



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Official Languages

LANG • NUMBER 035 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 29, 2008

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Chair

Mr. Steven Blaney

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•(0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Good morning everyone and welcome to the 35th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This morning, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we proceed with the study of bilingualism within the Coast Guard.

I have a few points to submit to you, committee members. First, it will be recalled that the *L'Acadien II* tragedy occurred exactly two months ago today. Three investigations into that tragedy are underway: that of the Coast Guard, that of the Transportation Safety Board, which will be public, and that of the RCMP.

The purpose of our meeting is to examine the Coast Guard's linguistic obligations. The Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, which is managed jointly by the Coast Guard and National Defence, also intervenes in rescue operations. That is why we have a representative from that agency here this morning. But we will of course focus on the Coast Guard.

I have been informed that the Coast Guard has an audio excerpt of a conversation between Ms. Aucoin and the Coast Guard. Out of respect for the families and relatives, and as Ms. Aucoin is the mother of the fourth victim of that tragedy, a victim whose body has not been found, I've been asked that that part be heard in camera, with the consent of committee members, of course.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask a question on that point.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Was it the Coast Guard or Ms. Aucoin who requested that we go in camera? Who asked that that excerpt not be public?

The Chair: Ms. d'Auray, can you clarify that?

Ms. Michelle d'Auray (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): The recording was made by the people from the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre. We don't normally make those recordings public, except in an investigation for investigators, which is not the case here.

We requested Ms. Aucoin's permission to broadcast the recording for the purpose of the committee's business. She granted it to us. Under the Privacy Act, we had to request her permission before playing the recording. We asked her whether she preferred it to be broadcast in camera. She expressed her preference, but we also pointed out to her that the committee might not stick to her choice.

Whatever the case may be, we nevertheless requested her permission.

•(0910)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Coderre.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Did she consent in writing? Did she sign a document to that effect?

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Concerning the broadcast?

Hon. Denis Coderre: Yes.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: We don't have a written document. We obtained her oral consent.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Second—

The Chair: Do you want to address your questions to the Chair, Mr. Coderre?

Hon. Denis Coderre: This is a point of order. You've already given Ms. d'Auray the opportunity to answer. So she's acting as a witness. That's quite important.

Did Ms. Aucoin know that the conversation was being recorded when she received the call? Was she told that the conversation was being recorded?

Lieutenant-General Marc Dumais (Commander, Canada Command, Department of National Defence): I don't think so.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: I don't believe that was the case. If you permit the recording to be broadcast, Mr. Chairman, you're going to hear the conversation. In an emergency situation, we can't tell the person that the conversation may be recorded.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chairman, people's privacy must be respected. We have lawyer friends here. The fact that a person's conversation was recorded without her knowledge and that she subsequently learned that it had been recorded when she was asked for her permission to broadcast that conversation, even in camera, troubles me. I find there are serious problems with the Coast Guard's procedure. When you call a credit card company's message centre, for example, you are informed in advance that the conversation will be recorded to ensure good customer service.

The Chair: Mr. Coderre, that's more a point... For the moment, I simply need unanimous consent to go in camera. I'd like us to continue. If there are no further comments, we'll decide the matter and we can proceed with the hearing of witnesses.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Ms. d'Auray, you said that Ms. Aucoin had expressed a wish, but you didn't say what it was.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Pardon me, Mr. Chairman, I—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Did she ask that it be in camera? Did she specify that she wanted it to be in camera? Is this troubling her or you?

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: I think we simply gave her that opportunity. She said she would like it, but we also explained to her that it wasn't for certain. She said she agreed in any case.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Did she agree to it being public?

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Yes, it would be public if that was the committee's wish.

Mr. Yvon Godin: If that was the committee's wish, she would agree.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Yes, sir.

The Chair: That's clear.

Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Chairman, with regard to this audio recording that is being proposed to us, I want to draw your attention to this. The audio recording must be relevant, as it is in the case of Mr. Coderre's motion, which states that we are here to study bilingualism within the Coast Guard in situations of distress. If that were not the case, I would grant what Mr. Coderre says. This could perhaps even become a criminal matter. In criminal matters, the person must know that it is being recorded, or we must have that person's authorization; otherwise it is rejected by any court. We aren't a court; we're here to determine whether the bilingualism rules are complied with on the boats. This isn't a criminal matter, and it's relevant if it is to prove to us that the services are bilingual or not.

That said, however, I don't know what it contains.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Petit.

It only remains for us to hear the viewpoint of the Bloc Québécois representative.

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Perhaps it's to calm things down, but I'd like to put the matter back in context. I had the opportunity to talk to Micheline Aucoin a few minutes after that conversation. Listening to my colleagues, I get the feeling this is becoming what Ms. Aucoin especially does not want, that is to say a spectacle. It should not be possible to rebroadcast that conversation to the public, for the media to eventually use it and for it then to pop up again in one way or another. She's already had to live through the events described in the conversation. The search was abandoned and her son disappeared. He is still missing; he has not been found. She is still grieving. Imagine if she hears those remarks on the radio, television or any public medium. That would do her an enormous amount of harm. So I ask committee members not to allow that conversation to be used publicly.

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

I believe that all the political parties have had the opportunity to speak. Some parliamentarians wish to speak again.

Mr. Coderre.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I entirely approve of what my colleague Mr. Blais just said. We met the families. We saw them. They don't need more grief and don't have to be a central part of the reason why the Coast Guard is here. I also understand why you want us to hear a conversation in an attempt to contradict what has been said in the media. There has been an enormous ordeal, and the Coast Guard unfortunately contributed to it in a way. That is why we have asked representatives who are central to the situation to come and explain to us what happened.

I entirely agree with what Mr. Blais has said. However, the fact that, in a search situation, a federal institution records telephone calls without the person at the other end of the line being aware of the fact concerns me enormously.

The Chair: All right—

Hon. Denis Coderre: No, there's no “all right”, Mr. Chairman. I have a right to speak as much and as long as I want. I can speak until 11 o'clock; so please show a little respect.

I want to protect Ms. Aucoin's rights. This recording clearly won't be heard in public. I don't want it to be a spectacle. These people shouldn't have to grieve again.

The Chair: You'll have your speaking time, Mr. Coderre. I'd like us to give the witnesses the time—

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chairman, with all due respect, this matter concerns a fundamental principle. Are we respecting a person's privacy?

If all my colleagues think we can listen to this in camera, I'll bend to their wishes, but I want it to be clear that, if a federal institution makes recordings without a Canadian citizen's knowledge, that's a very serious problem. There's also the fact that members of Ms. Aucoin's family and other persons who spoke to her will contradict that conversation. That's why I want us to be prudent today.

The Chair: Mr. Lebel, do you want to raise a point?

Mr. Denis Lebel (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, CPC): I think there is unanimous agreement that this should be done in camera. When I call a coordination centre... But I don't want to fuel the debate. I think we agree and that we're going to do this in a manner respectful of Ms. Aucoin to avoid having her relive the event. I agree with Mr. Blais.

The Chair: Very well.

We'll now proceed with the hearing of witnesses.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman. This matter must be studied in camera, and I see a number of individuals whom I don't know.

The Chair: Pardon me, Mr. Coderre, but it is only the screening of the video that will be done in camera, not the meeting as such.

Hon. Denis Coderre: You mean the audio recording.

The Chair: Yes, I'm talking about the audio recording.

Hon. Denis Coderre: When we come to the hearing of the audio recording, I will ask that only committee members around this table and one assistant per party be able to remain in the room.

• (0920)

The Chair: The usual in camera procedures will apply, but, for the moment, we are in a public meeting and we will be as well after we have heard the audio recording.

That point being clarified, I thank committee members for their sensitivity to the individuals involved in this ordeal.

This morning, we have Michelle d'Auray, Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. She is accompanied by Mr. George Da Pont, Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard, and Lieutenant General Marc Dumais, Commander, Canada Command. Without further ado, let's begin the hearing of the witnesses.

Ms. d'Auray, welcome to the committee.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We thank you for this opportunity to be with you this morning. We'll be making a few preliminary remarks, each in our turn. I will begin and will be followed by Lt. General Dumais, then Commissioner Da Pont. We're going to explain the roles and responsibilities of our various components and provide you with an overview of how communications for search and rescue operations function. To conclude, before the hearing of the recording, I will provide some brief background to the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre.

We necessarily appreciate that it is unfortunately the after-effects of the tragic incident involving the fishing boat *L'Acadien II* that occurred in the night of March 28 to 29 last, during the seal hunt near Cape Breton, that have brought us before your committee today. In the wake of that incident, questions have been raised about French-language communications during the rescue operations.

Allow me first to acknowledge and emphasize how difficult this incident has been for the families and friends of those who were lost, for the survivors and their families, and for the community at large. I sympathize and I am sure my colleagues also sympathize with them with all their heart.

I must also tell you that, as you said, Mr. Chairman, three investigations into this incident are currently underway. One is being conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to assess whether a criminal investigation is warranted; a second is being conducted by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, which has a legal mandate to determine the causes and underlying factors that led to the accident; and, lastly, a review by the Coast Guard was launched immediately following the incident, to examine whether the relevant policies and procedures were followed.

We have retained an independent investigator for this review, Retired Rear-Admiral Roger Girouard, who brings a wealth of experience and expertise to this task. He began his investigation a few weeks ago and intends to complete it and make his report public this fall.

[English]

As the committee can appreciate, I am not at liberty to get into the details surrounding the incident while the investigations are ongoing. Once the reports are completed and issued, we will be able to comment on the findings, results, and recommendations.

The government has committed to making public the findings of all the reports. As my minister, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, has indicated, Mr. Girouard's report will be shared first with the families of the deceased and then more broadly with Canadians.

My minister, the commissioner, and I have committed to ensuring that any recommendations stemming from Mr. Girouard's report are addressed expeditiously.

[Translation]

As regards the delivery of services in both official languages, I want to emphasize that my department, which includes the Canadian Coast Guard, is fully committed to the acts and obligations in this area. With more than 10,000 employees across the country, we are very much aware of the importance of delivering bilingual services in the designated areas.

[English]

Before turning to the language of service, I would ask General Dumais to speak to his responsibilities on the federal search and rescue program. Mr. Da Pont will then address how bilingual search and services are provided.

[Translation]

LGen Marc Dumais: Thank you, madam.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, good morning.

I am Lt. General Marc Dumais and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you this morning. In my opening statement, I wish to inform you on my responsibilities and why I am here.

First, to echo the comments of the Deputy Minister for Fisheries and Oceans, I would like to extend my sincere condolences, on behalf of myself and everyone in the Canadian Forces search and rescue organization, to the families, loved ones and friends of those who passed away in the tragedy of *L'Acadien II*.

• (0925)

[English]

My current appointment is the commander of Canada Command. As such, I have the responsibility for commanding all Canadian Forces operations that occur in Canada and in North America, with the exception of the NORAD aerospace defence mission. Hence, all Canadian Forces missions, whether in defence of Canada or providing military assistance in support to another federal or provincial authority, come under Canada Command.

I report directly to the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Hillier, and my headquarters are here in Ottawa. I have six regional commanders across our country as well as one commander in Winnipeg who provides air capability and who reports to me.

[Translation]

As you may know, the federal search and rescue program is led by the Minister of National Defence. The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is responsible for delivering the maritime portion and this is done through the Canadian Coast Guard. As Commander of Canada Command, one of the missions for which I am responsible is providing the Canadian Forces Search and Rescue response across Canada.

With respect to the Search and Rescue role, three of the previously-mentioned commanders also have responsibilities for the three Canadian Forces search and rescue regions in Canada. They are the commander of the Joint Task Force Pacific region, responsible for the west coast, the commander of the air capability, again located in Winnipeg, who is responsible for the central part of the country, and the commander of Joint Task Force Atlantic region, who is responsible for the east coast.

So, to summarize the search and rescue chain of command related to today's discussions, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Halifax coordinates Canadian Forces and Canadian Coast Guard responses to search and rescue events on the east coast. This centre reports to the Commander Joint Task Force Atlantic, who reports to me, as Commander Canada Command.

While the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre comes under the military structure, it is a joint organization with both Coast Guard and Canadian Forces personnel working together. The Coast Guard personnel are managed through their own reporting chain, and responses to marine incidents are generally dealt with through the Canadian Coast Guard organization. The Joint Rescue Coordination Centre's responsibility is to coordinate the best possible response to search and rescue situations between our two organizations.

[English]

Hence, for the search and rescue mission, my responsibility is the command and control of Canadian Forces search and rescue response. However, in the Canadian Forces other organizations are responsible for the training, education, career progression, and posting of the personnel who are in the search and rescue organizations. Hence, the individuals in the search and rescue system are managed by the environmental chiefs, primarily the chief of the air staff and the chief of the maritime staff. Also, the chief of military personnel, who has already appeared before you, is responsible for developing and maintaining the policy framework required to apply the Official Languages Act within the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Of course, as the one responsible for the delivery of the search and rescue capability, I have a responsibility for ensuring this response is adequate. That is why I am here today. To respond to any concerns there may be with respect to the level of service in terms of the Official Languages Act provided by the Canadian Forces following the tragic events of *L'Acadien II*.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dumais.

Commissioner, perhaps you would like to address the committee.

Mr. George Da Pont (Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

If you will allow me, I would like to begin by stating for the record that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard are fully committed to the letter and spirit of the Official Languages Act and to implementing all requirements flowing from the Official Languages regulations and policies.

Like my colleagues, I would like to express my deepest sympathy to the families and friends of those involved in the capsizing of *L'Acadien II*. The issue has been raised on a broader scale about whether the Coast Guard delivers consistent bilingual search and rescue services. I would like to take a few moments to put this concern to rest.

It may be useful to begin by stating for the record that the Official Languages Regulations require the Coast Guard to deliver bilingual SAR services at offices or facilities where, over a year, there is at least a 5% demand from the public for services in English or French. The Regulations also state specifically that bilingual services be delivered in the Halifax SAR Region. I want to assure the Committee that we meet those requirements.

● (0930)

[English]

Mariners will most often use their radio to engage the search and rescue system. In a limited number of situations, they will also use automated signalling systems to communicate. However, for the majority of mariners who make a radio call, they will contact one of the coast guard's 22 maritime communications and traffic service centres. Nine of those centres offer bilingual services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All positions in these nine centres are designated bilingual at the BBB level. One is located in Newfoundland, two in the maritime region, four in the Quebec region, and two in our central and Arctic region.

If a call is received at one of our non-bilingual MCTS centres, a conference link is established immediately with a bilingual centre. When one of our MCTS centres receives a call from a vessel, it maintains communication with the party on the other end while critical information is relayed immediately to the most appropriate joint rescue coordination centre, or JRCC, that General Dumais spoke about, or to one of the two marine rescue subcentres run by the coast guard.

All JRCCs are staffed, as General Dumais noted, jointly by DND and the coast guard, and offer services to the public in both official languages at all times. The two coast guard subcentres, one located in Quebec City and the other in St. John's, Newfoundland, also offer access to bilingual services at the B level.

Access means that where and when bilingual service is not available at a centre, and that would be the case in our St. John's centre, callers are immediately connected by conference call to the MRSC in Quebec, where French language services are available. While it is part of the standard operating procedure for the centres, I want to emphasize that this does occur very rarely. On average, our MCTS centres field about 950,000 calls a year. Generally, about 10 of those calls on average are relayed to the maritime rescue subcentre in Quebec.

Overall, we respond to some 8,000 marine search and rescue incidents a year. Of those, on average 3,000 lives in those incidents are at risk, and we save about 2,900, a success rate of about 97%.

Once a request for assistance has been received by a joint rescue coordination centre, a response is launched as quickly as possible. All available possibilities of assistance are used, including any vessels of opportunity. That could mean that commercial vessels, fishing vessels, or recreational vessels, whoever happens to be closest to the scene, will be tasked to respond and assist.

[*Translation*]

Our success as a service organization depends heavily on our developing and maintaining strong links with the community we serve – whether that community speaks French or English. This is very important to us, and why we are committed to fulfilling our obligations under the Official Languages Act.

I would now like to turn back to Ms. d'Auray to continue with her remarks.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Thank you, Mr. Da Pont.

As I indicated at the start of my presentation, we have noted that some issues were raised in the media in the days following the capsizing of *L'Acadien II* about the language of service provided to the mother of the missing sealer, Carl Aucoin.

As I indicated, we have brought the audio tape exchanges with Ms. Aucoin and we had planned to play them for you. The search for Mr. Aucoin was reduced on Saturday, March 29, which is to say that the active search effort was stopped. The divers had spent an enormous amount of time trying to find Mr. Aucoin's body and, after a fairly extended period of time, the search effort was reduced. It then became an operation directed by the local police force.

Before the search was actually reduced, the coordinator of the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre Halifax asked the Sûreté du Québec to contact the family of the sealer to advise them of the change in posture. I want to emphasize that it is normal operating procedure to have local officials on the ground contact the families in these situations. The Sûreté du Québec later confirmed that they had unfortunately not made contact and apologized to the family members.

As a result, and most unfortunately, the mother of the missing sealer learned about the change in posture from media reports. She contacted the Coast Guard's Marine Communications and Traffic Services Centre in the Quebec region the next day, Sunday, March 30, to seek information. She was provided with the 1-800 number of the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Halifax, which she called the following morning. In this instance, the Canadian

Forces Aeronautical Coordinator, who possesses an EBB level, answered the call. As you can hear, Ms. Aucoin wanted to know whether search efforts to find her son had been stopped and was informed that the RCMP was now responsible for the matter. She was also given a telephone number in order to reach the RCMP.

Later that same day, Mr. Aucoin's aunt contacted the Coast Guard Regional Operations Centre in Halifax for additional information about the search reduction. The Acting Director of Maritime Services, who is bilingual, returned that call and provided additional information. The next day, on Monday, he flew to the Magdalen Islands, where he remained for a period of time and became the prime contact for all further communication with family members.

You will therefore hear the exchange between Ms. Aucoin and her respondent. As we stated, we have obtained Ms. Aucoin's permission to play this recording to you. I would like to express my thanks to her for that. All that remains for us is to listen to the recording.

• (0935)

The Chair: Very well. Thank you, Ms. d'Auray.

We'll now suspend proceedings for a few minutes to enable technical services to prepare for the in camera portion.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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_____ (Pause) _____

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• (0950)

The Chair: We'll now resume public proceedings. Now that we've heard the audio tape, we'll proceed with the second part of our meeting, the exchange, questions and discussions with parliamentarians.

Without further ado, Mr. Denis Coderre, of the official opposition, will begin.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm willing to greet all three of you, but personally I think it was pointless to hear from the Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the National Defence official today in view of the fact that, in my motion, I asked that the Coast Guard people come and talk to us about the situation in French. I also understand, in connection with staying in the water, that a bit of an effort is being made to drag in a red herring. One thing is certain: without talking about the content of the conversation between Ms. Aucoin and the Fisheries and Oceans Canada people, I repeat that I'm extremely concerned to see that the Coast Guard people, even in an emergency, record the remarks of people who want responses without informing them that their remarks are being recorded. I think we should take a serious look at that.

I was there too, and I also experienced some difficult moments with the families when I went there, on behalf of our leader and of the official opposition, to share that ordeal in a dignified manner with the families and people of the Magdalen Islands. I arrived there the previous Friday, so I don't intend to talk to you just about *L'Acadien II*.

Incidentally, I think the investigation should be independent. When the Coast Guard investigates itself, even though it has retained someone from the outside, I don't call that an independent investigation, and I hope all possible light will be shed on this incident. The Liberal Party of Canada would like a truly independent investigation.

However, I am very concerned. We are presented with statistics, but I don't believe it's appropriate to do that when you're talking about rescues and individuals. If only one person died or only one stricken family was unable to obtain services in their own language, that would already be too many.

Mr. Da Pont, a number of fishermen and hunters tell me they are forced to establish contact with other colleagues, other fishermen, in order to get services in French. Can you assure me that everything related to calls is really bilingual? It seems that what you're telling me and what actually happens in the field are two separate things.

• (0955)

Mr. George Da Pont: As I explained in my comments, 22 centres provide communication and marine traffic services. Nine of those centres provide bilingual services. Every person who occupies a position in those centres has the BBB bilingualism level in communication. Apart from that, as I explained, we've put procedures in place. If there is a call in French, it has to be immediately transferred to a centre that provides services—

Hon. Denis Coderre: From what we were told, when people make a distress call, they are told to call Quebec. One man on a boat was suffering from phlebitis and waited four hours before getting services in French. When you're on a boat and the situation is serious, as far as I know, you don't know everything that's going on when you call Quebec. The Quebec people answering the call don't necessarily know what's going on. I would prefer to ensure that there are services in French in Halifax and that I'll be answered by something other than an answering machine. Instead, don't you think we should ensure that, on all shifts—emergency centres operate 24 hours a day—people aren't required, in an emergency, to walk around with a dictionary because they don't understand English.

Mr. George Da Pont: As I said, we think the procedure in place meets the needs. To my knowledge, language problems have never worsened any situation in search and rescue operations.

Hon. Denis Coderre: So you're saying there's no problem. Can you confirm for me that, as a result of the situation of the families and the situation of *L'Acadien II*, they were required to transfer a bilingual Acadian from Fisheries and Oceans to the Halifax office because they weren't able to provide the services? Can you name that person for me, please?

Mr. George Da Pont: It was Tim Surette, who, at that time, was the acting director of marine services. He had previously worked at Fisheries and Oceans, but he took up his position at the Coast Guard a few months before the incident.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Do you agree with me that the families complained because they found it hard to get an answer in French? Instead of trying to get rid of them and have them come up against an answering machine... In this kind of situation, families deserve dignity and respect and to have someone answer them in their language.

Mr. George Da Pont: I deeply regret the way in which Ms. Aucoin learned about it on the news broadcast. That's definitely unacceptable. As the deputy minister explained, the normal procedure is that the police handle communications on the ground, for all kinds of reasons. In this case, there was obviously a problem, and I deeply regret it.

Hon. Denis Coderre: What are you going to do so that this doesn't happen again? Under your mandate, you're responsible for managing resources. From now on, are you committed to providing adequate resources so that French Canadians, Magdalen Islanders, Acadians, and others, no longer feel like second-class citizens?

Mr. George Da Pont: I don't believe we provide second-class services. We'll definitely change the procedure to ensure the communication is made before altering a search.

• (1000)

The Chair: Pardon me, sir; we can come back to that.

Thank you, Mr. Coderre.

We'll now go to Mr. Blais.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Here's my first question, Mr. Da Pont. Logically, one can get the impression—this is written in your documents—that one of the essential aspects of a good search and rescue operation is communication. Communication means comprehension. In that sense, were you able to communicate adequately, both during the search and rescue operations and in informing the families, particularly that of the young man who is still missing and whose mother is Ms. Aucoin? I don't know how to judge that communication. What do you think about that?

Mr. George Da Pont: You asked two or three different questions.

The services offered at the Marine Communications and Traffic Services Centres are bilingual, at level B. I believe you're asking me whether that level is adequate in the case of search and rescue operations. We think it is because, in the context of those operations, few questions will be part of the communication. We've only received one complaint in the past five years concerning the services provided by the centres, and language problems have never been an issue.

Your other question concerns the family. I accept the fact that communication was not acceptable in this case. However, in a case such as this one, it is normally the police on the ground who handle communication regarding the most delicate matters. That's what we had planned, but unfortunately that's not what was done. There was a breakdown in the process, and I accept that.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Do you agree with me that it would be normal, when a good organization delegates to or asks another party to do a job, to check that the work is done? You mentioned that it was up to Sûreté du Québec to inform the family that the search had been abandoned, but did anyone check to see that Sûreté du Québec had done the job? Obviously not.

Mr. George Da Pont: No, not in this case. It isn't a problem that has previously occurred.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Do you understand that it's not normal? It's already shameful and it makes no sense that the family was not made aware, but it's not normal either, it's not logical, when you delegate, not to check to see whether or not the work is done.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Mr. Chairman, in this case, there was a situation that had not previously occurred. Normally, when transactions are conducted with the police department, whether it's the RCMP or Sûreté du Québec, generally, and to our knowledge, those transactions, those communications are done normally. In this case, there was a breakdown—that's absolutely clear—and we unfortunately learned of it when Ms. Aucoin placed her call. That's why there was a hesitation on the respondent's part, because normally—and I note that a tragic situation is obviously never a normal situation—that communication should have been made. We subsequently contacted Sûreté du Québec to try to get a clear understanding of why there had been this breakdown in communication, which led us to examine our procedures to determine whether, before stopping a search activity, we should check to see whether, when a message has been sent or forwarded to a police department, the communication has actually been made.

As Mr. Da Pont explained, the search and rescue activity ends when the rescue function is completed and when it is no longer possible to think that there will in fact be a rescue. So, at that point, the activity is one of searching for a body, and that's when the transfer is done.

•(1005)

Mr. Raynald Blais: A number of things come to my mind. First, those who are used to doing search and rescue are the people from National Defence and the Coast Guard. It isn't the Sûreté du Québec people who conduct searches at sea. As you will readily understand, if you delegate to another party the task of explaining to a family that the search has been abandoned, a series of questions will be raised. People will ask why it is being abandoned, what has been done, who long it has gone on, what measures have been taken and what new steps will be taken.

All the Sûreté du Québec person can tell the family is that the search has been abandoned—that's it, that's all—because that person won't know much more about it. Understand that I would also like you to be able to consider what it really means when you delegate. If you delegate a power, that's one thing, but if you simply delegate communication, should the information provided be full and complete? In this case, it definitely wasn't full and complete.

The family would have known sooner rather than learn about it in the media. I had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Aucoin a few minutes after the hearing we had earlier. She was angry, disappointed and distressed because the rescue had been called off. I'm telling you that because it's not easy simply to say that you're delegating communication and that the matter stops there. I think you have to go further than that.

The Chair: Please answer very briefly, Ms. d'Auray.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Once again, according to the standards and procedures, I can tell you that the information is communicated to the police, whether it be Sûreté du Québec, the RCMP or another police department. They send people who are able to inform people and deal with these delicate situations. It is very difficult—and that's

why we act in this manner—to have a telephone conversation with people in these kinds of situations. And if it were done by people at our communication centres, that's the way it would be. That's why we work with the local police departments so that these communications are done more directly and so that support can be given to these people in a situation of distress.

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

We'll continue so as to give every parliamentarian equal time.

Mr. Godin.

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

First, on behalf of the New Democratic Party and myself, I would like to offer my condolences to the families of the fishermen who perished on *L'Acadien II*. As the member for Acadie—Bathurst, in northeastern New Brunswick, I know that many fishermen go to sea every day. We've had the misfortune to lose a number of them. I can understand the situation of the families, particularly since we've just had a tragedy in Bathurst. Seven young people and a teacher lost their lives in January.

However, we must keep in mind why we are holding this meeting today, which is to study bilingualism within the Canadian Coast Guard. The questions concerning *L'Acadien II* have already been asked, and I would like us now to focus on bilingualism. This morning, you submitted an accurate retranscription of the conversation that took place between Mr. Aucoin's mother and the Coast Guard. Do you agree on that?

We asked you to appear in order to tell us about bilingualism within the Coast Guard. However, we read the following in the French version of the transcript:

Mother - Bonjour vous parlez français?

JRCC Watch Officer - Oui

The document that you've submitted to us isn't in French; it's a translation of an English document. That simple fact shows a real lack of respect for the official languages. You dared appear before the Official Languages Committee with a document the French version of which does not even contain the word “mère” and in which the officer's title hasn't been translated. I would like you to take note of that.

Furthermore, Mr. Da Pont, you mentioned services provided where numbers warrant, and you mentioned a figure of 5%. I believe you said that numbers in St. John's, Newfoundland, didn't warrant such services and that people had to call from Quebec. Is that correct?

•(1010)

Mr. George Da Pont: In fact, no. The St. John's marine rescue sub-centre transfers French calls to Port-aux-Basques where there is a bilingual marine communications and traffic services centre.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When you say 5%, what place are you talking about?

Mr. George Da Pont: That percentage comes from the Official Languages Regulations. It stipulates that we have certain specific obligations.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But where does that percentage apply, in the case of the Coast Guard?

Mr. George Da Pont: It's the Official Languages Regulations.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I understand that it's the regulations, and I know them, but I want to know what place this applies to in the case of the Coast Guard.

Mr. George Da Pont: Pardon me.

[English]

This applies really in a variety of our centres where we deliver services and where there is a demand and a requirement over 5% for service in the other official language. For example, there is one centre in Newfoundland that I just mentioned, Port aux Basques, that provides bilingual services in that area. Two out of the three maritime communication and traffic service centres in the maritime region provide bilingual services. All of the four in Quebec provide bilingual services. Two in our central and Arctic region provide bilingual services, and there are—

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: We're talking about Coast Guard services, but the boats aren't on land; they're at sea. In the case of francophones, does the 5% apply to people travelling by sea, who come from the north shore to Quebec, from Newfoundland, from the Gaspé Peninsula, Chéticamp or elsewhere in Nova Scotia? Are you calculating the people from St. John's or those who work at sea? I don't see how you can calculate the 5% in the case of fishermen who are at sea.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: There are two aspects to that 5%. The first concerns the delivery of services, that is to say when people call a communications centre. The other concerns activity on a ship, to conduct a search and rescue or to provide some sort of support. I'm drawing the distinction between the two because the delivery of communications services is land-based, that is to say that it is done from communications centres. That's where the 5% issue applies.

I'm going to close on this point. Staff is assigned to a Coast Guard vessel based on the vessel's mission. If a ship leaves on an exploratory mission, the crew will be constituted accordingly. Crews aren't bilingual at all times.

•(1015)

Mr. Yvon Godin: We agreed to broadcast the audio tape in camera, but that's not the case with the transcript. In that transcript, the mother says: "[...] that's no longer your responsibility...". In the audio, the quality of the French is so poor, based on my criteria, that she should have said—

Hon. Denis Coderre: With all due respect, Mr. Godin, we heard the audio in camera and I wouldn't like us to disclose the content of the transcript. However, I agree in condemning the fact that it was written in disgusting French.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The point of order concerns only the audio portion.

The Chair: I'm going to allow Mr. Coderre's point of order. The audio portion is indeed confidential. We can comment on the nature of the remarks, but I would ask you not to cite excerpts of the conversation. In those circumstances, I'll allow the point of order.

Thank you, Mr. Coderre.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I'm going back to the transcript, which is not in camera, only the sound recording is, so that it is not repeated on the radio.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, I have expressed my point of view. Committee members may make comments.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chairman, I request unanimous consent that the transcript should also be part of the audio.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right, I agree. I use it differently. I won't read the transcript.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, we're going to finish with the point of order. I think we've settled the matter. I'll give you back your speaking time.

Mr. Petit, please go ahead on the point of order.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Coderre is right. We don't have any right to do so indirectly, even orally. We agreed that it should be heard in camera. We shouldn't exaggerate either.

The Chair: Exactly.

Gentlemen, thank you for that clarification, which is entirely appropriate.

We'll now continue with a representative of the NDP.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'm going to ask my question differently. She began to ask one of her questions in French, then she continued in English because she felt she wasn't understood.

Do you agree with me?

LGen Marc Dumais: As the individual in question is a member of the Canadian Forces, I'll answer, Mr. Chairman.

Yes, she had to speak in English. I don't excuse that employee. He is an anglophone. He admitted so at the start of the conversation. He meets the language standards of the position and the duties. We're not trying to judge the quality of his French. Under the Official Languages Act, we must be able to communicate with people in the language of their choice.

The employee was dealing with an extremely delicate subject with a person who was really concerned by the tragedy. I believe he made a valiant effort to communicate the information and to explain that it was now the RCMP that was handling the matter. I admit he had some difficulty, but he ultimately managed to communicate with the woman in a relatively sympathetic manner and to give her an explanation.

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

We'll now go over to the government side and Mr. Denis Lebel.

Mr. Denis Lebel: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ms. d'Auray and Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Dumais, it goes without saying that we will reiterate our condolences to the people who have lived through this ordeal. There is no doubt that the hearing of the recording of Ms. Aucoin's discussion shows us, in events such as this, how fragile the opportunity to speak and be understood in one's language is. We can very well understand the situation in which these people must have found themselves.

At the funeral, our government was represented by the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Lawrence Cannon. I spoke with a number of people from the Magdalen Islands, and this event is still very present in their minds. I understand Mr. Blais very well when he tells us about the emotion he experienced, like everyone who was there. That's another reason for us to make sure that, in our country where the two official languages should be respected everywhere, they are respected at serious events such as this.

I would like to go back to the delegation to Sûreté du Québec. First, from whom did the mandate to Sûreté du Québec to make the announcement come? Did it come from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police? We know that, between police departments... Was it done in writing? Has any corrective action been taken since then? We realized that there was a problem, and I understand that that kind of mandate isn't assigned every day, but Ms. d'Auray spoke to us earlier about the observation that was made. Have corrective measures been taken?

• (1020)

Lgén Marc Dumais: As the deputy minister indicated, there's nothing unusual in that for this kind of tragedy, but normally in such cases—I'm talking about the aerial aspect and about the National Search and Rescue Secretariat—we work in close cooperation and communication with the families involved, whether it be in the case of an air crash or another problem of that kind.

In this case, I don't know exactly who decided to delegate the communication to Sûreté du Québec, but it's a more or less normal procedure since the distance was enormous. In addition, this involved a marine situation. We have to delegate the power to communicate on our behalf to a professional organization, such as the local police force.

I don't want to speak for the Coast Guard, but at one point shortly after the incident, it delegated an individual to liaise directly with the family to avoid communication problems. Each case is different, but I assure you that, in every situation, people do their best to be sensitive to an extremely emotional and difficult situation for all participants and all those who are directly affected. It's somewhat sad that the communication was not made as soon as possible, but, prior to that, we had used those people to communicate with families. There was simply an unexpected breakdown, and the people have apologized. It's unfortunate, but that is what happened.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: According to the decision tree, in terms of delegation of authority, the Joint Coordination Centre calls the local police. Since the coordination centres are staffed by people from both the Coast Guard and the Canadian Forces, that depends on the person in the position at the time. However, it's really the coordination centre that decides whether or not to continue the search. As I explained earlier, we really have to consider whether

there is a sufficient chance of finding a survivor at that point. We conduct all possible searches to find the person, then we move on to the—pardon the expression—recovery stage. When the decision is made, it is then communicated to the local police department. In those situations, this is done at the local level because it's easier to find the people on the ground. I don't want to go into all the details, but the delegation is made by the Rescue Coordination Centre.

Mr. Denis Lebel: Earlier Mr. Blais said it couldn't be done in a strictly platonic way by means of an announcement. There obviously has to be a discussion in advance. We need to know the context in order to explain the reasons. I don't know whether corrective action was taken, but it will clearly have to be done that way: it's too important.

You told us about the Joint Rescue Centre, and there are Canadian Forces people on the committee. We summoned the Canadian Coast Guard people, but we see that we had to hear other witnesses as well.

I'd like you to explain to me how the centre works. The call was received by a Canadian Forces person. However, I thought that was more the role of the Coast Guard people. How does that kind of centre, in which partners are involved, operate?

• (1025)

LGen Marc Dumais: Mr. Chairman, it's an operations centre comprising a number of offices, some of which belong to the Canadian Forces and others to the Coast Guard. There is a very close connection between the two organizations, but they each have their own chain of command.

As Ms. d'Auray explained, the person who answers the call is the one who is nearest the telephone and on duty at that particular time. The person responsible for the centre is normally a military member on duty. These are essentially Canadian Forces centres housing representatives of the two partner groups taking part in the search and rescue mission.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Denis Lebel: Yes, in part. However, I would like to know, because it is that coordination centre that received the call, what percentage of employees come respectively from the Coast Guard and the Canadian Forces.

LGen Marc Dumais: I believe that the centres are staffed by approximately 20 persons, a dozen of which are military members. The others are Coast Guard employees. As I said, this partnership works particularly well. The same model is in use on the west coast. All the centres receive more than 900,000 calls a year. The three search and rescue centres in the country receive more than 9,000 a year.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lebel. Your time is up.

We'll now begin the second round with Mr. D'Amours.

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

Thank you for being with us this morning. I'm going to put my questions specifically to two persons, Mr. Dumais and Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Dumais, with all due respect, the next time you submit documents to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, you should make sure they are presentable. The problem is not simply that they are incomprehensible; they are full of mistakes. With a level of language of this kind, a school student would fail grade 6. We're talking about the federal government, and you are here in the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This document that you have submitted to us is shameful. I hope that, next time, the message will finally get through. I may not be good in French, but this document is very poor.

It was said that the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre met the needs. They're dealing with francophones, but, in the west, I'm not convinced the percentage of francophones and unilingual francophones is that high.

Mr. Da Pont, you said that it met the needs.

Mr. Dumais, you say that it meets the needs of the office, but tell me, you who are a francophone, without going into details, whether you managed to make some sense of this exchange. Despite all the good will that your officer was able to show, were you able to understand the slightest comment that could help that person, who was relatively calm, despite the extremely difficult situation? Did you understand anything?

LGen Marc Dumais: My answer is yes. I understood the exchange that took place in the context of that communication, as well as the intention of the captain in question.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I hope you didn't understand the text as such because it's full of errors of French. I can't read the text. It nevertheless concerns the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre. During a rescue operation, the people aren't underground; they're at sea, and people try to find ways to help them, not only those who have disappeared, but also their families.

Take the example of the 911 system. People will try to assist the person until help arrives, knowing that the person may be in distress, in crisis, but that's not what was done in this case. They tried to get rid of the people. From what I heard, that's what the people felt.

Once again, you'll tell me that errors occurred. At one point, do people realize on their own that they aren't able to provide adequate assistance to those who are in distress and to their families, or to tell them that they're handling the situation, that they will find the person? All they do is give them a telephone number. Even though they are in distress, they tell these people to dial a telephone number and hope they will be served and get some answers. In these kinds of situations, the Government of Canada, the Coast Guard and National Defence are unable to assist people from start to finish.

Let's suppose that the call to your centre came from a person in great distress. This is the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre. How would the communication have taken place? Would it have resembled this one?

●(1030)

LGen Marc Dumais: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I take responsibility for the documents in question. They come from my office.

Second, with respect to the coordination centres and bilingualism needs, it must be clearly understood that these are rescue centres. Their primary responsibility is to save lives. That's their mission. Of course, under the Official Languages Act, services must be provided in both official languages.

As Mr. Da Pont indicated, to our knowledge, there have been no cases in which an inability to communicate in the first language had a negative impact on the outcome of the mission.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dumais.

We'll now go over to the government side and Mr. Daniel Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Good morning to the three of you.

You have a joint committee of the Armed Forces and the Coast Guard; you work in the same buildings. Earlier you said that your employees had level B and could speak English and French equally well, in accordance with the requirements of their positions. You also said that there had been no complaints. However, according to a newspaper article that I have in front of me, Mr. Gilles Rhéaume filed a complaint concerning bilingualism.

Do you remember receiving that complaint?

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: Mr. Chairman, to our knowledge, that complaint was filed with the Commissioner of Official Languages, not with the department.

Mr. Daniel Petit: But you were aware of that complaint.

Ms. Michelle d'Auray: We were informed of it. We were also told that the Commissioner's office was examining the document to determine how it was going to handle it.

Mr. Daniel Petit: I'm going to read you what's written in the May 27 issue of *L'Acadie Nouvelle*:

He also wants to know whether the act that requires the Coast Guard to offer search and rescue services in both official languages at all times was complied with.

You see that we've turned around this question from the outset. Following these events, you no doubt searched your conscience to see what had happened.

I'm speaking to Mr. Dumais or Mr. Da Pont. Perhaps Mr. Da Pont can give me a better answer. It's not that I don't want Mr. Dumais to answer me. You have to prepare for distress cases. Do you consider bilingualism adequate in these cases? I say "adequate" from a rescue and distress perspective. It may be adequate to determine whether a boat is coming, but we don't care about that; that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about distress and rescue cases.

How do you see that, Mr. Da Pont?

●(1035)

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you for the question.

My view is that so far it has proven to be adequate. The basis I would put that on is as I indicated, and as General Dumais indicated: to the best of our knowledge, we've never had a situation, a search and rescue case itself, where linguistic issues were seen as contributing in any fashion to the case. So from the perspective of the actual search and rescue operation, no.

I would also say that as with any other organization, the level of our service is reviewed and audited from time to time on a regular basis to determine whether the level in which the service is being provided is adequate. Generally, that has been sustained in the reviews in the past.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Petit: Now I'm going to ask Mr. Dumais a slightly more specific question.

You are responsible for the offices there, what's called the joint centre. The Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean was reopened so that there can now be a lot more francophones, so they can work in French and also have access to the positions you have today.

Have you yourself detected any weaknesses? Now is the time to tell the committee. From a rescue and distress perspective, have you seen anything in the language area? Are you considering any improvements that, based on your experience, could be made? Naturally, one can always say that there is a personnel shortage, that it isn't paid well enough and that there isn't enough vacation, but have you sensed any weaknesses? All that must have made you search your conscience. Did a connection fail? We know a connection failed at Sûreté du Québec, but we won't talk about that. Quebec will handle its own problems. But I want to know whether there was a problem.

LGen Marc Dumais: From my point of view, absolutely not. I can only talk about the coordination centre in general and for the Canadian Forces. As I said earlier, all the positions are filled. As regards the staffing of positions, search and rescue organizations are the priority. So the positions are filled and people are well paid. There's no problem in that regard.

As I said, the search and rescue program is an outright success for the Canadian Forces, and I believe the same is true for the Coast Guard. The system has been in place for years; it has proven itself and works extremely well. It saves thousands of lives every year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dumais.

As Mr. Petit has used much of the time that was allotted to him to ask his question, I must reduce the time allotted to you to answer it.

We'll continue with Mr. Blais.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Thank you very much.

The first point I would like to discuss with you is the testimony of Ms. Aucoin, who showed her disappointment and frustration with the degree of communication she had with the people in authority. I find it hard to understand what you're telling us. I get the impression you're telling us the level of quality of communication is adequate. However, when I spoke to her by telephone on Sunday afternoon, Ms. Aucoin was clearly distressed after speaking to the people. She wasn't satisfied. She was disappointed and frustrated.

Are you as well?

• (1040)

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Chairman, I have a point of order.

Mr. Blais is speaking as a witness. According to him, he was told certain things. Then let him be a witness and perhaps I'll ask him whether Ms. Aucoin actually spoke to him. He cannot report those

remarks indirectly. Earlier Mr. Coderre introduced a motion that we adopted. We can't go any further. In saying things like "she told me that...", Mr. Blais alludes to facts that we cannot talk about. He should be careful, Mr. Chairman. The spirit of the document cannot even be discussed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Petit. I can't allow your point of order, since Mr. Blais represents this riding as a member. He is referring to exchanges he had with his electors. So I'm going to ask Mr. Blais to continue.

Mr. Raynald Blais: I'll let you answer my question, Mr. Da Pont.

[*English*]

Mr. George Da Pont: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I indicated that I really deeply regret the way that Madame Aucoin heard the news. That should not have happened. I accept fully that this is not the way anyone should hear that type of news. I would never pretend that this was the case.

When I indicated that I was confident that the level met the requirements, I was talking about the actual search and rescue case itself, the actual operation. Here, obviously, we're talking about communication after the event. As we indicated, it was very regrettable. We have already explained how that happened. Obviously, when Madame Aucoin called the joint rescue coordination centre, they were unaware, in taking the call, that communications with the Sûreté had not in fact taken place.

So there were a number of factors, and obviously the individual dealing with the call didn't have that information at their fingertips.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Allow me to interrupt you. The question doesn't concern that, but rather the exchange between Ms. Aucoin and the authorities responsible. She wasn't satisfied. That's what she told me. Are you satisfied with the quality of that exchange?

[*English*]

Mr. George Da Pont: There it's harder for me to comment, because as far as I'm aware, that's not been expressed to us directly. But we recognized very quickly that the communications were not what they should have been. That is when we asked one of our francophone directors from the maritime region to go to Îles-de-la-Madeleine. He stayed there a number of days. He became the primary contact with the families to deal with just that lapse that had taken place.

So once we became aware of it, we took immediate steps to correct that unfortunate problem.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: The joint coordination centres operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They handle distress situations, disasters and tragedies. Can you guarantee us that proper bilingual communication services are offered 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: What I can say is that in our bilingual centres, all of the positions are designated bilingual. And in those centres, almost every individual occupying those positions meets the language requirement.

[Translation]

Mr. Reynald Blais: You're saying that all positions are designated bilingual or virtually so, but I would like you to give us more details. What do you mean by "almost"? What does "bilingual" mean in the way you use it?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: No, I indicated that nine of our MCTS centres provide bilingual services. In those nine centres, all the positions are designated bilingual at the B level, and the incumbents in all those positions, with only a very small number of exceptions, currently meet that requirement.

[Translation]

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

We'll now continue with Mr. Godin.

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

Mr. Dumais, earlier I believe you said you were satisfied with the organization from the standpoint of bilingualism. Do you agree?

LGen Marc Dumais: In general.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Since we're here to talk about bilingualism within the Canadian Coast Guard, I'd like to know whether francophones can take search and rescue training in French.

•(1045)

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: Yes, it is. French language training is provided for the individuals who operate and work in the MCTS centres and also on the vessel.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: For example, is the search and rescue mission coordinator course given in French?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: To the best of my knowledge, we give all the courses in English and French at the Coast Guard College, but we don't give them each year.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Are the sea search planning course and the search operations chief course given in Canada's two official languages?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: I would have to verify that, sir, and get back to you.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'd like to give you a document that comes from a website that states that the search and rescue mission coordinator course is currently offered in English only. The sea search planning course is currently offered in English only. To take the search

operations chief course, candidates must be able to communicate and take the course in English.

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: I will look into this situation, sir—

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Is that part of the 5%?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: If I could respond, please, as I indicated, we do offer the courses in French and English. We do not offer them in French and English every year.

I will verify that and advise the committee—

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Is it in English every year and never, or virtually never, in French?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: It depends on the registration for the courses and the linguistic needs of the people who are registering for the course. I will verify that and advise the committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I've previously filed a complaint with the Commissioner of Official Languages since we had the same problem at the Department of National Defence. There was a form in English, the Admission Form to the Marine Institute, to register for one of the courses.

Are the people who work aboard the Sir William Alexander bilingual?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: Yes, from time to time. As I think the deputy minister explained a little while ago, we provide the service as part of the crewing process, and it depends on where the vessel is going to work and what it's going to do. We assess whether there is a need to provide a bilingual service. If there is, we would have people on board.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: About a month ago, the Sir William Alexander was in the Caraquet region. The Gaétan Haché fishing vessel made a call to find out if there was ice in the entrance to Caraquet. The conversation took place in English only. Mr. Gaétan Haché, who is the boat's owner and captain, spoke in his broken English. He was told that it was open at Bas-Caraquet, but that there was ice as he arrived at the wharf. That was in English. Mr. Haché said in English that he would be there in two hours, and he wound up in the ice.

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: Again, sir, I'm not aware of that situation. I will have to check into it.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: There's a problem.

Earlier, Mr. Dumais, you said that you thought the conservation was quite good and that Ms. Aucoin had been required to switch from French to English because she felt she wasn't understood. You can't say there isn't a problem. You're talking to a person who is experiencing emotion. Imagine if that person hadn't understood English. How would he have understood broken French? The lady understood English since she conducted part of the conversation in English.

Will you admit that there is a problem with regard to official languages? It has always been recognized. It's now recognized at the Department of National Defence. At the Coast Guard, they have a problem. Do you admit there is a problem, particularly since some courses are only given in one language?

LGen Marc Dumais: As regards the military staff at the coordination centre—

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'm talking about the boat.

LGen Marc Dumais: I can't talk about the boat.

Mr. Yvon Godin: So let's talk about the centre and about the people I name, like the chief of search operations.

The Chair: Please answer very briefly, sir.

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

LGen Marc Dumais: There are seven duty officer positions, and five of those seven positions are occupied by persons with a functional bilingual linguistic profile.

Mr. Yvon Godin: They have level BBB.

LGen Marc Dumais: No, they have levels EBB and EEE.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much.

We have the possibility of doing a third round. I can allocate three to four minutes to each political party. Let's start it right away.

Mr. Rodriguez.

• (1050)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): I'm going to make a very brief comment before handing over to Mr. Coderre.

It looks like the entire human aspect is being lost in all this, and I deplore that. People are becoming mere figures and statistics. You're wondering whether there are enough people to warrant hiring bilingual individuals. If so, they may have a B or BB level, or whatever. The whole human aspect and the importance of communicating in a situation of crisis or distress are being left to one side. I wanted to say that because I find it utterly deplorable. I hope these decisions aren't being made just to cut costs.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Da Pont, when people are in a situation of stress, have you noticed that they return to their mother tongue? You speak good French, but you've spoken mainly in English. You speak both languages, and that's entirely to your credit.

I put myself in the shoes of the families and especially of the fishermen. Let's get this clear: it's not just the matter of *L'Acadien II* that's at issue here. I wonder why they stopped the search and abandoned *L'Acadien II*. I'd also like to know why they stopped diving, when the diver wanted to continue. Ms. d'Auray talked about the divers; we could talk about them a little more, but I promised that we would discuss the official languages component.

Some fishermen say they have to link up at sea with the third, fourth and fifth boats. They can't speak English. It's not a sin; Canada has two official languages. You are a federal institution and you have to offer services in both languages. The question doesn't just concern the operations centre. Unfortunately for us, every time we receive a report from the Commissioner of Official Languages, the worst two departments in that respect are Fisheries and Oceans Canada and National Defence. Ms. d'Auray is more sensitive to the francophone issue. I know her; she will definitely be working on that.

You can't tell me that all the Coast Guard operators covering all shifts are bilingual. The fishermen definitely won't go and see you because they have to work with you every day. I understand them. Our work as members is also to ask questions in order to help in helping them. Don't try to make me believe that all the operators are bilingual, Mr. Da Pont. That's more than a story. We have too many examples showing the contrary.

What are you going to do, apart from calling Quebec City? When I am at sea in the Halifax or Cape Breton regions and I ask someone from Quebec City a question, that person doesn't know what's happening there. The staff in Quebec City isn't as concerned and doesn't have the same information to answer my question.

What are you going to do to change the situation and put on a more human face? I'm also very concerned about the transcript of the conversation. I understand why Ms. Aucoin was devastated.

How are we going to ensure that, instead of calling Quebec City, staff... We can't simply say that Quebec is French and the rest of Canada is English. What are we going to do to make you really comply with the Official Languages Act?

[English]

Mr. George Da Pont: First of all, I would say you've asked obviously a number of different questions. I do want to say for the record that I personally and the coast guard are deeply committed to providing services in both official languages. We do take those obligations very seriously. We have made efforts to ensure that this is the case.

I did not say that every operator is bilingual. I did say they were bilingual in nine of our 22 centres. I think the issue you're raising is an issue of whether the B level is sufficient, and I think that is a legitimate question. What I would say is that we have examined that on a number of occasions in the past, working with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. We've done audits, we've done reviews—

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Da Pont, when a person is at sea and in distress, do you tell them not to worry because your bilingualism level is B? Tell me frankly.

Mr. George Da Pont: For the third time, I'm telling you that I entirely agree with you. The communication with Ms. Aucoin wasn't coherent.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I'm not talking about Ms. Aucoin, but about the fishermen.

The Chair: Mr. Coderre, we're going to let Mr. Da Pont answer your question.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I'm talking about the whole thing.

Mr. George Da Pont: This is the first time I've heard that fishermen have to call other boats three or four times.

• (1055)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Da Pont.

Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Chairman, guests.

I find what we heard this morning horrible. This tragedy had already occurred many hours before Ms. Aucoin communicated with the Canadian authorities responsible.

We can't even talk about your qualifications, but the French that was used with Ms. Aucoin was of poor quality; it was mumbling. In a crisis, please show some empathy; step out of your role as commissioner. You're a father, let's suppose your son or daughter was in a state of stress. You would like people to be able to answer you coherently when you are in a state of profound sadness.

It's not a B level that's required, but rather a C level, so that the people on the front line can respond adequately.

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau, pardon me for interrupting you, but I've just been informed that there is going to be a vote in the House in 25 minutes. I need unanimous consent to continue the meeting. If I get it, we will continue. I would ask you to finish your question.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Yes, all right.

You also have to consider assistance and support. The idea isn't simply to say that the information has been transmitted and then move on to the next call. You also have to offer people assistance and support, have the information to hand, so that you don't leave them waiting. That makes no sense.

I was a teacher. When a student had been forgotten, when he wasn't put on the bus, you can be sure that the information given to the parents was quite a bit more concise and that numerous efforts

were made to reassure them. In this case, we're talking about the probable death of a person, about searches, and so on. The French is of poor quality. A C level has to be required.

If I'm not mistaken, you said in the Public Accounts Committee that 22 centres were bilingual. However, I've now learned that nine are. They have to be able to respond to all citizens across the land in both official languages. I hope that's clear. I won't even ask you for your opinion on that. I suggest you go and see your officers responsible. We will do our job and ensure that the quality of service in these kinds of situations is improved. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

[*English*]

Mr. George Da Pont: I would just like to make two points, if I could.

I've apologized for and I regret, as I've said on a number of occasions, the way the communications were handled with Madame Aucoin. I would not disagree with the points you made. That is why, once we became cognizant of that, we sent someone to Îles-de-la-Madeleine to become the primary point of contact to provide, in a compassionate and sensitive fashion, all of the information that you have indicated.

I agree completely with you that's what people deserve, and I regret very much the way this particular incident unfolded in that situation.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That completes our meeting this morning. I would like to thank our witnesses, Mr. Da Pont, Ms. d'Auray and Mr. Dumais, for making themselves available and for their dignity in the circumstances. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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

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