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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 36 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, May 30, 2022, the committee is resuming consideration of Bill C-13, An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, to enact the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and to make related amendments to other Acts.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for members and witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

If you are participating via Zoom, you can access interpretation services at the bottom of your screen by choosing floor, English or French. If you are in the room, you can select the appropriate channel and use your earpiece.

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Members in the room who would like the floor should raise their hands. Members participating via Zoom should use the “raise hand” feature. The clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members. Your patience and understanding are appreciated.

Pursuant to our routine motion, I want to let the committee members know that all the witnesses went through the required connectivity tests before the meeting.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

From the Association of Canadian Port Authorities, we have Daniel-Robert Gooch, president and chief executive officer. In addition, from the Commission nationale des parents francophones, we have Gillian Anderson, president, who is joining us by video conference, and Jean-Luc Racine, executive director.

Each group will have a maximum of five minutes for their opening remarks. I will let you know when you have about 30 seconds left. If you run out of time, you'll have an opportunity to cover any points you missed and speak to the important elements of the bill as you answer members' questions.

Starting off the presentations will be Mr. Gooch from the Association of Canadian Port Authorities. Go ahead, Mr. Gooch. You have five minutes.

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch (President and Chief Executive Officer, Association of Canadian Port Authorities): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today on Bill C-13.

I am Daniel-Robert Gooch, president of the Association of Canadian Port Authorities. We represent the 17 Canadian port authorities that move most of Canada's international cargo and operate at arms-length from the government to manage federal port lands.

[*English*]

Canada's port authorities support the protection of Canada's official languages and are diligent about meeting their obligations under the OLA. However, there are some concerns with how official language issues are already handled today under current legislation.

As Canada's port authorities are charged with operating federal port assets at arm's length from government, they are expected to operate self-sufficiently and independently from each other. While all port authorities work to promote and enable Canada's trade, this is done primarily at a localized level within each port authority's regional jurisdiction, as set out in its letters patent. Their resource levels vary significantly, with some having only a handful of staff. They also operate in many parts of the country where finding staff with minority language capabilities can be quite challenging.

The concerns we have with Bill C-13 are directly related to these factors for which the one-size-fits-all approach on perceived official language requirements under the Canada Marine Act today raise concerns about Bill C-13.

OLA compliance is more burdensome for port authorities than for other federal institutions that are larger and national in scope, a matter that C-13 would exacerbate.

The tension that port authorities are already facing to increase transparency and to work toward better alignment with local communities through greater local communication will be increasingly in conflict with the risk of failure to comply with OLA requirements and increased exposure to vexatious complaints.

While some official language complaints are well founded and require corrective action, our members have, in recent years, faced increasing complaints that are vexatious in nature and do not, in our view, protect or assist with the values that the OLA stands for.

For example, our ports strive to consult extensively with the community on major developments with the potential to impact the community, such as infrastructure and construction projects.

It has been a shared goal of Canada's port authorities and the Government of Canada to build on our port efforts to be more consultative and collaborative with users and the communities they serve. Our members have made major efforts to improve on this over the years since the CPAs were established. It's a trend we understand transport Minister Alghabra would like to see continue, and increased consultation may be mandated in amendments to the Canada Marine Act that we expect to come forward soon, but the official languages commissioner's interpretation on port OLA obligations, combined with these proposed changes to the act, threaten to blow these efforts significantly off course.

Our member ports are regularly diverted by complaints from out-of-province individuals who have developed a niche business reviewing port websites to find highly local consultation documents provided only in the language of the community. Even though these initiatives are entirely local in scope, complainants are earning thousands of dollars simply by searching for these materials online from the comfort of their home, thousands of kilometres away.

Surely this is not the intent of the Official Languages Act, nor is it consistent with the intent of the federal government when it established port authorities more than 20 years ago. These complaints are not coming from port users or local residents, yet they continue to be advanced and investigated by the official languages commissioner without regard to the nature, accuracy or veracity of the complaint.

Our members must respond to these investigations, which divert staff and financial resources that would be otherwise dedicated to communication and collaboration with users and stakeholders who are actually in the community.

Given this is the situation today, port authorities are concerned that the expanded powers of the OLC, including administrative monetary penalties proposed in Bill C-13, would exacerbate the situation. Canada's port authorities do not enjoy the limitless resources of the federal government with which they must compete for bilingual employees. In many regions of the country, it is difficult for our members to recruit bilingual employees. These practical differences in operations and local distinctions should not expose port authorities to unreasonable penalties.

Additionally, unlike airport authorities, which share many characteristics with our members, port authorities are subject to part VII of the OLA, which outlines the government's goals of not just protecting but enhancing minority language rights and fostering the full recognition of both languages. While these goals are laudable, it is hard to reconcile them with the mandate of Canada's port authorities to operate port assets at arm's length of government in a way—

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left, Mr. Gooch.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: —that supports Canadian trade and competitiveness as outlined in the Canada Marine Act.

We submit that this part of the OLA should not apply to Canada's port authorities in the same way that it does not apply to airport authorities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Anderson will speak for the Commission nationale des parents francophones.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anderson, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Ms. Gillian Anderson (President, Commission nationale des parents francophones): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, I am delighted to appear before you today, on behalf of the Commission nationale des parents francophones, to discuss Bill C-13.

We are very glad that the new Official Languages Act will finally be passed soon. The reform of the Official Languages Act is of the utmost importance to francophone minority communities.

We are also very glad to see that Bill C-13 recognizes the importance of the education continuum and that early childhood programming will finally be seen as an integral part of learning in minority language communities.

From the outset, I want to make clear that we fully support the five amendments the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, or FCFA, proposed to ensure that the bill lives up to the expectations of all Canadians.

I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to one of the FCFA's proposed amendments, one that would make a significant difference to the development of our communities. I am referring to the addition of strong, robust language clauses to the funding transfer agreements with the provinces and territories. I want to underscore the importance of those language clauses, but above all, I want you to know how critical it is that those language clauses go hand in hand with clear and firm commitments.

Here's why.

As you know, the federal government signed the first early learning and child care agreements with all the provinces and territories in 2017. Those agreements contained language clauses, but the clauses were very vague and ill-defined, resulting in significant differences from one province to another.

For instance, Manitoba, in its action plan to implement the bilateral agreement, committed to allocating 14.5% of child care spaces in the province to the francophone community. As of now, Manitoba's French-speaking community can say with certainty that it received the funding and that the government kept its promise to provide the number of spaces it said it would.

Conversely, even though every bilateral agreement contained a clause requiring the provincial or territorial government to address the needs of francophones in minority communities, the members of those communities received absolutely nothing when the province or territory failed to firmly commit to implementing the language clause. That was the case in British Columbia, Alberta and the Northwest Territories.

Worse still, between 2017 and 2021, British Columbia's francophones were never consulted. No one from the ministry responsible for early learning ever met with the francophone community to find out what its needs were.

In 2021, the federal government signed a second round of new agreements on early learning and child care with the provincial and territorial governments. This time, the language clauses were a bit more defined. Still missing, however, are firm commitments from the provinces and territories as well as specific targets. That lack of commitment worries us.

Here are two examples to illustrate just how worried we are.

First, the Government of Nova Scotia announced in 2021 that it wanted to use the federal funding to merge the administration of all of the province's francophone and anglophone child care services, giving the responsibility to a single agency. That agency is already in place and it operates exclusively in English. Rejecting the administration of their child care services by an English-language authority, francophones rallied successfully to make the government reverse course, at least for the time being. Decisions are still coming, so we remain concerned.

Second, the Government of Ontario recently announced that it would fund child care services as long as workers earned less than \$19 an hour. As a result, francophones will not receive any funding under the program, given that French-language child care centres have worked hard in recent years to retain French-speaking educators, who all earn slightly above \$19 an hour. That means that

funding will benefit anglophone child care centres, most of which operate for profit, not francophone centres.

Lastly, I want to leave you with this important message. Bill C-13 must be passed as quickly as possible. In the months ahead, the government will release its official languages action plan, and that plan needs to be supported by a new Official Languages Act, one that has been passed by the House of Commons and the Senate.

Thank you.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Anderson

I would like to point out that we have with us Ms. Gazan, from the New Democratic Party. She is standing in for Ms. Ashton. Welcome to the best committee on the Hill, Ms. Gazan.

We will now begin the first round. Each party will have six minutes to question the witnesses. I will be strictly enforcing the time limit so that everyone has an opportunity to ask questions.

The committee's first vice-chair, Joël Godin, will start off the round with six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for participating in the study.

My question is for Mr. Gooch, from the Association of Canadian Port Authorities. You said that you were subject to stringent laws or requirements and that the official languages commissioner could receive a greater number of complaints and complaints regarding very specific issues.

Tell us, if you would, about the vexatious complaints you mentioned. The purpose of the act is to prevent the decline of official languages, to protect them and to improve the situation, but everyone knows French is the language that's in trouble. You said you were uneasy with the commissioner's ability to fine ports, saying that people were taking advantage of the complaint mechanism and getting rich by searching port authority websites for certain materials.

Can you give us examples? Can you also tell us how many vexatious complaints the Association of Canadian Port Authorities has received in the past year?

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: Thank you for your question.

I'm going to answer in English so I can be more specific.

● (1120)

[English]

I do not know the number of complaints. We are not the recipient of complaints. It is the port authorities.

I know that my organization has not, but other organizations have put forward access to information requests to understand the nature of the complaints and have not been able to get that information. I do know from our members that the incidence of complaints has increased in the last five to seven years.

I'll give you an example. I think the challenge that our ports struggle with is that they are seeking to be more consultative with indigenous groups, with communities, with the people and the users in the actual market that they serve. To do so effectively requires lots of documents.

What we're seeing is individuals who have absolutely nothing to do with that—they're not local and they're in the other part of the country—have discovered they can just go on websites and find in a consultation document at the bottom of page 5 a reference to an appendix, and it is in English.

We don't believe that is the spirit of the reason that Official Languages Act obligations were put on Canada port authorities.

We've seen the incidence of these types of complaints increase in recent years, and we think that the perverse impact is that ports now will have an incentive to consult less or provide fewer documents, and that's not where Minister Alghabra wants the industry to go. That's not where the Government of Canada seems to want the industry to go. We are expecting Canada Marine Act amendments that, if anything, will increase the requirements for consultation. The port authorities want to comply, but they want to comply in the spirit of that and not be hijacked by individuals who have discovered that they can make money in this way.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: You anticipate carrying out more consultations, but history has taught us that, in your sector and many others, the consultation process doesn't ensure the protection of the two official languages.

What can the Association of Canadian Port Authorities do tomorrow to protect both official languages in a meaningful way?

[English]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: Our members are seeking to comply with the requirements of the OLA. Greater clarity on what the expectations are would be helpful, but we don't believe that what is happening now is in the spirit of the Official Languages Act. We believe it is opportunism, quite frankly.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: You have nothing to suggest?

[English]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: We have heard examples—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Forgive me for cutting you off, but I don't have a lot of time.

Do you not have any tangible suggestions at this time to improve the bill?

[English]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: We do have one request, which is that the port authorities be treated a bit more like the airport authorities. In the way the requirements are written for port authorities, there is an obligation that they are to promote the use of French in the community in the same way that a federal institution would. The airport authorities do not have that requirement, so that would be one improvement.

I can't tell you how to draft this bill, but the situation we have today is that port authorities are treated as if they are a head office, so—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Sorry to cut you off, but I'm running out of time, and I have another question for you.

You have made clear that you don't want to be subject to the obligations set out in the act. That's what I take from your presentation. You can appreciate, however, that every good corporate citizen has to do their part. As long as this country is bilingual, with English-speaking and French-speaking populations, everyone has to pitch in. Is your association willing to give up some of what it wants for the good of the community?

[English]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: I'm not sure that I answered the question. Can I continue to answer the one you asked earlier?

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gooch and Mr. Godin. You'll have a chance to say more the next time around.

Our next questioner is Marc Serré, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Official Languages. You have six minutes, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their presentations.

I would like to look further into the question you were asked earlier, Mr. Gooch.

In your presentation, you said there is a labour shortage in many areas. You said that in some remote regions, you were unable to offer services in French.

We are studying Bill C-13, which seeks to give the Official Languages Act greater force and to fight the decline of French. You didn't really answer the question you were asked earlier. You are required to offer services in French, so why do you not do that now?

• (1125)

[English]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: Our port authorities strive to offer services in French. What is happening is that there is a game going on whereby individuals are seeking out obscure documents. We've heard of one case of a port getting in trouble because there were two words that were not translated.

The Commissioner of Official Languages has a certain amount of flexibility in how he or she applies the requirements, and we're not seeing that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: Why are you opposed to the commissioner being able to impose more fines?

Do you have funding for French training, your employees' second language?

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: I don't have a figure in mind.

What we would like to see is the requirements being applied in the spirit in which they were intended and that our port authorities not be diverted by individuals who are simply profiting from the system.

One of the challenges we have—it's bizarre—is that the port authorities are treated as if they are headquarters. We have a situation in which a port authority—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: So you do not have funding for French training...

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: If I could finish one of my answers, I—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Gooch, I have to interrupt. I will stop the timer.

The committee members have very little speaking time, just six minutes each. They ask questions and you are required to answer them to the best of your knowledge.

Mr. Serré has asked you a question, so I would ask you to participate in this exercise as everyone around the table usually does.

Mr. Marc Serré: I see you do not have a budget for training in French as a second language.

I don't know if you understand our frustration. In some countries, there are two, three or even four languages, but in Canada we are struggling to have two. So why is this so difficult for you? You agree with the principle of the official languages, but you do not accept that it applies to you. That is what I'm trying to understand.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: Our ports are striving to fulfill the requirements of the Official Languages Act. It's not just about money; it's also about the availability of training. Under federal institutions, there's funding available for French language training. It isn't available to port authorities. Even if it was available, would they be able to find it? Would they be able to find the employees?

Port authorities are competing with federal organizations with a very generous pension and benefits. Port authorities are operating at arm's length from government. It was an intentional decision of the Government of Canada to put entrepreneurial spirit into the administration of the port authorities. They are doing their best to fulfill

their significant mandates for trade, but at the same time respect the requirements for official languages.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you very much.

Ms. Anderson and Mr. Racine, thank you for your presentation.

You said that Bill C-13 has to be passed as quickly as possible since it has greater force and includes measures for francophone minority communities.

Can you tell us how the action plan is related to Bill C-13? We would like to strengthen the action plan in order to support communities. In your opinion, why should Bill C-13 be passed as quickly as possible so we can then move on to the action plan?

Ms. Gillian Anderson: I will begin, and will then hand it over to my excellent executive director.

As to the continuum in education, it is clearly very important for linguistic clauses to be incorporated into the agreements as quickly as possible. We must strengthen the continuum in education starting with early childhood, because the young people we are losing now will not come back later on. So we have to take action immediately to support children who are currently 5 and under by establishing clauses that help them stay in francophone communities. That is the main objective.

I will hand it over to Mr. Racine now.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine (Executive Director, Commission nationale des parents francophones): Let me just point out that the 2018-2023 action plan for official languages will soon expire, meaning that all the funding for francophone organizations will cease, unless we implement a new official languages action plan by then.

We would like that new action plan to draw heavily on Bill C-13. The more quickly that bill is passed, the greater its impact on the action plan. Moreover, the new act will legitimize the action plan.

• (1130)

The Chair: You have 40 seconds left, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Anderson, you talked about linguistic clauses and the differences in early childhood agreements between 2017 and now. Can you give us any examples of current early childhood linguistic clauses in terms of functioning and operations? The provinces seem to have different ideas of what a linguistic clause is.

Ms. Gillian Anderson: I will let Mr. Racine answer that.

The Chair: You have to answer in less than 10 seconds, Mr. Racine.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I will surely be able to come back to this. I have some very specific examples that illustrate the importance of linguistic clauses. Without them, there is no support for communities.

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

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

The Chair: I will now give the floor to our second vice-chair, Mr. Beaulieu, for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses who have come to help us improve Bill C-13.

My first question is for the representatives of the Commission nationale des parents francophones.

I read the study entitled “Où sont passés les milliards \$”, published in 1996. It provides a review of the official languages in education program. It notes that the program was initially intended to provide some redress after the long-standing prohibition of French schools. The French-language education system outside Quebec was very poor at that time.

One of the study's conclusions regarding the funding provided from 1970 to 1988 is that just 28.5% of the funding went to francophones outside Quebec for education in their first language. The anglophones of Quebec, on the other hand, which already had an over-funded system, received 47.7% of the funding for their schools. For second language education, it was 14.3% outside Quebec and 9.5% in Quebec. The study said that this really hurt francophones, who assimilated quickly and did not receive enough funding, since most of it went to the anglophones of Quebec.

Can you elaborate on that?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I will take that question, Ms. Anderson, if I may.

I would say that is precisely why we need linguistic clauses. All the funding in Canada is channelled through provincial and territorial agreements. Without linguistic clauses, we will certainly not get our fair share, and we will not be able to say that we did not get our fair share if it is not spelled out in the agreement.

Let me give you a very specific example. This might answer two questions at the same time.

British Columbia signed an agreement in 2021. The provincial government undertook to spend \$11.3 million on indigenous day care services, which we are very pleased about. We are not complaining at all because it is very good news. On the other hand, do you know what they promised francophones? They promised to consult them, that's it.

This is what is happening now, which is why we need strong linguistic clauses with specific targets. We need commitments. The government of British Columbia is willing to make commitments to the first nations, which is very good, but why is it not willing to make commitments to francophones?

Let me give you another example. In 2017, in the first agreement, the government was supposed to consult francophones. Do you know when it met with francophones? They met in April 2022. Between 2017 and 2022, there was not a single meeting or consultation, and there was no funding for francophones.

In order to avoid a repeat of what you are telling us, we need clear linguistic clauses with specific targets. The experience on the ground in Manitoba has shown that when the provincial government makes a firm commitment, we get results. When it is vague and unclear, we do not get any results. That is reality. That is what we see in practice.

• (1135)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: A very good observation.

Do you represent Quebec as well, or just francophones outside Quebec?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Francophones outside Quebec only.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: From what I have seen in the white book and in Bill C-13, the government appears to be committed to increasing funding to French immersion schools, but there is not the same commitment to French-language schools.

Based on what various stakeholders have said, while immersion schools are not a negative thing, francophone parents feel they contribute a great deal to assimilation.

Shouldn't there be commitments to increase funding for French-language schools?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Definitely. We will see that in the next official languages action plan. Specific requests have been made in that regard. We shall see what comes of it. We are hopeful.

But we also hope to see this for early childhood education. There is funding, but it needs to be structured.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If it were in Bill C-13, there might be greater certainty.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Yes.

I think Bill C-13 already recognizes the importance of the continuum in education. To our minds, that continuum extends from early childhood to post-secondary education, and includes primary and secondary schools.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In my opinion, I think we have to start by providing adequate funding for schools and post-secondary education, by and for francophones.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Exactly, and early childhood and post-secondary education at the same time.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Quite right.

The Chair: You have less than 30 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It is clear that, in Quebec, positive measures favour English alone. So the Quebec government is opposed to binding linguistic clauses.

I think we could talk about this again to see if there is some way of not hurting each other.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

[*English*]

Madame Gazan, you're next. You have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

It's very nice to be in committee today.

I apologize.

[*Translation*]

I am practising my French, but I still don't speak very well.

[*English*]

I'll ask my questions in English.

My first question is to Ms. Anderson.

The CNPF qualified Bill C-13 as a step in the right direction, but said that it clearly needs improvements. The NDP has been fighting for linguistic clauses to be included in the bill to support improvements.

From your standpoint, is passing this amendment, or these amendments, a requirement for your organization to continue to support the bill? Could you provide some background on why or why not?

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gillian Anderson: Linguistic clauses specifically for francophone minority communities are essential, as our executive director said earlier. I will hand it over to him now, in case he has something else to add.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: We fully support Bill C-13, because it goes in the right direction.

As Ms. Anderson said, I think a few changes are needed. The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada made five very clear requests.

The key for us today is to make sure that the bill has linguistic clauses, because that is what will allow us to make progress. Otherwise, we will miss out on this opportunity to have a strong bill.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Just to follow up, if these amendments aren't made, will your organization still be supporting the bill, yes or no?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Please allow me to answer, Ms. Anderson.

We want the proposed amendments to the bill to address the specific needs of francophones. We think the amendments we have proposed are reasonable and will enhance the vitality of communities. It would be very hard for us to say we are in favour of a bill

without these important linguistic clauses, because that would hamper our vitality.

Later on, I will talk more about some of the things we are experiencing, which prove that we need this type of clause in our federal-provincial-territorial agreements.

• (1140)

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

Again, my question is for Ms. Anderson.

When the federal government reached an agreement with the provinces and territories, you indicated that you felt it was a major setback for francophones, mostly because there were no linguistic clauses to protect French minority communities' rights to have access to French early child care centres specifically. You in fact had called the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development to make sure these clauses were included in the agreements, specifically for those who were not signed yet for Ontario. The Liberal government chose to ignore that.

What are the consequences now for francophone parents to try to access French early childhood centres or the consequences for early childhood centres that are French that may not receive the same funding as other early childhood centres? Do you think this could have been avoided with linguistic clauses in the agreements?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gillian Anderson: I completely agree. Provinces and territories must definitely be required to negotiate these agreements, through the establishment of rules or laws that require the negotiation of linguistic clauses that are favourable to francophone minority communities.

Without those clauses, our culture and language will gradually disappear because we do not have access to the same services as anglophones. With everything happening in the world right now, a parent who has to choose between an English program and a French one that costs 10 times more will always choose the less expensive one because the parents ultimately bear the cost.

It is essential that the federal government require the provinces and territories to negotiate these agreements to ensure that every province and territory does something to support our francophone minority communities.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: I know the committee heard from francophone communities across the country that relayed the same concern that you shared, which is that they don't have enough schools. They need better access to French schools that are run by and for francophone communities and people.

Perhaps in the next round of questions you can follow up on that. I know we don't have a lot of time.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The next questions will be from Bernard Généreux, who has the floor for five minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Racine and Ms. Anderson, based on what you have said, the Liberal government's official languages action plan for 2018-2023 was clearly not effective. In spite of the hundreds of millions of dollars invested by the government, according to the examples you provided, it is completely absurd and utterly ridiculous that the francophones of British Columbia were not consulted after five years and that Nova Scotia made an English organization responsible for French-language day care services.

Moreover, the current act does not impose any accountability on the provinces.

What makes you think the current bill will change that?

Ms. Gillian Anderson: I will begin, and Mr. Racine will follow.

We firmly believe that Canada is a bilingual country. We have to maintain that belief and hope that the federal government will always support the country's two official languages. We have no other option than to believe that things will change, that the act will truly recognize the value of francophones and the importance of investing in the francophone minority and moving forward.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Ms. Anderson, I would like to believe you. I would also like to believe that we can trust our federal government, but I am not sure that is the case.

Mr. Racine, in the examples you gave us, you asked for amendments to the current bill, specifically with regard to language clauses, which are nonexistent. To guarantee that the bill includes them, would you accept that these language clauses don't apply to Québec?

• (1145)

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I think it's really a decision that you have to make at the political level.

We want francophone communities to be able to count on these language clauses. The more these clauses are specific, the more the action plans appended to the agreements will include firm commitments, and the easier it will be.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Racine and Ms. Anderson, I will say it again: in light of what you have experienced over the last five years, in spite of all the money the federal government invested in French-speaking minority communities, nothing has really improved, evidently, and French is declining throughout Canada.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: The last Action Plan for Official Languages did, however, lead to federal investments in early childhood education for francophones. Nonetheless, the real problem is with provincial and territorial agreements, where we lose some control and don't really know what's going on. We don't know how the money is spent.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: At that point, there should be obligations under legislation regarding federal-provincial relations.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Exactly.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: We will have to keep using regulations. Just imagine the positive measures. What are they, and what are they going to give us?

I find it difficult to understand and, above all, to believe that positive measures will have a different impact or lead to different results, based on what we have seen over the last five years.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I think language clauses and agreements will let us see potential positive measures proposed in provincial action plans.

I will give you another very concrete example. The government of British Columbia decided to invest in \$10-a-day child care, but they have to function at least 70% of their licensed capacity. However, it is so difficult to recruit French speakers that it's impossible for francophone daycares.

I have a newsflash for you: \$10-a-day child care in British Columbia will be for anglophones. Francophones will go to those daycares because they can't reach 70% of their authorized capacity. They are lacking too many resources.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Could you clarify your statement and tell us if the 70% applies to schools or daycares?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I'm talking about daycare. It's an agreement that affects daycares.

To be entitled to the subsidy for a daycare to charge only \$10, it must be able to operate at 70% capacity.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Are First Nations also subject to this percentage?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: Yes, but francophones are more affected.

We should have been consulted, because that could have been a useful positive measure.

Instead of setting it at 70% for francophones, it should be 40% or 50%, because we are in such a difficult situation. An early childhood educator can work on the francophone side as well as on the anglophone side. If the salary is better on the anglophone side, she will take that job, but not vice versa. It is much more difficult to recruit francophones, and right now, it's a catastrophe.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Racine. We will come back to the issue.

The next speaker is Ms. Kayabaga, who has five minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will start by thanking our guests for being here today.

Ms. Anderson, you said earlier that you would like to see the federal government impose an obligation on provinces and territories to implement the measures we are passing. How do you see this happening? The federal government does not normally impose obligations on the provinces and territories. The federal government can encourage them, but cannot compel them. So what do you mean by “obligation”?

Ms. Gillian Anderson: In Alberta, where I am, the way funds are spent when the federal government sends them to provinces and territories changes depending on the party in power.

When sending these funds, if the federal government could require them to be earmarked for francophone minority communities, not used to subsidize something else, that would help us significantly. Then we would have a guarantee—not just hope as we do now—that these funds will come back to us.

Provincial organizations are responsible for negotiations, and they hope to be consulted on how funds are spent. It doesn’t happen in every province, and it can change from one year to the next. Since a new government is elected every four years, we have a tendency to hope that things might go better on a financial level, if it didn’t go as well during the last mandate. However, this is not something we can rely on.

Maybe the word “obligation” is not the one I should have used. Actually, I wanted to say we have to ensure that our organizations get targeted agreements.

• (1150)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I understand what you’re feeling. When two levels of government don’t work together to come to an agreement that meets the community’s needs, it’s very difficult. However, we are unable to impose any obligation in this case.

You understand the importance of passing Bill C-13. French is declining throughout the entire country. For communities like yours, in Manitoba, it’s very urgent.

Could you explain the importance of passing this bill as quickly as possible? We could dig in our heels and say that the bill isn’t perfect on every level, but that would just delay its passage, and communities will pay the price.

Ms. Gillian Anderson: The longer things drag on before the bill is passed, the more consequences there will be.

However, as Mr. Racine mentioned earlier, it’s very important to take into account the different recommendations we proposed. I think it’s in the near future...

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: So, this work is ongoing, then?

Ms. Gillian Anderson: Exactly. However, it must be done as quickly as possible.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Mr. Racine, did you want to add any comments?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I think it’s rare to see a certain national consensus for a bill, and yet what we’re seeing it currently. There are a few little objections here and there, but we feel the current circumstances are favourable. The longer we wait, the more likely it is that this consensus will break down.

We think the time has come to act. The FCFA started this process six or seven years ago. It’s been a long time, and now it’s time to act. Yes, every political party has decisions to make about the bill, but let’s go. We have to move forward.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I fully agree with you, being a member of a minority language community in London. I understand the importance of passing this bill, especially because one clause says that the bill can be reviewed every 10 years. It would give us an ongoing opportunity to consider how we can serve francophone communities throughout Canada.

However, I think the most important thing you said, Mr. Racine and Ms. Anderson, is that we need to respond to francophone communities throughout Canada, especially for education.

I’d like to come back to the issue...

The Chair: You have less than 10 seconds, Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Over the long term, how do you think the education provisions will contribute to the vitality of French in minority communities like ours?

The Chair: That’s an excellent question.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Mario Beaulieu for two and half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I’d like to talk about the necessity of passing Bill C-13 quickly.

Québec has 90% of francophones in Canada, which offers considerable support and a large market for recruiting French-speaking teachers. And yet, French is declining faster and faster. In Bill C-13, there is almost nothing to address the issue. Furthermore, the federal government will mostly continue helping to anglicize Québec.

Don’t you think that it would be worthwhile to review this bill and ensure that Québec can fight the decline of French? Otherwise, it will have a negative impact on francophones outside Québec.

Do you prefer not to answer?

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I don’t know. What we want is to respond to the needs of francophones.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You want to meet the needs of francophones outside Québec.

Mr. Jean-Luc Racine: I’m talking about francophones outside Québec. For our part, we do not want to start commenting on what Québec should do. I do not think it is our place.

• (1155)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I completely understand.

Mr. Gooch, from the Association of Canadian Port Authorities, are there any francophones on your board of directors?

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: We have five or six CEOs in Québec, all francophones. We have Martin Imbleau in Montréal, Carl Laberge in Saguenay, who is also the chair of our board of directors, and Pierre Gagnon in Sept-Îles. We also have Denis Caron in Belledune, New Brunswick.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Very well. These people are sitting on the board of directors, which is excellent.

In your brief, you seem to be on the defensive about complaints sent to the Commissioner of Official Languages, as well as its authority. Do you think all the complaints against Canada's port authorities are unjustified?

The Chair: Please answer in less than 20 seconds.

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: No, I already answered that some complaints were valid. However, some people file complaints like it's a part-time job.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel-Robert Gooch: We've even heard of individuals who have gone to our ports and said, "We found this on your website"—

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Gooch.

The floor is for Ms. Gazan for two minutes and 30 seconds.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

Going back to Ms. Anderson, you spoke about early childhood centres. We've also heard, as I indicated, witness after witness from francophone communities across the country who have relayed the same concerns as yours in terms of the need for better access to French schools run by and for francophone communities and people, and new Canadians included, who would like to have an education in French but can't get it. I am a Manitoban, and I know this is the reality.

What do you think we need to do to get to a point where everyone who would like to have their education in French would be able to get it?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gillian Anderson: I think all schools should be on the same footing.

It's interesting, because I've lived my entire life in Alberta, and my parents both live in Manitoba. So I find this compelling.

I have children in high school and one in university. I see them choosing programs in English-language schools because they are better funded, given that the anglophone majority attends them.

If we don't have the funding needed to offer a basic education in French that is at least the equivalent of what anglophones get in their language, we can't compete with English-language schools. That's why it's important to subsidize different programs and services in French: to ensure our young people stay in francophone schools, rather than going to anglophone schools.

Maybe that would help Mr. Gooch recruit francophone workers into his organization. The more francophones graduate, the more workers there will be that speak both official languages in Canada.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Just building on that, I know that in Manitoba the amount of funding that a school receives is based on the number of students provincially.

Do you think there need to be changes in terms of funding so that we can accommodate and support francophone schools?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gillian Anderson: Absolutely, without a doubt. This has always been the case, and I think it will remain so.

It's not fair to fund French-language schools on the same level as English-language schools. When there is a smaller number of francophone students, more resources are required to create the same type of programs in French.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Anderson.

I know that I have been strict with speaking time, but it allows all members of the committee to ask their questions. Members are used to it.

Ms. Anderson, Mr. Racine and Mr. Gooch, if you want to send any additional information to the committee, such as information that you may not have had time to provide to us because the chair rushed you a little, don't hesitate to send it in writing as soon as possible to our clerk, who will send it to all the members of the committee. I sincerely thank you for being here.

The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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