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—
Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

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• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): Hello.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), we will begin our study on language training for members of Parliament.

We are pleased to welcome Mr. Pierre Parent and Ms. Nina Maimone this morning, both from the House of Commons. Their presentation will be about ten minutes long. We will then have time for questions and comments from committee members.

I assume you will be giving the presentation, Mr. Parent. Please go ahead.

Mr. Pierre Parent (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is a rare privilege for a member of the administration to be invited to a committee meeting of this kind.

Hello.

As chief human resources officer for the House of Commons, I am responsible for the language training centre. The centre's mandate is to improve the ability of members of Parliament, their spouses, and employees to work and offer services in Canada's two official languages. The centre also offers its services to employees of the administration of the House and to other parliamentary institutions.

The centre typically offers three types of training.

First, the centre offers language training in the national capital region. Ms. Maimone indicated that many of you are already taking that training. These courses are offered by our teachers, at our offices at 131 Queen Street, and also at your Hill offices in Ottawa.

Second, language courses can be offered in your ridings. In that case, we use external suppliers to meet your needs in your ridings.

Third, we can offer language training outside the national capital, as intensive immersion, with the option of homestay accommodations. Those of you who have been here for a long time are familiar with the program that was offered until recently at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

In terms of assessing your needs, at the initial meeting, the teacher works with the member to determine their proficiency in the other official language. The training is then tailored to the member's competency level, their specific needs, and their learning style.

[English]

Members can choose a combination of the options available through the centre. Some have opted for individual courses in Ottawa, as well as immersion and individual training in their constituency. The centre works with members to help them meet their learning objectives.

In the information note that we provided to you in the past few days, you will find additional details regarding the services offered, as well as some information regarding our ongoing process to establish agreements with English- and French-language schools across Canada.

Finally, we also included some information regarding the number of members who receive language training.

[Translation]

With me today is Ms. Nina Maimone, the manager of our language training centre. We will be pleased to answer any questions from the committee about our program.

The Chair: Is that everything?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Yes, thank you.

The Chair: Perfect. Let us proceed right away to a first round then.

We will begin with Mr. John Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I thank our witnesses for their presentation this morning.

[English]

I want to start with a couple of general questions. I will ask in English, but feel free to answer in either language.

Do you have a breakdown of the linguistic profile of Parliament as a whole? Generally you probably know which MPs speak English and which speak French, but do we have any indication of how many are bilingual, and what level of bilingualism there is in general?

Mr. Pierre Parent: We don't maintain that information because it's not necessarily a requirement. Basically, there's no requirement to become an MP, as you are aware, so there's no testing. We have that information for our employees because our employees do require linguistic profiles. We don't maintain that information, unfortunately. We have to guess by regional representation. Sometimes we figure out by the types of names that we get that there's a possibility of offering certain services to that population.

Mr. John Nater: I'm curious, what is it on the administration side of things? What's the profile like among House of Commons staff?

Mr. Pierre Parent: The House of Commons staff is pretty high, I would say it's above 95%. We serve a population that requires services in both languages, so it makes sense for us to provide that service in both official languages.

Mr. John Nater: It makes sense.

I'd be curious to know, from past experience and past Parliaments, what the continuation rate is among parliamentarians who undertake French training. Does it go for the full length of Parliament? Do most MPs stick with it? What's the drop-off rate among MPs?

• (1110)

Mr. Pierre Parent: We know that in each Parliament the number of students goes up because there's a renewed interest in our services. I don't know if Nina has more information.

Ms. Nina Maimone (Chief, Official Languages, Language Training and Assessment Centre, House of Commons): At point of contact, we pair you up with a teacher, and the teachers reach out to all of the MPs whether it's previous or new MPs. We have a high rate of MPs who continue their training because the teachers will reach out to them and say, "We're back, are you ready, did you want to continue your training?" Often, they will continue their training.

Mr. John Nater: From past experience, for an MP who starts at the beginning of a term with very minimal language skills, what's the general achievement rate at the end of a four-year term?

Ms. Nina Maimone: It depends on the rate and frequency of training, and the number of hours per week. It depends on their objectives, and what they're focusing on. In general, depending on the objective, if it's an oral objective, then yes, if you're there... Right now, we offer three to four hours a week of training to all MPs. As Pierre mentioned, we also offer training that you can continue in your riding. You can do immersion across Canada. There are multiple options where there does not need to be a break in training. You can continue throughout the year.

Mr. John Nater: What you put into it, you get out of it; if you put the effort in, like anything.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Absolutely.

Mr. Pierre Parent: That's the message we give to members or students in general. It's a personal investment. Basically, we can provide training sessions as much as we can, but there's a personal investment that's required by any student. We give examples like watching TV and reading in the second language. That needs to happen outside the classroom in order for the student to progress. Those who invest more outside the classroom will have better success, of course.

Ms. Nina Maimone: We also have MPs who are currently using Skype with their teachers here in Ottawa. Some of them prefer to continue with their teachers, because they're more comfortable, and the teachers know where they're at, so they do continue with Skype.

Mr. John Nater: What types of technology do you use in language training? Like Skype, for example, are there other technologies that are being employed?

Ms. Nina Maimone: At the moment, we're using Skype. We are looking into self-learning programs. We're in the process of seeing

which ones work and which ones don't. We're in the process of researching right now for an online version. Right now, it's mainly Skype and face-to-face.

Mr. John Nater: With respect to regional breakdown, do you find there's a pattern in terms of what region of the country MPs are from, or is it across the board?

Ms. Nina Maimone: It's across the board.

The Chair: Thank you, John.

[Translation]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Paul Lefebvre and Mr. Dan Vandal, who will share their speaking time.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here.

A report from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages was tabled this morning. We have had a look at it. Since the interim commissioner will be appearing before the committee in April, I would like to discuss this during the second hour. I would like to make sure that we leave enough time to discuss this report and that we can welcome the commissioner as soon as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lefebvre.

As soon as we have finished hearing from the witnesses here today, we will proceed right away to the item you just mentioned.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Maimone, you talked about ways of improving one's written French. Many people speak both official languages, but are not comfortable writing one of them. Even though I studied in French at university, I do not feel up to the task of writing in French. Writing well in French is a special talent.

What level of training is available?

Ms. Nina Maimone: We offer training at all levels. There are courses for beginners, maintenance courses, and development courses. It depends on the person's proficiency level. At the initial meeting, the person tells the teacher their objectives. We then develop the course based on the person's objectives.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Your intensive training is often short-term. It is a maximum of six hours per day, up to five days per week.

How many members are taking that intensive training?

• (1115)

Ms. Nina Maimone: In fiscal year 2016-17, there were 60 people in immersion.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre: Very well. Thank you.

Over to you, Mr. Vandal.

Mr. Dan Vandal (Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Lib.): Since when have you offered the program to members of parliament?

The Chair: One moment please. We have a technical problem.

Until I get the go ahead to continue, I would like to welcome Alexe and Charlotte, Ms. Holke's children.

We will now pick up from where we left off.

You have the floor, Mr. Parent.

Mr. Pierre Parent: The program dates back to the early days of the Official Languages Act. We were one of the forerunners.

At the beginning, we used to send members for immersion, primarily at the training centre at the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean. We used the facilities and the school there. Things evolved over time. As to how the administration became more involved, that is not entirely clear. In any case, since the college at Saint-Jean closed its facilities in the early 1990s, we have taken on a greater role. In other words, the program administered by the House of Commons has existed in its current form since roughly the early 1990s.

Mr. Dan Vandal: I am reading here that employees and members' spouses have access to the training.

Mr. Pierre Parent: That is correct.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Do many such people, spouses in particular, take training?

Ms. Nina Maimone: In 2016 and 2017, two spouses took our training. We also provided training to at least 60 or so assistants.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Does your program include an evaluation component?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Absolutely.

When someone signs up for training, if it is a new learner, we invite them to do a placement test. That test serves to evaluate the person's knowledge of grammar and their oral proficiency. We then place the person in a group, based on their proficiency level and objectives.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Oh really? Okay.

Ms. Nina Maimone: The training is 12 weeks long. For the beginner and intermediate course, there are 48 hours of training. For more advanced courses, it is two hours per week for a total of 36 hours.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Is the training for employees who work in Ottawa only?

There are often employees in the ridings who want to take training.

Ms. Nina Maimone: We are not necessarily the ones who organize training for employees in the ridings. That said, they often call us for advice. When they send us names of schools, we can advise them on which ones to choose. In addition, we can refer them, since there are schools that we work with in the ridings.

Mr. Dan Vandal: Very good. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vandal.

Please go ahead, Mr. Choquette.

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for coming to talk about language training for members, a very important service that is also offered to their spouses and assistants. Very interesting.

First of all, I would like to pick up on what Mr. Lefebvre said earlier about the report tabled this morning by the interim commissioner of official languages. The report talks about services in both official languages, including during airport screening. I will table the following motion, which could be discussed...

The Chair: If I may, Mr. Choquette, I would like to clarify that Mr. Lefebvre said...

One moment please.

Mr. François Choquette: I would still like to table the following motion:

The Chair: One moment please.

Mr. François Choquette: "That the Committee invite the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages..."

The Chair: One moment please.

I simply want to clarify what was suggested earlier.

● (1120)

Mr. François Choquette: No problem, Mr. Chair. I was just using my speaking time.

The Chair: I said earlier that we would consider that right after the question and comments period.

We have received a notice. We will discuss it later.

Mr. François Choquette: I will simply read the notice and then move on to the questions right away. The notice reads as follows:

"That the Committee invite the Interim Commissioner of Official Languages for an additional hour on Thursday, April 13, 2017, to present and explain the report on bilingualism in airports."

My questions for the witnesses are as follows.

Do you know whether the number of MPs who have taken courses in the other official language has increased or decreased?

Ms. Nina Maimone: The number has increased considerably since the start of the new Parliament. We currently have 119 members in French training and 19 members in English training.

Mr. Pierre Parent: The number of people registered typically increases after an election, but then it drops off gradually. After each election, the administration of the House of Commons has to adapt the services it offers to the new members elected by Canadians. It depends on the members' demographic profile. If a great many members are anglophone, that will impact the French training we offer. We see an increase after each election, but the number then drops off gradually in the four subsequent years, when there is a majority government. Other than that, it is cyclical, but above all it depends on the members' profile.

Mr. François Choquette: I don't know when this changed, but, in the past, official languages training taken by assistants came out of the government's budget and not the member's budget.

Mr. Pierre Parent: The administration of the House of Commons took part in a strategic review of activities that led to budget cuts. That was in 2010, 2011, and 2012. The Board of Internal Economy then had to consider where to make the cuts. That was before I arrived, in about 2011. It was a decision by the Board of Internal Economy.

Mr. François Choquette: Did that affect the percentage of assistants who took language courses? Do you have figures on that? Our member's budget is limited. We have to decide where to invest our budget to offer services to constituents. Cutting the language training budget for our assistants is one possibility.

Ms. Nina Maimone: No, not really. There is roughly the same number of assistants taking language courses.

Mr. François Choquette: Can you send the committee the previous percentage of students and the current percentage so we can see how things stand?

Mr. Pierre Parent: That is noted.

Mr. François Choquette: Language training is very valuable. I am in language training and my teacher is excellent. For public servants, there is a language profile, level A, B, or C, for example.

Ms. Nina Maimone: That's right, a position has a language profile attached to it.

Mr. François Choquette: That's right.

When an MP takes a course, why not evaluate their knowledge and language skills at some point? It could be just for the member's purposes; it would not have to be made public.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Many MPs have come to take a bilingualism test at our centre. As an MP, you are welcome to take a bilingualism test.

Mr. François Choquette: Perfect.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have a few seconds left.

Mr. François Choquette: If I only have a few seconds, I will stop here.

Thank you very much, Ms. Maimone.

The Chair: Thank you.

There seems to be a problem with a microphone. We will take a break until the technician can fix the problem.

• (1120) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1125)

The Chair: We are back.

Ms. Lapointe and Mr. Samson will share their speaking time.

Ms. Lapointe, please go ahead.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us.

This is very interesting. My colleague Mr. Choquette is taking English training. I am also among the 19 members taking English training, and I am improving.

Is it possible to do English immersion training? I know some anglophone colleagues are in French immersion. If I wanted to do English immersion this summer, where would you suggest I go?

Ms. Nina Maimone: In the past, I have arranged for English immersion in Toronto, New Brunswick, and Vancouver.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: In that case, which budget would it come out of?

I know that, for our assistants and all our staff, it comes out of the constituency office budget. Does the same apply for MPs?

Ms. Nina Maimone: No.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: No?

Ms. Nina Maimone: No. It comes out of our budget.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay. Very good. Every member of my team is in training. I have a team of four people who are all taking different courses, some in the riding, and the course is based on their initial proficiency level.

By the way, could I take courses to improve my written French?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes, absolutely. Are you referring to immersion or to courses that are offered here, in Ottawa?

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I mean here.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Here. Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I am in training right now. The teacher is very nice. She comes to see me to help me improve my spoken English. As to my French, though, I am always trying to improve it. Is that also available?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Absolutely.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay. That is interesting.

You referred earlier to courses at the Collège militaire royale de Saint-Jean. Were the courses there in French and English?

Ms. Nina Maimone: They were in French.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: In French only?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes, it was French immersion.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Was English immersion offered at another military college, or not necessarily?

• (1130)

Ms. Nina Maimone: No, not necessarily.

Mr. Pierre Parent: That was one of the shortcomings of the service model at Saint-Jean. It focused primarily on French as a second language. By diversifying the training we offer and having service providers right across Canada, we can actually go to various places and we also offer English immersion programs, which was not necessarily the case before.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay. Thank you. I will hand it over to my colleague, Mr. Samson.

Thank you.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Ms. Lapointe. What you were saying was interesting. I will pick up from there.

I have a few quick questions. I often hear comments on the ground. I hear there are a lot more English teachers than French teachers available. I hear that people have to wait, that there is a waiting list for French teachers, whereas it is easy to get an English teacher.

Is that true? Yes or no?

Ms. Nina Maimone: No. We do not have anyone at all on a waiting list right now. Everyone is in training. Everyone is receiving training from a French teacher or an English teacher.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay. I had heard there were not enough French teachers, but you are saying that is not the case. Thank you very much.

Ms. Nina Maimone: No. It sometimes depends on schedules. If we send you a teacher at a time that conflicts with your schedule, we can sometimes find another. The trick is finding a good fit between the members' schedules and those of the teachers.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's good. I like your answer because it answers part of my second question.

Some members have also mentioned a lack of flexibility. In the case of someone who takes three classes a week, for instance, the classes have to be at set hours, such as on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. only. However, as you know, members' schedules vary considerably from one day to the next. Is there some flexibility? What I hear said is that there is no real flexibility.

Ms. Nina Maimone: It depends on the number of members the teachers have on their rosters. The majority of my teachers teach a minimum of 10 to 14 members of Parliament.

We really have to be able to align the schedules of the members and the teachers. If a member wants more flexibility, as has happened many times in the past, we change things by assigning a teacher to him who is much more available.

However, certain members prefer set schedules, and others do not. We try to meet their needs.

Mr. Darrell Samson: So if I understand correctly, if a member prefers flexible schedules from time to time, all he has to do is talk to you and you will look at how to make a change.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Absolutely. Let me give you an example. Currently, I've assigned two teachers to the same member because his schedule changes every week. That was not a problem. I suggested two teachers. They organize their schedule according to the member's availability.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Very well. That's good. This will be my last question.

Mr. Parent, I know you mentioned this earlier. You said that from one government to the next, you cannot really predict an increase in the needs, because it depends on who is elected and we do not control that, the population does.

I have a general question. Has demand been higher over the past 10 years, as opposed to over the past 30 years? I know you were not in your position during all of that time, but try to answer.

Was there an increase, and a higher percentage of people who took classes for a longer period of time?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Yes, we have seen an increase.

I'll speak about my personal experience. Although I was gone for eight years, I was employed by the House the first time from 1993 to 2005. I don't quite have 30 years experience with this program, but not far from it.

Indeed, from election to election we see that there is renewed interest in the second official language and that it is considered important. Our administration is one example: we open bilingual imperative positions. You have to be bilingual before you can occupy those positions. This is a big incentive to learn the second official language.

We see that ministers, parliamentary secretaries and members of shadow cabinets have a renewed interest in having bilingual people. Interest is generated from election to election. It's an incentive for people to invest in their training. Moreover, the figures we have at this time are representative of the situation. More than one-third of members are currently taking language training.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Parent.

Mr. Samson, you have the floor.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I have a question on shadow cabinets. What are they?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Shadow cabinets are formed by the opposition parties. Members of a party are made the opposition spokespeople for a given area, for instance finance.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That isn't a very good translation.

Mr. Pierre Parent: No, but it's the usual term.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I think Mr. Choquette is much livelier than a phantom.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

You also mentioned parliamentary secretaries who take language classes. We have one among us; Mr. Sean Casey takes French courses. He could probably say a few words about his experience with bilingualism.

Mr. Casey, you have the floor.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you.

I don't have a question. It is true that over the past five years I have probably been one of your best clients.

As you know, when I arrived in Ottawa after being elected in 2011, I did not speak French. I took advantage of the French immersion program that was offered every summer in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, and also of the language training offered on Parliament Hill. Today I have a French lesson at 1 p.m., immediately after our committee meeting. In addition, I see a French teacher on Prince Edward Island twice a week during all of the House constituency weeks.

Here is what I can tell you. The immersion program at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu gave you the opportunity of staying with a host family. I did that and it was certainly key to my progress. After the Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu school was closed, I went to Logibec-ILAQ in Quebec a few times. However, I found that I did not progress as well there as at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, because at 5 o'clock at the end of the day I went to a hotel and so it was not at all the same thing.

I mentioned the lack of flexibility of teachers here on the Hill. At this time on the Hill I have an excellent French teacher, Mario, but he has fixed hours for his lessons. For instance, today will again be a short lesson because the committee hearing will end at 1 p.m., and oral question period will follow at 2 p.m. So we reserved a one-hour slot, but the lesson will probably last 40 minutes, and that is not an exception by any means. It's normal because of the House schedule. It was impossible to change the hour for the class.

As you can see, my experience has been really positive. As I said, I began in 2011 and now I am comfortable in French without needing the help of an interpreter. In addition, your document indicates that you offer three categories of language training. I am in all three. I am one of the 119 members registered for language training in Ottawa, one of the 25 registered for language training in the ridings, and one of the 60 members registered for French immersion courses outside of the national capital region. That's my experience.

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

Ms. Boucher and Mr. Généreux will be sharing their speaking time.

Ms. Boucher, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): Good morning.

Thank you very much for being here.

I had the opportunity to take English classes from 2006 to 2009. Then I decided to stop taking classes and go to immersion. I went to immersion several times. I made an agreement with my anglophone colleagues; I speak to them in English and they answer me in French. We try to make these types of agreements.

What surprises me are the figures. One hundred and nineteen people are taking French classes and 19 are taking English classes. I find this figure of 19 people very low, because a lot of francophones do not speak English, or speak it very little. At the Standing Committee on Official Languages we fight ardently for the French language in minority communities. I come from Quebec. There are a lot of francophone members who do not take English classes. It's egregious and a little disappointing to see that only 19 people are taking English classes. I find it disappointing that we ask our

anglophone friends to understand French, but that it does not seem mandatory for the francophones to understand English. I'm a bit disturbed by this duality.

What was the situation like in the past? Was the number of those taking English classes that low?

• (1140)

Mr. Pierre Parent: I can answer that question.

I have seen the same figures, basically, since 1993. Indeed I see that the number of people who take English classes has always been lower. In a previous job I managed a language school and it was the same thing.

Here we always start from the premise that the francophones are more bilingual and that consequently they need less second-language training. As I said earlier, we do not give the members tests. Consequently, we don't know what the members' level of bilingualism is, and which ones need training. That data does not exist and we start with that premise.

Given the historical data not only here, but also elsewhere, perhaps the issue of bilingualism is a factor. I do not have a conclusive answer.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: In any case, it's revealing to see that francophones are not taking English classes. Someone might say he is bilingual when he only knows "yes, no" and "toaster".

Ms. Nina Maimone: We offer the same service to everyone.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I know that you offer it. The worst thing is that it is not because the service is not offered that that figure is that low.

I yield the floor to my colleague.

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

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the witnesses.

The committee asked you to appear this morning to help us see how we can be ambassadors of bilingualism with the parliamentarians.

Aside from the fact that teachers contact the members, what promotion does your office conduct with all of the members and employees? Do you suggest directly to employees that they take classes? Are there any promotion efforts, aside from the fact that teachers get in touch with members?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Are you talking about members' employees?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: In fact I am referring to all of those who are eligible for the program.

Mr. Pierre Parent: Let's say that it is easier to do that with the population our services are intended for. Most of our positions are designated bilingual imperative. There is a profile for the position and an individual profile. If the linguistic profile of the position is BBB, for understanding written material, writing proficiency and oral competence, the person has to reach those levels. This is what encourages people to come to us. Normally when positions are designated bilingual imperative, we hire people who are already bilingual. As to the members and members' employees, that population is a little harder for us to reach.

We send them a lot of messages. Last week I had a chat with a member. Unfortunately, I found out that our messages are not really read. We have trouble reaching the members and their employees to inform them about our services. Everything is on our website. All of the information can be found in the Members' Allowances and Services Manual. Members are a population that is quite difficult to reach, because they are in Ottawa for a fairly limited time, and they have other things to do.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'd like to get back to Ms. Boucher's comment. Are francophones in fact more bilingual than anglophones? The Lefebvres, Arsenaults and Vandals of this world are people who are already bilingual, born outside Quebec, but the Quebec members should normally be those who learn English. However, Canadian francophone or francophile members are reputed to already be bilingual in several cases, and perhaps that is why fewer of them take classes.

• (1145)

Mr. Pierre Parent: That is a generalization.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Is it a fact rather than a generalization? Is it a fact that francophones are more bilingual?

Mr. Pierre Parent: It is a fact in this region. I have been in this area since 1990, and so in the region...

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You are talking about the national capital region?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Exactly. So it is a generalization made on the basis of that reality. However, if you get away from the national capital or even the large cities in Quebec, the level of bilingualism probably goes down considerably.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Would it not be interesting—as Mr. Choquette asked you to—to obtain some figures? You said that you do not necessarily have them, but would it not be desirable to conduct a survey of the 338 members to find out more?

It seems to me it would be interesting for the committee to obtain the results of such a survey; you could survey all of the members in order to see who is bilingual. I see that you have some quite accurate figures with regard to the number of people who are taking classes, but if as a committee we want to take action to encourage the use or learning of both official languages, it seems to me that it would be easier if we had some tools or the results of some analyses.

Ms. Nina Maimone: The members self-evaluate.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You mean right now?

Ms. Nina Maimone: In general.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Personally, I have never been asked to self-evaluate.

Ms. Nina Maimone: They can answer that, in their opinion, they are bilingual and that there is no need for them to take language training. We also hear that.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: A lot of my anglophone colleagues do not speak French.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: From time to time we organize evenings where we speak only French.

Ms. Nina Maimone: As a rule, the members are not given any tests.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: During those evenings we speak only French and this is also a way of meeting people. The objective, however, is to show that it can be fun to speak French.

Mrs. Nina Maimone: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'll ask you another question, quickly. The people you do business with on a normal basis and who provide the English or French classes, are they freelancers, or entrepreneurs?

Mr. Pierre Parent: We have both. Since there is a lot of fluctuation in our activity level, we have a core group of permanent employees, employees who work when demand is minimal. When demand peaks, we have a pool of contract employees who work elsewhere but who also provide services to us. Also, thanks to all of the external schools in the ridings, we are able to deal with those fluctuations; but we have a core group of permanent employees.

The Chair: Mr. Arseneault has the floor.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: With your permission, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chair, I would like to add something.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'd like to thank Mr. Parent for his openness. I submitted the candidacy of a private school in my riding where immersion classes can be taken, and where students may stay with families. Mr. Parent was very receptive to the suggestion. In fact the school is currently making a bid and it should soon be authorized to receive students.

You will allow me, I hope—not on behalf of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, but with regard to the members—to promote that private school. I don't know if I have the right to do that, but I can say that the school in my riding is open to members from all parties. You are welcome in a Conservative riding if you want to come and study in La Pocatière.

Mrs. Nina Maimone: It is an intensive immersion school.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

I will now give the floor to Mr. René Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to welcome the witnesses and thank them for these excellent answers.

Of course when you are the last person to ask questions, all of the relevant ones have already been raised. I don't want to be a parrot, but I did like what I heard. I'm especially looking forward to the figures you are going to give us to follow up on the questions put by our colleague Mr. Choquette. That will be interesting.

What struck me in your comments is that immediately after an election, the demand for language classes tends to increase and then over the years, if I understood correctly, there is a drop. I don't know what explains that; perhaps it is that the workload of those who are taking the classes gets heavier. What explains that phenomenon in your opinion?

Mr. Pierre Parent: Once again, this is very anecdotal. We can suppose that certain students reach the desired level of knowledge, that others lose interest, and that others have heavy workloads that prevent them from continuing. We have never really done any specific surveys to determine the reasons. What we see, and once again this is anecdotal, is that, yes, after the massive arrival of a group of members there is renewed interest for our program, and then over the next years the interest diminishes and levels off. Interest does not necessarily fall to zero, but that is a typical scenario. It does not mean that the same situation will occur after the next election, but that is the tendency we see from one election to the next.

Mr. René Arseneault: How much speaking time do I have left?

The Chair: You have four minutes.

• (1150)

Mr. René Arseneault: Regarding the question put by Mr. Samson, I believe that the costs must now be covered from members' office budgets, but this has not caused discouragement.

Ms. Nina Maimone: That concerned the assistants.

Mr. René Arseneault: Oh, so we are speaking only about members' staff.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes.

Mr. René Arseneault: So for the members themselves, there is no difference.

Ms. Nina Maimone: Correct.

Mr. René Arseneault: The demand for training remains generally the same.

Mr. Pierre Parent: In the members' case the training is paid out of a central budget, so there is no problem. A member's personal budget is affected only if there is a cancellation with less than 24 hours' notice, or if a situation that is unrelated to parliamentary activities occurs, or events out of the control of the member arise.

Mr. René Arseneault: Perhaps you have already answered this question, but I would like to know whether, from the inception of these services, you have noticed an increase or a stagnation in demand. I'd like to know which. I know that the demand increases after an election and goes down after that.

Since the second language training service has been in effect, have you seen an increase in the demand?

Mr. Pierre Parent: I haven't conducted any specific analyses on this subject. I'm speaking from memory, but if we had to establish a curve for the members—

Ms. Nina Maimone: There was an increase following the election.

Mr. René Arseneault: There was an increase over the years, despite the fact that the number of seats increased?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes.

Mr. René Arseneault: My next question is a bit more specific.

I'm described as bilingual, but I refuse to call myself that. I don't speak very fluently in English. I don't speak English as comfortably as I speak French.

For the classification test, you need to determine where to place the candidates.

How many classification levels are there?

Ms. Nina Maimone: The teacher assigned to the member gives the member the classification test or talks to the member to establish the course. For group language training, there are three beginner levels, three intermediate levels, two advanced levels, and development and retention courses.

Mr. René Arseneault: I may be wrong, but I imagine that members want to learn the second language first and foremost to be able to communicate orally.

Nonetheless, are there members who refer to themselves as bilingual—and who may be bilingual from an oral perspective—but who want to improve their writing skills?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Yes, there are. However, the goal of the training is to improve all their skills, meaning both their oral and writing skills. With beginners in particular, we need to work right from the start on all components, including oral skills, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation. With a more advanced member, we can work on one skill in particular, such as writing, speaking or comprehension.

Mr. René Arseneault: How is this actually done?

Ms. Nina Maimone: You simply need to contact our office. We'll organize the course immediately.

Mr. René Arseneault: It's that fast?

Ms. Nina Maimone: Absolutely.

Mr. René Arseneault: Should the members be surveyed to check whether they've ever considered taking a second language course?

From what I can see, it's very easy and positive.

Since I haven't used this service, I'm a bit ignorant. However, I have the impression that I would benefit from using it.

Have you surveyed each member and office, one by one?

If not, should you do so?

Mr. Pierre Parent: We haven't done so for a number of reasons, but we have the necessary tools. We could easily send out a survey containing three or four questions. However, in my experience, given the large number of members, it's always difficult to obtain responses.

Mr. René Arseneault: The Conservatives don't listen.

Mr. Pierre Parent: I won't comment on that. However, since you're very busy, it's difficult to reach you.

If the committee were to ask us to conduct a survey of this nature, we could do so. We could ask a few questions to determine, for example, whether people know about the House's language training program; whether they consider themselves bilingual; and whether they think they're at an advanced, intermediate or other level.

• (1155)

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Généreux and Mr. Choquette, you can each ask a question.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'll follow up on what Mr. Arseneault said.

I think you must conduct this survey. You must also follow up to make sure the 338 members have answered the questions. The Standing Committee on Official Languages must obtain an accurate picture. Based on that picture, we could take measures or ask you to take measures to increase—

We must understand that the public sees us as ambassadors for all sorts of issues. The same is true for official languages. As members of the official languages committee, obviously, we're immersed in the issue, and we promote bilingualism. However, the other members aren't necessarily drawn to the issue. It's not a matter of relevance or perseverance. Obviously, all members have their own issues.

Our country is bilingual, and we want to promote the two official languages. As members, we must be ambassadors of bilingualism, or at least show an interest in bilingualism. Obviously, we can't force our respective caucuses to take an interest in the other official language, but we can certainly draw attention to the issue. The political parties have work to do in this regard, and they can draw attention to the issue. However, we don't have data, if I may say so—

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: —incentives.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Can the committee officially ask our witnesses to make this effort? We don't need a motion for this.

The Chair: Mr. Parent, did you hear our colleague's request?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You said you have the tools to do it.

Mr. Pierre Parent: Yes, we have the tools.

It's a bit more difficult to conduct follow-ups because we need to proceed member by member. I need to verify the situation from a technical standpoint. I know there's electronic identification for members. I'll talk about it with my colleague who works with the information systems. Regardless, the technology enables us to conduct this type of survey.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: We could each talk about it with our colleagues and with our parties' caucus chairs. I happen to be a caucus chair.

The Chair: Mr. Parent, can the information be sent to the clerk so that we can discuss it?

Mr. Choquette, you can ask a question.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I just want to follow up on this response.

The Chair: Pardon me?

Mr. Darrell Samson: I want to follow up on the question asked by Mr. Généreux and focus on what he said.

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

Mr. Darrell Samson: If we could send the party leaders data on how many members in their caucus are bilingual or unilingual, the leaders could then promote bilingualism. That's all.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Choquette, you can ask a question.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before asking my question, I want to mention that we must, as Mr. Généreux said, promote the importance of the two official languages and bilingualism. Official language communities must be represented, protected and promoted across Canada.

However, I don't think all members need to be bilingual. We mirror our society and community. It's normal to have unilingual people on both sides. However, everyone must be informed about the two official languages.

Is raising awareness of the official languages' importance part of your mandate, or is that not the case at all?

Mr. Pierre Parent: We raise awareness internally, within the administration. I'm also responsible for the House administration employees. As part of our mandate, we must inform our 1,800 employees, who are there to serve you, about the importance of the official languages. However, outside our organization, with regard to the members, it becomes more difficult. The members are independent. You're parliamentarians.

I haven't been given the specific mandate to do this promotion. We do it indirectly through the language training program.

• (1200)

The Chair: I see that it's noon. We'll end on that note.

On behalf of all of us, I want to thank Mr. Parent and Ms. Maimone. You gave excellent presentations and you provided good information. It's certainly very important to promote the bilingualism of members.

We'll suspend the sitting for a few minutes.

[The committee continued in camera.]

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