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Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Welcome to the third meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This morning, it is our pleasure to welcome the National Defence and Canadian Forces ombudsman, Mr. Yves Côté, and the director general of operations, Ms. Margaret Brandon. Thank you for having accepted the committee's invitation at such short notice.

As you are probably well aware, the committee proceeds as follows: witnesses have approximately 10 minutes to make their opening remarks, then the committee members have 7 minutes to ask questions, followed by further rounds of five-minute questions.

Mr. Côté, you have the floor.

Mr. Yves Côté (Ombudsman, Office of the Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman): I would like to begin by sincerely thanking the committee for inviting me to testify this morning on issues relating to the treatment of francophone recruits and students at Canadian Forces Base Borden, a large military training establishment north of Toronto, Ontario. As you already mentioned, Mr. Chairman, this morning I am accompanied by Ms. Margaret Brandon, the Director General of Operations in the Office of the Ombudsman.

Over the next few minutes, I will highlight some of the experiences that we have had with respect to the treatment of francophone recruits and students at Borden. In doing so, I will point to what I believe are very serious problems that go to the heart of fairness and the welfare of our Canadian Forces members—in this case, potentially hundreds of francophone members of our military.

I will also discuss the challenges that we have experienced in trying to get the senior military leadership to address, in a timely and tangible manner, the problems that we found in Borden. I can tell you that this has probably been the most frustrating case that I have experienced in my more than two years as military ombudsman.

When I travelled to Borden late last year as part of a routine outreach visit, I met with more than 40 francophone students who informed me of very serious difficulties they were experiencing in getting access to services and training in their first official language.

I will give you a few examples. Among other things, francophone students said to me they often received commands and instructions in English only, a language many did not understand. Also, I was told, it was not uncommon for francophone students to receive course assignments in English only, which they often did not understand and could not satisfactorily complete.

I was also told that francophone students being trained in vehicle maintenance were informed that a manual, which was available only in English, would not be translated. And the day before my visit, a career manager from Ottawa spoke only in English to a group of anglophone and francophone students, except for concluding his remarks by saying, and I quote: “Pour les francophones, c'est la même chose.”

As these examples show, there were very serious issues related to fundamental fairness, respect and the welfare of our newest Canadian Forces members.

[English]

Shortly after I returned to Ottawa, I wrote to the Chief of the Defence Staff to inform him of the problems I had encountered at Borden and to request immediate and longer-term action to ensure that francophone students were treated with respect and given every opportunity to succeed in their new careers.

In his response to our office, General Hillier committed to producing an official languages strategic plan with a number of medium- and long-term corrective measures to address the serious linguistic problems at Borden. In addition, we were told that a short-term action plan would be developed and that it would include additional funding and the immediate implementation of awareness education, the immediate introduction of a rapid feedback mechanism that would allow students to voice language concerns separate from the chain of command, and the immediate appointment of an official language champion from within the senior officer corps of CFB Borden.

It took some time for us to obtain a copy of this action plan. We finally received it in May. However, once we got it, we were generally satisfied with the proposed measures it contained. On the surface they appeared to be a good step in the right direction. After receiving a copy of the plan, I directed two of our investigators to conduct a follow-up examination at Borden to track anticipated progress and assess the results achieved for francophone students. They visited Borden in June.

Following surveys and town hall sessions with nearly 200 francophone students, our investigators found that the plan was in fact not being implemented as described to us, and that the situation was worse and more widespread than I had previously understood.

I was deeply disappointed to learn that, contrary to what I had been told, the vast majority of the short-term corrective actions that had been promised and that had been described as immediate and ongoing had not, indeed, been implemented at CFB Borden. By and large, francophone students remained unaware of their linguistic rights. Most of them did not know how or to whom to report problems and how to get effective help. Base services, including things such as medical care, were often provided in English to francophone students incapable of expressing their concerns in English.

In short, francophone recruits and students were experiencing unacceptable language barriers and felt isolated and alienated. It was also clear that their morale was suffering and that there was a serious risk that the professional development of these students was being hindered.

As this made it clear that no tangible action had been taken to address the very real problems at Borden, I formally requested the intervention of the previous Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Gordon O'Connor. I am pleased that following a meeting with him in July and thanks to the clear instructions given by the previous minister, it now appears that action is being taken to address the problems at Borden. Although I am encouraged by this, I remain disappointed in the length of time it took to begin addressing these fundamental fairness and welfare issues.

[Translation]

I should note that I have discussed this issue with Mr. Graham Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages, and we'll continue to keep him apprised of any developments in this matter. I also believe that Mr. Fraser may be undertaking a new initiative related to the issue of official languages in military schools and training establishments.

As far as next steps go, I remain committed to tracking the progress that is made at Borden to ensure that all Canadian Forces students are respected. I will review with great interest the report I have asked for from the chief of military personnel by early December. This will describe the results achieved on the ground at Borden. My investigators will again be travelling to Borden in early 2008 to assess the results that have been achieved.

And I intend to monitor very closely any linguistic challenges faced by other Canadian Forces members, English-speaking as well as French-speaking, during my future visits to our military bases, wings and schools across the country.

● (0910)

[English]

At this time, Mr. Chairman, we're ready to provide any assistance that we can to this committee.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Côté.

As I indicated earlier, we will now go to our first round of questioning, beginning with Mr. Mauril Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Good morning, Mr. Côté and Ms. Brandon. Thank you for being here this morning.

In order to establish a legal obligation framework, can you tell us what legal framework the Department of National Defence and its practices are subject to, at CFB Borden in particular?

Mr. Yves Côté: It is clear, Mr. Chairman, that the Canadian Forces as a whole, including those working at CFB Borden, are covered by the directives and practices contained in the Official Languages Act.

The mandate of the Office of the Canadian Forces Ombudsman does not deal specifically with official languages issues, but rather with issues relating to the well-being and fair and equitable treatment of Canadian Forces members. It is on that basis that we have taken an interest in what is happening at Borden, given the negative impact that these issues were having on recruits and young members of the Canadian Forces there.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Given DND's obligations, which also apply to CFB Borden, what exactly does the department need to provide to recruits who are there for their training?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, the work that we have done has not amounted to a strictly technical assessment of how the Official Languages Act has been implemented at Borden.

There are two or three extremely important points I would like to make. First, it seems absolutely clear to me that all Canadian Forces recruits, whether they are English-speaking or French-speaking, have the right to express themselves in the language they understand, in their first language learned, during their training. In the case of most people that we met at Borden, it is the only language that they understand and can use. They have the right to be answered in their language and, in particular, to feel that it is not a privilege, when they are asking to be served in their mother tongue. They are asking to be treated in a fair and equitable way, like any other Canadian citizen.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: In your opinion, that was not the case?

Mr. Yves Côté: In many examples contained in the correspondence that I sent to the Chief of Defence Staff, it really was not the case. I could mention one or two new examples that have not been given before.

This morning, I looked over the comments made by the recruits that we went back to see in June. Some of them mentioned that when they sent memos in French, for example, they were asked to take them back and translate them into English, or else the memo in French went to the bottom of the pile and no action was taken because the information was in French.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned that people who went to the medical clinic in Borden with health problems had to deal with service providers that could not interact with them because they did not understand French. This sort of thing has happened regularly at Borden.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: How did this come to your attention?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, as the ombudsman for the Canadian Forces, part of my work is to make periodic visits to armed forces bases and wings across the country, as well as in Afghanistan, which I had the pleasure of visiting about a year ago.

During my visits, I tried to meet with forces members of all ranks and all backgrounds. When I spoke in that context to a group of French-speaking recruits at Borden, some of them told me that they were having problems. I met with three groups of between 12 and 15 people, for a total of about 40 people, and I asked them to explain what their daily life was like at Borden.

I was very struck by the comments made by a man, who was about 34 years old, originally from Chicoutimi, in the Saguenay—Lac-St-Jean region, where I come from. He told me that he was stationed at Borden and that he did not understand a word of English. When he was on the parade ground or in his company and people spoke to him for 25 or 30 minutes in English, it was as if he was hearing Chinese, since he did not understand anything. He told me that he tried to make them understand that he was having problems, and that he would like to be spoken to in a language that he understood, but they looked at him as if it was up to him to adapt. People even told him to learn English and to come back and see them later.

That is how I first learned about the problem at Borden. Then in June, we took a much more systematic and in-depth approach. We sent two investigators who met with 185 recruits.

● (0915)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Did you visit forces members on other bases, besides Borden, who made representations to you about not being able to use their mother tongue?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, there have not been many formal complaints. Indeed, there have been very few. From the anecdotal evidence, however, it would seem—and this should be mentioned—that the same sorts of problems may arise for unilingual anglophones in Saint-Jean, for example, and for other francophones on other bases outside Quebec.

As I mentioned earlier this morning, the Commissioner of Official Languages has indicated that he intends to undertake an audit of some aspects of training in the Canadian Forces. So we are working closely with him on this issue.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I am curious to see how things are working in Saint-Jean. You feel that you should also see whether French-speaking members at other bases across the country are being effectively treated as full citizens. Do you intend to check this out in person and see whether this is the case at other military bases?

Mr. Yves Côté: That is certainly my intention, as I continue with my visits. Next week, in fact, Ms. Brandon and I will be at CFB Petawawa. I will also be visiting other bases. When I do, I certainly

intend to ask questions and make sure that people feel comfortable raising this kind of problem, if it exists.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I have one last question, if I have any time left.

The Chair: You will be able to ask your question in the next round, Mr. Bélanger, since your seven minutes have already expired.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That is fine.

I will ask my question later, Mr. Côté.

The Chair: We will now go to Mr. Raymond Gravel.

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Côté, thank you for your presentation.

You talked about problems in Saint-Jean, Quebec. Would the problem in Saint-Jean be the reverse of the problem in Borden?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I would like to be very clear about this. We have not carried out a systematic investigation of the language issue, except regarding the situation at Borden.

I said earlier that there had been very few complaints about this. That said, one can very well imagine that unilingual anglophones in Saint-Jean may face comparable or similar problems to what has gone on and may still be going on in Borden right now.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: You wrote recently, in a letter dated September 24, 2007, that the situation had improved. Listening to what you have to say today, the situation does not seem to have improved very much. Therefore, why did you write that letter? Has the situation actually improved at Borden?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, we have not gone back to the base to assess the situation since June 23 or 24. In fact, after our meeting with Minister O'Connor, where a senior military officer was present, very clear instructions were given to the effect that the situation had to change.

We had been told that two very high-ranking officers went to Borden in connection with those instructions. We were given the speaking notes that they used, apparently, in speaking to the students, instructors and military leaders. Those notes indicate that the message was sent very clearly that things needed to change.

On the other hand, last week—I think it was Friday—an article was published in a newspaper called *The Barrie Examiner* relating an interview between the local journalists and the commander of the Canadian Defence Academy. The general was quoted as saying that the problem was not as serious as what I had described. He also felt, apparently, that I had been wrong in accusing the chain of command of reacting with little enthusiasm and dragging their feet a little bit. So he was to some extent questioning some of the things that I had done.

So when I see that kind of thing, which happened last week, on Friday as I said, I think it is a bit unfortunate. So, on the one hand, what we see in the official communications, etc., seems quite appropriate, but when I see someone like this general, who holds that kind of position and rank, I feel that it is somewhat regrettable and perhaps a bit worrisome to have this kind of thing reported in a newspaper article.

We have a photocopy of the article, which was written in English only. We could table it with the clerk, if you are interested.

• (0920)

The Chair: Yes, of course.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Does the fact that there is still a problem prevent francophones from going to Borden?

Mr. Yves Côté: I don't think that prevents them from going to Borden. Borden is where a number of members of the Canadian armed forces go to once they have completed their basic training in Saint-Jean. It depends on the occupations they have chosen. They include cooks, mechanics, drivers or people working in logistics and administration. Be they francophones or anglophones, they head to Borden once they have completed their training in Saint-Jean. That is where the courses they need to obtain their occupational qualifications are given. In that sense, to respond to the member's question, Mr. Chairman, that does not prevent them from going there, except that, as I have indicated, once there, they are not necessarily treated with openness and given access to the services they might need to ensure they obtain their occupational qualifications.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: How can you explain that changes are so slow in coming? Are anglophones refusing to properly serve francophones? Is it because there is a lack of means? Is it a financial problem? What is the problem exactly?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, the problem is first and foremost one of culture and attitude, which leads me to believe that it is essentially a leadership problem. Once the military leadership will have not only issued very clear messages, directives or even appropriate orders, but also decided to ensure close, disciplined and strict follow-up, I think things will change rather quickly.

What I find especially deplorable and regrettable about this situation is that francophones tell us that when they are at Borden and are told that they must learn English to integrate, to become normal, if you will; they get the impression they are being sent a cultural message, and it is a matter of openness.

It seems to me that all Canadian citizens, whether they be unilingual anglophones, francophones or whether they be bilingual, are entitled to be treated and welcomed in exactly the same way, regardless of where they are serving in the Canadian armed forces. Unfortunately, what we have seen, noted and especially heard from the recruits and students at Borden leads us to believe that the current situation isn't quite what it should be.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Do I still have some time left, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: You have one minute remaining.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I will ask you for a brief response.

You said that you will be sending people to investigate in early 2008. If that doesn't bring about change, what do you intend to do?

Mr. Yves Côté: As I've indicated, I along with my office are extremely concerned about the issue. We will ensure follow-up on the ground at Borden to see where progress has been made. Obviously, I did not come here this morning to prejudge what could happen, but if the changes we are expecting, hoping for and, in a sense, demanding, are not made, we will make sure that the issue is brought to the attention of the appropriate authorities, including the Minister of National Defence, and that our views will be made public in a timely manner.

• (0925)

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

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

We will now move on to Mr. Yvon Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I also thank Mr. Côté and Ms. Brandon for having come today. I want to congratulate you for the work that you have done up to now and for having made it public.

This is nothing new. The Standing Committee for Official Languages has determined through its studies that the Department of National Defence is the one that has violated the Official Languages Act more than any other department has. They have set new records in this field. I think that you are right in saying that this is a cultural issue and that it is not easy to change things. They must be wondering who these people are who dare to come and try to change the system at Borden. This might be coming from the upper ranks. When the government appoints people, it is responsible for making sure that those people are respectful of Canadian law.

Let me give you an example which I mentioned earlier, I think. It has to do with attitude problems. Last year, or two years ago, we went to Romania. We flew home in a plane belonging to the Canadian forces. This is just one small example, but it shows a great lack of respect. As we were boarding, we were not supposed to talk and we could only look at the picture, because there was nothing else to see. While I flew on that plane, they showed a movie. Usually, there is a first movie in English and a second one in French. I had no problem with the French movie being shown in the second place because both movies cannot be projected at the same time. To my great surprise, the second movie was also in English. With all the technology that is available today, they are not even able to show a movie in French to our francophone soldiers who are leaving Canada for Afghanistan. We are not asking that the big general learn French, we only want some technology. This example shows a problem with attitude.

Regarding what you have discovered, I do not want to be pessimistic, but I do feel that way after hearing what you said. A culture cannot be changed overnight. Do you not think that after all we should recommend that our francophone soldiers be trained in their own institutions? I do not understand how we can do it in any other way.

In New Brunswick, we finally decided that there would be francophone schools and anglophone schools. We cannot put both language groups in the same institution. One group will get the upper hand and put pressure on the other group. This is especially the case in National Defence, where all we hear is "yes sir" and "don't question what I say". If you want to stay, you must not become subject to disciplinary measures and you must not end up being put in a hole where you will get rough treatment. You must follow the rules.

You can continue your studies with an eye on the future, but I think that you must keep in mind that this is an impossible mission that cannot succeed. We will never be able to put both groups together while making sure that the francophones are treated with respect. This will never succeed.

I would like to hear what you think of this, because I feel pessimistic.

Mr. Yves Côté: On the one hand, with regard to the way in which the Canadian armed forces go about education and training, it is not really up to me to decide whether an institution or a school should be located in this place and not in that place. This is up to ministers, high-ranking officers and officials. They must deal with these issues and find the best solutions that suit the circumstances.

On the other hand, as ombudsman, I am looking at the way in which the Canadian Forces are scattered all over the country. When I see the things that are happening at Borden, for instance, I think that it is possible, even there at this time, to take measures to improve the situation.

Regarding optimism or pessimism, I am still confident that if the right directives are given and properly followed, things can change for the better.

• (0930)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Here is how I see the problem. We are responsible for adopting legislation. They are about to table legislation regarding young offenders. Once the laws are adopted, whether you like or not, either you'll stay on the straight path or you'll go to jail. As for us, we adopted an Official Languages Act including part VII and sections 41, 42 and 43. All of this is Canadian law. Nevertheless, those who are in charge of defending our country do not even abide by its laws! This is why I am pessimistic. We send people abroad to impose law and order, but they are not even able to abide by Canada's Official Languages Act. In this sense, National Defence has the worst reputation of any institution in this land.

Mr. Yves Côté: Let me repeat that we worked in close collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, whose mandate is more specifically directed to the issues that we are debating here this morning.

As I said, I think that he announced his intention to do a review on the education and training system in the Canadian Forces. I presume that he could approach this review in a perspective that is wider than ours.

As for me, I will certainly continue working in close collaboration with Mr. Fraser and exchanging notes with him regarding the advancement of this file. I hope that by working together, we will be able to ensure that unilingual francophones in Borden, more

specifically, will be treated in a more open, generous and welcoming manner.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté. Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Let us now continue with Mr. Harvey, from the government side.

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): First, Mr. Côté, I thank you for being here. The chief priority of your mission probably does not consist in detecting the problems encountered by certain francophone soldiers in training centres like the one at Borden. I thank you for being our eyes and our ears, and for informing us today about this important matter.

Certain measures were taken, such as reopening the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean. In any case, when the government closes down a francophone college, it has its responsibilities. The military people are not the only ones who are responsible for this. I think that the reopening of the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean was a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, we realized that there is more work to be done and that it will take time.

As I want to hear you out, I would like you to tell me your opinion about the other priority measures that we should take to improve the training and the other services provided in French for the francophone students at Borden college.

Mr. Yves Côté: I think that this committee should continue being as open as you were this morning by inviting us to discuss the issue. I believe that this is part of an investigation and that other witnesses will be called, including Mr. Fraser next week. We must keep up our efforts and send a specific message to the Canadian armed forces to tell them that every recruit and every student, be he or she francophone or anglophone, has the same basic rights and must be welcomed with equal respect. We must do this.

As I said earlier, the ombudsman's office will certainly continue to follow the advancement of this file—I hope that it will develop in a real and concrete way—over the coming weeks and months. Personally, as I said, I intend to work closely with Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages, to put our efforts and our energy together and make the current situation become a thing of the past.

• (0935)

Mr. Luc Harvey: Mr. Côté, you said that you would do another investigation in early 2008. If my colleagues agree, at the end of this meeting, we could adopt a motion to invite you back to present that report to us for discussion.

Thus, you might have an opportunity to tell the authorities at Borden that you will have to report on this file to the Standing Committee on Official Languages as soon as you have made some progress.

Do you think that this would be a good tool in your hands?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I am at the service of Parliament and the parliamentary committees. If at any time this committee wants me to come back and report on the progress of the files and on our observations on the ground, I will always feel glad, privileged and honoured to do so.

Mr. Luc Harvey: We must set priorities and take measures to make sure that things improve at Borden college, but apart from the follow-up that we discussed, can we do anything else to make sure that the francophones who are studying at this college or at the military colleges as a whole in Canada receive services in their language?

The Chair: Mr. Côté.

Mr. Yves Côté: By raising the profile of this issue, by welcoming us here and by perhaps inviting other witnesses eventually, you have already taken some important measures. This will show the people who are in charge of Borden and perhaps those who are here on behalf of military leadership, that this committee is taking this matter very seriously. I think that this will really help us to improve conditions for students in the field. Besides, I presume that you will be hearing other witnesses who will probably help you to define other subjects that should be looked into and other measures that should be taken.

Mr. Luc Harvey: Mr. Chairman, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Luc Harvey: You said that some francophone soldiers had left the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean in order to finish their training in certain subjects at Borden. Am I right?

Mr. Yves Côté: Not exactly, Mr. Chairman.

When the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean was closed, the students who would have normally studied there ended up in Kingston at the Royal Military College of Canada. At Borden, there are schools that are different from the military college itself. They train people to become cooks, clerks, drivers, mechanics and so forth. There is also an avionics school. This is not directly related to the closing down of the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean.

Mr. Luc Harvey: Thus, there was no such thing as a first stage of training at Saint-Jean later completed at Borden. This is really something very specific to Borden college.

Mr. Yves Côté: Yes and no, Mr. Chairman.

All recruits who enlist in the Canadian Forces must go through basic training whether or not they are officers. All the recruits from Canada follow this course at Saint-Jean. It can take about 13 to 17 weeks. Once they have finished this course, these people can go either to Borden, or to Gagetown or to Halifax. This is how things are usually done. In this sense, it is accurate to say that everyone goes to Saint-Jean before going to Borden, but as I said earlier, the closing of the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean is not directly related to the turnover of students at Borden.

Mr. Luc Harvey: We are not talking about a closing down but about a reopening.

Mr. Yves Côté: The question was about the closing of a college, and that is how I answered it. Of course, they announced that the college would be reopened.

The Chair: Let us now begin a second round table with Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté and Ms. Brandon, thank you for appearing before us this morning.

I am very worried about the issue that you raised during your presentation. I would like to look at it from a very specific point of view. Let me give you some background. A few months ago, the former Minister of National Defence appeared before the committee to discuss certain files. It had to do with not requiring that high-ranking officers become bilingual. In other words, they would be allowed to remain as unilingual anglophones, and the francophones would agree to it.

During that meeting, I put a question to the minister, who, I imagine, was using interpretation. I asked him to answer me in French, but he was not able to do that. I then pointed out to him that if I were a francophone soldier who does not understand English and that if this person gave me orders in English on the battlefield, I would be in bad shape. My quality of life, my health and my safety could be in jeopardy. It would be a serious problem.

Mr. Ombudsman, if these students cannot understand English—and they are not obliged to do so—do you think that this situation is bad for their training, their safety, and, if they need medical care, for their health? They may not even be in a position to receive the services that they are entitled to. The federal government of this country is boasting that it is bilingual, but those are just empty words. In fact, when it comes down to the crunch, it does the opposite of what it says it is doing. Do you think that this is fair to francophone soldiers or would-be soldiers?

● (0940)

Mr. Yves Côté: Clearly, the people who spoke to us had been affected in a number of ways. The member mentioned some examples having to do with training. As I said earlier, they're asked to do their homework in a language they do not understand. So they do what they can. One individual told me that he did what he could, but it happened regularly that he had not really understood and only realized that later. The work submitted was not what was expected, and the teachers wondered why he had not understood.

Another very important point is that classes in French are offered much less regularly at Borden. It often happens that francophone recruits have to wait a number of months to have access to a course they need in order to advance. Anglophones are offered these courses much more often. As a result, they can advance much more quickly.

The member raised the issue of health care, and I did talk about the hospital. The situation is the same as regards dentists. One of the recruits also told us that when she wanted to sell her house, the services were provided by anglophones only. And the recruit in question did not speak English.

The same sort of problem happens in the case of reception services. I spoke to the people who work there—the first person you see, in other words. Some individuals told us that when they came to Borden for the first time, the person they dealt with did not speak French at all. Imagine how "welcomed" people feel in that case.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I do not know how much time I have left, but I am going to raise a point, and I would like you to give a yes or no answer, Mr. Côté. I listened to what you have had to say, and in my opinion, there is clearly a flagrant lack of respect for francophones in this country—both in Quebec and outside Quebec. Would you agree?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, the treatment received by the francophone recruits we spoke to is deplorable. It is unfortunate and such things should not happen in a country like ours. As I said in my correspondence with the Chief of the Defence Staff, I am expecting this situation to change, so that all recruits in the Canadian armed forces feel comfortable and welcomed, regardless of their first language and their abilities in the other language. What we saw in Borden is not at all what we should aspire to.

• (0945)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

We will now go to Mr. Claude Bachand, who is also a member of the Standing Committee on National Defence.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): I'm originally from Saint-Jean, Mr. Chairman. I want to take this opportunity to assure my colleagues that at the Saint-Jean military base, there is no problem. In fact the opposite occurs, since there are starting to be complaints that English is spoke too widely at the Saint-Jean military base. Imagine the day where there's too much French spoken at the Borden base, and we will have solved the essential problem.

With regard to the military college, we also have to consider how the French fact is viewed in the army. Initially, there was a closure. Now, everyone is bragging about the reopening, but I want to remind my colleagues that this reopening is only partial. Previously, Saint-Jean had university status; now it has college-level status. Its university status must be restored. The prestigious past of this military college must be acknowledged. That will be a signal in favour of the French fact.

I also want to remind you that there's a language school in Saint-Jean, precisely for new recruits. Before the new bilingualism policy, once the recruits had completed their 13 weeks, as you said earlier, they spent about 20 weeks learning the basics of their second language before they went on to their area of specialization. That has ended since the new bilingualism policy came into effect. The department decided to create anglophone units, francophone units and bilingual units. As a matter of fact, I recently asked the minister's office if it could give us a list of these units. That hasn't even been done yet. So there are problems.

Mr. Côté, I've always admired the way you handle your file, but I would like you to indicate to us the legal scope of the ombudsman's intervention compared to the legal scope of the possible intervention by the Commissioner of Official Languages. In your opinion, do you both have a mandate to intervene in the consideration of this issue?

Mr. Yves Côté: Given the ministerial directives which are at the origin of the creation of the office and which indicate what we

should do and how we should do it, up to a point, it's absolutely clear in my mind that we have a mandate to examine these issues. The ministerial directives specifically mention that we must address issues regarding the fair and equitable treatment of members of the Canadian armed forces. So when we see how these people, like those we met in Borden, are treated, it's very clear to me that justice and equity are called into question in a very fundamental way. For my part, I have no doubt whatsoever that we have an important role to play.

Before I talk about the Commissioner of Official Languages, I would add that I am only an ombudsman. An ombudsman—and this is true of all ombudsmen I'm aware of, including the *Protecteur du citoyen* in Quebec—has no executive power. We can issue recommendations, which I did in my correspondence, and as I do regularly, we can ensure follow-up and if need be, make files and issues public if it's necessary for people on the outside to exert pressure so that things get moving. This has to be stated. That's our mandate, and that's how we fulfil it.

Now with regard to the Commissioner of Official Languages, it goes without saying that he is responsible for enforcing the Official Languages Act and conducting studies and appropriate audits to see what progress has been made by various institutions, including National Defence and the Canadian armed forces, and then for issuing the type of report and taking the type of measures allowed under the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Claude Bachand: A little earlier, you referred to a commander or a high-ranking officer who seemed to be calling everything into question. I don't image you get ulcers because of this, since you don't report to the chain of command, you report directly to the department. Right now, is Mr. MacKay aware of the problem at Borden?

Moreover, normally your investigators deal with different files informally, at the lowest possible level to begin with. Did you operate that way? I get the impression that you went higher up quite quickly.

Mr. Yves Côté: I'd like to make two comments here. First of all a point of clarification, Mr. Chairman. Technically, I don't report to the Department of National Defence, but rather to the minister. I was appointed by the governor in council. Yes, I report to the minister, and I mentioned that. Perhaps it's worthwhile to point it out again. When I raised the question in the presence of the former minister, Mr. O'Connor, in late July, I saw his reaction. I was there when he issued directives, orders and instructions to the military. It was quite clear that he wanted things to change, and they did change.

Now with respect to Mr. MacKay, Ms. Brandon and I met with him in late September and we discussed a number of files, including this one. I mentioned to him how important this one was. I can tell you that the minister stated that he's extremely interested in this situation. I promised him that I'd keep him informed of developments as things progressed.

The last point I'd like to underscore, Mr. Chairman, is the fact that we did start at the lowest level, in one sense. When I left the Borden base in November, I went to see the commander in his office, in the presence of his chief warrant officer, who is the highest ranking non-commissioned officer, and I told him that they had a serious problem and that I was certainly going to follow up on this issue, because according to what I'd heard, the way francophones were treated left a great deal to be desired. They were seized with this question immediately and that's why I wrote to the Chief of the Defence Staff about a month later. Given the importance and the seriousness of the issue, I felt it was appropriate to inform him.

• (0950)

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

We will move on. Mr. Godin, it's your turn.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You said a little earlier that you had an article that you could give our clerk. I would like this article to be sent to our clerk. I would like the House to have this article translated.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, that's what we want to do. We have copies here that we can give the clerk.

The Chair: If you wish, Mr. Côté.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I said: "to the clerk".

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Ombudsman, I simply wanted to remind you that we will read it and that we will have it translated before distributing it to members of the committee. That is a rule in our committee as it is in all other committees.

Mr. Yves Côté: Given that this is the Committee on Official Languages, we will not contest that.

Mr. Yvon Godin: They don't speak both official languages at reception. Respect for both official languages is a long-standing story. Even at reception, they're not bilingual.

Are the trade instructors bilingual?

Mr. Yves Côté: Some members of the teaching staff can work in both languages.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Are there any who don't speak both languages?

Mr. Yves Côté: According to what we were told, in some cases, that's what happens. Sometimes these people are spoken to only in English.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In a plant where mechanics is being taught, for example, does a translator accompany the instructor?

Mr. Yves Côté: I do not believe that a translator accompanies the instructor. If so, it must be the exception rather than the rule. Honestly, I cannot answer that question.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Could that be part of your study? This goes further than simply saying that the manual is not available in both languages. It is the system that is not providing training in both official languages to the two different groups in our country, as stipulated by the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Yves Côté: I agree, but I want to add something that I did not mention this morning. We are told that, sometimes, even when the documents are translated—in 95% of the cases it is from English to

French—the translation quality is quite poor, even when students take their exams. They are given questionnaires in French that—

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have said that National Defence is the worst place, but there are other places where things are not going very well either. Take the example of nurse practitioners. Only one out of five students passes the course. But when five anglophones took the same course, they all passed. Does that mean that francophones are not very intelligent? The English-to-French translation of the course is terrible, and the questions do not even relate to the course.

I used that example because the same situation could arise at National Defence. So you should make recommendations to make sure that there is light at the end of the tunnel, or we will need two institutions.

Mr. Yves Côté: I'm eager to see the extent to which our recommendations have been implemented. One of them was to create an effective complaint mechanism that would be known and easily accessible to recruits. Recruits in the Canadian Forces are really at the bottom of the hierarchy, and they have to deal with the chain of command that can be very daunting. They could use that kind of mechanism without worrying that they will be told that Côté is at it again with his complaints.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I think that it goes further than that. For example, a soldier who is learning to be a mechanic might ask his instructor if he wants the windshield changed and might be told: "I don't speak French." It is all well and good to create a mechanism, but the machine is broken. How can they go to Borden and say that instructors who are not bilingual have to leave? That can't be done. I am not criticizing you personally, but rather National Defence. The problem can't be solved unless the problem is really addressed. It doesn't matter what kind of complaint mechanism is brought in: the problem remains that the person at reception and some of the instructors do not speak both languages.

Do you agree with me? I would like you to answer yes or no.

Mr. Yves Côté: I cannot answer yes or no. The points that you are raising are extremely valid.

• (0955)

The Chair: You have used up all of your time, Mr. Godin.

We will now go back to the government side with the Honourable Michael Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, I want to thank you for your testimony, and I am pleased to meet you.

[English]

I have a point to make and then maybe you could provide comments to it.

I think one of the big backdrops, one of the big things that need to be acknowledged, is that the Canadian Forces are very stretched right now. We have a mission in Afghanistan that is taking up a lot of the operational strength of the forces. I was reading through the binder that was provided. Specifically I was reading through comments that Major-General Daniel Gosselin, who is chief of military personnel, had made to the Canadian Forces Base Borden in August of this year.

With respect to the issues around the forces being stretched because of our mission in Afghanistan, he

says: You will also appreciate that due to the operational tempo, there is a significant demand for bilingual military personnel to work in headquarters and support services overseas. This limits the number of service members who can be assigned to the schools and CFB Borden.

I would also point out that the other broad background to this problem at Canadian Forces Base Borden you've rightly pointed out is the fact that in the 1990s the military went through significant cutbacks, which is the real foundational reason as to why they are struggling to provide services in both official languages. I once again quote the Major-General who says:

You should be aware that delays in the delivery of training are not primarily a language issue. ... This overall backlog is a result of greatly expanded recruiting for the Canadian Forces, as a result of force expansion, without a comparable increase in training capacity. We have suffered significant downsizing in the mid 1990s and never recovered in terms of school staff.

So I think there are two contextual facts that we have to acknowledge. One is that the military went through significant downsizing in the 1990s, which it is yet to recover from. It's in the midst of a massive expansion right now. There will be some problems that come along with that expansion, as we rebuild the forces.

I think the second contextual fact is that we are engaged in one of the most significant combat operations overseas since the Korean War. This too has stretched the ability of the forces to quickly address some of the problems at Canadian Forces Base Borden. I think those two pieces of information—the fact that we had these significant cutbacks and that we are engaged in a major theatre of action overseas—need to be acknowledged as part of this debate.

That being said, I think you've done some very good work here in championing the rights of linguistic minorities in places like Borden. Maybe you could provide comment on the challenges that the forces have with respect to trying to rebuild some of that capacity as we undertake an era of expansion.

• (1000)

[Translation]

The Chair: You have approximately one minute, Mr. Côté.

[English]

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chair, the two elements of contextual background that the member has put on the table are very real. In fact in my last annual report I did mention that one of the things I see across the forces is how stretched the organization is, how many people we see that are not only double tasked but often triple tasked, and all the cost that not only members themselves but also family members have to pay or support as a result of this. This is only part of the reality that the CF is facing now as an institution that is, as we just said, very stretched. At the same time the problems as we saw

them in Borden are serious problems. The question for the leadership will be how they decide to address them, keeping in mind of course the context in which they operate, but also the seriousness of the problem as it exists in Borden.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I will just make a very small comment. Major-General Gosselin is not the CMP. He is not the chief of military personnel. He is the new commander of the defence academy. The chief of military personnel is Major-General Semianiw.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much for that clarification, Mr. Côté.

We will now have a third round of questions. I have to apologize, since I should have had the government go second last time and I did not do so. I will continue with the usual order. The order for the third round is as follows: first the Liberal Party, followed by the Bloc Québécois, the Conservative Party and then the New Democratic Party. We will start on the Liberal side with the Honourable Mauril Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let us try to get down to brass tacks, Mr. Côté.

I want to start with a comment. I agree with my colleague, Mr. Godin, about the complaint system. When there is a complaint system, I feel like a second-class citizen, since francophones in this country all too often have to complain in order to have their rights respected. I do understand that these things are happening in a certain context, but the Official Languages Act was passed in 1969. Do we need to go back to 1969 to find excuses for National Defence? Do we need to go back to 1969 to explain the lack of respect that the Canadian Forces have shown francophones in Canada? It is unfortunately true, and I have had personal experience with this, having had responsibility for this file when I was associate minister. We talked about this issue at that time, Mr. Côté.

As you know, this attitude is reflected even in the expression "vandooze." I think it shows a lack of respect when people say "vandooze," knowing full well that they are talking about the Royal 22nd Regiment. It is like saying "Big Joe Mufferaw" instead of Joe Montferrand. There is also a question of culture and respect, which seems not to stick very well in the minds of officers and chiefs of defence staff, either present or past. That was my comment.

Who has primary responsibility for this issue? Is it the base commander who really has the power to decide to do things better? Do we need to go further up the chain of command? Is it the responsibility of the Chief of Defence Staff?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I am not necessarily the best person to answer that question. People in uniform would be much better placed to do that. From what I have understood, the Borden base is part of a hierarchy and comes directly under the command of the Canadian Defence Academy in Kingston, which reports to the Chief of Defence Staff. Given the scope and severity of the problem, it seems to me that leadership should not be limited to the local level, to the base, but should also involve people who are higher in the chain of command.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Harvey may be moving a motion later to have you come back here. I agree, but I think that it would be appropriate as well to bring to the committee the person or persons who are responsible for administering the Borden base in order to make sure that the Official Languages Act, like all the laws of Canada, is complied with. I would really like to know who we need to hear from in the chain of command. I do not necessarily intend to call in the Chief of Defence Staff; he cannot be responsible for everything. At the end of the day, yes, he is accountable for everything, but there have to be people advising him. There must be some kind of delegation of authority.

Who is it?

•(1005)

Mr. Yves Côté: The problem, Mr. Chairman, is that the highest superior officer responsible for official languages in the Canadian armed forces is the Chief of Defence Staff, who, once again, is responsible for the academy in Kingston and the Borden base.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That is the person who answered you on March 30 or April 1. Is that right?

Mr. Yves Côté: It has changed since then. There are new people, and General Semianiw is now the Chief of Military Staff.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

Another thing. You are expecting a report for December 1.

Mr. Yves Côté: Yes. We asked that these people report back to us on the situation and progress at Borden on these issues. We are expecting the report at the very beginning of December, December 1.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There is one thing I would like to request, which might not require your appearing before us again. The committee will determine that a little later. Could you send us a copy of the report and your comments on it?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, if possible, I would prefer that we do our follow-up work once we receive the report. We intend to work very diligently on that. Then we would forward the report to the committee along with our audit. That is how we would like to proceed. That would certainly be my preference.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I must say that I would like to see the report at some point, but some time sooner than in two years, if possible.

I have a final question for you. Why did you hold a press conference in November?

Mr. Yves Côté: That is one of the ways I make my reports public. In almost every case involving an important systemic issue—such as the snipers, recruitment, or the Wenzel case—we invite the media to come and hear what we have to say. We did that two weeks ago on this issue, and there was some interest in it.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: So in future press conferences, you could also talk about Borden and the follow-up to that.

Mr. Yves Côté: I intend to follow this issue very seriously. I am not at ruling out the possibility of discussing it publicly.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would invite you to talk about it publicly as often as possible, Mr. Côté, because that is the only way that we will be able to change a culture of this type.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger. You have a built-in timekeeper.

Mr. Gravel.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I do not know whether you told us how many francophones there are in Borden.

Mr. Yves Côté: The figures we have been given have not been checked, but there are roughly 1,500 francophone recruits and students at Borden each year.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: You have not received many complaints. These francophones do not file many complaints.

Mr. Yves Côté: We have received very few complaints. When I went to Borden and heard about the issue, I was surprised, because, quite honestly, I was not expecting it at all. Before I visit any base or wing, I always ask the people in reception services who get complaints to inform me of them. During my work in preparation of my visit, no one told me that I might hear about some language complaints.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I have a comment on that. Since they are a minority, francophones do not complain often, because they are somewhat embarrassed not to speak English. It is seen as somewhat shameful not to speak the language of the majority. We see this even in Quebec. We are a minority within Canada.

I studied in Rome, Italy, where the Canadian college is located. Francophones were in the majority there. There were only a few anglophones. When there was a group of six francophone priests and an anglophone arrived, the language of the conversation switched to English. We asked why that was, and the answer was that the francophones were practising their English, because as a minority, they thought they absolutely had to speak English in this country, that it was failing on their part not to speak English. That is why the anglophone minority is very well treated in Quebec. Earlier, my colleague said that so much English was spoken in Saint-Jean that there were complaints on this. The opposite is not true.

Being a francophone is seen as a defect, and anglophones know that quite well. That is why we have to act proactively. In the case we are discussing, if we wait for complaints in order to change things, we will be waiting a long time.

We have to be aware of this situation in order to take some action. If we do nothing, these people will just fade into the woodwork and not speak out.

Mr. Yves Côté: I would like to make a few comments on that, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, as I mentioned, students or recruits in the Canadian armed forces are new and are at the bottom of the ladder. Filing a complaint with a person in authority or with an office such as ours is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Second, some people are not aware that we exist, and that may be why they did not come to see us.

We did a few surveys in June 2007. Of the 185 francophones who completed our questionnaires, 85% said they did not know where to go to get assistance, and 81% said that they did not think the assistance they needed would be available. This certainly confirms the impression that people do not know what to do or where to turn, and that even if they did, they were not sure they would manage to get results.

As my investigators and I make our visits to the bases and the wings, we will definitely be paying more attention to the language issue. Once again, I am not ruling out the possibility that some unilingual anglophones may find themselves in a similar situation. Obviously, our office must be impartial and objective: we must keep our eyes and ears open as regards this issue within the Canadian armed forces.

• (1010)

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Do you get along well with Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages?

Mr. Yves Côté: I will not speak for him, but I think we got along very well. He was extremely receptive. I met with him once, and we have spoken two or three times since then. I can say that he is very sensitive to what we are doing here. He had absolutely no objection to my incursion into his territory, because he understood very well that there is an issue of fair and equitable treatment involved. So far, there has been excellent cooperation between his office and mine, and between Mr. Fraser and myself.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gravel.

We will now go to the government side. I will give the floor to the parliamentary secretary, Pierre Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you for your presentation.

You have spoken about certain problems, challenges and the culture that exists.

[*English*]

It's a problem of leadership, of attitude, but I think there's a very practical side to finding solutions to these problems.

I don't believe there's a quick-fix solution, it's not something that money will solve, that you just throw money at. We need trained and capable instructors.

[*Translation*]

They must be bilingual and able to offer education and training in French, in this particular case.

I was a member of the Canadian armed forces for 20 years. As Mr. Chong said, we must remember that there has been a huge reduction in the number of members of the forces in the last 20 years, and I am not thinking just of equipment here. We know about the equipment situation, but there is also the staff issue. When I joined the forces, there were 85,000 members, and when I retired in 2000, there were 63,000. That is a reduction of 20,000, or 25 to 30%.

The Canadian armed forces have genuine operational commitments to National Defence Headquarters, and with the United

Nations, as regards training. The forces have a great many obligations.

[*English*]

The Canadian Forces are spread very thin. They have many commitments, not enough trained personnel.

I think the first challenge to finding a solution lies with its resources. When I say "resources", I mean trained, qualified personnel who are capable of instructing but who are also bilingual.

The second challenge is bilingual *formation*.

[*Translation*]

The Canadian armed forces had a policy on bilingualism, which proved to be a failure. Our commissioner described it as a failure. They are in the process of establishing a new policy, but it just started, in April, I think. We are now living with the consequences of the former policy. We cannot deal with the bilingualism problem in one easy step. The past failure had consequences. We are now living with the consequences of that policy. I would like to be clear—the situation in Borden must be improved.

[*English*]

We owe this to our francophone soldiers, and particularly to their training as technicians, etc.

I think you're a little bit like me.

• (1015)

[*Translation*]

You would like to have some practical solutions, some genuine solutions.

[*English*]

But I think it's necessary to look at the practicalities of what's involved.

For example, the Canadian Forces would have to find bilingual instructors, but they have all of these commitments. Not everybody can instruct, they have to be qualified in their trade, they have to take instructional courses to be able to instruct, etc.

Borden is a huge base. A lot of training goes on in Borden. So when you think about the logistics of finding these trained instructors who are bilingual, and if you go to a unit and you say, we're taking 15 of your people, what if that unit's training for Afghanistan? What if that unit has operational commitments? If they're doing something else, who will replace them? When will they move? When will the people replacing them move?

There's a logistical challenge here, so I think we have to take this into consideration.

[*Translation*]

In one of your letters, you wrote, and I quote:

I believe that these initiatives are a positive step forward, and will go a long way to addressing the significant problems that were brought to my attention by Canadian Forces members when I traveled to CFB Borden late last year.

This leads me to believe that you are satisfied with the proposed solutions, but that things are not happening fast enough.

[English]

There are practicalities that must be overcome to be able to implement the solutions.

I wondered if you could comment on that. You seem to be happy with what's been proposed, you seem to be unhappy with how quickly it's being implemented. Yet given the context I just explained, I can understand why, realistically, it's taking time. It's a huge base, there are lots of courses being run, and finding those people takes time.

Could you comment on taking that into consideration?

Mr. Yves Côté: Most certainly, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

The member talked about practical considerations, and we can perhaps add to the existing problems of the Canadian Forces the fact that it is becoming very difficult to send francophones to Borden for training. Many people stationed in Bagotville, Saint-Jean or Montreal say they do not want to go to Borden or Barrie in Ontario because their families are afraid of ending up isolated in an anglophone environment, and that it would be very difficult. But that's another problem. Regarding practical considerations, I do agree with you that there are many.

Mr. Chairman, the member said I was an optimist, but I have to shatter his delusions. I did indeed write that positive steps had been taken, but when we returned on a follow-up visit last June, after we were given a summary of the plan of action, we realized that in practical terms nothing seemed to have changed. So my feeling of optimism took a beating.

Furthermore, in a piece which appeared in the *Barrie Examiner*, which we will table at the end of the meeting, this high-ranking officer said that, as far as he was concerned, the problem was not as serious as I said it was, and that it was an exaggeration to say that the chain of command had not reacted with all due diligence. So when I see people react that way, I lose my sense of optimism.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté. I apologize for having to interrupt you, but you did not have much time to respond.

We will now continue with Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I have just heard the government's reaction.

I find it regrettable to hear Mr. Lemieux say that National Defence has commitments with NATO and the UN, as if these were real commitments, whereas bilingualism was a different matter all together. In the same way, Mr. Chong has just said that in the past, no monies were spent on this issue. But that's not what we're talking about. The fact is that it is not more expensive to hire a mechanics instructor who is bilingual.

As far as I am concerned, I am not willing to put up with excuses. We're not even talking about money. When you hire people to provide services, you have to hire those who speak both languages. What we are dealing with is a lack of respect and an infringement of Canadian law. It does not cost more to hire bilingual receptionists for Borden college than it does to hire unilingual English-speaking receptionists. Are we going to leave it at that? Not as far as I'm

concerned. I do not want the government to backtrack. The fact of the matter is that there is a culture at the Department of National Defence and because of it the department simply does not accept that there are two founding nations and two official languages. Services must be provided in both of these languages.

Mr. Côté, you seem to agree with these people that it costs money, that it's hard at National Defence, and that we will have to take our time. I don't agree with the fact that we have to take our time.

• (1020)

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, all I did was recognize that there were some practical realities. I also repeated several times that the situation at CFB Borden was deplorable, regrettable and unacceptable. I have not changed my mind on the assessment we made.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Would you agree that this has nothing to do with money, but rather that it is a matter of attitude? It does not cost any more to hire a bilingual instructor.

Mr. Yves Côté: I repeat that, in my opinion, this is also an issue of leadership, and that this is significant. If clear directives are given by people in positions of authority, and if there is a rigorous and strict follow-up, much progress can be made.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I do not like the word "progress". I want to solve the problem. It seems that it is always francophones who make progress. We have been making progress for 20 years, though we had to fight hard for that.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I do not want to be simplistic, but as the saying goes, Rome was not built in a day. We are talking about progress, about positive steps forward, about determination and real energy to...

Mr. Yvon Godin: Please do not forget that I salute your efforts. I am not attacking you personally, but rather the Department of National Defence.

Let's talk about Gagetown now. Do you intend to go to the place where our soldiers train? Will you visit every base with regard to this matter?

Mr. Yves Côté: There is no doubt that Gagetown holds a particular interest for us, because that is where our recruits train, and not at CBF Borden. I certainly do not exclude the possibility of visiting Gagetown to see how recruits are dealing with language issues.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Has there ever been a study on the translation of documents published by National Defence, such as documents published on the Internet, or is that rather a matter for the Commissioner of Official Languages?

Mr. Yves Côté: We have not looked at that, but in my opinion, that is a matter for the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, because the well-being and fair treatment of Canadian Forces members might have less to do with language issues than with training at CFB Borden.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That is all, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We will now begin the fourth round. I would like to ask members who are carrying on conversations amongst themselves to please leave the room so we can hear the witnesses.

We will continue with Mr. Rodriguez from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I will share my time with Mr. D'Amours.

Good morning, Mr. Côté and Ms. Brandon.

Mr. Côté, in your report, you say that the issues raised also include encouraging people to switch jobs when documents in French are not available. In other words, careers are managed based on which textbooks are available.

Is it fair to say that?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, we certainly heard that type of comment. Some francophone recruits and students, who are particularly ambitious and who wanted their careers to progress, were told that courses they wanted to take, such as logistics or administration, would only be available to them in several months' time, but that if they wanted to switch jobs, courses would be more readily available to them.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: In other words, a person who has a dream, who wants to achieve things, would be told that the dream was out of reach because the textbooks are not available in that person's language, so they should think of doing something else.

Mr. Yves Côté: Training and progress in vocational development, in certain cases for anglophones as well, are delayed because the courses in their language are not available yet.

• (1025)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You also said that francophone recruits risked being ostracized if they dared request services in French. Do you have any examples of when they were treated poorly or had other problems?

Mr. Yves Côté: Some people, for example, have told us that they had to get used to speaking English because French was the language of the minority, and they could go back as soon as they were prepared to speak English.

That comes back to what I was saying earlier: 85% of recruits who responded to our questionnaire said they did not know where to turn for help, and 81% of them believed that there was no help available. We heard regularly about incidents where francophones tried to speak French, and were told that it wasn't the thing to do, and that they had to learn to speak English.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What happens when recruits arrive? Are they given some idea of how things work? Do they expect problems? Do they understand that they won't be able to function in their own language because they will not have access to the same services and that they will not have equal rights?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, it is very difficult to answer that question in general terms. However, I think that a significant percentage of French-speaking recruits who arrive at Borden find that the language situation is not necessarily what they expected. In fact, it probably comes as a surprise to many of them.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, dear colleague.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, when we hear comments to the effect that we have obligations to NATO and Afghanistan, to National Defence Headquarters, and so on, I think those are nothing more than excuses. I think it's cheap to come up with excuses as to why we cannot give francophones the chance to receive services in their own language.

This means that, for the rest of their lives, francophones will have to live with excuses—that is what the government side seems to be saying. They seem to be saying that because people live in a certain place, pursue a certain career or wish to go somewhere else, they will not have access to services in French, unfortunate though it is.

It is very cheap for the government to even dare say such things. It is as if francophones were less than nothing, and, given what will end up happening at National Defence, francophones will stop having access to services in French.

Don't you find that cheap too?

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, when I was studying law, I was taught about leading questions.

I would like to come back to what I have told you several times this morning already. The situation at Borden is deplorable, regrettable, and in many cases unacceptable.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That does in fact give me something approaching an answer. I think that gives me what I need.

There was one last point I wanted to make. We are talking about bilingualism and so on. Earlier, some members on the government side said that there was a new policy in place. Mr. Côté, in your opinion, does the fact that some senior National Defence officials will no longer have to be bilingual not send the wrong message to the rest of them? The government says that it will no longer force senior officials to be bilingual, and thus we cannot expect those less senior to necessarily receive the bilingual services to which they are entitled.

The Chair: I would ask you to be very brief in your answer, please.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, from a technical standpoint, I cannot answer the member's question. If I understand correctly, you will be hearing the Official Languages Commissioner in a week. He will certainly be able to tell you his views on that point. Once again, I will reiterate that the situation we saw in Borden should not be what it is.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to the government side. Mr. Daniel Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Côté. Please tell your mother to vote for me, since she lives in my riding.

Some hon. members: Oh, Oh!

Mr. Daniel Petit: I would like to begin with a rather more delicate subject. I'll start by prefacing my remarks with a short introduction so that I am clearly understood. I am a new member of this Parliament. Half of CFB Valcartier is located in my riding, so I have been well aware of what goes on in the Canadian Forces, even before situations like the one under discussion today arose.

In some newspapers—for example, in Quebec's *Le Soleil*—we read that when the Liberals were in power—we were not there previously—there was no equipment, no men and no money. Journalists wrote that the submarines the government purchased were rusted, that helicopters were falling out of the sky, that equipment was painted green for use in the desert, that there were not enough weapons, and that there was not enough support in terms of equipment.

You are the ombudsman, and you are responsible for two major portfolios: the issue of language, and people who come back with post-traumatic stress syndrome. You have to take action, and goodness knows it is a delicate issue. We hear about it in our region all the time. We talk about language, but there is also a problem with underfunding and underrepresentation. The army has been treated like garbage for almost 13 years, and now, you are being asked about what you've done about language and what's going on with language.

I come from a French-speaking province. They teach mechanics at Borden, as the students they teach are not necessarily officer cadets. At Borden they teach mechanics, they teach trades. In my riding, in schools that teach mechanics, we talk about something that in French we call the *raban de ferlage*. Do you know what that is? In English, it's a "crankshaft". If you ask someone in French to repair a *pare-brise*, the mechanics will not understand. If you ask them in French to repair the "windshield," they will understand. If you use the English word "muffler", they will understand what you mean. But if you call it by its French name, if you call it a *tuyau d'échappement*,... What's the problem?

We French speakers, have a problem with our language. There is something I would like to know. You have studied the problem at Borden. That is an extremely anglophone environment, and the government has an institution that is supposed to be bilingual. At one point, you wrote the following to General Hillier—is he Chief of Defence Staff? Allow me to quote you:

I was pleased that we were able to reach an agreement on these short-term measures. I was also pleased to learn that there now seems to be some concrete action taking place.

What prompted you to write that? Did you see some measures with your own eyes? I would like you to be somewhat more explicit.

• (1030)

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, could the member please tell me the date of that letter?

Mr. Daniel Petit: The letter is dated September 24.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, here is what happened.

In July, I met with Mr. O'Connor, the then Minister of Defence, as well as with the Chief of Defence Staff, the same gentleman who is in the position today. The minister set out his expectations very clearly, and put into effect the very concrete recommendations I made. Subsequently, things seemed to be happening. As I said, two senior officials—two majors-general—went to Borden to talk about the issue and speak to the troops. Thus, we agreed that a report on the current situation would be submitted on December 1.

As a result of the commitments made at the time, I was rather optimistic, something that you will see reflected in the letter. But I

would remind the member once again that last week's interview leads me to believe that, for every step forward, we have perhaps taken a half-step back.

There is something I would like to add. The member said that we work on two issues. For the record, I would simply point out that we do in fact work on a very large number of issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, assistance to families, and many others.

There is one last point I would like to make to the member: my conversations with my mother are highly confidential.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Chairman, if I have any time left, I would like to give it to the parliamentary secretary.

The Chair: Unfortunately, you had only five seconds left, Mr. Petit.

Mr. Bachand.

• (1035)

Mr. Claude Bachand: Mr. Côté, I believe you have other instruments at your disposal, which you have not yet mentioned. I believe there is an advisory committee that provides the ombudsman with opinions and advice. At least, that is what the act provides for. In principle, the committee is chaired by a lieutenant-general.

I would like you to give me the name of the lieutenant-general in question, and to tell me whether you intend to put the issues regarding Borden you have raised today before the advisory committee.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, it is as if the member had a window into our internal operations.

Even as we speak, the advisory committee is chaired by Michael Caines, retired lieutenant-general and former chief of defence staff. At the last meeting with the advisory committee, some seven or eight weeks ago, I presented the Borden issue, and put forward the observations and recommendations made. Members of the advisory committee were entirely supportive of our approach, and said they were as surprised as we were by what we saw at Borden.

Mr. Claude Bachand: You have yet another instrument. You need not restrict yourselves to dealing with individual complaints, you can go further and launch a systemic investigation. I can tell you—since I have toured all bases myself—that what we are seeing in Borden will also happen in other bases.

I believe that the Official Languages Commissioner has already stated that National Defence had the worst record on official languages and bilingualism. It seems to me quite appropriate for the ombudsman, who has seen the scope of the problem, to initiate a systemic investigation, particularly since you are not short of staff. I know you are very busy, but nonetheless you do have 50 officials under you.

Do you plan to initiate a systemic investigation, so that the issue is not restricted to Borden? I believe that many people could testify about how things are across the system, except in Quebec, I would think, because the bases in Quebec are more respectful and more bilingual than those in other provinces.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, it is quite true that our office comprises some 50 or 52 valiant and courageous officials who do exemplary work.

As I said earlier in answer to a question by another member, there is no doubt that I have a keen interest in Gagetown at present, and it's quite possible that at some point we might decide to go and see how things are there.

However, I would like to clarify one point. A systemic investigation might have a certain scope, or look much like what we are doing with Borden. Meeting some 185 to 200 people is well beyond dealing with individual complaints, and comes rather close to conducting a systemic investigation. However, I do not exclude the possibility of going into greater depth. Whatever happens, I will take note of the intentions stated by Mr. Fraser, so that there is no duplication between us and so that we join forces using our resources in the most effective way.

Mr. Claude Bachand: The Chief of Defence Staff has submitted an official action plan to the ombudsman, and I have it here. It comprises many aspects I would like you to tell us more about. For example, an official languages champion was to be appointed within the officer corps. Has that been done? Who is the champion? There are other aspects as well. An initial survey was to be conducted. Has that been done? Can we have the results? A strategic plan on official languages at CFB Borden was to be developed. Has that been done? Can we see the plan? What progress has been made in general with implementing the action plan submitted by the Chief of Defence Staff?

Mr. Yves Côté: First of all, an official languages champion has indeed been appointed. If I remember correctly, the champion is Major Bouchard.

The action plan to which the member refers was appended, I believe, to the letter dated May 24. When we visited the base in June, most of the measures had not yet been implemented.

We are eager to receive the report slated for December 1, to determine the extent to which measures have been applied. At that point, we will decide on how we are to follow up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachand.

We will now go to the last series of questions in this fourth round, with Mr. Yvon Godin.

• (1040)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I know that Mr. Bachand thinks that everything at Saint-Jean is just fine, but I think it would be a good thing to conduct a study for comparison. If everything is indeed fine, it could serve as a model. I don't think it is up to Mr. Bachand to tell us that everything there is fine. It would be your job, Mr. Côté, to report to Canadians and to use Saint-Jean as an example.

I find it is unfortunate that the government thinks the problem began only 13 years ago, in the fall of 1993. I think the problem has been there for a long time.

I will conclude by congratulating you on the work you have done, and on having the courage to continue with it. Your responsibility is to show the authorities and the public what is wrong. It is unfortunate that some people cannot feel fully included within a

community, but feel they are second-class members of that community. I am not saying that our work in other countries is not important, I am just saying that it is more important to respect our Canadians here, regardless of their language. It is unfortunate and regrettable, and excuses of the kind we have heard should not be accepted. They might make excuses, but that does not mean Canadians are obliged to accept them. It really shows the kind of respect they have for the other language. I have never heard the government make recommendations to ensure that things improve, but I have heard them saying that there is not enough money. Yet there was a \$14-billion surplus this year. If the will were there, the problem might already have been dealt with.

That is all I have to say. Thank you.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the member for the support he has given our office and our work.

The Chair: Thank you.

That completes the fourth round. Some members have said they would like to ask additional questions. We could do a two-minute round, without any particular order.

On my list I have Mr. Bélanger, then Mr. Lemieux.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Côté, you surveyed Canadian Forces personnel at Borden. You referred to that survey. Are you ready to share it with us?

Mr. Yves Côté: The survey is in a form that cannot necessarily be shared, but we can certainly share the results with you, Mr. Chairman. Of course.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Now this is something I have not discussed with my colleagues, but personally I believe a systemic study would be a very good thing. I encourage you to go ahead with it.

I don't know whether my last question was to Mr. Côté as much as to our researcher, Mr. Chairman.

I would like someone to explain to me what the legal status of a member of the Canadian Forces is. I'm under the impression that, when a person joins the Canadian Forces, he or she acquires a specific status. Do members of the military waive the rights to which they are entitled under the Official Languages Act? If they would like to file complaints, do they have to file them through the military legal system? Earlier, we talked about a complaint system. I would like to know whether a member of the Canadian Forces has to file a complaint from within the military system. If so, I would imagine that very few members of the forces would like to come up against the staff at the beginning of their careers. I would like to know what the legal status of a member of the Canadian Forces is.

Mr. Yves Côté: Mr. Chairman, I have two or three comments to make in response to that.

On the whole, I believe that a member of the Canadian armed forces does not waive the rights to which he or she is entitled under the Canadian Charter of Rights, the Access to Information Act, the Privacy Act, or any other federal statutes that would apply. I don't claim to be an expert in the field, but I know of no provision that suggests members of the Canadian Forces waive their rights under the Official Languages Act by putting on a Canadian Forces' uniform.

If you wish, we could help your researcher study the issue, in order to clarify things. However, I believe that the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages would be a better place to provide information of that kind.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In concluding this last round, I would like to thank our witnesses for having come here today. I would also like to reiterate our government's firm and unswerving commitment to official languages in all federal institutions, including National Defence and the Canadian Forces. Those two institutions recognize the importance of official languages. They have already obtained tangible results, as demonstrated by the National Defence Official Languages Program Transformation Model. We have already talked about that.

The Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean has also been reopened. The situation there is not the same as it is in Borden. We remedied a historic error flowing from a decision by the Liberal government in 1995 to shut the college down. That was a bad decision—it was bad for our French-speaking non-commissioned officers from Quebec, and for Canada as a whole. The college is now open again, and taking in its first students. We took action.

Thank you.

• (1045)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux. You have one minute left.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Earlier, Mr. Bélanger talked about the status of military personnel. I would like us to talk about the status of the army. We know that the army is a federal institution, but I would like to know whether it is subject to certain regulations, statutes, and so on. Mr. Bélanger raised a very interesting point—Liberals do so as well from time to time—a point that we should explore in full.

The Chair: All right, Mr. Petit.

We will ask Mr. Paré to make a brief comment. After which we will be thanking our witness.

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher): I will just make a few comments. I do not want to go into too much depth here,

because I do not have the details at hand. I know that the commissioner's office had prepared analyses on this piece of legislation. One of the problems that occurred was the following: the military are not assigned to positions. The system works by unit, whereas the act was developed so as to apply to the public service in a general manner. That creates confusion. With regard to the army's legal status, a distinction has to be made here: Treasury Board directives do not apply specifically to the army, but the army is supposed to use them as a model.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Are you going to be providing us with a report?

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré: I will analyze these issues and give you a briefing note that will elucidate these questions.

The Chair: Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We would like you to point out in the report whether the Canadian army is subject to Canadian law or not.

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré: In terms of directives, the situation is not the same. For example, the army must use Treasury Board directives as a model.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The fact remains that it must respect Canadian law.

The Chair: Thank you for having provided us with this information, Mr. Paré.

Mr. Côté, I would like to thank you for having been here today and remind you that you have been our first witness since prorogation. Together with Ms. Brandon, your testimony has greatly helped this committee advance its work, and we thank you for that.

With respect to committee business, if you want to continue, we have five to ten minutes left for routine motions. We could also add a few minutes to continue our work in camera. We could have a sort of mini steering committee meeting.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I would like to point out that when the committee agreed to have a steering committee, it was also agreed that the latter would sit at times other than during regular committee meetings.

The Chair: There is no motion to that effect, Mr. Bélanger.

We will suspend this meeting and allow our witness time to leave the room. We will resume our work afterward.

Mr. Yves Côté: I thank you very much for your invitation and for your attention. Of course, we remain available to help you in any way possible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will adjourn for two minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera.*]

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