That completely exceeds the role of our committee, I think. Our committee has no power in that regard. Those people can make the request themselves to meet the Prime Minister.

Subsection 49(1) of the Official Languages Act is clear. Even the QCGN says so in its letter.

For those reasons, I am against the motion. If organizations such as the FCFA and the QCGN want to meet with the Prime Minister, they can make the request themselves. It does not have to go through the committee at all.

•(1235)

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I don't agree with Mr. Lefebvre. If that's not the role of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, then what is?

You are the first to want to defend official language minority communities, including the anglophone community in Quebec. However, when we demand accountability, that's a whole different story. Yet it's not a big deal. We also received motions like that when we were the government and we accepted them.

Even if the committee carries the motion, we will not be the ones setting the Prime Minister's agenda.

What's the purpose of the Standing Committee on Official Languages if we can't even stand up for the communities that are asking us to represent them? What is your role in the Standing Committee on Official Languages? We will have to change its name, because, right now, you are not defending the official language minority communities. You are standing up for your government, which is unacceptable. The francophone communities, the Acadian community and Quebec's anglophone community need us. Regardless of our stripes, our committee must represent them and give a voice to the request those people are expressing in the newspapers, since they cannot submit the motion to our committee. If our committee can't even receive those requests and turn them into motions, why are we here, apart from looking at each other and preparing fine reports?

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

Mr. Choquette, the floor is yours.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Chair, I'm extremely disappointed. We have been at each others' throats for a month and a half. I thank Ms. Meilleur for withdrawing her candidacy. She was the only one with the dignity to do what had to be done.

That being said, what do the people from official language minority communities think? Perhaps you have talked to them recently. Perhaps you have talked to members from the FCFA, the QCGN, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario or the Société des Acadiens et Acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick? What did they have to say?

They asked me whether we could set aside partisanship on the committee, particularly in selecting the next commissioner. However, once again, today, we are seeing partisanship.

If you did not like this motion fully, you would have been able to submit an amendment and do things differently. There is still time to do so. Instead, you have completely refused this request. However, the Standing Committee on Official Languages, our committee, has a mandate to defend the Official Languages Act, to ensure compliance, to stand up for official language minority communities and to ensure their vitality.

What have official language minority communities been asking for in the last few weeks? They have been asking to meet with the Prime Minister. They do not want to meet with members of the cabinet or the Prime Minister's Office, but the Prime Minister himself.

In that respect, you received the required notices. Last week, I was fine. I introduced the motion on Thursday and I proposed that you

take the time to study it. We could have asked that it be addressed immediately, and we could have embarked on a partisan game, saying that your intention was to vote against the motion when we wanted to vote in favour of the motion, claiming that the government is not doing its job, and so on. Instead, we suggested that you take the time to consider the motion. That was fine and we agreed to study it on the following Tuesday. I don't feel that you have studied it. That's what bothers me.

Apart from tomorrow's meeting, I do not think there will be any more meetings before the end of the session. I do not know whether we have one planned for next Tuesday.

The Chair: We wanted to have the issue settled before the end of this meeting. That being said, we are supposed to sit next week.

Mr. François Choquette: For the benefit of the QCGN, the FCFA and other official language minority groups, I would like us to agree on a motion. It does not have to be the same motion, word for word, but I would like us to agree on a motion on the appointment of the Commissioner of Official Languages. I would like us to put partisanship aside. Otherwise, there will never be an end to it. The groups are telling us that they are fed up, that this is not helping them move forward and that this debate does nothing for them. In the meantime, we are not addressing issues such as immigration and early childhood, which are very important to the communities.

I do not know whether we will have a meeting next Tuesday or whether we can hold a special meeting next Thursday. I do not know what we can do. I am not against the idea of letting the dust settle. Call the presidents of the FCFA and the QCGN and see what they want, and what we can do, even if it is just to support the next selection process. We should all agree in committee, because right now we're just remaining divided.

● (1240)

The Chair: Mr. Généreux, the floor is yours.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I appeal to your independence. As the minister said, the Standing Committee on Official Languages is independent. You are free to amend Mr. Choquette's motion, so please let yourself do so. What is stopping you? You do not have to follow your whip's instructions. This is an independent committee.

Ms. Lapointe, you are constantly talking about the anglophone community in Quebec. Now it turns out that they are calling on us today. What will the papers say tomorrow? They will say that Ms. Lapointe voted against the possibility for the communities to meet with the Prime Minister. That is what the papers will say tomorrow.

The committee is independent. The minister clearly said so in the House. Ladies and gentlemen, do your job. The communities are asking you to do so. It's as simple as that.

The Chair: Mr. Arseneault, go ahead.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If we are to put partisanship aside, it has to be done objectively and respectfully on both sides of the table. That does not detract from the quality of all the members who are here, and whom I admire. I admire everyone here. If we want to put partisanship aside, we must stop talking about interfering in a government's selection process.

Mr. Choquette, stop laughing and listen to me.

You are telling those listening to us at SANB and the AJEFNB, among others, in Acadia, in New Brunswick, that this committee is completely incapacitated because we refuse to accept a motion suggesting to the government that those groups should have access to the Prime Minister. In fact, all the committees, organizations and individuals around the world who want to meet with the Prime Minister can do so, or at least ask to do so. What you are saying publicly is that this committee is incapacitated, because we are voting against this motion, which is a simple recommendation asking the Prime Minister to meet with those organizations.

All of us around this table are quality people. Since I have been on this committee, we have dealt with issues such as immigration, the translation bureau, Air Canada, early childhood, and so on. Not once were we quarrelsome or obstinate. Not once did we vote for one motion to the detriment of another. We have always passed the motions unanimously. It is wrong to claim or try to make people believe, and especially those two organizations for which we have a lot of respect, that this committee is incapacitated if this motion is rejected.

So we have to make that distinction. If we really want to put partisanship aside, we need to distinguish between subsection 49(1) of the act, the freedom of people to access or to request access to the Prime Minister, and the work that we do and for which we have been truly mandated.

That is why I am very comfortable voting against this motion.

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: With all due respect to my colleague Mr. Arseneault, who knows how much I respect him and all the members of the committee, I must say that this is the best one yet.

My colleague says that, if people want to ask for meetings with the Prime Minister, they are free to do so. Come on! We too are free to do so and to help them get a meeting with the Prime Minister. Nothing prevents us from voting in favour of this kind of motion; people are free to make such a request, and so are we.

Do not use lawyer talk to justify yourself. I am not sure whether the communities went to see you, but they contacted us. We are not asking for it, Mr. Arseneault; your communities are. Just because you reject it by talking like a lawyer, I do not buy it, because that's not the reality.

The QCGN and the FCFA are the ones making this request all over the media. It is just a motion to support the request of these groups. As for the rest, the Prime Minister will manage his agenda. The purpose of this motion is only to help these groups go one step further, to show the Prime Minister that even the committee is helping those communities that he cares about, as he keeps saying in the House.

Now you have just given us a diatribe. If we want to respect each other, we will tell it like it is. We will not play lawyers. I will not play the girl from the community or the Conservative. Here, my name is Sylvie Boucher, and I speak on behalf of those who have called on me. It has nothing to do with my political stripe. I'm here to help them. I have been on the Standing Committee on Official

Languages for 10 years. I have seen more than most. We have also played politics. It was a no-win situation, because our communities are paying the price.

We are squabbling over something silly. The motion is not harmful to anyone. We are not asking for the moon, and we are not the ones making this request. People want some extra support to gain access to the Prime Minister. As for the rest, Gerald Butts and Katie Telford will manage it.

That is the reality. People no longer want to see a situation like the one we have experienced for three weeks or even a month with Ms. Meilleur's nomination. And I'm not just talking about our committee. People also do not want this issue to be referred to the Senate and go through the same circus.

What we are doing here and now is not just for the government in power today, but for all the governments to come. If we return to power some day, we can say that it is written that the communities want to be consulted. That is all. Then, if the Prime Minister does not want to meet with them, it will be up to him to let them know. However, as a committee, we will have done our job of helping them have this discussion with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will make his own decision; he is a big boy.

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, the floor is yours.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is very simple. I understand what subsection 49(1) of the Official Languages Act contains. In reality, however, this is not a normal situation. We had five weeks of controversy and then the nominee withdrew her application because there was so much controversy. It had the effect of creating divisions in communities. The matter took up all their time. The communities felt trapped.

There will certainly be a new commissioner; we have no choice. What the communities want is to make their recommendations known to the Prime Minister before he starts any new procedures in this selection process.

Yes, Minister Mélanie Joly has met with the communities, but what did Sylviane Lanthier say when she came out of the meeting with her? She said that she still would have preferred to meet with the Prime Minister. What did Jean Johnson say after his election? He said that he wanted to meet with the Prime Minister. What did Jim Shea, the president of the Quebec Community Groups Network say? He said that he wanted to meet with the Prime Minister.

If this was a normal situation, we would just have to follow the process set out in subsection 49(1) of the act and there would be no problem. However, this is not a normal situation. It is an exceptional situation. We have had polemics for five or six weeks and it is still not over.

What are the groups representing official language minority communities telling us? They are asking us to set partisanship aside once and for all. Committee members have been tearing themselves apart on this issue for a month and a half. One of the first things to do is to sit down together and decide to put this all aside. A process like this makes no sense and cannot continue. We are certainly not going to let the communities suffer because of it.

All we are asking is that the committee should sit down together and send a clear message about what those communities want. They want to meet with the Prime Minister and tell him about their recommendations. They do not want to decide who the next commissioner will be; they just want to tell the Prime Minister about what they want in terms of the process, so that they do not feel left out of it. That's all. They want that to be done at the highest level of this government because official languages should also be one of this government's highest priorities, any government actually, no matter its stripe. That is what they are asking for, given that the situation is really different, exceptional and serious.

So I repeat my appeal. If you need to think about it, if we need to call each other in order to settle this, let's do it. Let's do it for the official language minority communities. They are saying that it is time for us to act and for us to come to an agreement, because this is hurting every community in the country.

We must not just be focused on subsection 49(1). We must also focus on our communities.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Are there any other comments?

The floor is yours, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Chair, let me offer the government a way out. When we vote, all it has to do is abstain. Then, it will not be voting against the motion.

The Chair: After listening to you, I might have something to propose.

A little earlier, someone asked a subsidiary question. Someone wanted to know what the committee will be doing next Tuesday. Tomorrow, the committee will be sitting from noon to 1 p.m.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: At the moment, Mr. Chair, I'd like to talk about the motion. We can come back to Tuesday. It's more important to talk about the motion than to talk about Tuesday.

The Chair: Let me finish, Mrs. Boucher. When you ask me for the floor, I will give it to you. At the moment, I'm the one who has it.

On Wednesday, we have a one-hour meeting with the two ministers, which includes the presentations and a time for questions. We had decided that the committee would not sit on Thursday. From what I see, I think that we will be back next week. So I propose to put committee business on the agenda of Tuesday's meeting. Much as Mr. Choquette proposed, we can come back to the motion at the next committee meeting on Tuesday.

I don't know whether that works for you. I also have to say that there's a second motion to deal with.

I'd like to hear what you think about it.

Mrs. Boucher, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: We do not know how things are going to turn out. Some people are saying that we are going to finish soon because everything is moving quickly; others are saying that we are going to finish next week. Whatever the case, I feel that the motion is important. I am happy that Mr. Généreux has opened the door to the

government members opposite. We have to talk about it again and, above all, we have to come to an agreement on a motion that will help us to help the official language minority communities.

If we have a meeting next Tuesday, I will not be able to be there, unfortunately because I will be in my constituency for personal reasons. However, I will be in contact with my colleagues. I can still be reached by telephone.

It is just that I find it disappointing that we have come to this point, after everything we have gone through. We worked so well for the entire year, but since Ms. Meilleur's nomination, a lot of business has got really messed up.

As I have said many times in the media, my confidence in the committee has really been broken. It has nothing to do with my colleagues here. However, I have come to realize one thing as I get older. At 54, I am involved in politics in order to deal with real issues; I can't put up with playing political games any more.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

Go ahead, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault: Given that all the permanent members of the committee are here at the moment, with no substitutes, and that our colleague Sylvie Boucher may not be able to be here next week, it would be preferable for us to vote today. Is that the issue?

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Perhaps not today. However, tomorrow, we have a one-hour meeting with the ministers. After that, we could perhaps set aside a little time. I don't know, but think about it on your side. Consider the avenues that we are offering you. We are opening the door to you. We could talk about it again tomorrow, given that we do not know when Parliament will complete its work.

Our official language minority communities need us. We are their voice. I do not want to abandon them. No way. Period.

The Chair: Any further comments?

Go ahead, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Despite Mrs. Boucher's absence next week, we could sit on Tuesday, or even Thursday. We are here to work and we are certainly not going to stop ourselves from working. We have no meeting on Thursday this week because our two meetings are on Tuesday and Wednesday. There is no problem next week, however, we will be here.

The Chair: Given that no one has called the question, and given that time is moving along, I will postpone the discussion, the decision, until next Tuesday, under the agenda item of committee business.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Are you talking about the question on the motion?

The Chair: Yes, the vote on the motion.

The same applies to the second motion. As we only have about five minutes left in this meeting, the second motion is also postponed until next Tuesday.

I have also been told that the clerk will have an idea of when we can go to Halifax and to Brome—Missisquoi.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: We do not know when we are wrapping up or coming back. It is difficult.

The Chair: From what we are told, we will be sitting right through to the end.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I know, but we do not know when the date of our next meeting will be.

The Chair: No, we don't know that.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: That's what makes it difficult.

The Chair: The make-up of the committees may well have changed when we come back. If our group, as it is presently constituted, now wants to visit the anglophone community in Quebec and the francophones outside Quebec by going to Mr. Samson's constituency, I think we should make a decision about it.

We could also deal with that matter in a small, select group that would be made up of one Conservative, Mr. Choquette, and a

representative from the Liberals. We could all get together and try to come up with some dates to propose to you. I don't know what you think about that.

So it would be Mr. Choquette, Ms. Lapointe, Mr. Nater and myself. We will get together outside a committee meeting and we will try to find dates for the two trips away.

For your information, at tomorrow's meeting, each minister will have about seven and a half minutes to give a presentation. In other words, we are going to divide the 15 minute period in two and give them seven and a half minutes each. That will be followed by a question and answer period.

Also, as I mentioned earlier, I would like you to stay for a moment at the end of the meeting to deal with the matter of the motions.

Thank you very much.

Meeting adjourned.

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