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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 80th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today is Thursday, May 9, 2013. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), we are here to study main estimates 2013-14, with regards to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

[English]

Before we begin, I understand there's agreement from members of this committee that, in light of the fact we only have one witness today and we're only dealing with one vote on the estimates, we'll adjourn at five o'clock today. That will allow members an hour and 20 minutes to ask questions or to provide comments to the committee.

Before we give the floor to Mr. Fraser, I understand that Madame Michaud would like to have the floor.

[Translation]

Ms. Michaud, go ahead.

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Thank you very much.

I would like to get some information for the committee. We asked Minister Kenney to meet with us. He said he would appear before Easter, and then he was supposed to appear in May, but we still have no set date.

Do you know when Minister Kenney would be available to appear before us?

The Chair: I don't have a date at this time.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Okay, but are efforts being made to have him appear before the fall, ideally?

The Chair: The efforts are ongoing.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Okay. We do need to discuss some pressing issues, so it would be nice to hear from him before we break for the summer.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Éline Michaud: There is something else. Quickly, I would like to give notice of two motions.

The first motion reads as follows:

That the Committee invite the Privy Council Office to appear for a two-hour meeting about official languages and the Governor in Council appointment process before June 1, 2013.

The second motion is the following:

That the Committee hold a public meeting, as soon as possible and no later than June 1, 2013, to address concerns expressed by officers of Parliament in the letter of September 12, 2011, to the Chairman of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages regarding their independence and accountability, focusing solely on the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

The Chair: Thank you for your two notices of motion, Ms. Michaud.

We will discuss them after the break, on Tuesday, May 21. Is that okay?

[English]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Chair, just on a point of clarification, we're aiming to finish at five o'clock, but if there are still questions that we want to ask, can we still ask those questions after that time?

The Chair: Certainly.

Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Chair, sorry, I'm not a regular member. I just want to make sure those motions will be sent to the normal member of the committee. That's the rule.

The Chair: Yes. We will ensure they're distributed to members of the committee, and we will discuss and debate those motions on May 21, when we return from our constituency week.

[Translation]

Mr. Fraser, you have the floor.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to let you know right away that my throat is a bit sore. So, if my voice gives out, my colleagues could certainly answer any questions.

[English]

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I would like to thank your committee for its interest in the operations of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

As an agent of Parliament, I provide parliamentarians with unbiased advice based on objective and factual information. This is to help you hold the federal government accountable for its stewardship of the equal status of English and French in Canada.

[Translation]

I am accompanied today by the following people: Nancy Premdas, Assistant Commissioner, Corporate Management; Ghislaine Charlebois, Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance; Sylvain Giguère, Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications; and Colette Lagacé, Director, Finance.

The Office of the Commissioner has a budget of \$23.9 million to support it in its mandate for 2013-14. That amount includes \$15.1 million in salaries, or 72% of the main budget. Our workforce consists of 163 full-time equivalents.

• (1535)

[English]

The expenditures planned for 2013-14 take into account the loan of \$2.8 million from the Treasury Board to pay the cost of moving our offices to Gatineau. This relocation will allow us to streamline our operations and examine the possibility of sharing resources with other agents of Parliament who will be located under the same roof.

[Translation]

Our operations are divided into the following three program activities: protection of Canadians' language rights, promotion of linguistic duality and internal services. I suggest we look at these activities one by one.

To protect the language rights of Canadians, the Office of the Commissioner resolves complaints through investigations, conducts audits, evaluates the performance of federal institutions and intervenes in court when appropriate.

[English]

The expenditures planned for this activity are \$6.5 million, which represents 27.4% of the total budget. The possible impacts of budget cuts on administrative programs and processes linked to official languages continue to preoccupy me. I will continue to observe the impacts of these budget cuts, both in Ottawa and in the regions. I will also continue to intervene, based on what is revealed by our investigations and observations.

[Translation]

I know that the numbers in the last census raised some concerns in a number of francophone communities across Canada. That is why we will analyze the impact of the 2011 census on bilingual services provided to official language communities by government offices across the country.

During the 2013-14 fiscal year, the Office of the Commissioner will release the results of an audit on how the government fulfils its language obligations with respect to provincial transfers.

[English]

It will not be a financial audit, but rather a review of the accountability process. The Office of the Commissioner will also publish audit follow-up reports for National Defence, Service Canada, and the Halifax airport authority. We will also begin two new audits. One will be a horizontal audit on the impacts on official languages of new service management models in a limited number of federal institutions. The other will be on Treasury Board Secretariat's role in the review of the impacts of proposed budget

cuts on official languages. We will also follow up on two others: one on Air Canada, and the other on Industry Canada.

I will continue to use my authority to intervene before the courts when necessary. During the next year, I will act as joint appellant in the *Thibodeau v. Air Canada* case appealed to the Supreme Court. This is to ensure consistent interpretation of Air Canada's language obligations and the primacy of the Official Languages Act.

[Translation]

Court proceedings against CBC/Radio-Canada are ongoing, and we will be able to evaluate the next steps once the CRTC renders a decision on the renewal of CBC/Radio-Canada's licences—specifically the licence for CBEF Windsor.

In 2012-13, the Office of the Commissioner received 505 complaints from people who claimed that their language rights had been infringed. Of those complaints, 415 were admissible. To exercise our investigative powers in the most efficient way possible, we will conduct a survey of the complainants and federal institutions involved. Moreover, since February 2013, the Office of the Commissioner has been providing the possibility of filing a complaint online.

[English]

We have also implemented a strategy to reduce the number of files in arrears. On April 1, 2012, there were 624 complaint files that had been ongoing for more than a year, 437 of which involved a single incident. As of March 31, 2013, only 69 of these files were still active.

Expenditures linked to promotion of linguistic duality are \$6.7 million, which represents 28% of the total budget. To promote linguistic duality, the Office of the Commissioner communicates regularly with parliamentarians, official language minority communities, federal institutions, and the Canadian public.

[Translation]

Canadians fully benefit from our research, our studies, the distribution of our information products and our exchanges with many key stakeholders. Since September, these exchanges have been able to take place on social media. The Office of the Commissioner now manages a Facebook page and a Twitter feed to promote the conversation with Canadians.

[English]

Over the next year, the Office of the Commissioner will communicate regularly with federal institutions that anticipate making investments under the new road map. This will be done to better understand the expected results on the vitality of communities and the teaching of official languages.

With the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017, I will follow up on recommendations from my last annual report, aimed at raising the government's profile when it comes to linguistic duality in Canadian society.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Furthermore, from 2013 to 2015, we will carry out an information campaign on the rights of the public who transit in airports.

Four studies will be published this year. A study on the bilingual capacity of the judiciary of superior courts—conducted in collaboration with the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario and the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick—will be completed shortly. That study will be a thorough examination of the federal judiciary appointment process and the language training offered to superior court judges.

[English]

We will also finalize a study on language training in the federal public service and another on English-speaking seniors in Quebec. In addition, we're working on a study on Governor in Council appointments. Lastly, we will look at a few potential study projects such as a survey of Canadians on bilingualism, the possibilities of learning a second language in colleges and CEGEPs, and a literature review of the effects of social media on our official languages.

[Translation]

It is also important to encourage the Canadian public to celebrate linguistic duality during various events across the country. For example, this summer, my staff will be on hand throughout the Canada Games in Sherbrooke to promote Canada's linguistic duality to thousands of visitors.

This effort is part of a strategy to work with organizers of major events to ensure that they include Canada's linguistic duality in their planning.

[English]

Our third program activity allows the Office of the Commissioner to bring together resources that support the organization as a whole, including asset management, finance, and human resources management. This activity is allocated a budget of \$6.7 million, which is 28.2% of our total budget. This amount does not include the cost of technological updates, which were \$1.1 million for this year, or the cost of moving to 30 Victoria, which was \$2.8 million. Together these represent \$3.9 million or 16.4% of our total budget for 2013-14.

[Translation]

These services, which are essential to any organization, ensure that taxpayers' dollars are used efficiently and transparently.

With that in mind, we have invested in new technological tools to optimize resources. For example, employees now rely on video and teleconferences to reduce the need for travel, increase productivity and lower operational costs significantly.

Thank you for your attention. I would now be pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Ms. Michaud, go ahead.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank each and every one of you for joining us today. It is always a pleasure to have you with us.

I will begin with some questions about an issue that was studied by the Office of the Commissioner. I am talking about the maritime

search and rescue centre in Quebec City. That was in the news again today.

Commissioner, you personally expressed concern on a number of occasions over the closing of the maritime search and rescue centre in Quebec City, and over the fact that the Trenton and Halifax centres still don't have enough bilingual employees.

In early April, your staff followed up on the implementation of your recommendations. I think that you can already tell us whether the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard have fully implemented your recommendations. Have they?

Mr. Graham Fraser: The follow-up has not yet been completed

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, go ahead.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The goal of today's meeting is to study the public accounts. Are we straying from our agenda if we talk about any departmental issues?

A voice: This is in the news.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I would like the members of the government party and the opposition parties to focus on the public accounts of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. We are straying from today's agenda.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Yes, Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Mr. Chair, allow me to say this.

The commissioner himself mentioned in his presentation some of the studies the Office of the Commissioner has carried out. My question is in the vein of what has already been said here. Mr. Gourde will have an opportunity to speak when his turn comes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud and Mr. Gourde.

Ms. Michaud has a great deal of leeway in deciding what questions she wants to ask, as long as they are relevant to the work done by the Commissioner of Official Languages.

● (1545)

[English]

If the questions are in any way related to official languages, I'm going to allow them. Make sure it's tied in some way to the official languages policy of the government or the office's spending, and I'll let the questions stand.

Go ahead, Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will let you answer, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Ms. Michaud, you asked whether we have followed up on our report. The follow-up has not been completed. However, I have been very involved. I am keeping a close eye on the process. I just saw a draft version, but the report is not finished.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Without going into detail, can you tell us whether or not the recommendations have been fully applied?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I cannot discuss that until the follow-up has been completed. We hope to finish it by June. But until then, since we are only halfway done, I cannot comment.

Ms. Éline Michaud: When will you make that information available?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have our sights set on June.

Perhaps Ghislaine can provide you with more information.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): As the commissioner said, we will send the follow-up report to the parties involved in the investigation in June.

Ms. Éline Michaud: So when will the report be available to the general public?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: As this is a follow-up report on an investigation, it will not be made public.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Okay.

Mr. Fraser, will you be able to share your conclusions or at least your thoughts on the situation?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Investigation reports and related follow-ups put us in a somewhat paradoxical situation, as we are subject to confidentiality terms, but the complainants are not. That means that the complainant is absolutely free to make the whole report public. That puts me in a difficult situation in the aftermath, since—

Ms. Éline Michaud: You may be asked to comment. I completely understand.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I have to adjust to the reality. If we have complied with the confidentiality terms, but the document has been made public, it's difficult for me to remain silent on the topic.

Ms. Éline Michaud: I understand. So we will see what will happen once the involved parties have received their copy of the report. We will see whether you will be asked to comment at that time.

Let's stay along the same lines. My colleague Yvon Godin asked the Office of the Commissioner how many violations of the Official Languages Act have been committed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada over the past three years. We have been unable to obtain an answer to that question.

Could you explain to us why exactly you cannot answer? Don't you keep a record of violations for each federal institution in order to assess their compliance with the Official Languages Act?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that was just a matter of the time needed to do this kind of research. In 2012-13, there were 15 admissible complaints, of which 2 underwent a facilitated resolution process and 13 were formally investigated. I can specify what parts of the act the complaints pertained to.

Ms. Éline Michaud: We would appreciate it if you could send us that in writing, for the committee's benefit.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, certainly. Allow me to go over the figures very quickly. There were 16 complaints in 2011-12 and 5 complaints in 2010-11. In addition, we can specify what part of the act was related to each of the complaints.

Ms. Éline Michaud: We would appreciate that. Thank you.

I would like to stay on the topic of the maritime search and rescue centre in Quebec City. Like everyone else, you have probably seen today's news. We have received no confirmation from the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, but it would appear that the government is considering reversing its decision to close the Quebec City centre.

Did you receive the same information?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I will not go into detail. However, I can tell you that, over the course of the follow-up, I have spoken with the Deputy Minister and the Commissioner of the Coast Guard. I do not want to repeat our conversations, but I can tell you that we discussed the importance of offering services in both official languages, based on the initial report.

• (1550)

The Chair: Okay, thanks.

Mr. Gourde, go ahead.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the commissioner for joining us today.

I was looking at the accounts. For 2011-12, you had a total of \$22,355,036. In the 2012-13 estimates, there was an initial amount of \$20,711,000, which is a decrease. In the end, we are talking about some \$23 million. I understand that this includes the moving expenses. You did manage to cut the Office of the Commissioner's budget.

Can you tell us how you did that and what kinds of efforts you had to invest?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We invested a great deal of effort and managed our operations very well.

I will ask Ms. Lagacé to provide a more in-depth account of our actions.

Ms. Colette Lagacé (Director, Finance and Procurement, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): In 2011-12, we undertook an A-based review. The goal of that exercise was to ensure that all the money allocated to the Office of the Commissioner was really being used to carry out our mandate. Eighteen employees within the Office of the Commissioner have been reassigned. We have analyzed all of our expenditures. Our operating expenses, such as travel spending, have been reduced. The commissioner now flies exclusively economy class.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Has the number of employees changed over those years, or has it remained roughly the same?

Ms. Colette Lagacé: According to the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Regulations, we are allowed to have 177 FTEs. However, we have 163, for a difference of 14 FTEs.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, in your presentation, you mentioned 600 active or backlogged complaints. However, over 400 of them concerned the same issue.

Can you consolidate them, or do you have to deal with them separately? Each complaint must cost a certain amount of money. If you have 400 complaints about the same issue, how do you proceed?

Mr. Graham Fraser: On several occasions over the past two years, certain incidents sparked an influx of complaints. The 400 complaints concerned Aveos, which was an Air Canada subsidiary. The complaints had to do with the right to work in French that had been affected by the structural change. We had previously also received 800 complaints about Radio-Canada's decision to close the CBEF Windsor production centre. That decision led to not only 800 complaints, but also a court intervention regarding the responsibility.

When we receive a huge number of complaints, they are consolidated. However, that work often requires analysts to invest a significant amount of time, especially in a case like that of CBEF Windsor, where we knew in advance that the case would probably end up in court.

However, that is not necessarily more expensive than the case of a complaint on a complex issue, which requires more time, more investments and more consultations with our lawyers. The investigation can become very complicated, even if we are talking about a single complaint. So we cannot necessarily establish a connection between the number of complaints and the cost in terms of resources.

I will ask Ghislaine to elaborate on that.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: In the case of the 437 complaints, we are indeed talking about a single investigation. In such cases, we consolidate the files. As the commissioner said, a large number of complaints can require a bit more time, but we do not conduct a separate investigation for each complaint. Only one inquiry is carried out.

• (1555)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: We are under the impression that many complaints are backlogged, but if 437 of them were consolidated, we wouldn't be talking about 600 complaints but rather 125. It would be considered as the same complaint, but repeated 437 times.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Every complainant has rights. So we have to respond to each complaint individually. A file is opened for each complainant because, at the end of the process, every individual has the right to recourse if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of our investigation. That does not mean 437 investigations are carried out, but we have to deal with the files individually because of the complainants' rights.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You can combine the two. The entire case will probably have the same outcome, but that does not necessarily cost more. The initial cost will be the same as that for another complaint. This should also be taken into account.

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, but we cannot tell 436 people that they have been unsuccessful because someone before them had not submitted that complaint and that their rights will therefore not be

taken into account. Every complainant's right must be respected, even if an investigation is conducted on the same incident.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Is it not considered a class action for the same complaint?

Mr. Graham Fraser: No.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: I will stop here. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Pacetti, you have the floor.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you to the officials for coming.

I have a quick technical question.

When you talk about how much is going to be spent on protection of language rights, the expenditures planned for this activity are \$6.5 million. But when I look at the budget I see for the protection of language rights, it's \$6.694 million and not \$6.5 million. Is there a typo?

Then on the promotion of linguistic duality you're saying you are going to be spending \$6.7 million, but it's \$6.527 million. Has that been inverted? Yes. Okay. I can go home now.

I'm going through my comments on your brief when you state you have already audited certain aspects, whether it be National Defence or the Halifax airport authority. You already disclose where you are going to be auditing the next two times. Are you not displaying your hand?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We haven't made that decision on the next two yet.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: It says here you're going to be looking at the Treasury Board Secretariat.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is a study rather than an audit.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: It's an audit. We always inform the federal institutions that we're going to audit them.

[Translation]

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: How far in advance do you inform them?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: That depends. We inform them at the very beginning of our process. We meet with them, we explain to them what the process will consist of—

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: What kind of a timeframe are we talking about when it comes to the audit?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: We don't have a pre-established timeframe. That depends on the extent of the audit and the number of institutions we will—

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: So you have no deadline for submitting the audit findings?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Usually, we follow the production schedule. We will begin those two audits this year, but they will probably be published sometime next year.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: The expenditures involved in those audits are reported each year. So it's not at the end, when the report is submitted, that the expenditures are—

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: No.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Here is my next question.
[English]

I'm reciting it from the English.

"I will continue to use my authority to intervene before the courts when necessary." Are there not costs related to that?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, there are.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: And those would be in the estimates as well.

Mr. Graham Fraser: They are an estimate in the estimates that are included in the protection as opposed to the promotion category for our expenses.

• (1600)

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Who would incur those costs? Would the Department of Justice help you, or would you have to hire outside consultants?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It depends on the case. One of the reasons we have been able to attract and to keep such talented lawyers is that we are able to offer them the opportunity to appear in court. That's sometimes larger—

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: So you may do it in-house with the lawyers that work for the department?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right. Our lawyers are not Justice lawyers for exactly that reason, because when they appear in court, if we are taking a federal institution to court, they are appearing with Justice lawyers representing the other side. It's very important that we are able to hire our own lawyers to work for us.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: So you have to keep them busy.

Mr. Graham Fraser: There are occasions when we seek an outside legal opinion, if we need an expert opinion.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: So all that would be costed in your estimates?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: I'll go straight to cost. I think Monsieur Gourde alluded to it, but you went from \$22 million to \$20 million in 2013, and if I subtract the moving costs, you will probably be around the same number as last year.

If you were able to cut your budget by 10%, why not another 10% for this year?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We went through a process, quite carefully, of hiring IBM to do an A-base review. They identified certain areas where they felt we were top-heavy as an organization, and we streamlined certain parts of the structure of the organization. I think we have been able to absorb some of the costs we've had to undertake, such as the upgrading of our technology system, by the careful management of those costs, and to eliminate some positions by not replacing people when they retired or moved on.

I think at this point, if we were to take another cut of the kind that you mentioned, it would begin to have a direct impact on our ability to serve complainants.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Okay. That's what I wanted to know.

There's no money in the budget for programs. None of this money is for programs that are given to organizations.

Mr. Graham Fraser: No. We have no statutory ability to write cheques to any organization.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Okay.

I have another question on the complaints. Again, I'm taking this from your presentation. You had 415 complaints last year, from 2012-13, and you said, "As of March 31, 2013, only 69 of these files were still active".

You didn't disclose how many were actually opened in this fiscal year. Or is that the same fiscal—?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is the same. That 469 that you're referring to is basically the backlog. By Ghislaine mobilizing her branch and investing a great deal of effort, we were able to reduce that backlog of 469 down to 69.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: What would be the normal complaint number in a year, if that's a fair question?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It's a bit lower this year than it has been in the past, but it has generally fluctuated between 600 and 1,000 complaints. We don't have a clear explanation as to why there's been a slight decline in the number of complaints.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Are there more complaints from English-speaking people or French-speaking people?

Mr. Graham Fraser: French-speaking people.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Is that because they can't get the service in French?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right. Although, there has been a decline in the number of what we call part IV complaints, the service to the public complaints.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: How do you determine whether a file has been closed?

If the person can't get service in French, what's going to change all of a sudden that the person will be able to get service in French? I'm assuming it's English Canada.

Mr. Graham Fraser: There is a particular process that the branch goes through to determine that a file is completed.

Ghislaine, do you want to explain it in more detail?

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Charlebois, and then we're going to go to Monsieur Trottier.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Well, the role of the commissioner is to determine if the complaint is founded or not, and then he can make recommendations. That's usually how the process is finalized.

We also have what we call the facilitated resolution process, where we will not determine if the complaint is founded, but we will try to find a solution to the satisfaction of the complainant. We work with the federal institution. If they commit to resolve the situation or put some measures in place, and we're satisfied, we can close the file at that time.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Trottier, go ahead.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us today.

I have a question about the estimates. Two major activities are involved—the protection of language rights and the promotion of linguistic duality—in addition to internal services. Does the protection consist of investigations, while the promotion consists of audits and studies?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Audits are part of the protection component. Complaint investigations, which come under audits, are also part of protection, as are our legal division's activities.

Promotion activities include communications, statements, policies, visits, trips I make to official language minority communities, publications and studies.

So studies are part of promotion, while audits are part of protection.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Promotion is an important aspect of your work. I assume that you receive and respond to requests to attend conferences in language communities across the country.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, I make about 50 appearances a year.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: How are decisions related to studies made? How do you establish priorities among the numerous options?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It is part of the discussions we hold regularly. Mr. Giguère and his team suggest priorities for studies, and we discuss them at our executive committee.

Mr. Giguère, could you go into more detail on that?

Mr. Sylvain Giguère (Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): In fact, we appeal to everyone internally and even externally, for study proposals. We can collect about 20 or 30 ideas for very interesting studies. We filter these ideas, which is in fact a framework for the studies. After that, there may be about 10 left. Obviously, since we do not have the capacity to do 10 or so studies in one or two years, the executive committee has to choose two or three studies per year.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Are the studies sometimes chosen based on the number of complaints you receive?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Not necessarily. It is often part of our discussions on our strategic planning and priorities that we are going to establish for a three-year strategic plan.

Based on our consultations with the community, we will sometimes make a decision or defer it. For example, at some point, we might have had the idea to do a study on a certain aspect that affected the anglophone community in Quebec. Based on what we heard, that community did not think it was appropriate at that time, whereas the anglophone community is now more open to us doing a study on the problem of seniors within that community.

Therefore, if a study affects the communities, we hold consultations. We do not want to impose anything that does not meet the community's needs.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Do you think you have the resources you need to undertake studies that fall under your mandate?

Mr. Graham Fraser: There are always strategic choices to be made. We would always like to do more. Given the current budget constraints, I think we are still managing to do relevant work on research and studies.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: I have a question about your offices. In addition to the office in the National Capital Region, you have five regional offices: one in Montreal, one in Toronto, one in Moncton, one in Winnipeg and one in Edmonton. What do these regional offices do? How many employees are there in those offices?

• (1610)

Mr. Graham Fraser: There are about 25 employees in the offices across Canada. They work mostly on promotion.

The role of the offices in the regions has evolved. My predecessor raised a problem with investigators in the regions investigating complaints. It was a fairness issue, in the sense that the investigators were living in the communities and were investigating federal institutions. There was a perception of bias for the community. So, my predecessor decided that people should not conduct investigations in their own regions.

Therefore, we made some changes to our ombudsman role. We are in the process of focusing the role of people in the regions on promotion. It is true that we may wonder why these investigators are in the regions when they are not conducting investigations in the regions. However, I should say that the contribution of these people is enormous. We did not change our minds overnight that these people should no longer work. There are people who contribute enormously, even though they are in the regions.

It is a transition toward using these offices for promotion with federal institutions and the community.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trottier.

[English]

Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Commissioner, for your presentation. It was excellent.

I have a couple of small questions. First, in your presentation you said that the Office of the Commissioner “has a budget of \$23.9 million to support it in its mandate for 2013-14. This amount includes \$15.1 million in salaries, or 72% of the main budget.” When you go through the programs, \$6.5 million is for protection of language rights, \$6.7 million for promotion of linguistic duality, and internal services is another \$6.7 million. That is not adding up to \$23 million; it's much more.

I understand that you are speaking about the programs, but you are making this statement on the salaries of \$15.1 million, or 72%. Can you explain this difference?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes. The salaries are not separate from the activities to the extent that if the bulk of the expense an analyst incurs doing an investigation is that analyst's salary, and similarly for somebody who is working on a study or doing parliamentary relations....

We do not have program costs in the same way that a department has program costs. We don't operate programs. We don't fund programs in the community. The bulk of our expenses are salary costs of people responding to complaints and people doing their work.

Nancy, do you want to elaborate on what the other 30% is?

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: You have 72%, which is \$15.1 million for salaries, only the salaries. What about the other 28%?

Ms. Nancy Premdas (Assistant Commissioner, Corporate Management Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): The other percentage is used to run the programs and run the office.

For example, the next-biggest investment for the office in terms of its budget is in professional services. We use those professional services for internal services purposes, whether we need to do a threat and risk analysis for the office or we need to develop new policies to comply with Treasury Board requirements, for example.

But it's also to run the office: paper, staplers, photocopiers, that kind of material. As well, there are aspects such as travel and hospitality related to conferences, or when we have meetings.

That's what the other percentage covers.

• (1615)

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Okay.

When you established the three programs—protection of language rights, promotion of linguistic duality, and internal services—you made them basically each 30%.

Can you explain a little bit more about internal services, and about what you mean by internal services? I understand the program for the protection of language rights. It's a very important issue. The promotion of linguistic duality is also very important.

But internal services, is it the expenses of your offices?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It's the expenses of our offices. It's the human resources. It's finance. It's internal audit. It's access to

information. It's the various support elements that enable us to do our work.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

It's always a pleasure to have you here.

Now, \$120 million is allocated by the new road map, in terms of Citizenship and Immigration, into language training for economic immigrants. I'm assuming that's language training in the majority language, for the most part, no?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am making the same assumption, but I'm waiting to see the details. I have exactly the same question about the relationship of that \$120 million to the goals and objectives of the road map.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: As a follow-up question on the promotion capacity—you've kind of answered it—what kinds of sums, or what kind of action, is being taken to ensure that new arrivals, and I'm speaking particularly in the west, have access to the second language, and to training in terms of it?

Mr. Graham Fraser: One of the challenges we have as a country is that, while there is a constitutional right clearly defined in section 23—the right to access to minority language education—there is no constitutional right to second language education. The result is that there's very uneven access for people to language training in the other official language. You raised the fact that this \$120 million has been identified as part of the road map. The road map has gone through a change of name from being a road map for linguistic duality to being a road map for official languages, which I assume is the reason why this funding, which is about funding the learning of what I, like you, assume is the majority language, is.... I have certain questions as to whether that really is in continuity with the goals and objectives of the previous road map.

The road map was renewed, and the figure went from \$1.1 billion to \$1.124 billion, which is a 1.3% increase. If you subtract that \$120 million, you're looking at a 9.5% decrease in funding for the previous programs. Like you, I have some questions as to what purpose that \$120 million is going to go to and what the relationship is to the original goals of the road map, which this purports to be renewing.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

For me, it seems like a bit of a contradiction in what “official languages” is supposed to be. If people coming in from another country wish to learn the second official language in the west, assuming it's French, but don't have that opportunity or are not supported in that quest to learn the second language, how does that help the promotion of French in the west, if the largest growing part of the population is immigration?

Mr. Graham Fraser: All I can say is that I think that's an extremely good question. I will be taking note of it.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

I'd just like a quick discussion about the minority press. Your predecessor, I believe in 2003 and 2005, put out two studies talking about the importance of the minority press and laying out recommendations about the importance. We're seeing, in print in particular, a rather disturbing decrease in the amount of advertisement taken out in minority press newspapers, particularly community newspapers in the minority official languages.

Have you been following that? Is that something that concerns you?

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Benskin,

Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am concerned about the state of the minority press, because I think the minority press plays a critical role in the vitality of minority language communities. One of the things I have noted and have become very aware of is that there has been a change in the criteria for funding small community newspapers that would depend upon the post office to distribute their publication. This has had a very deleterious effect particularly on *La Liberté* in Manitoba, because it serves the entire province.

The minority press is not unique in facing an advertising problem. The written press everywhere in North America is facing particular challenges, but I think the written press still plays an extremely important role for the vitality of minority language communities. I think it's important that role be recognized and supported.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. O'Toole.

[Translation]

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fraser, welcome. Thank you for your report.

[English]

I was going to start with a question on the estimates, but my colleague, Madame Michaud, decided to bring more political issues into this. I thought I'd take advantage of the clarity you might be able to provide.

While I was in the air force, I had the good pleasure of serving at a rescue coordination centre in Trenton, Ontario, with the Coast Guard and with air force officials, many of whom were francophone. In-house, the ministers repeatedly said that language services would be a priority.

But on that issue, I'm wondering if you, as the official languages commissioner, could comment on the geography of a location.

When I was at Trenton, our rescue centre had responsibility for Ontario, parts of western Canada, and the Arctic. Certainly I think from a language perspective the priority would be service in both languages for people in distress, whether the call was in Trenton, Halifax, or Victoria.

From your point of view, is it really the language service that's the priority and not necessarily the location where the bilingual, francophone, or anglophone Coast Guard official or air force official is present?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I'm a little hesitant to answer in detail, because these are some of the issues we are dealing with specifically in our follow-up to the recommendations we made on our investigation into the proposal to move the search and rescue centre.

What I would say is that it is critical, when vessels are in distress, that the people who are on the other end of the radio are able to understand them, and that time is of the essence. As you know from your own experience, a successful rescue is often a matter of responding in seconds or minutes rather than hours. So a clear understanding of what is being said by somebody who is in a position of extreme stress is extremely important.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: You made a very good point. Thank you. The example of a vessel was a good one. Obviously a vessel, whether at sea, or on a lake or a river, would be using radio or cellular to get through to a coordination centre, whether Trenton or Halifax. In my experience, having worked in Trenton with some outstanding francophone Royal Canadian Air Force officers, we had that ability. But I think the minister has said that it's good to ensure that consistency across the country.

Getting back to estimates and your presentation, I have two remaining question in the amount of time I have so I'll put both of them out there. There was some discussion about reductions internally, travel and other things. I'm wondering if you could provide a little more detail. Is that reducing travel between your regional offices?

My second question is in relation to your outreach to the summer games and summer festivals, which I think is admirable and very innovative. My question is this. Do you proactively look at what events of a national nature might be happening across the country, or are many of these organizations coming to you? How is that communication going?

• (1625)

Mr. Graham Fraser: It's a bit of a combination of both. This was one of the results of our work on the Olympics. Following the Olympics we produced a publication that has a checklist of things that organizations need to take into account if they're going to be able to deliver their events in both official languages. There is a publication within the publication, literally a tear-out, and the person who is responsible for language issues at the Canada Summer Games in Sherbrooke said he found this very valuable. He literally has it pinned on his bulletin board beside his desk.

Our Montreal office has been working very closely with the organizers at the Canada Summer Games in Sherbrooke. I'll be there for the opening. Other people will be there throughout the games.

Similarly, from the outset I've had a series of meetings and our people have had a series of meetings with the organizers of the 2015 Pan American Games. It's been a very collaborative relationship. I think they have found it useful. We have found it useful, and so we have been looking ahead at the various events that are coming down the pipe, and whenever there's an announcement that there's going to be some kind of event we say, "Is there a role? We should be in touch with somebody so that they are able to take advantage of the experiences we have acquired", and now we are working with these different organizations.

In terms of reducing expenses, we now have audiovisual links to our regional offices, which we didn't have for a long time, so in the past to have a meeting that would include people from the regions, more often than is the case now, they would fly to Ottawa. Now it's much easier just to punch them up on a screen and have that meeting.

Even though I'm travelling as much if not more, my own travel expenses have dropped over the years, because I have made a point of flying economy rather than flying executive and the difference in cost is significant.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Good afternoon, everyone. Congratulations on your work.

I would just like to come back to a point on the issue of the Quebec City marine rescue sub-centre. You shared your concerns as an officer of Parliament. The Auditor General shared his concerns, as well. So, there are two independent officers of Parliament who have shared their concerns about the capacity to provide adequate bilingual services, should the rescue sub-centre be moved. I think we can say that there might be a problem here. Now back to the matter at hand.

I greatly enjoyed your presentation, Mr. Fraser. I see that you have worked hard and will continue to do so. This year, you are going to publish the results of an audit on transfers to the provinces, as well as follow-up on audits of National Defence, Service Canada and the Halifax Port Authority; we will have some nice files to study here. You are also conducting audits on management models, on the role of the Treasury Board Secretariat, on Air Canada and on Industry Canada. And it doesn't stop there. In fact, three other studies are on their way: one on the magistrature, one on public service training and one on appointments made by the Governor General. I think we can draw inspiration from these topics in establishing our agenda for the year.

Point 2.1 in your report on plans and priorities reads as follows: "Determine the trends of federal budget restraint measures and their impact on upholding language rights and advancing linguistic duality." We know that we are in a period of cutbacks. We have heard from Minister Moore. According to the numbers, at Canadian Heritage, there will be a decrease in investments in developing official language communities and in promoting official languages.

How will you follow up on all of that? Are you going to write a report on the impact of cutbacks on the linguistic obligations of the government or of the various departments? Will you provide us with a report?

• (1630)

Mr. Graham Fraser: It's an ongoing concern that we take into account in our analyses of the work of the departments. It is an aspect we will study. I think we will also conduct an audit of the Treasury Board, isn't that right?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Yes. As Mr. Dionne Labelle said, the audit will be of the role played by the Treasury Board in instructions given to federal institutions at the time of cutbacks.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Will we receive it sometime this year?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: It probably won't be published this year, but next year. The audit will take place this year. The report will be made public because it is an audit report.

In addition, a certain number of files are related to complaints that followed the cuts. We are in the process of finalizing them. Those reports will definitely not be published, but we hope to be able to analyze the complaint files as a whole. Perhaps the commissioner will be able to make some public messages about the findings of those investigations.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: We are awaiting that information impatiently.

In the same document, your report on plans and priorities, it states that you hope to obtain a 60% response to the recommendations that the office of the commissioner has made to the various departments. In my opinion, a response rate of 60% to your recommendations isn't much.

Why that target? Is it because it seems that the departments are not reacting to your recommendations?

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, I wouldn't say that.

We have developed an evaluation grid for the results of our recommendations. Some of them have been accepted, others have been accepted partially, and some have not yet been accepted. That this leaves some leeway. Some recommendations that have not necessarily been implemented in a given year could be in the future.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Would you like a higher rate than 60%? You seem to be saying that 60% is acceptable. Why not set the rate at 80%?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is a good question. We are going to think about that and determine whether we have been too generous or too demanding.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Yes, you need to be demanding.

May I continue?

The Chair: You can ask a brief question.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: The last time you were here, you were in the process of studying the report on labour standards for federally regulated private sector industries in Quebec. The report was submitted quickly by the Minister of Industry. What were the findings of your study with respect to that report?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We did not do a formal study.

Sylvain, would you like to provide more detail on that?

Mr. Sylvain Giguère: We basically studied the entire report, but there was not enough information to give us a very clear picture. If we wanted more information, we would have to do our own research. That is what we took from the report.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Galipeau, you have the floor.

• (1635)

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome Mr. Fraser and the assistant commissioners.

I greatly appreciate the cooperation between this committee and the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, institutionally and personally, as well. Unless I'm mistaken, you have appeared before the committee some 30 times since 2006.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Probably. I think I testify about half a dozen times a year, on average.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I would like to ask you a personal question. Was moving your office motivated by effectiveness? Will you be more effective when you are on the other side of the river?

Mr. Graham Fraser: There were a number of reasons. We were given an opportunity to be closer to other officers of Parliament. Two of my colleagues had to move.

For Public Works and Treasury Board, it is also an opportunity to apply the Workplace 2.0 standards, which will be applied across the public service.

I thought to myself that it would also be an opportunity to work with my fellow officers of Parliament and to benefit from shared services. Moreover, it was better to adapt to these new standards in a new building than to adjust in the existing building. Public Works found it helpful that we were involved in the process.

The government is sending a very clear message to institutions. It wants them to consider shared services. We are well aware that our independence could be threatened if we had to share services with the departments we are supposed to oversee. However, we are protecting our independence by sharing services with other officers of Parliament.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I understand, and I greatly appreciate your response.

You are here with three assistant commissioners. How many assistant commissioners are there in total? I thought to myself that it might be sort of like CBC/Radio-Canada, where there are 26 vice-presidents.

Promoting official languages, especially when you live in a minority community, like I have my entire life, is a delicate business. It often leads to demagoguery. It is important to be very cautious in that respect.

The roadmap that was released about a month ago is 40% more generous than the one from the previous government. It is the result of about 30 personal consultations that the minister held with communities across Canada. The roadmap represents what the minister learned from consultations with the linguistic minorities at that time.

I can tell you, if you don't already know, that money has been earmarked for communities of recent immigrants precisely because they had expressed a desire to have access to the minority language. From the time they arrived in Vancouver, Asian community members have been camping out all night in front of French immersion schools there. They want access to education, not in the majority language, but in the minority one. Since they want to become full Canadians, they want to have both languages. The money added to the roadmap is allocated specifically for that.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Kudos, if that's the case. The way that \$120 million was presented did not make that clear, and it concerned me. However, if it is indeed going to language training in both official languages, great. As you said, the census figures show that immigrants coming to Canada are more proficient in both official languages than English-speaking Canadians born and bred here.

• (1640)

[English]

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I'll tell you what an old psychiatrist friend of mine once said. "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar".

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you very much, Monsieur Galipeau.

Madame Quach.

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank everyone for being here.

Since you are talking about immigration, I will continue along those same lines.

According to Statistics Canada's national household survey, the results of which were made public yesterday, there is not a single French-speaking country among the top 10 largest countries that are sources of immigration for Canada.

Do you have any comments on that observation, given that you are promoting both official languages?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think it is extremely important for official language minority communities to have access to francophone immigration. In the past, there were very well-established targets for francophone immigration to provinces outside Quebec. We wanted it to represent at least the percentage that the minority represented in the general population. Unfortunately, we have not managed to obtain those kinds of results.

I think some recruitment programs have been successful, such as Destination Canada, which recruits in France, Belgium and Maghreb, I think. I think it is a significant contribution to the vitality of official language minority communities.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

You spoke about targets that have not been met. Citizenship and Immigration Canada has a francophone immigration target of 1.8%. I personally find that very low. It seems to me that we had consulted communities that wanted the target to be 4.4%.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right.

• (1645)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: You say that there are recruitment programs for francophone minority communities. Do you think there is a lack of funding for that kind of recruitment program?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I know that the Provincial Nominee Program was transferred from the provinces to Ottawa, much to the Province of Manitoba's regret, in particular, as it had used that program to highlight the importance of francophone immigration. This cooperation between Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Province of Manitoba and the Société franco-manitobaine is an example I point to often. I think that this cooperation is ongoing and that there are signs that these immigrants are integrating successfully. They arrived some eight years ago under this program. Their integration into Manitoban society is the proof of the success of this program. The spirit of cooperation was at the root of this success.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: I think that we both agree that there is a lack of funding and resources in this area.

In your 2013-2014 Report on Plans and Priorities, you set a 50% target for official investigations, which must be resolved in 175 business days or less. This means one investigation out of two. Are there sufficient resources to reach that objective?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think so. I'm going to ask Ghislaine to complete my answer. I think that the complexity of complaints is often related to the reluctance of some departments to reply in an timely manner.

Ghislaine, are there other factors?

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: You talk about the reluctance certain departments show. Does that happen often?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: No. We usually have good cooperation from federal institutions. The 50% target was set because of the large number of backlogged files.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Can you tell us how many files are backlogged?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Currently, there are still about a hundred files that have not been processed after more than two years, and another hundred that go back from one to two years. The rest of the files go back less than one year.

Our objective is to have a reasonable inventory of files, one which would allow us to reach our service standards in 100% of cases, ideally. These standards are set at 175 business days for official investigations and 90 business days for facilitated resolution files.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: How many investigations are assigned to each investigator? Would having more investigators allow you to process files more quickly?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Earlier, we mentioned that we had done a review of A-base services a few years ago. One of the recommendations was precisely that we have additional temporary resources to help us to reduce the backlog. We are going to obtain these resources this year. We are going to hire people who—

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: How many?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: We are going to add approximately five temporary resources. We hope that this will allow us to greatly reduce our backlog and reach our service targets next year. That way, rather than having a 50% target, we can set the bar somewhat higher.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I have a couple of questions, but first of all a couple of comments. Of course, France is Canada's fifth- or sixth-largest trading partner, I think. In fact France made one of the largest investments in Canada in Total, the oil and gas company that's located in my riding, I'm very proud to say. In my riding as well is the oldest francophone community in Alberta, Plamondon, which is full of francophones.

Mr. Graham Fraser: One of them is sitting one over from you, I think.

[Translation]

An hon. member: Not Plamondon.

[English]

Mr. Brian Jean: Everybody wants to be my constituent. I'm not surprised.

One thing has been of interest to me. I've been trying to learn French for some time, and I've been here now almost nine years, nine years in June. I moved to Quebec, while I've been here, eight years ago. In fact, I like to say that I have the perfect life. I sleep in Quebec, work in Ontario, and pay taxes in Alberta. Conservative governments for generations have made sure I can do that and pay low taxes.

In fact, it's odd to believe, but I actually pay somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$10,000 a year fewer taxes than some of my colleagues on both sides of the House here, just because I live in Alberta. I didn't want to depress anybody by saying that, but I do want to say that Alberta has a tax advantage there—

• (1650)

Mr. Royal Galipeau: You're gloating, eh?

Mr. Brian Jean: —and some other provinces should consider it.

During my period of time in Quebec, I've been trying to learn French, and one thing I've noticed is that closed caption TV is something I utilize a lot. When I watch English programming I have closed captioning on, and when I watch French programming I have closed captioning on.

I've noticed that French closed captioning is not available when there's an English program on. So when somebody speaks on the news in English, for instance, I can catch 70% of the French words and I understand and I can put the story together if I get the pictures, but I notice that in fact the technology is there for two-closed-caption programming—I did some research on this. So if you have a program giving news in English, it could actually have closed captioning to have French and English, so you could follow in both languages.

I'm not sure if anything has ever been done in that area. I did a lot of research on it, and I discovered that it only costs programmers about \$35 to have the extra closed caption programming on. So they could have dual closed captioning in English and French, and it could actually be required that programmers across Canada have that.

My question to you, because I couldn't find any empirical evidence proving my theory, is this. Have there been any studies to indicate whether or not, first of all, that would be a successful method by which people could learn the other language—which I think it would be? Secondly, could there be an advantage there for cultural exchange? Certainly, when I started to learn French, I understood more about my francophone colleagues. Frankly, I understood more about their position on the French language, on culture, on the different priorities they have compared to Albertans, and I wanted to do that before I could vote properly on anything here.

So Mr. Fraser, have you heard of something like this, and if so, what have the studies shown?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I'm intrigued by your comment and by the research you've done on this.

To the best of my knowledge, we have not done any research on this subject. The nearest thing I can think of, and it's not a direct comparison, is that Finland has the highest literacy rate in the OECD.

One explanation I have read for this is that in contrast with a lot of other European countries, they do not dub any of their English-language programs; they run subtitles. There is an incentive for young children who are watching their favourite programs to be able to understand the subtitles, and ultimately it helps them learn English as well. It's always amazing the degree of trilingualism among Scandinavians.

So I don't even have a formal reference for you, but that's one of the explanations I've seen for why Finland has the highest literacy rate in the OECD—their use of Finnish-language subtitles on English-language programming.

Mr. Brian Jean: Has my conversation intrigued you enough to do additional research on this to find out whether or not the empirical data would substantiate my theory?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It's something that I will bring back and we will discuss, but I've learned not to make any spontaneous commitments involving our research resources before seeing what our commitments already are.

Mr. Brian Jean: You sound like you're more of a politician than a....

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Brian Jean: Very good. Thank you.

Those are all my questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Michaud.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you very much.

I'd like to go back to the issue of the \$120 million that was transferred to the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. We in the NDP feel that the government's intentions in this regard are not always clear. I would like to be able to share your mild optimism, but unfortunately we see that there are 9% cuts to the Roadmap for

Canada's Linguistic Duality, if one deducts the \$120 million that was transferred.

I'm very anxious to see what use will be made of it, really. We are still waiting for Minister Kenney to appear before our committee. At that time we may be able to obtain clarifications on the situation, or at least we hope so.

To get back to your presentation, I wonder about the sum of \$3.3 million that was added to pay for the cost of the move to Gatineau. According to the information we have, your budget had been increased, but you say that this is a loan.

Which item in the commissioner's budget will provide the reimbursement payments?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that they will come from the management services budget, but over a period of nine years.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Do you think this may hinder your investigation capacity or prevent you from doing your work?

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, I don't think so. In fact, this is quite an interesting initiative. This is the first time we have decided to work in this way. Our colleagues from the privacy commissioner's office did not find that either and they were the recipients of a similar loan.

• (1655)

Ms. Éline Michaud: We will see the results over time.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right.

I think it was an important gesture to support the autonomy of the agents of Parliament.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you.

I will now move on to other topics. In fact, I have three questions and I would like you to answer yes or no to two of them.

Is the investigation you launched into the complaint about the appointment of a unilingual anglophone Auditor General still open, yes or no?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you. We will come back to that.

I would now like to discuss the matter of the unilingual cards used by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Did the minister confirm that he would stop using the unilingual cards in the course of his activities?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Could you repeat your question, please?

Ms. Éline Michaud: Is the minister going to stop using the unilingual cards?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have not yet received the minister's reply. In fact, a preliminary report was sent to the institution—

Ms. Éline Michaud: If I understand correctly, there has been no reply in that regard. Is that correct?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Not to my knowledge.

Ms. Éline Michaud: I can see that was a no.

You were present when I tabled the notices of motion, at the beginning of the meeting. Regarding the motion concerning responses from senior officials to agents of Parliament, you know that the Conservative-dominated Standing Committee on Public Accounts has decided not to take any action in response to this letter, which dates back to 2011.

What is your reaction to that? Do you not feel that this shows a certain lack of respect toward the work of the agents of Parliament?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We had hoped that the pilot project which asked a parliamentary group to consider the funding requests from agents of Parliament would become permanent, but that did not happen. So we are left a bit unsatisfied. The letter was a reply from all of the agents of Parliament to a letter that had been written by the President of Treasury Board, at the time—

Ms. Éline Michaud: Yes, we are aware of it.

Mr. Graham Fraser: The purpose was to ensure that embarrassing incidents would not happen again, and to verify whether agents' activities were subject to sufficient oversight. We said very clearly in this letter that there is an accountability process, comprised in particular by my appearances before this committee, the reports, and the internal audit we conduct as well as the Auditor General's audits. Since I have been in this position, the Auditor General has given us his seal of approval.

We said that the important thing was that there be a meticulous process used when choosing agents of Parliament. That was the gist of our letter. We have not received an official reply.

I don't know what methods are used to make the selection. Be that as it may, I would be quite willing to reply to questions from this committee if I were asked to appear on that topic.

The Chair: Very well, thank you.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Commissioner, I must congratulate you. The opposition often tries to trap you with their questions. They seem to try to put partisan words in your mouth, which reflects poorly on the spirit of the committee. That said, I want to congratulate you because you navigate really skilfully and give independent answers.

I would like to go back to the matter of the backlog. You said that the number of complaints had gone down over the years. I think that that may help to keep costs in balance.

How long have the number of cases been declining, how many years?

• (1700)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I would say three.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: I would say that over the course of the past two or three years, we have seen a slight decline. It isn't considerable, but there is a drop.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: What could that drop be due to? Is it due to government programs, or to the effectiveness of the last roadmap? If there are fewer complaints, there is surely a reason for that, unless it is circumstantial.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I have no answer to that. It is difficult to determine why something does not happen. It can be interpreted in an optimistic or a pessimistic way. One could just as easily say that the institutions are meeting their obligations better, or that people have become disillusioned. Perhaps they are not as aware of their rights when the issue of language rights does not make the headlines.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: You once said to the committee that in the course of doing your investigations, you had noted improvements in the departments overall. Some had improved their rating. If all of the departments improved their rating and if services to Canadians improved in a general way, one could expect that there would be fewer complaints. In fact, if better services are being provided, there will be fewer complaints. You can't have one without the other.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right. That is the relation I have always seen between these two factors. We have to play our promotion and protection role. If we do promotion properly, people will be aware of their responsibilities and there will be fewer cases where the rights of Canadians are not shown proper respect. So there is a direct relationship between those two aspects of the work of the Office of the Commissioner.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If the whole of the machinery of government is doing a better job, that surely reflects a strong political will to respect linguistic duality and to provide services to all Canadians. We talked about it in the Speeches from the Throne. I think that the message has been well understood: we have to show greater sensitivity and offer better-quality services. That can't hurt, in any case.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have seen continuity in the respect governments have shown over the past 40 years. No government abandoned the principles of the act. However, we continue to have to meet challenges in certain federal institutions. Some institutions have more trouble than others.

I have always said that it was a matter of leadership, fundamentally. Often, when there is a change of leadership, when someone new arrives in a department, sees problems and decides to make improvements, we see the results almost immediately. Conversely, if the message is sent almost immediately that this is not a concern for senior management, the changes are more gradual.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Fraser, thank you for confirming that our country is headed in the right direction regarding linguistic duality.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: I will not ask you if that was in fact what you said.

I am always surprised to hear Mr. Gourde say that we have been partisan. I just heard Mr. Brian Jean's comments on taxation. He was rejoicing about the fact that in Alberta, they pay \$10,000 less tax than in Quebec. When Alberta has \$7-a-day daycare, pharmacare and parental leave, we'll talk. Currently, I do not think we can talk about tax equity. I find this completely out of place.

But, let's get back to you, Commissioner. On the matter of translation, *Le Devoir* reported that departments were reducing the number of internal documents they were having translated. They are asking francophones to draft memorandums in English. You expressed some concern about this during your last appearance. You were supposed to meet with the president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees to discuss it. I believe that meeting took place.

Can you tell us about the outcome of that meeting?

• (1705)

Mr. Graham Fraser: The people from the association and I shared our concerns. I think that I told the committee the last time I was here that this is the type of situation where it is often very difficult to find written proof that there was a specific directive. However, there are silent or non-verbal ways of sending a message indicating that one feels one does not have time to send a document to translation, and that the minister's office wants it immediately. We know very well that even if the minister is bilingual, that may not be the case for all of the members of his staff.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Are there documents that are no longer being translated that used to be before? Can that be checked?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Personally, I do not have any figures on that, but I know that this state of affairs is of great concern to the Translation Bureau.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Are you going to follow up with these people on this matter?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am going to try to follow up on that. You raised a good point. Comparing the number of documents that were translated five years ago to the current number would give us an indication.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Indeed, that would provide an indication. Thank you.

I have another question, which is not partisan at all. I am going to talk about Statistics Canada. When this agency published its data from the 2011 census, its representatives said that the data on language were considered to be of good quality. However, Statistics Canada urges those who use the data to be prudent in interpreting the evolution of the language situation between 2006 and 2011. The data are good, but must be used cautiously.

Heritage Canada and the Treasury Board Secretariat use that data to develop their public policies. Does this message from Statistics Canada worry you?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It confirms the concerns I expressed when the long-form questionnaire was abandoned. Certain questions were transferred from the long-form census to the short questionnaire. As you know, we received complaints, but of course this was not the fault of Statistics Canada. Now that the new data has been published, we can see how careful the representatives of Statistics Canada are with regard to the use being made of it. This morning, or yesterday, a text written by the former Chief Statistician, Munir Sheikh, was published; it discusses the risks involved in using that data continuously, year over year.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Are you going to make recommendations to Statistics Canada on the data you would like to see

included in the form to enable you to do your work properly, and to provide a good assessment of demolinguistic development in Canada?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Mr. Fraser, you may reply.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is one of the things we are going to consider. We have not done a complete analysis of the data that was published yesterday; it is too recent. However, we of course are going to think about what needs to be done on the basis of the data which has just been published.

• (1710)

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

We'll have a short intervention from Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The last little bit of discussion raises some questions in my mind as to the importance. What I'm hearing shows me there's a growing importance to the role that you and your office, in particular, play in terms of interpretation as well as enforcement or awareness of official language rules.

I'm a bit concerned about the issue with Statistics Canada. Just quickly, I think you said you had to relieve 12 or 17 people from your inner workings of their positions in this last adjustment.

Mr. Graham Fraser: It was a very gradual process over the last three or four years, and we were able to do it with considerable precision. It was not a matter of massive—

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: It's just that you had also mentioned you were in the process of hiring five new people—caseworkers, I'm assuming.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's right.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: What's the average caseload per caseworker in your office?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: There is actually no average caseload, because it always depends on the complexity of the files. So it's not a number of files but more the case that, as the analysts work, they have specific institutions they're responsible for. For example, if we don't get any complaints for some institutions, the analysts for those will help on other files.

It's difficult to actually establish a specific caseload.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: But you feel with those five additional caseworkers you'll be able to catch up on the backlog?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: That's the plan. They will work on the old files, so the analysts will concentrate on the files we receive within the year.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Okay.

In terms of the decrease, I would like to comment that even though there is a decrease, from my perspective, it doesn't mean that the need for what you do becomes less important. Just because crime may be on the downswing for a particular period, we don't take policemen off the streets.

With that, I'd like to add my voice to thank you and your team for the work you do. You do it very effectively. We hope we can continue to support you and your office in the work you're doing.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you, all members, for your questions on the estimates.

I have two votes to conduct right now.

Shall vote 20, under Privy Council, carry for the amount of \$21,621,488?

PRIVY COUNCIL

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

Vote 20—Program expenditures.....\$21,621,488

(Vote 20 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the chair report the main estimates for 2013-14 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your questions and testimony.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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