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—
Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC)): Dear colleagues on the Standing Committee for Official Languages, I am pleased to see you today.

My sincere thanks to the media here today.

Mr. Théberge, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

Pursuant to Standing Order 111.1(1), we are studying the certificate of nomination of Raymond Théberge to the position of Commissioner of Official Languages, referred to the committee on Thursday, November 30, 2017. With us today, as an individual, is Raymond Théberge, the nominee for the position of Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Théberge, we will give you 10 minutes for your opening statement. After that, there will be a period for questions that will last about one hour and 45 minutes. Let me say that we are very pleased to welcome you today.

As members of the committee, we all have Canada's official languages close to our hearts. Your appearance before us is very important for the future and the health of Canada's official languages. I am sure you are aware that your replies will be scrutinized and will capture our attention in no uncertain terms.

Mr. Théberge, you have the floor.

Mr. Raymond Théberge (Nominee for the position of Commissioner of Official Languages, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I would like to thank the committee for their welcome today and for giving me the opportunity to introduce myself, to make myself better known, and to discuss with the committee some of the issues and challenges of Canadian duality.

I am honoured that my application for the position of Commissioner of Official Languages has been considered. The position is critical to the development of official language minority communities and to the promotion of linguistic duality as a fundamental Canadian value.

First, I would like to draw the committee's attention to some of my experiences.

I am originally from Sainte-Anne-des-Chênes, Manitoba, and from a French-Canadian family. That is what we were called at the

time, French-Canadian. At home, there were always discussions about French-language education. I remember my mother's involvement in school elections, in recruiting enough students for a class in French, and in the advisory committee for the creation of a Bureau de l'éducation française. That office, by the way, is threatened today by the loss of the assistant deputy minister's position. We must always be vigilant. A number of generations fought for French-language education and the demands continue to this day.

The advent of official bilingualism and the Official Languages Act is a seminal event for my generation. The enthusiasm for bilingualism was palpable. It raised enough curiosity in me to lead me to the study of linguistics, so that I could understand and grasp this thing called language that is at the heart of my identity, the central value that defines me.

Back in Manitoba, the Bilodeau case had given rise to negotiations between the Société franco-manitobaine and the provincial government about an amendment to section 23 of the Manitoba Act. That was setting in which I came to head the Société franco-manitobaine.

The community ratified an agreement. The euphoria was short-lived because, once the agreement became known, forces opposing it quickly mobilized. All of a sudden, Manitoba was plunged into a language crisis that lasted several months.

The government backed down. Public hearings were held in communities, mostly anglophone communities. There were municipal plebiscites on francophone rights, and there were certainly threats. Finally, the government abandoned the plan and the Bilodeau case was referred to the Supreme Court of Canada.

I am reminding you of these events because they mark the beginning of a professional journey ever focused on understanding and promoting official language minority communities, whether as a professor, a researcher, an administrator, or even as a public servant.

[English]

Research is one of the tools that we have to inform language policy. During the eighties and nineties, I had the privilege to be involved in numerous research projects, individually and collectively, with colleagues from across the country. We investigated various aspects of ethnolinguistic vitality, bilingualism, language learning, and other topics. The result is the existence of a rich and robust evidence base to guide language policy development.

During this time, beyond academic conferences, I was asked to give countless talks on language-related topics to community groups, parent groups, and stakeholder groups. Parents were seeking assurances about the language of instruction and its impact on student success—francophone and French immersion parents alike.

The courts have also relied on research findings and expert witness testimony to arrive at their decision.

• (1535)

[Translation]

I am currently the Chair of the Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities, which also works in collaboration with the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, or QUESCREN.

[English]

My role as a senior public servant responsible for French-language education in two provinces, located in anglophone departments, was more often than not to provide an understanding of the realities and aspirations of the francophone community to colleagues, deputy ministers, and ministers. The expectation of the community was that you would defend and promote those policy initiatives that advanced French-language education. Also, in both instances I was given the responsibility for programs in French as a second language.

[Translation]

The francophone university in Ontario is one example of a community project that has come from my group. I was asked to lead the first group of experts tasked to define the best way to meet the needs of post-secondary education in the south and south-west regions of the province. Today, a bill was introduced in the Ontario legislature.

As rector of the Université de Moncton, I headed a wide consultation process with the members of the francophone and Acadian university communities with the purpose of developing the university's first strategic plan. During my mandate, the university adopted its first plan, increased its research funding, established the position of complaints commissioner, and modernized its governance and transparency mechanisms.

The Université de Moncton is a vital player in the francophonie in Canada and abroad. Almost 20% of our student body comes from abroad. The institution is developing so that it can better respond to the aspirations of Acadia and the francophonie.

[English]

One of the trends changing the face of minority-language communities in Canada is the arrival of international students and French-speaking immigrants from Africa, the Maghreb, and other French-speaking countries. International students have contributed to enriched student life on campus and in the community.

Immigration is one of the keys to the continued vitality of minority-language communities, but our communities have to be open and willing to embrace newcomers who speak French but who do not necessarily share the same *patrimoine*. This trend brings

together the themes of diversity and linguistic duality. How do we manage such change? Are communities prepared to accommodate?

[Translation]

Where are we in terms of the intent of the Official Languages Act?

The English-speaking minority in Quebec and the French-speaking communities outside Quebec are different, but an amalgam of factors, such as social demographics, immigration, early childhood and technology, will have an impact on how they will develop or how they will become brittle. There has certainly been progress in education, in health, and in the law, for example, but the evolving social context places the issue of linguistic duality at the heart of the Canadian federation, where it has always been. The issue is not settled, hence the importance of restating that linguistic duality is a federal government priority.

We are now at a defining crossroads. We are waiting for the next action plan for official languages and the Official Languages (Communications with and Services to the Public) Regulations are currently being modernized. The Mendelsohn-Borbey working group on the language of work in the federal government shows that difficulties in using French as a language of work still exist.

Finally, the last report of the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages was very eloquent in the economy of its recommendations. There was actually only one:

As the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act approaches, the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages recommends that the Prime Minister, the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada assess the relevance of updating the Act, with a view to establishing a clear position in 2019.

• (1540)

[English]

In English we have a term: “speaking truth to power”. I fully intend to speak truth to power, because when you believe in something, it means taking a risk. It means standing up for something, and that is the role of the commissioner. I say humbly that I do believe I have what it takes to carry out the work of commissioner. My depth of knowledge of the issues and the challenges related to linguistic duality speak in part to why I am the right person to take on the role of commissioner and tackle those challenges within the mandate of the office. I have also demonstrated my leadership qualities in a number of organizations—academic, government, and community.

[Translation]

If you do me the honour of entrusting this responsibility to me, I will continue the commitment of commissioners who have gone before to defend, protect and promote linguistic duality as a fundamental value of Canadian society.

Thank you for the time you have given me; I will be pleased to answer your questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Théberge.

We will now start a round of questions.

At the outset, Mr. Th  berge, I would like to tell you that our objective really is to determine your competencies in terms of the role of Commissioner of Official Languages, your qualities and your knowledge of the legislation.

Before we proceed, I would like to mention that I have consulted the members of the committee and we are prepared to agree that, at the end of the question period, the Bloc qu  b  cois should be allowed to ask a question, for a minute or two. Do we still have unanimous consent to that effect?

Some Hon. Members: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): That's great.

So let us begin with the first question, from Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chair.

Mr. Th  berge, thank you for being here today and congratulations on your nomination.

Sadly, we are starting with me, the lady from Alberta,

Mr. Ren   Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Happily.

[*English*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: First, historically Official Languages has functioned to protect the French language. I don't think it's a surprise when I say that. How will you work to include anglophones as we strive to be a truly bilingual country? You've touched on the points I'm going to mention and the questions I'm going to ask, but that would be my first question, Monsieur Th  berge.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think that it is important to realize that, in Canada, we have a collection of official language minority communities that are different from each other. The English-speaking community in Quebec faces a number of challenges that are unique to them. I think that it is important to recognize that, at the moment, the linguistic minority in Quebec faces major challenges in accessing services, especially in the regions outside Montreal.

Recently, I had a conversation with one of my colleagues from Bishop's University, Michael Goldbloom. He told me that, at the moment, the retention rate in Quebec has stabilized but, once again, in the regions, they are seeing a lack of services in early childhood, for example. They are also seeing that, in a number of regions, the anglophone community in Quebec is facing socioeconomic challenges: the number of students in the schools is going down, the bilingualism rate among young people is going up, and it is more and more common in Quebec. The key to success at the moment is to discover how to serve the regions outside Montreal, such as the Eastern Townships, Quebec City or Trois-Rivi  res.

In that respect, the role of the commissioner is limited, because a lot of the situations are the result of provincial involvement. For example, a lot of amalgamation is happening in medical services, social services, hospitals and so on. Traditionally, those were places where English-speaking leadership in Quebec was developed. Those institutions are becoming fewer and fewer. So how can we go about ensuring leadership for the future?

Moreover, you probably recall an organization called Alliance Qu  bec at one time. Alliance Qu  bec no longer exists. Now there is the Quebec Community Groups Network, whose current president, Mr. Shea, is one of my former colleagues at Canadian Parents for French.

We must remember that the role of commissioner, in Quebec as elsewhere, is to defend the interests of linguistic minorities at all times and on an equal basis. Clearly, that must be a priority for the commissioner.

The other part of your question dealt with bilingualism in the West and in Ontario, for example. Our Canadian education system is how we are going to increase the country's bilingualism rate. You know that it was Canadian innovation, so to speak, that created what we call immersion. Immersion is wildly successful everywhere, to the point that we have a shortage of teachers all across Canada. Immersion is recognized as the best way to teach French as a second language.

There are also other challenges in post-secondary education. It is all very well to be able to provide primary and secondary education in French, but people also have to have access to university, college, and other programs in French. They vary from province to province. In British Columbia, there is a French department at Simon Fraser University. In Edmonton, the University of Alberta has the Campus Saint-Jean. In Saskatchewan, the University of Regina has the Cit   universitaire francophone, and Manitoba has the Universit   de Saint-Boniface. There are about 14 institutions outside Quebec. So it is a challenge.

• (1545)

I also feel that it would be good to develop an online platform that could be accessed by all Canadians who want to learn French or English as a second language. I know that the government is thinking of doing so and I encourage it to take action. An online platform like that would allow people to go through the training at their own speed.

Training is really the answer to the question you are asking. The same goes for the public service. Language training must be increased in order to make sure that people can work in French.

Bilingualism is the result of education. In Canada, the number of bilingual Canadians has levelled off, especially in two provinces, Quebec and, more particularly, New Brunswick. So we have our work cut out for us.

However, Canadians are crazy for immersion. So we have to find enough teachers in order to be able to meet that demand. In British Columbia, parents are getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning in order to stand in line to be able to register their children in schools that offer immersion programs.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): You have 30 seconds left.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Similarly, you touched on this, but in your opinion, what is the relevance of our two official languages in what has evolved into our multilingual society? You mentioned this in your opening remarks. Could you expand on it, please, in your opinion?

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): A quick answer, please.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Okay.

The diversity that we are seeing in Canada now is one of the fundamental changes, especially because of immigration. Linguistic duality has always been part of our federation. Of course, we had two languages, French and English, even before confederation existed.

Today, though, linguistic duality is seen in a multicultural framework, which is a situation we have been seeking for a long time. However, multiculturalism is no longer defined as it was in the past. Today, we talk about diversity and inclusion. Communities have to be supported so that they can come to terms with this new reality and be in a better position to receive immigrants.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you, Mr. Th  berge.

We now move to Mr. Vandal.

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

Mr. Th  berge, from one Franco-Manitoban to another, it is a pleasure for me to welcome you. Welcome to Ottawa. We are not in the House of Commons, but we are very close.

You have worked very hard for Canada's francophonie, in Manitoba, in Ontario and in Acadia. However, I would first like to talk about your experience in Manitoba, specifically as assistant deputy minister in the Bureau d'  ducation fran  aise, the BEF. As you know, the BEF is very important for Franco-Manitobans. There has been a lot of talk about it in the media recently.

Could you describe the role you took on and the way you went about representing the interests of Franco-Manitobans in the government of that time?

• (1550)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Thank you for the question.

First, I feel that it is important to give you some details about the selection process for the assistant deputy minister in Manitoba. The selection committee includes members of the community. That means that the selection of the assistant deputy minister is not solely reserved for public servants or government representatives. Community members play a role also.

As I said earlier, during my presentation, when we work in an English-speaking environment, our role is very often to make other people understand the reality of francophones in a minority situation. You have to repeat it a lot, but it takes time before our colleagues get it. In a lot of cases, we had to revise a policy or proposed policy from a francophone point of view. I always made the deputy minister or the minister aware of the impact that a policy could have on the francophone community.

I also had a specific mandate, which was to develop a funding formula for French-language education. The idea of the formula was to ensure the sustainability of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, the only French-language school board in Manitoba. It covers the entire province. We had to develop a funding formula to meet its needs. In that context, there were a lot of discussions

involving the DSFM and the community. Each time there was a new program, we had to ensure that it met the needs of the Franco-Manitoban community.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Thank you.

One of your former colleagues at the BEF described your sensitivity to the linguistic experience of minorities. In 1985, you became the director of research at Coll  ge universitaire de Saint-Boniface, which is now the Universit   de Saint-Boniface. You said that the language crisis in Manitoba was a turning point for Franco-Manitobans. You lived in our community. In Manitoba, the fight for language rights and linguistic duality is still on today.

Could you describe the lessons that you learned from this historic event in Manitoba and that you can apply to the work you are going to do?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It is important to remember that, at the time, we wanted to negotiate an amendment to section 23 of the Manitoba Act. We wanted to change the translation of the 1890s legislation to enshrine French-language services in it.

The important thing for communities is to have access to services and to be able to create francophone spaces.

When you launch a lawsuit, it all depends on the case. The Bilodeau case dealt with the translation of the regulations of an act. If that case was won in the Supreme Court, the result would be the translation of the regulations. I therefore learned that, before going to court, it is important to understand the case and assess whether you will obtain the answer you are looking for.

A decision of the B.C. Supreme Court is a recent example. This victory could be described as mixed, because some money has been given to the school, but the fact remains that the French-language school system is not equivalent to the English-language school system.

The danger is choosing a case that does not fit the needs. That said, at the time, it was the best tool we had. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was very recent and section 23 of the Manitoba Act was there. Since the 1980s, language rights have been before the courts. Many cases that went to the Supreme Court helped to clarify the impact of section 23 of the Manitoba Act on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or the impact on section 16.

It is very important to clarify what the charter or certain pieces of legislation mean. I learned that, if you want to take the legal route, you really have to clarify the objectives you are seeking.

• (1555)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you, Mr. Vandal.

We will now go to the NDP. Ms. Quach, go ahead.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroit, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Th  berge. Congratulations on your nomination.

Let me go back to section 49 of the Official Languages Act, which provides that “the Governor in Council shall... appoint a Commissioner of Official Languages for Canada after consultation with the leader of every recognized party”.

What do you understand by the word “consultation”? In your opinion, does that just mean information, or seeking the consent of the leader of each party?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I do not feel I'm in the best position to answer a question about consultation.

On my end, I have followed a process developed by someone else. I'm aware of all the discussions about the consultation but I don't think I am in the best position to talk about it.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Okay, but if you had to consult, would you simply provide information to people or would you be interested in getting their opinion?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: If I am chosen as Commissioner of Official Languages, when I consult people from the communities, I will listen to them.

However, I have no comments about the specific issue you just mentioned.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: That's fine. I completely understand.

You talked about the issue of anglophones at the Office of the Commissioner. I do not know whether you are aware that the only bilingual anglophone who is a director at the Office of the Commissioner will be retiring. Have you thought about a strategy or a way to replace him?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: You are telling me something that I did not know. Since I am not the Commissioner of Official Languages yet, I am not necessarily informed of what is happening in the office.

However, one thing is clear: the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages must be representative of the communities it serves. One person may not be enough.

I would like to go back to what I said earlier. The commissioner's role is to protect all official language minority communities, and it is important that he be equipped to do so.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

I will now go into the details of the departmental plan of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

In its report on Air Canada, the Standing Committee on Official Languages recommended that the government have more teeth and that it be able to, among other things, issue fines and administrative monetary penalties.

What do you think? Do you agree that the commissioner should be given more powers?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I read your report, which is very interesting.

That said, there are two ways to answer the question.

First, there is the principle. In my opinion, the principle dictates that the commissioner must have access to tools to ensure that the Official Languages Act is implemented.

Second, it remains to be seen what this means in practical terms.

In my opinion, if people read a great deal about what is happening right now, they will understand that we want more teeth. If we want more teeth, the legislation must be tighter. I think it's important to consider those options. Now, in terms of what this means in practical terms, I will say that, if my application is successful, the Office of the Commissioner will study the issue.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: The Office of the Commissioner has nonetheless received a number of complaints against various companies, including Air Canada. Those companies have broken the law on many occasions. They even went to court, but they ultimately received no penalty.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I have asked this question a few times: what is the point of legislation if it has no consequences?

If I may, I would like to comment on Air Canada.

Air Canada is a very powerful symbol for Canadians. When Air Canada was privatized, a commitment was made. Just because a number of years have gone by does not mean that we are going back on our commitment. The commitment was made and it must be honoured.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

I would like to ask one last quick question.

Do you think the Supreme Court judges should be bilingual?

• (1600)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Once again, there are two answers.

In principle, I think so.

In practice, to what extent are we going to represent Canadian diversity in the Supreme Court? In my view, the Supreme Court belongs to all Canadians. We have to start thinking about what this means in practical terms.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: In your view, where does the complexity lie?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: In the debate about the last nomination, the regions were discussed. There was also a speech about an indigenous judge. Canada is multicultural, and its face—

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Canada is officially bilingual.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It is officially bilingual, absolutely. This does not mean that they are mutually exclusive.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: There's room for improvement.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): You have 15 seconds left.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: I'm done, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): I will now turn to Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. Ren   Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Th  berge. I am pleased to see you here today. I know that you are not officially our Commissioner of Official Languages and that you are not in that position yet. My questions are not intended to trick you before you become familiar with the files or before you have experienced the reality of the new duties, if they are entrusted to you.

I looked at your career and your curriculum vitae. You have certainly accumulated tremendous experience and you have a lot of arrows in your quiver, having lived and worked with minorities, be it in Manitoba or Ontario. You have a lot of experience in education and you studied in Quebec at an anglophone university. So you are familiar with the dual reality of minorities, anglophones in Quebec and francophones outside Quebec. Clearly, I dare say that you have reached the pinnacle of your wonderful experiences in the last five years at the Universit   de Moncton, in New Brunswick. I will refrain from saying too much about it so that I'm not called pretentious, which I am not.

In all seriousness, Mr. Th  berge, you said a few words that touched me right off the bat. You said that the position of Commissioner of Official Languages is key in promoting minority rights in majority communities. I will not give you a law test, but let me take you back to subsection 16(3) of the Constitution Act, 1982, which says:

Nothing in this Charter limits the authority of Parliament or a legislature to advance the equality of status or use of English and French.

If you officially became Commissioner of Official Languages, how would you see your role, in light of subsection 16(3), which says that the charter does not limit the authority to advance the equality of status or use of English or French?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think the ideal is clearly the equality of status of English and French in Canada. The reality is that we are far from it.

In my opinion, an officer of Parliament position is created because significant value is seen in it. In this case, it is linguistic duality. That's important, and it has always been part of the Canadian federation. However, the status of French and the status of English are clearly not the same. French is the majority language in Quebec, but it is a minority language in North America. English is a minority language in Quebec, but the majority language in North America. In the provinces outside Quebec, French is very much in the minority.

So we have an extremely long way to go in terms of equality of languages. We have some tools to achieve this. We have the Official Languages Act of course, but it is not enough. We also have the action plan on official languages, but that is not enough. So we need concerted action. As I mentioned, we have the act and the action plan. The act itself is not bad. If it were implemented as it is supposed to be, it would perhaps help us come a little closer to the equality of French and English.

For instance, if we look at parts IV, V and VII of the act, we see significant shortcomings and gaps. If we want to advance toward this ideal of equality of French and English in Canada, we must have the tools to do so.

• (1605)

Mr. Ren   Arseneault: Do I still have time?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): You have two minutes.

Mr. Ren   Arseneault: So we have to start with the goal of equality of language minorities. This much-touted promotion of duality and rights is not fixed in time. There's constantly work to do on a daily basis to try to achieve this linguistic equality, wherever we are in Canada, pursuant to the Constitution Act, 1982.

How can your experience, your background, since you became an adult and started work, help you carry out this promotion once you start wearing the hat of Commissioner of Official Languages?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Let me first talk about the francophone communities outside Quebec, followed by the anglophone community in Quebec, whose realities are slightly different.

Outside Quebec, we must constantly promote and support the minority language. We must always provide the resources needed to ensure its vitality. There are a number of ways to do so, such as creating living spaces in French. Vitality is defined by the quality and quantity of interactions we, as Canadians, have in French, and the capacity building of organizations and institutions.

Take, for example, the Universit   de Moncton. Acadia would not be where it is today without the Universit   de Moncton. Fifty-four years ago, Acadians built a university that changed the community in 50 years. We need institutions that are able to meet the needs of their communities, regardless of whether it is the Universit   de Saint-Boniface, Campus St. Jean, or Simon Fraser University. Our institutions must be strong and able to serve the communities.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you, Mr. Th  berge.

That's all for Mr. Arseneault.

Ms. Lapointe, the floor is yours.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivi  re-des-Mille-  les, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chair.

Thank you for joining us, Mr. Th  berge. I appreciate your being here.

[English]

I'm a Quebec MP for the riding of Rivi  re-des-Mille-  les, a suburb north of Montreal. If you are appointed, what is your global knowledge regarding the English-speaking community in Quebec? You began speaking about that, but I would like to hear more.

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: May I respond in French?

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Certainly.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I mentioned earlier, there is the National Research Institute on Linguistic Minorities at the Universit   de Moncton and on our board of directors, there are representatives from the anglophone community in Quebec, especially from universities like Concordia University and McGill University. So we are already doing research on the English-speaking minority in Quebec.

A book was published in 2013 by Richard Y. Bourhis on the decline of the anglophone community in Quebec. It was based on demographic analyses. As I said earlier, there is a significant difference between what is happening in Montreal and what is happening outside the city.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: My riding is in the northern suburbs. It's not a rural area or Montreal. It's different.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: In recent years, the number of services to the English-speaking community in Quebec has been declining, be it health services or social services. There has also been a decline in the socio-economic status among English-speaking Quebecers. This contradicts the perception that exists among many Canadians with respect to the English-speaking community in Quebec.

Already, some time ago, when we were talking about anglophones, we were thinking about Westmount, but that is no longer the case. I think we will have to work closely with the Quebec Community Groups Network to find solutions. Earlier, I was talking about creating living spaces in French, but it is almost equally necessary to create living spaces in English. In fact, as services disappear, which is an important part of a community's vitality, there is a decline. It has been experienced often in the west, especially with the demographic changes that have occurred after the transition from rural to urban.

There was a meeting at Bishop's University recently, where the young people all said the same thing. They are willing to stay on the condition that there is employment. Most of them are bilingual, but there is an issue of opportunities. For example, very few anglophones work in the Quebec public service. It is not a matter for the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, but I'm making that observation.

• (1610)

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Along the same lines, what is the first step you would take to ensure that the English-speaking community remains alive and well? You are talking about jobs and living spaces in English. Earlier, you talked about retention and all services. This fall, the Standing Committee on Official Languages travelled to the Eastern Townships.

[English]

As for the Eastern Townshippers, there used to be 50% over there; now there are 6%.

[Translation]

The percentage difference is very large.

So, what would be the first issue that you would tackle?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: First and foremost, I would travel to meet the communities. It's one thing to read about the communities, but it's another thing to talk to them and live their experiences.

When policies or programs are put in place, it's extremely important to consult with the people who will be the first to be affected by these programs and policies.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I'd like to come back to something you said earlier because I found your remarks very interesting.

You spoke about online training for adults, both anglophones and francophones,

Depending on the generation, people sometimes have some literacy problems, in French or in English. I'm quite interested in knowing what you think about that.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: What do I think about literacy?

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You talked about improving bilingualism through online training. However, there are some people who have a literacy problem.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Illiteracy is a problem in Canada, regardless of the language.

We did a lot of work on that when I was on the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada. We were part of an international research group that checked the illiteracy rate in various countries every five years. The illiteracy rate in Canada has not changed in 15 years. The illiteracy rate is still very high. It's even higher in rural areas. The rate is very high in Acadia, for example.

I would say there has been a decline. When people leave school in grade 11 or 12, depending on the province, the skills are getting worse because people don't read anymore. We must find ways to recreate reading habits, which isn't easy. There are all kinds of programs to encourage people to take classes. There are a lot of community programs, but the community volunteers are exhausted.

We need to find a new approach if we want to boost literacy in Canada.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Mr. G  n  reux, you have the floor.

Mr. Bernard G  n  reux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivi  re-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Th  berge, thank you very much for being here today.

I would like to start by putting things into context.

From the outset, in light of your resume and the answers you have given to our questions, I have no doubt that you have the skills required to fill this position. By the way, congratulations on the career you've had. However, if you're here today, it's because there was a fiasco in the spring. Poor Ms. Meilleur had to go through that period.

I'm going to ask you a few questions, and I'm obviously asking you to answer as best you can. I think this is important. Not answering questions could give rise to some suspicion. So I ask you to answer them.

Yesterday, in the Senate, you said that you became interested from the moment the position became vacant on July 28. However, Ms. Meilleur withdrew on June 7. Were you part of the first cohort?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: No.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You weren't?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: No.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Between June 7 and July 28, you saw everything that happened and you thought you might be interested. Who did you approach to give your name in order to become commissioner?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I gave my name to Boyden.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay.

Did you give your name to the company?

• (1615)

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Yes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Right.

If I understand correctly, you took the lead. The company didn't do the research to find you.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I applied online. Then Boyden got in touch with me.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay. Perfect.

We don't want history to repeat itself.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I understand.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: The term is normally for seven to 10 years. If we don't want history to repeat itself in 10 years, it is an important thing to understand.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): You could have applied, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Absolutely. But one thing is for sure: my application would definitely not have been screened in.

You talked about the process earlier, and I found that very interesting. I would even say that you had stars in your eyes when you spoke about Manitoba's process for appointing the assistant deputy minister for Francophone Affairs, if memory serves me correctly.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Exactly.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You said that members of the community were also involved in the process.

I ask you this question very sincerely: do you think that could be a way of choosing commissioners in the future? I'm talking about the commissioner of official languages.

However, the communities involved could be members of a possible selection committee. I don't think that was the case this time, because it's a government process. In fact, the government contracted an external firm.

Do you think that would be something we should be looking at? Maybe this is a suggestion you could make, as a commissioner, to avoid fiascos like the one in the spring.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: We have read a lot of things, after what happened in several organizations, including the FCFA, the SANB, the SNA and other groups. We've talked about the process. Should I be speaking about the process? I don't know, but it's clear that this

position is extremely important for the future of francophone and anglophone minority communities.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm putting the idea forward because it might be an interesting way of doing it in the future.

I now want to talk about your ability to be independent of the government that just appointed you, even though it outsourced the process to an outside firm. The minister didn't intervene this time, unlike the other time.

Do you feel totally independent from the government that appointed you? Of course, the government has to appoint someone who can criticize it in terms of management, governance, bills, and so on. It's important to consider this aspect as well.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Absolutely.

During my career, I have worked for Conservative and Liberal governments, as well as for a New Democrat government, in Manitoba. My role will be to defend and promote linguistic duality in Canada. If the government needs to be criticized and pursued, that's what we are going to do.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I would like to give you an opportunity to criticize the government, if I may.

I will start with a digression.

Our official languages committee is working extremely well right now. We all do a very good job here, no matter what party we represent. You said earlier that you read our last report. We will present another one next week.

Despite some reluctance from each of our parties, I can assure you that our committee is independent. The minister said that the committees are independent; I can guarantee you that ours is. We even go against some things.

In interviews, which have gone down in history, the minister said that before, governments were working in isolation, but the current government is taking a whole-of-government approach.

Now, the departments are sending the ball back and saying that it's not their fault, it's the other's fault and things like that. I don't think there is a perfect approach, whether it's vertical or horizontal, but we have to make sure that all the departments fulfill their official languages responsibilities, which is not currently the case.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I've been working in this area for a long time. In the 1980s, people were already saying that the interdepartmental approach was the solution for meeting the needs of minority communities.

The fact remains that each department... [technical difficulties]

• (1620)

Mr. Alupa Clarke: We're going to suspend the meeting for 30 seconds.

• (1620)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1620)

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Since the technical problems are ongoing, we're going to adjourn.

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