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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (0920)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): The meeting is now public.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on January 29, 2024, the committee is meeting to begin its study on the language obligations related to the process of staffing or making appointments to key positions.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who we are honoured to have with us this morning.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, you are in a rush. You don't even have a clerk.

The Chair: We welcome Mr. Raymond Thériège, Commissioner of Official Languages. With him is Mr. Pierre Leduc, assistant commissioner, strategic orientation and external relations branch, and for the first time, Mr. Patrick Wolfe, assistant commissioner, compliance and enforcement branch.

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for being here.

This meeting will allow us to conduct the study requested by the Commissioner, but perhaps he can give us some more tips or direct us to help us conduct it more effectively.

As you know, Commissioner, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. I am very strict with the time and will crack the whip to give all the political parties more time to ask questions and get some answers, in a give-and-take process.

You have the floor, Mr. Thériège.

Mr. Raymond Thériège (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, honourable members of the committee.

I'd like to acknowledge that the lands on which we are gathered are part of the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, an indigenous people of the Ottawa Valley.

As you may know, in 2021-2022, following a record number of complaints filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, I recommended that a study be conducted on language obligations related to the staffing of senior management positions in the federal public service and Governor-in-Council appointments. The idea behind this recommendation was to determine whether knowledge of both official languages should be a requirement when hiring for these types of positions. The study you are

undertaking is in response to this recommendation, and I'd like to thank you for it.

[*English*]

I've said it many times in the past, that being able to speak both official languages is, in my view, an essential skill for any leader, especially those in federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act.

The bilingual nature of an organization depends, in large part, on the bilingualism of those occupying positions at the highest levels. They need to lead by example and must be able to represent all their employees and Canadians in both official languages.

I therefore believe that proficiency in both official languages must become a hiring criterion for senior management positions in the public service and for Governor in Council appointments.

I am pleased with the amendments made by your committee last spring to Bill C-13, particularly with regard to the language training required to ensure the bilingual capacity of deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers who are newly appointed to the federal public service, if they are not bilingual at the time of their appointment.

[*Translation*]

It will be interesting to see the impact of this change on the public service over the next few years. That said, the job is only half done. In the absence of clear policies and guidelines, how can we ensure that this change will be implemented, measured and adjusted as necessary? What measures will be put in place to support incumbents when they return from language training to enable them to carry out their responsibilities effectively in both official languages? What will happen in cases where senior civil servants are still unable to master their second official language?

I also question the absence of bilingualism in the list of essential criteria for Governor-in-Council appointments. As you may know, in recent years, a number of appointments have raised eyebrows among Canadians because no bilingualism criteria were required as part of the nomination process. This has led to a significant number of complaints to my office.

● (0925)

[English]

We should be looking at all senior management positions and institutions subject to the Official Languages Act to ensure that a command of both official languages is part of the requirements of these positions.

Moreover, the act did not address current senior public servants at the time of royal assent. However, the legislators' intention behind the addition for newly appointed deputy ministers should shine through to all senior management.

In my opinion, any leader in the federal public service must be able to express himself or herself in both official languages and understand anyone who speaks English or French, in order to promote the use of both official languages and encourage linguistic security in the workplace in the federal public service. This also gives a voice to the issues on the table.

Senior management must lead by example and send a clear signal that both English and French have a prominent and equal place in the federal public service, so that public servants can flourish in both official languages. It is high time that we acted.

[Translation]

I'm confident that your study will shed light on the hiring criteria for senior public service positions and that it will help government decision-makers take a closer look.

Thank you for your attention. I'm happy to answer your questions in the official language of your choice.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

As you know, there will be rounds of questions and answers. In the first round, each political party will have the floor for six minutes.

Before we begin, I would like to salute the new members of the committee: Ms. Kusie from the Conservative Party has returned, and we have Ms. Koutrakis from the Liberals. We are very pleased to have them on the committee.

To begin the first round of questions, Mr. Joël Godin, the first vice-chair of the committee, has the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner. We would have liked to meet with you at 8:15 this morning, but it was cold and I understand that it may be more difficult for you to be here at that time. We parliamentarians were here and we were awake.

I would like to hear your thoughts on the fact that, although the new Official Languages Act received royal assent in June 2023, you still do not have the tools you need to impose administrative monetary penalties. Those penalties are set out in the act, but first the government has to issue an order. Do you have any information about when it will give you the tools to do your job more effectively?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: I have not been given a firm date as to when the order that will bring the act into force will be issued.

Mr. Joël Godin: Is that an important tool for you to perform your role more effectively?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Yes, I think it is an essential tool, especially since the act will apply to the transportation sector and the travelling public, areas that have been the source of many complaints received by my office for a considerable number of years.

Mr. Joël Godin: You say it is essential, but the government is dragging its feet on the order. I have a very simple question for you. Who in cabinet has to table the order?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: That's a good question: Is the Minister of Official Languages or the president of the Treasury Board responsible for the order? That is not clear to me.

Mr. Joël Godin: What you are saying is music to my ears because we introduced an amendment to make the Treasury Board responsible for the act. Unfortunately, the government did not agree to our amendment.

So can you tell me whether the current government is upholding the spirit of the Official Languages Act as to the appointment of senior officials by the Privy Council?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Since Bill C-13 was just passed last June, I could not say whether the most recent appointments are in compliance with the act. They should be in compliance. I am not aware of recent appointments though, so I cannot say whether they uphold the act or not.

Some aspects of the act will come into force in June 2025, including the requirement that all public servants have the right to be supervised and to work in their preferred official language in any region designated bilingual for language of work.

● (0930)

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm sure you saw the Radio-Canada report to the effect that the senior public service does not represent both official languages equally, with 50% francophones and 50% anglophones. Can that be remedied by the act? Will the act require the government to appoint bilingual people from now on?

I am referring also to the Governor General, who is bilingual but does not speak French, and to the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, the only bilingual province in Canada, who is a unilingual anglophone. Will the act require the government to comply with and uphold French-English bilingualism in Canada?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: The act does not apply to the appointment of the Governor General of Canada or the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick. So the simple answer to your question is no.

Mr. Joël Godin: You can appreciate that the Prime Minister of Canada has a legal obligation, but he should also have a moral obligation and should lead by example. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I said, it is important for all senior federal leaders to be able to communicate in Canada's two official languages and for Canadians to be heard in both official languages.

The new Official Languages Act based on Bill C-13 does not address the examples you mentioned. Two other bills, Bill S-220 and Bill S-229 do currently address those possibilities—

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Both of those bills are Senate bills.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: —but they have not been studied yet.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Does the new Official Languages Act have enough teeth, as the former Minister of Official Languages said at the time, to give us hope for the future and that senior officials will be bilingual?

The Chair: Please answer in less than 30 seconds.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: If section 34 regarding deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers is properly implemented, the answer is yes. Yet there are many issues involving the implementation of that section of the act.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: So it is not complete and not clear, from what I understand.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's right.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you, Commissioner.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin and Mr. Th  berge.

I will be strict with your speaking time so we can have a second round of questions.

The next questions will be from Mr. Drouin and Mr. Samson, who will share six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

So we will have two rounds in the end? If so, we will not have to share our speaking time.

The Chair: There might be a second round, but it will be short.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay, we will share our speaking time then.

The Chair: Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here with us, Commissioner. In the interest of transparency, I have to say that I know one of your assistant commissioners very well. He is a good person and I want to say hello to him. I do not know the other assistant commissioner as well.

You sent a letter to the committee asking us to study bilingualism in the senior ranks of the public service, which is in fact why you are here today.

I remember how things were 10 or 15 years ago, and I think you referred to it: when a senior official was hired, they were sent for French training. Who is responsible for confirming that the official is truly bilingual after completing that training? Is there any follow-up in the senior public service, in your experience, or rather was the

person sent for training and there was no follow-up once they came back?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: When a person is sent for language training, for various positions they have to reach a certain level and take tests to prove that they have reached a certain level in oral expression, written expression and comprehension.

Are senior officials subject to the same tests? In some cases, they certainly would be. Yet the new approach in the act does not say much about that.

• (0935)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I support the principle for Governor-in-Council appointments and the level of bilingualism required in such cases.

On the other hand, what can be done to ensure that unilingual francophones, who might be very good people, can also have access to those positions, especially considering that certain appointments are for a specific region or for an organization that focuses on certain criteria in certain regions?

Perhaps we will invite you back later on if we undertake that study, but as to unilingual francophones, I know some in Eastern Ontario who do not speak a word of English. I'm sure it's the same in both western Canada, where some people do not speak French, and in Quebec, where some people don't speak English.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: You have to remember that, wherever you are in Canada now, there is diversity. That diversity includes both official languages. There is a short-term approach and a long-term approach. The long-term approach is to have programs that give students access to second-language training. In the short term, we can offer training to candidates.

I remember Mr. Michael Ferguson, a former Auditor General. He did not speak French when he was appointed, but he learned to speak it very well after taking training.

The conditions have to be created so those people can apply as candidates. If it is not clear that there are opportunities to become bilingual, that means that it might not be as important as it should be. The act has been in effect for more than 50 years, and we are still asking the same questions. How can that be after so many years?

Mr. Darrell Samson: Mr. Chair, I have two minutes left, is that right?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half, Mr. Samson, but you will have a full five minutes in the second round of questions.

So you may continue if you wish, Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Great, thank you.

In its study, what parameters do you think the committee should use in examining this issue?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: First, you have to really understand how things are now. There are hundreds of appointments. To what extent was bilingualism a definite or important asset? What is the rate of those appointments?

It would also be helpful to identify the trends in those appointments over a certain period. Radio-Canada reported recently that the number of francophones appointed dropped last year. Was that an anomaly? As Mr. Bernard Derome wondered, is it a trend that might continue?

If there is a declining trend, it needs to be corrected. First you will need the numbers, the data and the statistics. You will also have to consider who is responsible for managing those appointments, specifically the secretariat responsible for senior officials.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Mr. Drouin.

The next questions will be from the second vice-chair of the committee, who represents the Bloc Qu  b  cois.

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

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

Commissioner, I would like to hear about how things are now, particularly at the RCMP, and the appointment of high-ranking unilingual officers to supposedly bilingual positions.

The RCMP commissioner admitted to the committee that there are no French-essential positions in Quebec, and said that even he did not understand why there are unilingual English positions elsewhere in Canada, but no French-essential positions in Quebec.

• (0940)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The situation at the RCMP is worrisome, especially in senior management. There are training programs, but for operational reasons management is unable to let people take them. Saying it is not possible for operational reasons is a ready excuse.

For a long time, the RCMP has had trouble living up to its official languages obligations in terms of communicating with the public and employee training. In my opinion, it is a question of organizational culture. I will soon be meeting with the commissioner to ask why it is taking so long for the RCMP to live up to its obligations.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The situation seems to have deteriorated, because there isn't even any training in French any more. Training is offered in English only or in a bilingual format, but we know that when training is bilingual, it favours English, in general.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Still, there's an interesting situation I'd like to point out. Many young cadets don't speak English when they go to Depot Division, which is the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Academy based in Regina. The RCMP does a lot of work in western Canada and the Maritimes. In the west, they very often work in English, so they have to give training to these young cadets from Quebec.

However, most of the complaints we receive afterwards don't concern English training, but rather French training, obviously. It's a situation that's been going on for a long time.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Earlier, you said you didn't want to comment on whether the government respects the spirit of the new Official Languages Act resulting from Bill C-13.

Recently, we've seen that the percentage of francophones appointed to key positions, that is to say federal political appointments, has dropped to an unprecedented level, from 24% to 21%. This aspect touches tangentially on what you're saying about bilingual positions. It seems to me that we don't see any political will to improve the situation since the situation started deteriorating.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: This is a percentage that concerns me. As I said earlier, you have to ask yourself whether this is an anomaly or whether it's a downward trend that's going to continue. When you see something like that, you have to react immediately. For example, this year, the number of appointments is not up to the mark. So we have to ask ourselves whether this trend is set to continue. I'm repeating myself, but, if it is a trend, it's very worrying.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Another factor concerns Quebec. I'm told that the federal government admits it has a responsibility to defend and promote French in Quebec as well. Yet we heard from the Public Service Alliance of Canada's regional executive vice-president for the Quebec region, who told us that there is indeed systemic discrimination in federal institutions in Quebec, namely the assumption that everything happens in English first. We've had many examples of federal institutions operating essentially in English, including the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency. There has even been one case where a lawyer was refused permission to plead in French.

Do you see any solutions on the horizon to improve the situation in Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The objective of the new act is the protection and promotion of French, not only in Quebec, but across Canada. We recognize that the French language is a minority language in Canada and North America.

That said, we're still in the very early stages of implementing the new act. However, if we look at the 2021 figures for the French-speaking population, I think it's important for the government to take action to support French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In your opinion, is there a solution on the horizon to improve the prevalence of French in federal institutions in Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: For the time being, no.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That is a very disturbing observation.

You said earlier that in the absence of clear guidelines for positions, you don't see any change on the horizon. What would clear guidelines to improve the situation look like?

• (0945)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I've talked a lot about the appointment of deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers. Indeed, there should not be a directive, but a much more prescriptive instrument. For example, if a person appointed to a senior management position does not master the second language, they must undergo training and reach a certain level of competence, which is measured. During their absence, it is important for the administration to ensure that their duties are carried out by someone who is bilingual, since the position is bilingual. Afterwards, there is also a follow-up in terms of—

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner. You'll have another chance to speak later, but I want us to have a second round of questions.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: What the Commissioner has to say is interesting.

The Chair: I know, it is interesting, but I have to give everyone the same chance to speak.

We turn it over to Ms. Ashton of the NDP, who is speaking to us from her beautiful region of northern Manitoba.

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

Commissioner, welcome once again to our committee.

In your 2022-2023 Annual Report, you recommended that the President of the Treasury Board, the Minister for Official Languages and the Clerk of the Privy Council “measure the actual capacity of federal public servants to work in the official language of their choice in regions designated bilingual for language-of-work purposes.” How do you think ministers should go about implementing your recommendations?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Up until 2017-18, I think, there were questions in the federal public servant questionnaire about the use of official languages, including one in particular about the use of official languages in writing in their work. That question was removed from the survey. As a result, it's difficult for us to obtain data on the extent to which bilingualism is alive and well in the federal government, the extent to which English-speaking or French-speaking public servants can use the language of their choice, or the extent to which they are supervised in French. We don't have data on this, and unfortunately, without it, it's hard to take a position one way or the other.

If memory serves, the last time we had data, 62% of public servants said they were able to write in French, while 93% of anglophones were able to write in English. So we could already see that people did not necessarily find it as easy to use the language of their choice. In terms of supervision, it's the same thing, but we don't have much data, unless I'm mistaken.

What's important is that the public service, through the Treasury Board or some other agency, gives itself tools to measure the use of both official languages in the workplace.

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right. Thank you very much. It is worrying that this form of data collection is no longer there.

I'd like to ask you another question. Your report states that from April 1, 2022, to March 31, 2023, some 714 complaints were received about public institutions allegedly failing to establish the language profiles of certain positions objectively. This number is three times higher than it was last year. Why is the government unable to solve this problem? What do you think should be done?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: This is what we call the problem with section 91 of the Official Languages Act, which says that every position must be evaluated on the basis of the language requirements needed to do the job. This section has always been poorly understood by managers, which has led to a systemic problem. Whether we receive 300, 600 or 1,000 complaints about this section, it's a systemic problem throughout the federal government. Every time we have a position to fill, it's extremely important to analyze its language requirements.

We published a report in 2020. We're currently in the follow-up phase of our recommendations, which means I can't necessarily tell you what the results are. I would, however, like to see changes in the way section 91 is applied in the public service. First, all managers should be educated on the use of this section, which, by the way, does not apply to positions filled by Governor in Council appointments.

This would be fundamental to building a bilingual capacity that would not only deliver services, but also ensure that anyone is able to work in the official language of their choice within the federal apparatus.

• (0950)

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right. Thank you.

In your Annual Report 2022-2023, you recommended that the sitting president of Treasury Board implement her three-year action plan to ensure that federal institutions comply with section 91 of the Official Languages Act by June 2025, at the latest.

Do you think the current President of Treasury Board will implement it by then? What would be your message regarding the timeline you're aiming for?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The year 2025 is fast approaching.

I can say that there is currently a task force within the government working on this issue, precisely to move things forward. Will they meet the deadline? I don't know, but there's work going on right now as a result of our recommendation and our special report.

The Chair: You have just under 30 seconds of speaking time left, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you. Will we have another two-and-a-half-minute round of questions, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right. I'll ask my question then.

Thank you very much, Commissioner.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We'll now begin a second, disciplined round of questions. Conservatives Ms. Kusie and Mr. Godin will share the next five minutes.

You have the floor, Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be sharing this question period with Mr. Godin. I'm going to ask my questions for the first four minutes. Then I'll give the floor to Mr. Godin.

Thank you again for the warm welcome. This is my second time on the committee. It's true that it takes a lot of courage to learn a second language. Even if I make mistakes, I still speak it.

I'm here as the member of Parliament for Calgary Midnapore, but also as the Official Opposition critic for Treasury Board. So I'll continue with some of the questions Ms. Ashton asked.

Mr. Th  berge, several departments are responsible for official languages: Canadian Heritage, Treasury Board, the Department of Justice and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, not to mention your office. Do you think it would be better to centralize power at Treasury Board to improve enforcement of the act?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The bill that has been passed, Bill C-13, does indeed give new obligations to Treasury Board. In particular, it is responsible for the governance of the act, i.e., its implementation. In my opinion, this implies that Treasury Board must provide direction to the federal government on the implementation of the act. Canadian Heritage also has a role to play, especially with regard to part VII. However, in terms of governance, it is extremely important, in my opinion, that there be a single conductor, not several. Nor should we forget the Action Plan for Official Languages 2023-2028: protection-promotion-collaboration. We need to ensure good governance of the action plan.

So, what are needed are clear, even prescriptive, directives from Treasury Board for the implementation of the act. In addition, it's important to remember that, in promoting compliance, we mustn't overlook the fact that for 50 years we've had a law that was difficult to enforce due to lack of understanding. Now we have a new one, with new obligations. It's extremely important that this law be well understood by the federal apparatus and Treasury Board has an important role to play in this regard.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: So it seems obvious to me that it would be much better to have centralized power.

• (0955)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Yes. I'll use the analogy of the conductor. Different departments have responsibilities, such as Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and Canadian Heritage, and the action plan must also be implemented. However, for the entire federal apparatus, it's important that there be a body responsible for implementation and governance.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Are you worried about the future of the French language in Canada?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: If you look at the statistics from 2001 to 2021, it's clear that the proportion of francophones is declining in Canada, and even in Quebec. I think that from 2001 to 2021, the

proportion of francophones across the country fell by 23%, especially outside Quebec. We've found ways to counter this decline somewhat, but yes, I worry about the vitality of francophone communities outside Quebec.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much. I yield the floor to Mr. Godin, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have 45 seconds.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, I'm going to ask my questions in quick succession. First, do you believe that the Minister of Canadian Heritage should testify before the Standing Committee on Official Languages, given that her department has a role to play under the act?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Which minister are you talking about?

Mr. Jo  l Godin: I'm talking about the Minister of Canadian Heritage. Should she testify here? Yes or no?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I don't see why she shouldn't.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: My second question is: is it possible for you to provide us with the list of suggested witnesses for the study you recommend?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Yes, we can send you this list.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, before we go any further, I'd like to advise you that I have a motion to table. So, I'd like you to stop the clock.

My apologies, Commissioner.

The Chair: Go ahead, there are five seconds left.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: At this point, I still have the right to table it. So, thank you, Chair.

You know the process, Commissioner. We're going to interrupt questioning because I have a motion to table, which is as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f), the committee undertake a study on the continuum in education, from early childhood to post-secondary, in official language minority communities.

I'd like to take this opportunity to greet two organizations, the Soci  t   de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, represented in the room by Ms. Arseneau Sluyter, and the F  d  ration des communaut  s francophones et acadienne du Canada, represented in the room by Mr. Fournier. It is at the request of these organizations that we wish to conduct this study.

That, in the context of this study, the committee :

(a) Study access to early learning and child care services in the minority language in Canada, including the quality of child care services and their impact on the linguistic and social development of children;

(b) Examine the funding, including through the Official Languages in Education Program, for elementary and secondary schools in the minority language in Canada;

(c) Examine federal funding for post-secondary institutions serving official language minority communities in Canada;

(d) Assess the federal government's capacity to gather data on the education continuum, including data on rights holders;

(e) Evaluate the impact of the education continuum on the implementation of the right to education in the minority language enshrined in article 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

That, in the context of this study, the committee invite, among others:

i) The Minister of Official Languages and the Minister of Canadian Heritage;

ii) The Commissioner of Official Languages;

iii) Officials from the Department of Canadian Heritage;

iv) The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadiennes, the Commission nationale des parents francophones, the Fédération nationale des conseils scolaires francophones, the Association des collèges et universités de la francophonie canadienne and the Quebec Community Groups Network;

v) Representatives from advocacy organizations in each province and territory where French is the official minority language;

vi) Representatives from school boards or provincial education associations in each province and territory where French is the minority language;

vii) Representatives from the ministries of Education in each province and territory where French is the minority language;

viii) Representatives from post-secondary institutions serving official language minorities in each province and territory;

ix) Experts from all areas of the education continuum in the minority language.

That the committee allocate a minimum of twelve meetings to this study; that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request a comprehensive response from the government.

You will understand, Mr. Chair, that this study is important. It stems from a request from, I would say, a hundred or so organizations that defend official language minority communities. Of course, the focus is more on francophones, as the Commissioner mentioned earlier. In my opinion, it's important to ensure the continued presence of French-English bilingualism in Canada, and that means education. From early childhood, we need to give our young people access to the extraordinary French language, and then ensure that they can maintain this link throughout their educational path to post-secondary education.

I ask the committee to proceed with this study as soon as possible. Obviously, we will prioritize the Commissioner's request for a two-meeting study. However, I would like this notice of motion to be accepted by the entire committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1000)

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, you may speak to the motion.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: This motion would require the unanimous consent of committee members, because we've already voted on and approved a study on post-secondary institutions, where there are dire needs, in my opinion. We already started a study on this subject, but we didn't finish it, and I'm in favour of carrying on with it. If we want to put another proposal forward after that to look at

all other educational institutions, I'll support that, but let's start with the study we've already voted on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

To put this in context, it's true that the committee adopted a motion to conduct the study Mr. Beaulieu is talking about. Not proceeding with that requires committee members' unanimous consent because the motion has already been adopted.

Mr. Serré, you have the floor.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We agree that Mr. Godin's proposal is important, but we want to propose amendments to his motion. In response to Mr. Beaulieu's comments, we've already started the next study.

However, the Commissioner doesn't come to the committee often, and I know he would like to come more often. Can we at least continue our discussions with him and talk about Mr. Godin's motion at the next meeting? The Commissioner is here, and time is of the essence. We want to ask him questions. Can the discussion on the motion wait? Otherwise, the committee could spend the next 30 minutes talking about this motion, and we really want to talk to the Commissioner.

The Chair: I still want to hear from Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I think Mr. Godin's motion is a good idea, but we have a few small amendments to make. They won't change the essence of the motion, but they will broaden the scope of the study. We'll send the amendments to the clerk.

I'd like to keep going with the Commissioner because we have another question for him that I think is important. If we can postpone the discussion about amendments to Mr. Godin's motion to the next meeting, that would be ideal.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Mr. Godin, over to you.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, there's one thing we have to deal with first. We're reaching out to the Bloc Québécois because we need unanimous consent to replace the study on post-secondary education that we adopted with the study proposed in my motion, which incorporates that first study.

Otherwise, I agree with Ms. Ashton and Mr. Serré on postponing the discussion to the next meeting. However, that meeting is supposed to be about the study of the subject the Commissioner is discussing with us today.

The Chair: The next meeting will be on Monday, March 18, after the parliamentary recess. We don't have any witnesses lined up yet.

Mr. Joël Godin: We need the committee's unanimous consent before proceeding.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, are you saying you want to go in camera?

Mr. Darrell Samson: No. I'm saying we can deal with this in camera at the next meeting.

Let's continue the meeting with the commissioner.

The Chair: To clarify, unanimous consent is required to cancel the study requested by Mr. Beaulieu and has nothing to do with Mr. Godin's motion. Mr. Godin's motion would encroach to some extent on Mr. Beaulieu's motion, which has already been unanimously adopted by the committee.

Mr. Godin, you're asking if Mr. Beaulieu wants to cancel—

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, my question is very clear. Do we have committee members' unanimous consent to cancel Mr. Beaulieu's study on post-secondary education and incorporate that topic into the study proposed in my motion?

If so, we can postpone any discussion on the amendments to my motion to the next meeting. If not, we'll continue the meeting with the Commissioner.

• (1005)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Beaulieu, it's up to you.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I've said it before, and I'll say it again: there is no unanimous consent.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's that.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have five seconds left.

Mr. Joël Godin: Commissioner, you're always welcome at the committee. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, thank you very much for being here with us today with your team. As you know, your role is very important, not only to the machinery of government, but also to the committee. That's why we always appreciate your opinions and advice.

I'll start with a sentence from your letter: "Leaders must lead by example". I think this sentence is very important because it contextualizes the situation in which we find ourselves. When I read that bit, I immediately thought of Mr. Rousseau and Air Canada, and it really pained me, because he was not someone who led wisely, in my opinion. That was very obvious. I'm very proud of our government for being able to react quickly, not stand for that and say that changes had to be made.

Back to my questions. There are three things I'm very interested in: deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers who have already been appointed, new ones, and those awaiting appointment. I'm going to ask you a number of questions, and you can address them in any order you wish.

What do we do about deputy ministers and associate deputy ministers who are already on the job but don't meet the bilingualism re-

quirements? Should they be assigned to departments that are less involved in the application of the Official Languages Act? Under Bill C-13, the new Official Languages Act, I find it unacceptable that these people can continue to hold such positions. What is your opinion on that?

Mr. Raymond Thériège: The new act is more about the future than the present situation. Anyone currently in a position is protected, and I don't really see how their employment conditions could be changed. Instead, we have to make sure this doesn't happen in the future, because senior leaders play a significant role. If they don't speak both official languages, I guarantee that their employees will work in only one of the two official languages, not both.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Commissioner. If I were a minister, I would make appointments myself, but I accept the answer you gave the committee.

Now, let's talk about new hires. Sometimes we're told that a unilingual person was hired because nobody meeting the bilingualism requirements was found. That's what the RCMP folks said. To me, that's unacceptable. I told them that, if they can't find a bilingual person and have to hire a unilingual person in an emergency or for security reasons, the position should never be given to that person on a permanent basis. Instead, they should hold the position temporarily until the right person is found. Everyone must comply with the Official Languages Act, whether they agree with it or not.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: If the duties related to a position require bilingualism, the person occupying the position must be bilingual. If they do not meet that criterion, they have to go on training, and the person acting for them must be bilingual.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, exactly. However, the RCMP said those people aren't required to take courses, even after they're appointed. I would therefore encourage you to include this very important point in your report.

Now let's talk about the pool of executives awaiting appointment. In principle, the people in that pool meet the hiring criteria for senior management positions, including bilingualism. So how do people who don't meet that requirement end up in that pool? Are they in the wrong pool, like when I end up in the wrong track while I'm skiing? What's going on?

• (1010)

Mr. Raymond Thériège: All ADMs who are already in the pool of candidates within the federal government have achieved adequate bilingual proficiency. They already meet that criterion. However, people are often appointed from outside the federal government, from the private sector.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériège.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Organizations never really complied with the former act because political will was lacking. Do you think there's political will to enforce the new act? The government already seems to be doing the opposite.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I'm an optimist by nature; otherwise, I wouldn't be here. We have to give it a chance. The bill was passed less than a year ago. Things are happening right now. Implementing this new act is quite complex for the Office of the Commissioner and for other federal institutions. There is an enormous amount of work to be done within the federal government in terms of promotion and compliance.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We've been seeing fewer and fewer bilingual people—that is, people who speak French—getting political appointments. That doesn't bode well at all. Do you think you should be more assertive or do more to rectify the situation? You're working on it, but I get the impression that not much has changed in the past 50 years: The Commissioner of Official Languages complains, but not much changes.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Indeed, incrementalism is a very slow way to effect change.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Let me briefly go back to what the previous speaker was saying about the fact that senior officials, among others, have to be bilingual. Unilingual people are allowed to get training. Shouldn't that be done ahead of time?

As my colleague said, people shouldn't get these jobs until they've completed their training and passed their exam. Moreover, if there are no qualified candidates who are proficient in French, people should get training, and the exam results should be taken into account before the position is awarded.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, thank you for your comments, but your time is up.

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

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

Commissioner, I'd like to talk more about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. You talked about the organization's culture. When Commissioner Duheme appeared before our committee, he said, "we have struggled at times in ensuring our full compliance with the act".

We're concerned about that culture and the organization's capacity. We all remember the extreme weather events in the Atlantic region. Alerts did not go out on time in both official languages. As the minister acknowledged, there may be a lot of forest fires again this year.

The RCMP is not currently prepared to meet all of its obligations under the act. Sometimes it's a matter of life and death. Why do you think this cultural problem persists? What should the RCMP do to fix it?

• (1015)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: A few years ago, we published a report on official languages in emergency situations. We found that, in all cases, preparation was inadequate. In other words, the necessary mechanisms, structures and processes had not been put in place to respond quickly in both official languages at the same time. As you said, if an organization sends a message to one segment of the population in one language, but waits 20 or 30 minutes to send it in the other language, it may be too late for that segment of the population.

Something that really stood out in our study was that, even though this has been going on for 10 or 20 years, organizations were still using the excuse that it was an emergency situation. Emergency preparedness is a reality, though. I just don't understand how, after 20 years, organizations still don't get that they need a mechanism to respond to emergency situations and immediately send a message in both official languages, thereby reaching 98% of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Ms. Ashton.

Commissioner, as you know, the committee has invited you to appear as part of its study on language obligations related to the process of making appointments to key positions so that we can benefit from your knowledge. The committee has scheduled two meetings, and we would really appreciate it if you could send the clerk of the committee a list of witnesses the committee should invite. We usually have two one-hour blocks per meeting, and we invite two witnesses. It's not a rule, but it's the ideal. That means we would have a total of four blocks over two meetings. We'd appreciate if you could do that as soon as possible.

That concludes the public portion of our meeting. I would ask committee members to stay in the room and be patient, because we're going to go in camera for five minutes. That will save us from having to meet in camera during the parliamentary recess.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

The meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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