



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Official Languages

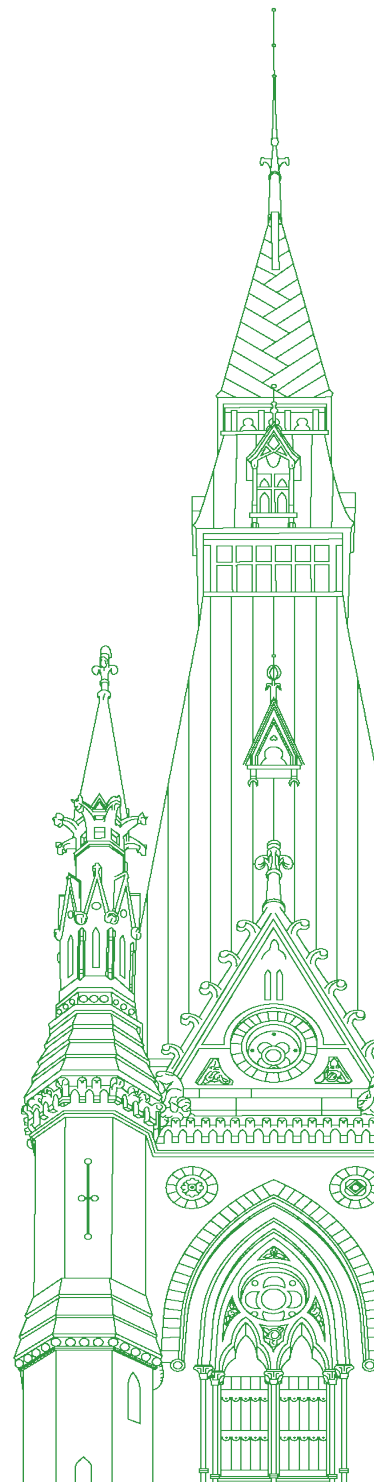
EVIDENCE

NUMBER 071

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Wednesday, October 25, 2023

Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



Standing Committee on Official Languages

Wednesday, October 25, 2023

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to the 71st meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on April 21, 2023, the committee is meeting for a briefing by the Minister of Official Languages on his mandate and priorities.

As I see no one new on the screen, I will dispense with the usual instructions regarding speaking time and so on. However, I would like to remind you to be careful not to put your earpiece too close to your mike when you speak because that causes feedback in our interpreters' headsets.

I would like to welcome the Hon. Randy Boissonnault, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages. He is joined by Deputy Minister Isabelle Mondou and Assistant Deputy Minister Julie Boyer, regulars whom we frequently see and are pleased to see again.

Minister, as you know, you have five minutes of speaking time. I'm very strict in that regard because we only have an hour and I would like everyone to have a chance to speak. I will immediately cut off all members when their time is up.

Mr. Boissonnault, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon to all the members of the committee.

First, I would like to say that this meeting is being held on the traditional unceded land of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for inviting me to appear today. As you heard, I am joined by the Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage, Isabelle Mondou, and Julie Boyer, Assistant Deputy Minister, Official Languages, Heritage and Regions.

Colleagues, a long time ago, I told Mr. Généreux that, the last time I was here, I still had hair, or at least I thought I had hair, in 2015.

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

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'm not talking about you, my friend, but I do know that haircuts have changed in the past eight years.

[*English*]

This is the first time I'm appearing as Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages.

[*Translation*]

However, you have known me for a long time as a result of the positions I have held here on Parliament Hill, particularly as parliamentary secretary to Ms. Joly. You know that the situation of our official language minority communities is important to me.

[*English*]

I understand all the great work you've done to make the lives of francophones across the west and anglophones in Quebec better. I can tell you that I've had the opportunity to highlight this committee's excellent work already.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for considering and approving Bill C-13. It took 50 years to modernize the Official Languages Act. I tip my hat and congratulate every one of you.

I have to say that the coming into force of the Act for the Substantive Equality of Canada's Official Languages on June 20 last was a major step forward. Modernization of the Official Languages Act addresses concerns and realities that I regularly see at home in Edmonton. My membership in an official language minority community is a part of who I am. I sincerely believe that what is happening in Alberta's francophone community—our challenges, our successes and the defence of our rights—can help further the entire Canadian francophonie and the promotion of official languages across the country.

• (1705)

[*English*]

Implementing the modernized act will allow us to support the French language across Canada, including Quebec, and defend official language minority communities.

As you already know the modernized act inside out, I'm going to highlight just a few aspects that I feel are particularly important.

[*Translation*]

First of all, support for education from early childhood to the post-secondary level and beyond—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. The interpretation isn't working.

The Chair: Just a moment. We're going to check. I'll stop your time, Minister.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'll speak in both languages.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You can continue; it's just for the principle of it.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: No, I understand.

I'm delighted—

The Chair: Just a moment, Minister. You are apparently speaking too quickly for the interpreters.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I see. My apologies to our interpreters, and I will speak more slowly. It's just that I'm happy to be here in committee.

I'm delighted that you are undertaking a study on post-secondary institutions. I also think that francophone immigration, which is essential to efforts to restore the demographic weight of minority francophones, is a critical issue. I note the new obligations requiring all federal institutions to take positive measures to promote the official languages and the fact that the strengthening of part VII of the Official Languages Act has been well received by stakeholders and the communities. I will be working closely with the President of the Treasury Board to prepare the regulations provided for under the act.

I would briefly like to recall that I travelled to 17 cities in the summer of 2017 to take part in the consultations on the action plan for official languages 2018-2023. It's very important for me to witness all the progress that we, as a government and Parliament, have made on these issues. I'm here to defend the official languages from sea to sea. I'm also here to defend western francophones and Quebec's anglophone communities. This action plan is real: a \$4.1 billion budget is significant.

I'll conclude with a brief story. I am very much attached to our two official languages. When I was 15 years old, I travelled to Ottawa as a participant in the Forum for Young Canadians, but I couldn't speak to half of the delegates. The realization hit me so hard that, when I returned to Edmonton, I figured I'd better forge ahead with my French studies. With a name like Boissonnault, I just had to.

The first time I applied for work as a parliamentary guide, I failed the interview because I didn't know the meaning of the word "chirurgie". The answer I gave was somewhat surrealistic, but it didn't pass muster. The second time, I passed the interview, got the job and was a parliamentary guide here in 1990, and I can tell you that I never would have believed I would one day be the Minister of Official Languages.

I'm a product of the system. The system works, and I'm here to make sure it works for many other Canadians. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boissonnault. You had 15 seconds left.

I would like to tell committee members and anyone watching our proceedings live that I'm quite proud to be in the presence of three francophones from Alberta. Never in my youth would I have thought that possible. I'm referring here to our colleagues Mr. Dalton and Ms. Goodridge, as well as Mr. Boissonnault himself. So I'm convinced the francophonie works.

Minister, the next four series of questions will come from the four political parties. The time allotted for questions and answers will be exactly six minutes per party. I will warn speakers approximately 15 seconds before their time is up and interrupt them if necessary so that all of them can ask their questions.

We will begin with the first vice-chair of the committee, Joël Godin, to whom I give the floor for six minutes.

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

Mr. Boissonnault, thank you for being with us and for taking part in this exercise. It's a pleasure for me, as a parliamentarian, to question you in your capacity as Minister of Official Languages. As you will understand, from now on, our relationship will never be the same when we cross paths in the corridors. I have some good questions for you and will probably interrupt you so I can get as many answers as possible to them.

Here's my first question: is French declining in Canada?

• (1710)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Absolutely.

Mr. Joël Godin: Is French declining in Quebec?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: You've just confirmed that French is in decline, which is already a step in the right direction. Now what specifically are you going to do about it?

I see that Bill C-13 contains a lot of elements, specific clauses, but that they aren't yet in force. You just confirmed that French is in decline in Canada and Quebec. To my mind, that means that there is an urgent need to act. As you said in your remarks, immigration is essential.

Is the section that appears in the act currently in force?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'll take 15 seconds to give you some context. There are more francophones in Quebec, but their demographic weight has changed. That's why the Prime Minister and other ministers have clearly stated that French is in decline in Quebec. We're seeing the same thing elsewhere in the country, in other provinces.

I wanted to clarify that point.

Mr. Joël Godin: What about the immigration plan?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: When the act came into force, we, as the government, were required to restore the demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec to its 1971 level, which was 6.1%. That's the jurisdiction—

Mr. Joël Godin: Now that Bill C-13 has been passed into law, is the section on immigration in force?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Those elements have to be enacted by order once we have all the necessary regulations, and that's the work that Mr. Miller is doing.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you for that answer.

Now I want to know how things are going. You are the Minister of Official Languages. As a parliamentarian, if I have a problem with an organization, I want to know who I should contact to resolve my issues with that organization or to give it instructions: the Treasury Board, Canadian Heritage or the Minister of Official Languages?

I think it should be the Minister of Official Languages. Is that what you think?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: This committee requested that responsibility for implementing the act be assigned to a central agency. You've managed to transfer that responsibility to the Treasury Board. Consequently, it's the current President of the Treasury Board who is responsible for handling all positive measures.

In response to your question, Mr. Godin, I would answer that it depends on which organization you mean: are we talking about CBC/Radio-Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which has made major mistakes, or a private sector organization?

Mr. Joël Godin: My question concerns departments in general. If it's the Canadian Armed Forces, for example, if there's a problem with the system, whom do I contact as a parliamentarian?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: You can contact Ms. Anand or the Commissioner of Official Languages, but you have to speak to the minister responsible for the situation because every department is responsible for implementing the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Joël Godin: You're telling me that you have to choose the right minister. However, that's why we requested a central agency so that a single minister would be responsible for forwarding complaints and administering the act.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: You have that: it's the President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Joël Godin: All right.

Which cabinet minister will decide to introduce the immigration order?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: First, it's the responsibility of Mr. Miller, then that of the entire cabinet.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'll continue. We've expanded the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages, but the sanctions, for which he is now responsible, aren't applicable. Perhaps that's news to you. When will that be put in place?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I've met the new Commissioner, and he's in the process—

Mr. Joël Godin: No, I want to talk about you, the government. Who will stand up in cabinet and say the order must be made so it can come into force?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's me?

Mr. Joël Godin: When will you do it?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Mr. Godin, there are five stages that have to be followed. There's the pre-consultation, the consultation, the cabinet brief, and so on. It will take months.

Mr. Joël Godin: This is urgent; French is declining, but you aren't ready to give me a date today. That's what I understand.

• (1715)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I don't have the timeline today, but—

Mr. Joël Godin: That's what I understand. Is it—

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: It's very important to do the work properly in the coming months.

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a final question, Minister.

The Chair: Just a moment, please: it's impossible for the poor interpreters to follow the conversation when everyone speaks at the same time.

Mr. Joël Godin: You can see my passion, and that of the minister as well.

The Chair: Go ahead, but one person at a time.

Mr. Joël Godin: Minister, we debated the inclusion of rights holders in the 2021 census here. The bill unfortunately didn't include that obligation. Consequently, how will you go about enumerating rights holders across Canada?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin, that's an excellent question, but we'll hear the answer to it later.

Mr. Drouin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm going to share my time with my colleague Ms. Kayabaga.

My colleague Mr. Godin mentioned the Commissioner of Official Languages. On that subject, I want to point out before this committee that I entirely disassociate myself from the comments of the former Commissioner, Graham Fraser, that were published in a recent article in *Le Devoir*. I completely disagree with him and want to say that anyone, past or present, who takes part in the debate on the decline of the francophonie and the defence of official languages has a duty to inquire into the matter before expressing an opinion.

I want to point out, Minister, that you are the author of the word "francourieux", or "Franco-curious". You mentioned that you had visited, for consultation purposes, 17 municipalities, including my own, Alfred, which I would note is the most beautiful one. Thank you for that.

You also said that the remarks of the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were unacceptable. We of course have an official languages policy, and we require that our senior officials be bilingual, whether at the RCMP, in the Canadian Armed Forces or elsewhere. As Minister of Official Languages, what will you do to resolve the situation, which is entirely unacceptable?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: As I said, I will be working closely on that with the minister, Ms. Anand, who is also responsible in this matter.

I answered a similar question on the subject from Mr. Beaulieu in the House, and I'll repeat the answer I gave him: positions are clearly designated bilingual, and it is the responsibility of the minister and cabinet to ensure that the public service staffs those positions with bilingual personnel.

Training will be provided within our government. I believe that, within the framework for the modernization of the Official Languages Act, \$20 million has been earmarked to establish a centre within the Treasury Board, a gain that has been made thanks to that modernization.

Since you may wonder what our respective roles are, I'll be very clear for my colleagues opposite. As the conductor of this orchestra, I ensure that all the musicians are playing the right music to promote our linguistic duality. Ms. Anand is responsible for putting the right people on stage and ensuring that they're in the right place and have received the right training.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will now give the floor to my colleague Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Good afternoon, Minister. Welcome to our committee. Congratulations on your new position.

Francophone immigration was discussed earlier. You aren't the Minister of Immigration, but you have an influence on francophone immigration.

Unless I'm mistaken, the 4.4% francophone immigration target was reached last year, and many organizations and communities now want to see that target raised because French is still in decline across Canada. Would you be able to encourage Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to raise the targets both to offset that decline and to help restore the francophonie across Canada?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's a very good question.

The francophone community in Alberta has changed in the past 15 years as a result of francophone immigration. Consequently, I have to congratulate the committee because I remember the debates that took place on this issue many years ago. At the time, it was impossible to increase francophone immigration from 1.5% to 4.4%, even though it was a more sensible target. However, we've now achieved 4.4%, which is the highest we've ever had.

It will be important for us to have an agreement or more cooperation between Quebec and the Canadian government regarding francophone immigration broadly speaking.

The work that our government has done and that you have done as parliamentarians has made it possible to secure new funding totaling \$137 million for the action plan. That includes \$25 million for innovating in immigration and \$50 million to support the francophone integration pathway and assist francophones when they arrive in Canada. This funding is for Edmonton as much it is for Atlantic Canada and the north.

I think this is a sign that the government takes francophone immigration seriously. Of course, Mr. Miller is responsible for meeting our targets, but we'll insist on setting higher and achievable targets.

• (1720)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

Since I only have 45 seconds left, you probably won't have time to tell me about your action plan. Perhaps you could do so soon. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Mr. Chair, I would like to note how important it was for Ms. Kayabaga to come to Edmonton. When MPs, whether francophone, francophile, "francocurieux" or *queer*, visit different regions of the country, that helps improve the situation. If more people travelled to Quebec and outside Quebec to speak both official languages, that would be a win for our linguistic duality.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boissonnault.

Mr. Beaulieu, second vice-chair of this committee, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Minister, according to the 2021 census data, the percentage of Quebec residents who mainly speak French at home declined from 79% in 2016 to 77.5% in 2021. Do you agree that suggests French is declining?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: When we met in my office, we agreed on the Statistics Canada figures. There are more allophones in Quebec who speak a different language at home but who can function in French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So you agree that these are valid figures and that French is on the decline.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: The figures are valid, and we'll be pleased to provide more.

The demographic weight has changed in Quebec; that's also the case across the country. Quebec has more people who speak French, but the demographic weight of francophones is declining.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: How do you explain the fact that the Minister of Immigration doesn't acknowledge that? He only acknowledges the decline in mother tongue use?

Two days ago, the Bloc Québécois introduced a motion in the House in which it presented Statistics Canada data, but the Liberals opposed it.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I think you have to let the minister speak for himself. It's important that he express an opinion on the subject.

However, I view the data from a certain point of view to protect the official languages across the country. I would like to see a strong francophonie in western Canada, just as I would like us to protect the language and societal rights of anglophones in Quebec.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Since the Official Languages Act was passed 53 years ago, nearly \$3.5 billion has been spent essentially to support English in Quebec. I did the calculations and it adds up to 94%. That money comes from federal taxes collected in Quebec. Ultimately, the Canadian majority is using our money to impose its language on the only francophone state in North America. Will that continue?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: It's very important to note that we must protect francophones outside Quebec and anglophones in Quebec. Quebec is an incredible society, one in which French dominates, and we want both to preserve it and sustain it.

I'd like to discuss the action plan for official languages and the money allocated to anglophones. We need to discuss real things: 40% of funding granted for anglophones is used to francize them so they can enter the workforce.

In addition to being the Minister of Official Languages, I'm also the Minister of Employment and the Minister of Workforce Development. I wear several hats. I think we can agree that, to keep Quebec strong, we need people who are well trained in French so they can access the workforce.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In the past, it was 6% of the budget at most. So will have to check that.

You say it's 40%, but, according to what the Bloc has read in the action plan for official languages, it was essentially anglophone organizations in Quebec that were consulted, and they're the ones that will be funded. You say that will be verifiable.

Is there anything that will serve to protect and promote French in Quebec?

• (1725)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Allow me to answer the question.

Of the \$137 million that will be allocated for Quebec anglophones, \$50 million will be used to francize people so they can enter the workforce. Our government is very receptive to the idea of holding discussions with Quebec regarding assistance for it to protect French and to reverse the declining demographic weight of francophones.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You said approximately 40% of new funding; that is, 40% of \$137 million of new funding. However, the budget for official languages in Quebec will be approximately \$150 million a year. Will 40% of that amount be used to promote French?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That won't be the case for the moment because the responsibility of the action plan and of the Department of Official Languages is to protect official language minority communities. Consequently there's no funding for Quebec since it is predominantly francophone. However, as I said, our government is willing to consider ways to work with Quebec to reverse the declining demographic weight of francophones in that province.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We'll take a proper look at that.

It isn't logical for 60% of new funding to be used to promote English. The budget contains no specific amounts, even though French is threatened and English is doing well in Quebec. The fed-

eral government justifies its support for English by saying that it's supporting linguistic minorities on a province-by-province basis.

However, even the UN Human Rights Committee has stated in one of its decisions that Quebec anglophones may not invoke linguistic minority rights because they're part of the Canadian majority. It even added that the majority in a province may claim minority rights if it is itself in a minority across Canada.

Do you agree that Quebec is in the minority in Canada?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I clearly stated that French was in decline and that francophones in North America constituted a minority. As you said, that has been confirmed by the UN. That being said, we can simply look at the figures.

When I meet the representatives of groups from anglophone communities in Quebec, they say they don't want to live their lives in English only. They are some of the most bilingual people in the country, and they simply want to know that their institutions and their rights are respected. As the Minister of Official Languages, I have a role to play in that regard.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Everyone agrees that there are English-language services for anglophones. Where we are less in agreement—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Beaulieu. I warned you I would be strict about speaking time.

Now we are headed for Alberta, with a stop in beautiful Manitoba.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much.

Minister, my question concerns French-language education in general, particularly the labour shortage in the child care services sector. For example, the Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario laments the shortage of educators in francophone day care facilities.

Knowing that nearly half of Franco-Ontarian children may not have access to child care services in their language before they are old enough to go to school, what measures is the government considering to solve the critical problem, experienced across the country, of a shortage of qualified educators? Would it consider improving working conditions, offering training or attracting new professionals to the sector?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Thank you for that very good question, Ms. Ashton.

Our concern as a government is to ensure that our child care services plan is fully implemented across the country in a manner consistent with the Official Languages Act. That, incidentally, was at issue in the initial bargaining rounds with the provinces. My ministerial colleague Jenna Suds is responsible for that file.

We agreed that we should increase the number of training programs for educators. Under our action plan, \$14.2 million is being set aside to train people on site. What's very important is that more day care centres will be created for francophones across the country and anglophones in Quebec. The issue of day care centre capacity is also important. To address it, we have a \$50 million fund to develop the capacity of French-language day care centres across the country.

Colleagues, we're talking here about services from "the cradle to the rocking chair", about fostering a continuum in education. A fellow minister of mine is responsible for child care services, whereas I'm responsible for the workforce. We want to secure an educational continuum that is long enough for people who so wish to acquire their entire education in French and then access the labour market.

• (1730)

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see.

The capacity of day care centres is so important. We already have a few buildings, but that's not enough. We need spaces because what we don't have is the personnel to work in the field.

Talking about the education continuum, we're aware there's a shortage of 10,000 French language teachers. This particularly affects immersion, of which I am a proud product. This shortage also affects education in French..

In order to provide a high-quality education in French across the country, how do you intend to cooperate with the provinces and territories to address the teacher shortage, which is clearly a national crisis in francophone and immersion schools across Canada?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Thank you once again for a very appropriate question.

I would've liked to go through immersion as well, but the program was cancelled when I was 14 years old and in grade 9. I had to take the French 30 program to get into university. Imagine.

In response to your question, we've invested \$16.3 million in immigration for the corridor for the selection and retention of French language teachers in order to attract francophone teachers.

In addition, why did we invest \$170 million in the post-secondary education system last year? It was to ensure that institutions such as the Collège Mathieu in Gravelbourg, the Université de Saint-Boniface in Manitoba, Campus Saint-Jean in Edmonton and other institutions here in Ontario could train the next generation of teachers so they can go out into the francophone or immersion system. That's essential.

When I was parliamentary secretary to Ms. Joly, I remember that the committee had made an effort to provide more money for education. This isn't the first year that we've had that money. This is an issue that constantly has to be raised with our provincial counterparts because this is their jurisdiction. In the negotiations on minority-language education programs, this is a very important factor that affects teacher training.

I hear you clearly, Ms. Ashton. This is the issue we are dealing with. We've put the money on the table to address this labour shortage.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see.

Talking about labour shortages, we know that many teachers who have come to Canada in recent years are francophone immigrants. That's something that the committee discussed at length during our recent study on francophone immigration.

Would you be in favour of establishing a new pool targeting French language education as a path to immigration to offset the educational labour shortage that we discussed and that the Association canadienne des professionnels en immersion noted in its 2021 study?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: We don't just want to do it; we're actually doing it with the francophone immigration corridor. That's exactly what the corridor represents: the recruitment of francophone teachers. The idea is to encourage people from francophone countries to come and settle in Canada and teach our children in French.

I'm very proud of this program. We'll see how the \$16 million will be used. If we need more money, colleagues, you know how to start the process.

Ms. Niki Ashton: We can't wait to see how it all progresses. I'm going to hang on to my other questions for later.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

We now go to Alberta.

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, congratulations on your new position.

[*English*]

We have a lot of connections. My father attended Collège Saint-Jean in 1940 and then sisters and family...so there are a lot of connections there.

I know you addressed this a bit, but you were appointed in July and the mandate letters are still not out. We're hearing that this is a continuation of before. I think you mentioned that.

To me, that reflects a lack of organization, energy and vision of the government of the Prime Minister. It's a little disappointing. I would think that would influence you, too.

One reason we're here is to hear about your mandate.

Could you comment on that, please?

• (1735)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Look, I will say this very clearly: I don't write mandate letters. I receive them. I have a very clear mandate letter from the mandate of my predecessor. It was a very clear mandate letter, colleagues. It's to get Bill C-13 passed and then to implement it. That's it. That's the job.

I said it in French earlier. I'm the conductor of the orchestra here, so I want to make sure we have everybody on the stage, they're playing the music we want to hear and we're dealing with the issues we have to deal with.

We had a big win in this modernization of official languages because we now have the President of the Treasury Board responsible for part VII.

Mr. Marc Dalton: All right, you don't have the mandate letter, so we'll go back to the mandate letter from the previous minister, Madam Petitpas Taylor—

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Let's be clear. It's the same mandate.

Mr. Marc Dalton: That's good. What was the first priority in that mandate letter?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: It was to pass Bill C-13 and implement it, should it be passed.

Mr. Marc Dalton: No, actually the first point was to pass, in full, the white paper. In the white paper, the number one point and concern expressed by the francophone community that we voted on was the fragmentation of power—that official languages are dispersed. You have a piece of it, the Heritage ministry and Treasury Board have some. We're saying that it needs to be under one minister, under Treasury Board.

That was the number one priority and we don't see that. I don't know if you're even aware of that. Do you have any comment?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'm totally aware of it. I think what I meant to say with the question was that you achieve that with the concentration of powers with the President of the Treasury Board having responsibility for the implementation of this act across government.

That is something this committee has been fighting for and that the communities have been fighting for since I was first elected in 2015. I think this committee can be very proud of that.

There are always things, in an act of modernization that takes 50 years to achieve, that may not be scoped in, but in this case this is a big win.

You're going to see Minister Anand on November 8 or 9, I think. You'll be able to ask her these questions, but we got the win, colleagues. It's in the Treasury Board.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Yes, the fragmentation is a concern and it's still there. The Conservatives have put forth amendments to put the authority with the one minister and that was voted down in spite of the white paper's recommendation.

Given what you said here about different ministers, would you not agree on the importance of having the Minister of Heritage come before the committee?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Colleagues, that's entirely in your scope, but there's no hierarchy in the ministries.

Let me give you an example.

I have a line responsibility in Employment and Social Development Canada and five other ministers that I work with on this file, but I don't have any senior role or authority over those other ministers.

It's the same when we look at official languages, Canadian Heritage and sport. Ministers are equal in this administration, so there's no reason for you to talk to Minister St-Onge about official languages because guess what, colleagues. I sign the cheques and I make the decisions. It will be my team that will be putting all the stages of the rules through Parliament to get them done.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Minister.

Having it so fragmented means it's just a bit more challenging for us as a committee, as far as representing second-language minority rights is concerned.

I have another question here. I'll just leave this with you as I'd be interested in your comments.

It is about the situation in Quebec with the out-of-province English-speaking students and the fees doubling. I'm wondering if you could comment on that, please.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Let me just clarify—

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Fragmentation is very different from having every single minister of the Crown responsible for implementing their responsibilities under the act. As it concerns the situation in Quebec, they have the rights on the ground over universities as their *champ de compétence*, but I think universities should be windows that are open to the world and not closed.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[English]

I'm sorry, Mr. Dalton. I said you're from Alberta, but you're from B.C. Your roots are in Alberta.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Dalton: I come from a military family.

The Chair: Exactly.

From British Columbia, we now go to Nova Scotia.

Mr. Samson, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'd like to inform you that I'll be sharing my speaking time with Mr. Iacono.

I just want to remind Mr. Dalton that the amendment to Bill C-13 respecting the Treasury Board was moved by the Conservatives, and I voted for it, which should please Mr. Dalton.

Minister, I'm very proud of your appointment and to have you here in committee. As you know, we've been working together, toward the same objective, since 2015. Now we have tools in the toolbox that we can use to do a lot of things that we've had trouble achieving in the past. There are francophones, the "francourieux", of course, but Acadians as well. It's very important not to forget the Acadians of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

My question is brief because I don't want to take up too much of my colleague's time. The Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences plays a very important role in the learning process and in skills development in minority language communities. I know that organization has asked your department to renew its agreement, which is a very important factor in enabling it to continue its work. Would you please tell the committee where matters stand in that file?

• (1740)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's very well put.

I worked in the early childhood field for nearly two decades before becoming an MP. As I said earlier, I know just how important the "cradle to rocking chair" continuum is.

With regard to RESDAC's good work, I know Mona Audet very well; she's nicknamed "Monatoba" because she represents her province so well. To give you an idea of how interested I am in her funding application, I asked my deputy minister, Paul Thompson, of the Department of Employment and Social Development, to speak with Ms. Audet. That was done, and we'll continue monitoring the file very closely.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Boissonnault

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Welcome, Minister, and congratulations once again on your appointment.

Minister, the action plan for official languages 2023-2028 contains four investment components for the next five years. Would you please tell us about the massive investments that the government plans to make in the official language minority communities?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'll give you the highlights, which are set out in annex 2 of the action plan. There's \$752.9 million for minority-language education and \$428 million in support for second-language learning.

As regards the new funding now in our system, I've already mentioned the \$50 million fund for the consolidated integration pathway for newcomers, another fund, \$147.8 million, to support minority-language education, and a third fund, \$65.8 million to support French-as-a-second-language learning.

The action plan also provides for a \$62.5 million increase for our community organizations on the ground. They've been urging us to grant more funding for years now to expand access for new groups.

The new action plan represents a total of \$1.4 billion of funding for all these great projects. So I tip my hat to all of you and to our government for improving this action plan and putting historic levels of funding on the table.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: These really are some very good figures, and I'm pleased with them.

Minister, would you please tell us where the situation stands regarding development of the regulations provided for in the act?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's a very good question.

Mr. Chair, please let me know how much time I have left.

Dear colleagues, I've learned a lot of things in this job, and I learn more every day. Considering everything you've put on the table, as minister, I have my work cut out for me to create regulations.

It's a five-step process. The first step is preconsultation with stakeholders to identify and draft regulatory options and hold information sessions. The second step is holding consultations on the proposed regulations. The third step is tabling a draft bill in the House of Commons and publishing it in the Canada Gazette. The fourth step is drafting a memorandum to cabinet to obtain support for the final regulations, which will come into force following ministerial approval and the signing of an order. The fifth step is to coordinate with Quebec and see if provincial rules and the Charter of the French Language apply.

We've started working on all the regulations, and I'm eagerly awaiting the Commissioner of Official Languages' contribution because I need to look at the fines he's responsible for. That work has already started.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: That explains why you said earlier that you couldn't set a date because there are several steps and stakeholders involved.

Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

The Chair: Thank you for being so disciplined.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have two and a half minutes.

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

I would like to pick up where I left off.

Mr. Minister, 40% of \$150 million over five years is about \$11 million or 7.5%, if no other money is allocated for French. Will there be more money for French in Quebec?

• (1745)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Funding for French in Quebec calls for a broader conversation with the Government of Canada. I've already initiated a conversation with Minister Roberge. I've also talked to Minister Girard, who is responsible for anglophone communities in Quebec and is very pleased that over \$40 million of the \$137-million investment is allocated for French language training so more people can access the labour market.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That money is being distributed over five years, but we don't know where the \$150 million annual budget is going.

I've often asked people at Canadian Heritage about this, but they hardly ever give us answers. Are we going to be told what that money is for?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Of course. I have that information here as an appendix to the public documents. Please feel free to have a look.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

Do you think Quebec's plan to integrate and francise 90% of new immigrants to maintain its demographic weight is legitimate?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: The province of Quebec has every right to francise newcomers. I shared a good story about that with you. I think it's entirely legitimate in Quebec's case. In order for newcomers to function well in Quebec, they have to be able to speak French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Based on its new prospective application indicator and first official language spoken numbers, the federal government says it has to offer services in English to 33% of immigrants in Quebec. Prospective applications could push that proportion up to 40%. However, we want to make French the common language, and we have to francise 90% of newcomers if we want to maintain our demographic weight. That means there's a problem.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: You know Quebec has exclusive responsibility for immigration in Quebec, period.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Let's go back to Manitoba.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The action plan was announced last spring. However, no date has been set for the money to flow, and organizations have received no additional funding. Will the money be distributed in early 2024?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Money will definitely be distributed in 2024, but it would be a bit ambitious to expect that to happen early in the year.

What I can say is that we have an action plan and a budget we have to present to Treasury Board. Then we have to flesh out the plan and launch an RFP. All that takes months, not weeks. I've already asked Acadian communities, francophone communities, and anglophone communities in Quebec to be very patient about this issue, which is a big concern for me. I know how badly community organizations need money.

The bigger agreements on education and services to official language minority communities will take longer because I have to engage in bilateral negotiations with each province and territory not once, but twice. That process is already under way.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Under the new act, you have until June 2024 to adopt a francophone immigration policy that will restore and grow the demographic weight of the francophonie outside Quebec.

When will your government make that policy public?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's a shared responsibility with Minister Miller. Regarding immigration targets and the govern-

ment's plan to restore the demographic weight of francophones across the country, we expect that to happen next week.

Regarding what you mentioned, we're going to do that work in accordance with the timeline laid out in the Act.

Ms. Niki Ashton: To another point, how is Canadian Heritage planning to mitigate the impact of releasing funds when it's so close to the fiscal year end on March 31?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's going to take a lot of work, and I'll be pushing the department to get it done.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Back to Alberta.

Mrs. Goodridge, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Canadian Heritage is responsible for Radio-Canada, but would you be able to comment on the decision to award a contract to a Parisian studio instead of a Canadian one?

● (1750)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I just want to say how wonderful it is to be in Parliament with you. In 2005 or 2006, we were in the same classroom. You were an amazing student. I was the lecturer. We would never have believed you would end up here.

I'll say it: The answer is that Radio-Canada made a huge mistake. That is Minister St-Onge's responsibility. I encourage you to discuss this with the CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada because I think she'll be coming here. That was inexcusable.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you for that. I was indeed a student in 2005.

You said your work is more like being a conductor than the lead minister on this file. The fact that there isn't one single person to talk to, but 50 different ministers people have to talk to when there's a problem, that's a concern for official language minority communities.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That question resonates with me.

You know, when I was parliamentary secretary, all the power related to official languages was concentrated in Ms. Joly's hands as Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister of Official Languages. At that time, ministers said that any official language issue had to go to Minister Joly. Then everyone realized that all ministers had to take responsibility for their obligations under the Act.

You gave the responsibility for implementing this excellent bill, which is now law, to the offices of Ms. Anand, President of the Treasury Board. That's a central agency. You succeeded. We succeeded. I think we'll see major gains. The new implementation centre planned for the Treasury Board will make the job easier.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: I don't have much time.

[English]

Effectively, part VIII of the act only gives authority to the Treasury Board over certain parts of the act—parts IV, V and VI and subsection 41(5) of part VII. It does not completely concentrate it to the Treasury Board.

This is a space where, frankly, it is not the golden goose that you claim it is. This is not what we were asking for.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I think many people in this room voted for the motion. I haven't checked the voting record, but I know that the law passed Parliament. There was robust conversation over the course of the year.

I remember when I was the parliamentary secretary.

[Translation]

It was a heartfelt plea from francophone communities that wanted those powers concentrated within a central agency, be it PCO, Treasury Board or some other central agency.

[English]

That would never work. So you landed in a great place.

I am always, and the future ministers of official languages are always, going to make sure that every single one of our ministerial colleagues is responsible for respecting the act and the law and for making sure that all minority communities have access to the rights and benefits that come from the great action plan we put in place.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Effectively, you're saying that we should continue to invite every single minister from all across government to come to this committee, because every single one is responsible for official languages when it comes to their file, and not you.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: You are completely right. Every minister is responsible for official languages in their ministry,

[Translation]

and there's the President of the Treasury Board.

[English]

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you. That's wonderful. It's good to know. Sometimes we have some consternation on this committee from members of the Liberal Party who are concerned about us inviting different ministers from every single different department, but here you're telling us that clearly we need to be inviting every minister to come. Every single minister is responsible for this, not just one.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I think you might run out of time with studies if you invite every minister, but know that every minister has a responsibility to implement the act. The minister responsible for making sure that part VII is implemented across government, with the implementation of the act, is the President of the Treasury Board.

[Translation]

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: We now know what happened at the RCMP with respect to bilingualism. Can you comment on that?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Bilingual positions must be filled by bilingual staff.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boissonnault. You finished your response just in time.

Mr. Serré, you have five minutes. We're going to hear from Ontario.

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

I'm very proud of the work the committee did on Bill C-13. Every political party, 300 parliamentarians and everyone here in this room voted in favour of this bill. We have seven provinces represented today.

I wouldn't be a member of Parliament if not for official languages. My father was here in 1969. He voted for the first version of the Official Languages Act. It's definitely very important.

Mr. Minister, let's talk a bit about education. As you know, things are tough, especially for francophone universities in minority communities. They are in danger.

There are two things to consider here. The first is the action plan and how we are going to tackle the situation. The second is related to the fact that, as you know, on June 30, Ontario's Conservative government flatly rejected the University of Sudbury's proposal to add courses in French “by and for” francophones, a proposal the federal government supported.

I would like to hear your opinion on that. We know it's under provincial jurisdiction, but seeing as we're all here, I'd like to know what you think.

• (1755)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Thank you very much, Mr. Serré.

Thank you for the great work you did as parliamentary secretary to Ms. Petitpas Taylor, and thank you for remaining in office.

With respect to universities, for both capital investments and operating costs, it's important to establish partnerships with the provinces. This is within their jurisdiction.

Back when Premier Kenney was making drastic cuts, slashing the University of Alberta's budget by 40% without even touching the University of Calgary's budget, we launched the “Sauvons Saint-Jean” campaign. We felt really threatened by that. It would have been a real blow to lose Campus Saint-Jean. Federal funding for Campus Saint-Jean is part of that.

In Ontario, I met with the Treasury Board president, Minister Mulroney, to discuss the issue. She is also my official languages counterpart and knew exactly what I meant when I told her that we were involved in the University of Sudbury file but that her government had to take the lead on it. She is well aware of that. We also talked about the Université de l'Ontario français and the fact the province has to take the lead on that file. We went through a difficult time during the pandemic, but I am hopeful the university will work out.

It's important to see bilingual and francophone institutions like Collège Mathieu, Campus Saint-Jean and wonderful examples of everything we're talking about in the Atlantic provinces and Acadia thrive all across the country.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you very much.

I'd like to ask a second question about the Canadian francophonie, the rural factor and the importance of the action plan, which has been approved and has \$1.1 billion in additional funds. We held consultations with the three territories and 10 provinces last year. How will the action plan, whose budget has doubled since 2015, help the economic situation of francophones in rural communities in western Canada, northern Ontario and the Atlantic provinces?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's very interesting. The answer has to do with the middle class, with every aspect of immigration all over the country and with the fact that we have a mobile workforce.

People settle in big cities, but they also settle in small communities. What we're seeing is that the francophonie outside Quebec is thriving in small and medium-sized communities. The provinces have to offer services in French where there is a significant population. I am responsible for implementing that regulation.

Here's an example. We just announced some very promising projects to be administered by the Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta and the Saskatchewan and Manitoba development agencies in both cities and smaller communities to support and promote the work of "francopreneurs", francophone entrepreneurs.

I want to see that work continue with the help of organizations like those ones and other economic development agencies from coast to coast to coast.

Mr. Marc Serré: Mr. Minister, we've heard from indigenous communities that there are 70 distinct indigenous languages in Canada. Can you tell us about discussions taking place about indigenous languages and official languages, as well as support for both?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'll start by saying in Cree:

[Member spoke in Cree]

[Translation]

That means, "Hello, you are all welcome." My Cree name means "strong eagle man", and I say this because I can be francophone, I can be Albertan, and I can be proud of our official languages and the progress we've made in preserving indigenous languages. Indigenous peoples also want the "by and for" principle to apply to them, and I see linguistic duality as the foundation of that, just like the preservation of the important heritage represented by the languages of indigenous peoples. That is also important to who we are as Canadians.

• (1800)

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

That's all the time we have for this meeting. Mr. Minister, Ms. Boyer and Ms. Mondou, thank you for participating.

Mr. Boissonnault, I want to thank you on behalf of the committee, not just because you're the Minister of Official Languages but because we can definitely tell that you're passionate about official languages. Thank you so much for participating and for giving such straightforward and specific answers.

We will continue in camera. The sitting is suspended.

[The committee continued in camera]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>