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—
Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1150)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC)): Without further ado, I now call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f), we are continuing our study on the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

With honour and enthusiasm, we welcome today representatives of French for the Future and Canadian Parents for French.

I'd like to begin by apologizing, on behalf of the committee, for the vote that will soon be called. We will nevertheless have time to hear from both organizations, who will each have seven minutes for their presentation. Afterwards, we should be able to accommodate two or three rounds of questions.

At around 10 after 12, the bells will ring for a vote, and we will need unanimous consent from committee members to extend the meeting a bit longer or come back after the vote. At that point, we can talk about how we wish to proceed.

I'd like to thank all four witnesses, who travelled to be here today. It's very much appreciated. We'll have the representatives from French for the Future start us off.

Over to you, Mr. Boudreau.

Mr. Alec Boudreau (Board Member, National Office, French for the Future): Thank you.

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I'll begin with an overview of what our organization does, and then, I'll pass the baton to Frédette Fortin, who will share with you our recommendations.

French for the Future is a national organization that promotes linguistic duality and the benefits of bilingualism to students from grades 7 to 12. French for the Future offers six different programs that provide fun and captivating opportunities for young people in both official language communities to connect, speak French and use French in daily life outside the school setting.

In carrying out its mission, French for the Future adheres to an ambitious strategic plan for 2019-23, entitled *Ma passion. En français*. To help raise retention and success rates among students learning French as a second language, French for the Future offers programs tailored to young people at key moments in their identity-building journey as they progress through school.

Every year, French for the Future connects with more than 50,000 students. We partner with a number of francophone organizations in minority communities who share our vision and desire to make Canada a place where all young people value francophone culture.

By participating in our programs, young people get to have meaningful life experiences and build strong interpersonal networks from which they can draw support at times of critical transition, to promote the choice to pursue studies in French. Our programs reinforce the benefits of French in the daily lives of youth by addressing their personal interests, maturity level and age.

Our organization works with 12 post-secondary institutions. They share our belief that French-language minority education and French as a second language studies are complementary factors that fuel and promote Canada's linguistic duality. Thanks to these invaluable partnerships, French for the Future is able to offer students more than \$267,000 in scholarships every year.

Through our programs, then, we encourage students to think seriously about pursuing post-secondary studies wholly or partially in French, thereby enabling them to build on and strengthen their language skills. In this way, French for the Future is helping to build a society in Canada where more and more young professionals value their knowledge of both official languages and have the confidence to use their skills.

Ms. Gabrielle Frédette Fortin (Executive Director, National Office, French for the Future): Mr. Chair, members of Parliament, we are very glad to be appearing before the committee today.

Before continuing with our presentation, I'd like to recognize the tireless efforts of the organizations that give official language minority communities a public voice. French for the Future would like to draw your attention to four recommendations that are at the heart of our vision of the Official Languages Act and the Canada of tomorrow.

It is important to understand that all our recommendations today will be meaningless unless Parliament undertakes a comprehensive review of the act and empowers a central authority to implement it.

Our first recommendation—the most important, in our view—pertains to an issue that has received little attention thus far. The Official Languages Act must provide direct educational support at every level, from junior kindergarten to post-secondary studies, to increase the number of learning opportunities in the other official language. In order to strengthen linguistic duality countrywide, it is essential to recognize education as a key driver of linguistic duality. Part VII of the act should clearly define the federal government's role in supporting second language learning, as well as the implementation measures and overarching principles guiding those commitments.

Our second recommendation is to remedy the lack of clarity in part VII and make it mandatory for the government to adopt a plan focused on job readiness and economic development. Allow me to explain. Having meaningful experiences in French is an absolutely critical determinant in committing to learning the other official language and being successful at it. French for the Future offers those kinds of opportunities through the local forums it hosts in more than 15 cities across the country. Young people get to experience life in French for a day and participate in their local francophone community.

Mr. Samson, in Vancouver, in 2017, you had the opportunity to see this amazing program in action. It brings together 4,000 francophone and francophile students every year. Students are able to explore the options available to them and figure out how they can become actively involved in their community and retain their language skills after completing their studies. Opportunities for young people to experience life in French are too few and far between. Unfortunately, the result is that more and more young people are having to rely on decentralized factors to justify their French as a second language learning. They say, for example, that French is the third most spoken language in the world, that they are learning it so they can travel to Europe or that they are in French immersion so they can work at the international level later. That's all well and good, but young people should be able—and, above all, want—to participate regularly in Canada's francophone community at the local level. They need to be able to see that communities are vibrant and growing, that they are places of genuine opportunity for all young Canadians.

I will now turn to our third recommendation. For over 20 years, French for the Future has been working to bridge the gap between young people in both official language communities. There is no doubt in our mind that the Official Languages Act has a pivotal role to play in bridging that gap. In addition to formally committing to enhancing the vitality and supporting the development of English and French linguistic minority communities, the federal government must commit to supporting and recognizing Canadians who speak or learn the other official language. What's more, that support and recognition must apply throughout the act. We are in favour of adding the right to participate in the implementation of the act so that communities truly have the opportunity to participate. As far as the regulatory requirement to consult is concerned, I would stress the need for the official language minority communities advisory council to include at least one member of the linguistic duality network. The advisory council was established by the *Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada* in its proposed wording of a new Official Languages Act, in part VII.I

In conclusion, the efforts we are making today towards modernizing the Official Languages Act will help redefine Canada's language framework for years to come. We weren't around when the Official Languages Act was created, but we will be to watch it grow and evolve. The technological landscape has radically changed the way we live, consume content and interact with others, not to mention how we express ourselves and speak our languages. For all those reasons, French for the Future firmly believes that young people are the partner of choice when it comes to implementing the Official Languages Act and should have a special place on any advisory council. Canadian youth want an Official Languages Act that is inclusive, strong, respected and innovative.

We would be happy to answer any questions you have.

Thank you.

• (1155)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you.

I will now hand the floor over to the representatives of Canadian Parents for French.

Mr. Derrek Bentley (Board Member, National Office, Canadian Parents for French): Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting us to appear before you today and share our views on the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

My name is Derrek Bentley, and I hail from Winnipeg, Manitoba. I am the Vice-President of the National Board of Directors of Canadian Parents for French, or CPF for short. Our organization brings together thousands of volunteers all over the country who recognize the value of French and its integral place in Canada, even though some of us don't speak French. CPF advocates for the creation of programs and opportunities for young Canadians so that they can learn and speak French, mainly through French as a second language programs.

On a personal note, I am from an English-only-speaking family and I took French immersion from kindergarten to grade 9. Then, I went to a francophone high school as a non-rights holder. I don't have any children yet, but I've been involved with Canadian Parents for French since I was quite young, having taken French as a second language programs. I firmly believe that all Canadians should be able to learn both of Canada's official languages and have access to services in the language of their choice, no matter what their mother tongue is.

[English]

To be clear, the idea of modernizing the Official Languages Act is super exciting for me personally as well as millions of others involved with CPF and other organizations across Canada.

There is so much potential here with this to move forward and create new, exciting change, and to perhaps move past this protection mentality, and move more

• (1200)

[Translation]

towards one focused on the vitality of French and Canada's francophone community, beyond the notion of protection. Thanks to this modernization effort, I think that's possible.

For Canadian Parents for French, the key lies in ensuring a modernized act does more than just protect minority communities. Continuing to work with the communities is fundamental. What they do is amazing, but it's important to look broader and deeper when rethinking the act so that it applies to every single Canadian.

[English]

With CPF, this comes through in five major points. We have these written out and we will be able to send them to you afterwards so you have them on record. I will discuss two today just to keep it short.

The first is the idea of giving all Canadians the right to learn both official languages through access to French second-language programs. In a Canada with two official languages, it simply seems logical that all Canadians should have access to this education. It should not be on youth and parents to be continuously advocating with schools, school boards and various government bodies to convince them of the importance of learning both of Canada's official languages.

The opportunity to learn these languages in someone's community should not be solely determined by school board willpower, which often requires a large amount of strong parent advocacy to ensure quality programs. Also, having to line up overnight to get a spot in an immersion program or enter a lottery for a spot should not be a reality in a Canada with two official languages. All those who call Canada home should have access to quality French second-language programs without all of these various barriers to access them that currently exist.

Like minority community families who have the right to have their children taught in a minority language, all Canadians, no matter whether they are rights holders or not, should have this right to learn both languages.

We know that using the word "right" has complexities behind it, and we're not suggesting that just through the OLA we will be able to suddenly make this happen, but we think that by modernizing the OLA we can begin the work towards this vision of all Canadians being able to do this.

For example, one way this could perhaps happen is by adding an education section into a new OLA that would guarantee resource transfers for French second-language programs specifically to provinces and territories, with clear auditing and consequences with teeth if these funds are used improperly and not for these programs. For example, buying basketballs with money for French programs doesn't necessarily help a student learn French.

[Translation]

Second of all, it's time to define linguistic minority communities more broadly. They should include people who want access to French-language services and not be limited to rights holders, entitled to those services because French is their mother tongue. If we want Canada to be a place where Canadians speak both official languages, we need to make sure every Canadian has access to services in the language of their choice.

[English]

I believe Canada and CPF as well are at a point where we need to start accepting and acting on the fact that those of us who are part of la Francophonie do not all have French as their first language. There are many more people involved as well.

Additionally, there are thousands of people who want to participate actively, but face barriers, and this includes the barrier of not being counted or not being able to access services in French in their communities despite wanting them.

Federal services in both official languages should be available for all Canadians where the request for services warrant.

[Translation]

In conclusion, I want to make clear that we completely agree with the points raised by French for the Future, especially the importance of always including and consulting organizations that advocate for French as a second language and French-language education. We need to be able to speak on our own behalf and not have others do it for us. No one knows our circumstances and needs better than we do.

[English]

The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages reported that 84% of Canadians agree that bilingualism is for all of Canada, and 96% support that federal services should be offered in English and French.

[Translation]

If that's true, we can definitely make that happen by modernizing the Official Languages Act.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Jandu.

Mr. Shaunpal Jandu (Consultant, National Office, Canadian Parents for French): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen and committee members.

I'd like to start by thanking you for this opportunity.

On behalf of Canadian Parents for French, I'd like to talk about linguistic duality in Canada.

[English]

What does "linguistic duality" mean? It means that Canada has two official languages, and neither one is more important than the other. It means that Canada is founded on a dialogue between two linguistic groups, anglophones and francophones, each of which look to preserve their own language while respecting the language of the other.

[Translation]

Linguistic duality is at the heart of being Canadian. It's a shared value that illustrates the importance of preserving our official languages. Although it is the tie that binds, unifying us all, we devote far too little attention to it. Rarely does the government promote linguistic duality.

The concept is so overlooked that, right now, the one and only definition of Canada's linguistic duality is found on the website of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

•(1205)

[English]

I believe there's a link between linguistic duality and Canada's diversity. After all, isn't it recognizing that there are two ways of saying something and realizing as well that there could be many ways of saying it?

Due to the importance of linguistic duality in Canada, three organizations have come together to help promote the importance of linguistic duality through the country.

[Translation]

Canadian Parents for French, French for the Future and the Canadian Foundation for Cross-Cultural Dialogue are working together to create the linguistic duality network.

[English]

We are working to shine a light on a Canadian concept that is unconsciously accepted in Canada and yet rarely overtly mentioned. Despite the many challenges we face, our country is one of the most diverse and tolerant in the world. I sincerely believe that linguistic duality can be said to be the cornerstone of our diversity and inclusion.

[Translation]

That is why we require that the committee, during its consultations and at all stages of implementing the act, consult the network and its members to further discuss the place and importance of linguistic duality in Canada.

[English]

We look forward to your questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you very much for your remarks.

[Translation]

Without further ado, we will proceed to the first round of questions.

Mr. G n reux, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Bernard G n reux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivi re-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses for being here this morning.

We apologize for the votes. We will have to leave soon.

First, I wanted to congratulate you on your work, especially since most of you are volunteer parents or students.

Let me ask each of the groups the key question, the big question: what do you want to see in the future legislation or what would you like to change in the current version?

Ms. Fr dette Fortin, I liked your expression. You said you didn't see the act when it was born, but you are seeing it grow up. What do you absolutely want to find in this legislation?

Each of you, independently, has mentioned a number of things. What is your top priority?

You understand that there are inevitably many options when a piece of legislation is being changed and that lots of things will happen. However, in your opinion, what is the key aspect, both for your group and for Canada's linguistic duality overall?

Ms. Fr dette Fortin, you have the floor.

Ms. Gabrielle Fr dette Fortin: Thank you for your question.

Our first recommendation, which is really important and not very well addressed, is our priority. The Official Languages Act must guarantee direct support at all levels of education, from preschool to post-secondary, in order to enhance opportunities for learning the second official language.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Okay. Let me stop you there.

What does "guarantee direct support" mean to you? Would you like the federal government to support the education sector under the future federal legislation, which you well know is a provincial responsibility? How do you want that to be reflected?

Ms. Gabrielle Fr dette Fortin: We are not talking about legislating education. That is indeed a provincial responsibility. However, we are talking about guaranteeing support and it is possible to do so.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Are you talking about education programs?

Ms. Gabrielle Fr dette Fortin: Yes, I'm talking about second language programs.

We would like—and I think CPF would also like—to see a section that deals directly with education in part VII.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Okay.

Gentlemen, the floor is yours.

Mr. Derrek Bentley: I would say pretty much the same thing.

It is about ensuring that we have the necessary resources and direct support for French as a second language programs through the act, so that the provinces and territories are more motivated and required to offer those programs. Right now, a province can simply abolish the program and offer it in English only if it so wishes.

In Canada, as a country with two official languages, we think it's a problem that immersion programs are not protected by legislation in any way.

Mr. Bernard G n reux: Do you not see a dichotomy between what you would like to see in the act and reality? For example, the government cannot say that it is giving \$100 to a province or territory, but that this money must be spent on a particular program. The federal government cannot impose this in any legislation. We have seen and heard it for years.

When you talk about guaranteeing resources, it becomes a constitutional problem, potentially. I imagine you realize that. If we ask for or include in a piece of federal legislation the requirement that federal money earmarked for education be absolutely dedicated, we are interfering with provincial jurisdiction. Do you see the distinction? In any case, that's how I see things. Perhaps someone can correct me.

Basically, I agree with you. There must be at least one item in the act that requires accountability. You already know that money is going to the provinces to ensure that—

• (1210)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): I'm sorry for interrupting, but the bells are ringing to call for a vote in the House.

I need your unanimous consent to continue the meeting for 15 minutes.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Let's resume.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: We can go much further in the act to ensure true accountability and find out where the money is going. The federal government has always provided and will always provide money to provincial governments for their education programs. Is this money really going to education? As you said earlier, the provincial government may decide to abolish a program, but it is not required to justify its decision. There must be some give-and-take, an exchange of good practices, which is not the case at the moment.

Do you have anything to add?

Mr. Derrek Bentley: You make an excellent point.

This accountability should not only be required for French as a first language programs, which the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms already requires us to do anyway. Accountability should expressly require that the money also be used for French as a second language programs. It should therefore specify "French as a second language", not just "French".

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Okay.

Do you have anything to add, Ms. Frédette Fortin?

Ms. Gabrielle Frédette Fortin: Yes, I would like to add that the framework for the federal government's role, particularly in second language education, may also include the obligation to negotiate and adopt a federal-provincial agreement.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you.

I'll stop there.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

We'll now move to Mr. Samson and then to Mr. Choquette. All parties will therefore have the opportunity to ask questions, which is very good.

Mr. Samson, the floor is yours.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for being here and for the extremely important work that you do on the ground. You are really familiar with all the issues related to bilingualism and linguistic duality. I'm not sure that we have really succeeded in promoting our two official languages over the past 50 years. Your work will help us to better understand the situation.

My first question is for Canadian Parents for French on the shortage of teachers. Are you aware of the government's investments to address that issue and do you have any comments?

Mr. Derrek Bentley: Yes, we are somewhat aware of that. The way that money will be used is still being studied. So we are not sure of the outcome yet, but those investments are much appreciated. They are a good starting point. However, it is important to go further and continue to invest.

The issue is not about to go away since French as a second language programs are constantly expanding. According to some studies, right now, almost 100,000 young people want to enrol in the programs, but they are not able to do so because there are not enough spots. Even if all of them could suddenly be accepted, the shortage of well-trained teachers and quality programs would still be a problem. The investments therefore must keep going.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I invite you to discuss this issue with the universities. They are saying that they will be providing significantly more generous scholarships for second languages, which will help them attract candidates.

You should send us your nice little document on which you have indicated the four or five results you want. I didn't bring it, but I read it at breakfast last week and I thought it was very good. I felt that you knew exactly what you wanted and that it would answer many questions.

Let me now turn to you, my friends from French for the Future. Your role is very important. To some extent, you are doing the same thing as Canadian Parents for French, and your activities are complementary. I am also thinking of the Canadian Foundation for Cross-Cultural Dialogue. Your three organizations are truly very interesting.

Ms. Frédette Fortin and Mr. Boudreau, you referred to something that is of great interest to me: education. I am from the education community and we should be making a significant change.

Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms grants minority language educational rights everywhere in Canada, except in Quebec. However, the rights only apply to primary and secondary levels, that is to say to young people aged 5 to 18. That is the problem. It is crucial that we add preschool and post-secondary education in the modernization of the Act, as you suggested. Can you tell us more about that?

• (1215)

Ms. Gabrielle Frédette Fortin: Thank you for the question.

We do consider the entire spectrum. We want equal opportunities for all young people and for an increasingly younger and increasingly older public to learn a second official language.

We are talking about designing a post-secondary stream in French, and it is extremely important to do so. We offer this opportunity to young people through scholarships that allow them to continue their studies in French, either partially or fully.

You mentioned the shortage of teachers. However, the idea is also to heighten the pride and the confidence of young people who are learning French as a second language, so that they can consider a bilingual or French-language career without fear.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You mentioned commitment. Your thoughts and comments were very interesting.

In my opinion, there are three parts to the process. First, the person must specify his or her identity, whether as Acadian, francophone, anglophone or other. Second, in addition to specifying his or her identity, the person must participate in what is happening. That's the beginning of the commitment. Third, the person mobilizes and leads others to support the cause and to commit. That is truly crucial.

My thanks to both your groups for their work. I encourage you to keep it up.

Do I still have some time, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): You have one minute left.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I can never say enough about Canadian Parents for French. Your organization has truly taken the cause of bilingualism to heart from the beginning. I would even say that francophone school boards have often pointed out, stressing the importance of French, that you are the ones calling for its expansion. In that sense, you have truly been instrumental in Canada. Congratulations on the work that you have accomplished on the ground.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you, Mr. Samson. I think you could have been a sociologist.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for joining us today.

We have heard a lot about official language minority communities (OLMCs), which are the pillars of our Canadian bilingualism. Canada's linguistic duality is so important that we must try not to just talk to ourselves. Otherwise, we will not get far. We must therefore support each other. Like Mr. Samson, I think you have opened a door. You have opened or even kicked in doors, but I'm not sure how we can make the majority communities aware of the other official language.

You mentioned it as part of the modernization of the act. We are seeing the current challenges, but how can we ensure that French immersion and French as a second language instruction are available and accessible everywhere? You are suggesting that it should be a right.

What could be done to ensure that the Canadian government shows leadership by enabling all those who want to learn the other official language to do so?

Mr. Derrek Bentley: The bilingual community in Canada is very big right now, but it is not necessarily recognized. We talk a lot about minority and majority communities, but there is this huge bilingual community between the two. I think a decision will have to be made at some point. Something may need to be included in the Act to define this community and provide support, exactly as you have just said. We want to provide support to minority communities because more people are speaking the language and want to contribute to it. Those people can tell the majority that they have already been part of

that majority, that they are still part of it, in fact, but that it is now part of a multiple identity.

It is therefore a matter of talking about bilingualism and defining what the community is all about. The next step is to provide concrete support and tell Canadians—if that is what they want—what to expect.

• (1220)

Mr. François Choquette: That's excellent, yes.

Mr. Alec Boudreau: In our work, we see that it is not a demand problem, but a supply problem. There are enough requests for more Canadians to become bilingual. The focus should be on improving access to second-language education. As Mr. Bentley mentioned, parents will line up two days before the school opens to register their children.

Draws are used to choose who can study in immersion. Some university representatives have already testified and said that they have the capacity and willingness to accommodate more students. They have the capacity and structure, but they don't have the money. They can't afford to add more students to their programs.

It must be accepted that Canadians want to learn French, that they want to have exchanges in the communities and that there is already a value placed on bilingualism and duality, but that people do not have access to training.

I see it in my personal life too. I'm a little like Mr. Bentley: I have one foot in each community. My English-speaking friends and family want to learn French, but they simply don't have a way in.

So what you need to do is open more doors.

Mr. François Choquette: My second question is precisely related to those who have access to French immersion, for example. You mentioned it earlier, and it is extremely important. How can we give them this linguistic security?

In other words, people spend years in French immersion. It is more than French as a second language. Still, for various reasons, they end up living with linguistic insecurity and not daring to speak French, for instance.

What can we do—and I know you do it every day—in concrete terms, to support your efforts to improve this linguistic security?

Ms. Gabrielle Frédette Fortin: I'll answer. In terms of—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): I'm sorry to interrupt you. You have 45 seconds left.

Ms. Gabrielle Frédette Fortin: Let's clarify Part VII of the act. This will make it possible to offer meaningful life experiences in French. Living in French is what's important. French isn't just learned in the classroom; it is also learned in life.

Mr. Alec Boudreau: A symposium on linguistic security will be held early next month. It will be led by our friends from the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, who will explore the whole issue of linguistic insecurity in greater depth. It will take place in Ottawa.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Yes. It will be May 29 and 30, I believe.

We received the invitation.

Mr. Derrek Bentley: Yes, it's in early May.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alupa Clarke): Thank you very much for coming.

Lastly, you had almost an hour. The other hour was for internal business. Still, we've had a good meeting with you. We understood your message clearly.

Send us any additional information you may have, such as about the green card Mr. Samson mentioned. It will be submitted to the committee.

Please know that we are very happy with your work.

I hope you have a very nice weekend, which starts tomorrow.

Thank you.

Colleagues, we are leaving to vote, and that concludes today's meeting.

We'll see you in two weeks.

The meeting is adjourned.

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