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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, and welcome to the 94th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Today we're continuing our study on the use of indigenous languages in proceedings of the House of Commons.

Just before we do that, though, I want to quickly do some committee business. Next Thursday, when we normally meet, is now on a Friday schedule, and that would be during question period, so my assumption is we may want to postpone that meeting. Is anyone opposed to that?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: The second thing is I have a letter here from Mr. Christopherson that I will just read out for the record.

> I just wanted to send a quick note to you and our committee colleagues to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed my time on PROC and I will miss the opportunity to work with such a passionate and dedicated group of MPs. I am proud of the work we have accomplished, and although committee members didn't always see eye to eye, we always remained respectful of each other and did our best to find common ground.
>
> PROC is really a special committee and I know you will all continue to do great work on behalf of all parliamentarians and Canadians.
>
> I would like to give a special thanks to you, Larry, for your excellent work as Chair. Following in the footsteps of Joe Preston was never going to be easy but you have matched his stature and are an important part of our committee's success. And of course, I would like to give a big thanks to our staff and analysts whose professionalism and expertise always make us look smarter than we sometimes are.
>
> Thank you again and best of luck to the committee on your future work.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> David Christopherson, MP
>
> Hamilton Centre

Today's first witness is Ms. Georgina Jolibois, member of Parliament for Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River. Ms. Jolibois will deliver her opening statement in Dene, and once again we have made arrangements for interpretation into both official languages.

Welcome to our committee, Ms. Jolibois. You may now proceed with your opening statement. Thank you very much for coming. *Mahsi cho*.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP) (Interpretation): Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

This morning is a nice day. Sitting here together, I'm happy to be here. I'm thankful to the House committee. Thank you for allowing me to speak my language. I'm thankful to the people on this committee for the opportunity to speak my language.

The reason I'm sitting here speaking my language is that when we're sitting there in the House of Commons, I'm not allowed to speak my Dene language. I speak English and I don't speak French.

What I want to talk about is where I'm from and my culture and my job, I want to talk to you about that.

I was born in La Loche, Saskatchewan. My parents brought me up with my Dene culture. That's why I am a Dene person.

I'm here to ask you to let Dene be spoken in the House of Commons. That's why I'm here. I'm thankful for that with all my heart.

It's difficult to speak my Dene language with my Liberal colleagues or MP Romeo Saganash.

When we come to Ottawa, the way I live is different from when I go back to my community. I was mayor of the community of La Loche for 12 years. I was there for a long time, helping out the community of La Loche. I did a lot of work for my community.

In 2015, I entered politics to be an MP for Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River. I was voted in to be here today. I'm a member from the La Loche community, a Dene person. Living in La Loche, my community, we spoke Dene, living our culture. We are surrounded by media, TV. The CBC channel was introduced in 1979. Other than that, there was nothing. We learned *O Canada* through the CBC.

Through my culture, my grandparents taught me to live my traditional life—fishing, snaring rabbits, setting a fishnet. We survived on that. It's our source of food.

I graduated from high school, from grade 12, in La Loche. I spoke Dene all the time with my colleagues. Becoming an adult, I learned English. When I graduated from high school, I went to university. I relocated to Saskatoon. I moved to a larger centre and from there I learned to speak more English. I'm still learning to speak English, and I'm proud to be a speaker of the English language too.

● (1115)

Where I'm located, there are people who speak the Cree language, the Michif language, and also the Dene language. When I get back to my community, we speak the Dene language all the time. There are quite a few speakers of that language in our area in what we call northern Saskatchewan. Fond du Lac, Black Lake, and Hatchet Lake are Dene communities. Patuanak, Dillon, and Turnor Lake are also Dene communities.

There are also Dene people out in Manitoba. In Alberta, we have Dene people living close to Saskatchewan. In the area of the Northwest Territories, there are also Dene people.

This is a big deal, and I'm thankful that we're sitting here together and talking about it—not just me, but all together—with people to look at us and for children to understand and to watch us, to say that this is what've we've done, and also, in terms of the education system, to say that this is what we're asking and what we're doing for our language. It's difficult.

What I'm talking about is that when I was elected as an MP, when I first tried tried to get elected to the House of Commons, they asked me to speak Dene at the House of Commons. That's what they told me. That's why it's still with me today. It's because I'm a member now. Recently I became a member, and I remember that once the people asked me to speak Dene in Parliament.

The person who is speaking the Dene language is here. We grew up together in the same community. We both speak Dene and we both speak English. The person who sits here understands English, and he's quite a ways from home.

There are a lot of people, I guess, who know Dene. I won't be the only person here in the House of Commons. There are a lot of Dene people, young people. If they want to be an MP in the future, if they get on the ballot, they might win. To give them an opportunity is why I'm asking for this. It's for the future, for our Dene people to look at us and to be proud of us for what we're doing.

Sometimes we don't all agree. We were at the educational institutions to talk about the Dene language. If we do this together, in Canada here, there are a lot of us here—not only Dene people, but also people speaking the Cree language. There are a lot of aboriginal people in Canada. There are a lot of aboriginal people in the provinces, in Newfoundland and the Northwest Territories, and in Nunavut and Yukon. There are also a lot of aboriginal people in B.C. They all think about speaking their languages and about talking about their languages in Canada.

I'm a member, and I'm a Canadian citizen from La Loche, Saskatchewan. I remember the way my grandparents taught us a long time ago and what they used to say. One of them was a chief.

● (1120)

They always told us to remember where you're from based on your language. If you have the opportunity to speak Dene, you speak Dene. That's why, in Canada.... I can speak in English after this.

If we make a commitment, we can really try hard to do it for the younger generation, even the adults. We can speak to them and tell them to have a strong mind, a strong heart, and to remember where they're from. That's the way we'll be in Canada. We are here together, being proud and working together.

Aboriginals also speak their Michif language. When Louis Riel was here, he probably thought the same way too. They give us the opportunity to get something. People say to ask politicians for something, so they can get something from them, but I think we can do this together.

The interpreter is from my community. He went to school, and there's not only him. There are a lot of people in our community who can speak and translate Dene. There's Allan Adam and also Cheryl Herman.

If we get together, we can do this together, and also for you too. I'm happy to be here with you. I'll say it again. In Canada, I know that it's not easy to ask for the opportunity to speak the Dene language. It's not just me. We have to find a way to do it. That's why I'm asking you today.

Thank you very much. This is an opportunity for you to ask questions.

The Chair: *Meegwetch*.

I want to also welcome Kennedy Stewart to our committee today, as well as the interpreter in Dene.

Thank you very much. It's great to have you here. It's an exciting second historic day of our meetings.

We're going to make sure that each party at least gets a chance, but can you be generous in sharing your times if there are other members in your party who want to speak?

Go ahead, Mr. Graham.

● (1125)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you for being here. Thank you for bringing this to our attention the way you have. I really appreciate it.

As I mentioned to our colleague Mr. Saganash two days ago, I think, the right to speak already exists, but the much more important right is the right to be understood, and I think that's a right that we have to address, and it's a very important study in that regard.

One thing we learned that I think took all of us by surprise was that in Cree, there is no word for MP. I heard in the translation that you kept saying “MP” in Dene. Is there a word in Dene for MP that is not English?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): The way we speak and understand our language, the way I'm talking to you right now, is through observation. Sometimes it's difficult to translate. When we say “MP”, the way we talk about it is as a part of government, the top government, the person who's in charge of paperwork.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: One of the quirks of our system is that when my mike is on, I don't hear the translation anymore. I'll have to make sure it gets turned off properly.

Can you give me a sense of the current population in the country whose first language is Dene? Are there any kind of numbers?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): In my community of La Loche, I'm proud of our children learning to speak English. It's easy for them to learn English, but in our community the kids are still speaking Dene the children on the reservation still speak Dene. Up in the Northwest Territories, Alberta, and Manitoba, there are Dene people. They still speak the Dene language in their communities. At least 5,000 people still speak Dene in that area.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

In your view, what is the process we need to be following? What steps are necessary to ensure that languages that are to be spoken in the House are properly supported? How do you see it working? What ideas do you have to propose?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): Today, among the members of the committee, I'm the only MP who speaks Dene. To speak our language, to translate it, to talk about it, they're here. I think it will be easy to speak our languages in the House of Commons. I think it will be easy to speak Dene in Parliament. In Saskatchewan, Dene speakers can be elected and can speak my language. We have done this before. To do this will be easier.

The way I see it, the people who are working at the House of Commons are going to see what you have done in this committee, what has been done in research. They will look at what people have done before and say, “We can do this in the House of Commons too.”

● (1130)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In terms of languages—because there are a lot of indigenous languages in the country, not three or four—what is reasonable? Should any language be available for translation by request? Over the long term, how do you see it? How many languages should be available, and how should we do it?

For the moment, at the start, is it reasonable for you that a notice period is given in order to ensure that a translator is available for your particular speech intervention in question period or whenever it is, and should the translation be bidirectional?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): What do you mean by “bidirectional”?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Right now we have a fourth channel on our listening system. If you go to channel 4, it says “Den” for Dene, but I don't think anybody is translating in the other direction right now. I'm using that as an example.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): I'm here, yes, but it's not just me. It's also the person who's going to interpret for me. We need to ask for that ahead of time, to get it ready and arrange for the person who's going to interpret for me to come over here to Ottawa from Saskatchewan to prepare for that. In the future, in the 2019 election, whoever is elected will come here, so there might be a Dene person here. It might be difficult to speak Dene if we're still working on this Dene interpretation, but in the future it might be easier with technology, and not only in the Dene language. There might be two to 10 Dene speakers sitting here with us. In the future it might be easier for this to happen.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When you arrived as a member of Parliament, did anybody in your orientation ask you what languages you spoke besides English and French?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): No. Nobody asked me. I speak English. It's easy for me to speak English. Some people think I only speak English. When I had the opportunity, when I got elected, I spoke Dene with the NDP people I work with.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Chairman, is it seven-minute rounds this time?

The Chair: Yes, but share it if you have to, because we may not get back to you.

Mr. Scott Reid: We may not have a second round. Okay, I'll try to reflect that.

I want to say that although I didn't know it at the time, my first experience with the Dene language was back in the mid-eighties when I was helping to organize something called the student commonwealth conference. High school kids would fly into Ottawa from all over Canada to have a simulated commonwealth heads of government meeting. We got to host a couple of kids from Fond du Lac for a little while. All I remember is that they were nice kids, and now they'd be middle-aged people like me. Anyway, that was my first experience.

I want to start with some questions about understanding the language itself, and part of this is my own natural curiosity. There are, of course, many aboriginal languages in Canada. Some have a very small number of speakers and are considered by UNESCO to be endangered. It has a ranking for whether a certain language is endangered, ranging from vulnerable to definitely endangered to severely endangered to critically endangered. Other ones, it seems to me, are in a position such that their long-term viability is very high.

I want to ask as a starting point whether you think the Dene language is endangered, or is it likely, demographically, to survive in the future?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): The way I think about it is that I'm proud when I go back to my community in northern Saskatchewan, either in Fond du Lac, Black Lake, Hatchet Lake, or La Loche, and in surrounding communities like Dillon, Patuanak, and Cold Lake, Alberta, too. Children, adults, or whoever are strong English speakers. To speak our language in the far north, people write in their language, but how can we maintain that? We're fighting really hard to do that.

The way I think about it for the future, when we're living for a long period of time, we're going to keep our language alive.

● (1135)

Mr. Scott Reid: Sorry about the delay. That's the translation.

I took a look at the Wikipedia articles. I consulted Wikipedia, and first of all I typed in “Dene language”. It sent me to “Chipewyan”.

What is the distinction between Dene and Chipewyan?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): I am a Dene Tsuut'ina person. When we speak about who we are, we say “Dene Tsuut'ina”. Chipewyan, the Cree people, gave us the Chipewyan name. Historically, where the Dene people were living, they were using pointed hats. It came from the way that we were dressed. We don't use the word “Chipewyan”. We say Dene.

Mr. Scott Reid: I get the impression that historically that happens a lot. When the Europeans arrived, they asked the people they had already met who those people were over there, and then they adopted the word that was given from one outside group about another group.

It sounds like that's what happened here.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): With the people who came over, Hudson's Bay Company people and also the priests and French people, some of our language is in French. We adopted some words in French, like bread. We also say *beaucoup*. That's the way we learned our language. The priests who stayed with us and lived with us learned how to speak Dene, and they spoke Dene with us.

It's not like that anymore. When they come from their country, some of the priests or missionaries use their first language, and then they learn how to speak Dene. The priest who is currently in La Loche is a speaker of the Dene language. Our bishop is also a Dene speaker. He does services in our Dene language too. The people in the schools are also speakers of Dene. That's the way we speak our language together and understand it.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have one last question. I think I have been using up all the time for my party here.

I have one last question that relates very specifically to having a translator for yourself. I'm going to ask this, if I get the chance, to our next witness as well.

I don't know if this is true with Dene, but some languages have within them different dialects that are to some degree mutually comprehensible, to some degree not mutually comprehensible. That's true with any language—English, French, German. I don't know if it's true of Dene. Given that you have been elected as a member of Parliament, ought we to try, if we're attempting to create translation facilities, to rely upon you to be able to identify where the pool of translators is who will be most helpful in allowing translation for parliamentary proceedings when you're speaking Dene?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): I think it's easy, because there are a lot of people who can speak our Dene language to interpret for us. There's one right here now.

The way that we keep our language is to be strong about it. We speak English pretty well, and we also speak Dene pretty well, not only in Saskatchewan but among people from Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. Alberta is the same too, I think.

In terms of what you're asking me, we understand two dialects, the “t” dialect and the “k” dialect. For me as a Dene, I use the “t” dialect. From the far north, there is a “k” dialect. When we say, “Let's go”, we use the “t” language, and in the far north they use the “k” dialect. There are differences in saying the words in Dene.

● (1140)

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: *Mahsi cho.*

Mr. Stewart is next.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby South, NDP): Thank you. Thanks for presenting and thank you for the welcome.

I grew up in rural Nova Scotia, and until I was about 14 I had kind of a one-nation concept of what Canada was. I was taught that John A. Macdonald somehow failed to have a unitary style of government and that we've had some compromise. Then through the sovereignty association referendum and the Constitution talks in 1982, I developed what was kind of a standard two nations concept of what Canada was.

It wasn't until 1993, with Meech Lake, when I was back at university, that I was introduced to the idea of a three nations concept of what Canada was, and I think I definitely subscribe to that now. It was an evolution in my thinking, and I think what you're presenting here today is what a three nations concept of Canada looks like in practical terms.

For example, in translation in the House, we have English and French readily available, and that reinforces the idea of two nations, but when we talk about a three nations concept—the third nation, of course, being very many nations of indigenous origin—how do we accommodate that? How do we reflect that in our institutions? I think that's why these discussions are so important. It's because that's what we're doing here. We're discussing how to have a Parliament where we talk about our future and how that would come through in our day-to-day activities here.

Therefore, I really thank you for this experience today. It is fulfilling what I hope we can achieve as a country.

I have a question to you. How do you see this proceeding, and how likely do you think it is that we'll actually achieve this equal recognition of founders of Canada?

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): Thank you for asking me that question. I think about this a lot, the way I'm going to speak Dene in the House of Commons. I'm an MP, and you are MPs here too. It's different when I speak my language. Some people speak English and French. Where I come from, in my community, the way we think about it—the way we grew up as indigenous people, Dene people, Métis people, people who are living in the north—is we say we are the first people. We grew up here. We lived here.

When you say “up to three nations”, I'll tell you the way we think about it. I think there should be four nations, the way I think about it. There are the people who came over here and are living here, people who will be working here. When we say “coast to coast” from Newfoundland to B.C., we help out the people who come over, and some people learn English and are recognized as Canadian citizens to give them the opportunity. For them, I consider that a third nation.

As Dene people and Métis people, there are a lot of us here. From our origins by being here, if we count that in, it would be difficult. When we speak, we say “nation to nation”. The way I think about it, the way we think about it, for the Denesuline and the Cree language, we're always put to the back of the land. From now, sitting here, sitting in front, we want to work together for young people. From where? Indigenous people say that, even from the far north. Even the Métis people say to fight for that. That's the way I think about it.

● (1145)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Great. Time's short here, and I'm just wondering if there are other things you'd like to add that perhaps you haven't been able to say yet, things that you've reflected on through the questions, or something that perhaps you weren't able to cover in your initial speech.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Interpretation): I'll say it again. Things are easy nowadays. Sitting here together, using technology, we learned a lot from that, talking about it from wherever we're staying. Because of that, speaking the Dene language in Parliament and having an interpreter position created—we have a lot of money, a lot of funds, for that. A lot of money is flowing to do things together, so I think it will be done, but we have to make a mental commitment to help each other out. If we don't think that way, I think we'll move a step backwards.

We talk about constitutional rights in English. We're asking for that.

The Chair: Are there any more questions from any members of the committee?

I'd like to thank you very much. I'd also like to thank your Dene interpreter, Julius Park. *Mahsi cho*. I think this is a very historic meeting, the first meeting we've ever had in Dene, interpreted on Parliament Hill, so you're part of history. Thank you very much. I think you sense the goodwill on this committee to proceed on this.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The Chair: We'll suspend to change interpreters.

● (1145)

(Pause)

● (1150)

The Chair: Good morning.

Welcome back to the 94th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs on the day after the anniversary of our filibuster.

For scheduling, the witnesses for the meeting we were going to have next Thursday will be at the first meeting after Easter.

Our second witness today is Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette, the member for Winnipeg Centre, who really initiated this whole process.

Committee members will recall that the Speaker's ruling of June 20, 2017, was in response to his question of privilege concerning the use of indigenous languages in the House.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Ouellette, and starting this process. It's my understanding you'll be delivering your opening statement in Cree. As was the case at our last meeting, we've arranged simultaneous translation in Cree.

Thank you very much. This is very exciting and historic, and you may proceed.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette (Winnipeg Centre, Lib.)(Interpretation): Hello, my friends, my relations. It is good to see you today.

We have lost our languages. Please help us. I have walked a long pathway.

Long ago, in the winter, I walked about while I was on this cold land. I visited 41 first nations communities. I met so many Cree, my relatives: the Dakota, the Oji-Cree, the Plains Ojibwe or Saulteaux, the Métis, the French people. I heard them, the people, wish for their children to have flourishing lives.

In this great structure, you have money. In the beginning, I was told my work has started for all Canadians. We must all work collectively together, since Canada has written the promises and how processes unfold.

We are related. If things have not happened right, we will change things. Help me. Help me to respect one another.

Treaties are about respect and brotherhood. Indigenous peoples have always had treaties. The Cree and the Blackfoot made treaties using common sense. There was to be no fighting in the winter, as it was too cold and not good to move women, children, and aged populations from their homes to different locations at this time.

If one tribe made war, they sought out the other chief and explained the reason they were making war. Quite often it was that the young warriors had too much energy and were bothering the whole camp. The old people knew that the best way to do things was to send them off to war against the enemy they knew. The two chiefs would talk, and one would be given time to move the women and children and old people. It worked for them, and later in peacetime they would talk about it.

The creation stories we tell about Weysakechak are about treaty. Those world treaties are about water, earth, air, fire, and of course the Great Spirit.

For instance, when a child is born, the mother's water breaks, and this signals that the child is to be born. He then gets his first breath of precious, sacred air, and he is a live human being. He's then wrapped in the warm hide and fur of an animal and enjoys the warmth of the fire and the life-giving milk of his mother. Soon he is playing with the other children outside on their own land, which happens to be Canada.

When the Creator finished creating the land, sea, and air creatures, he called everyone forward and told them to ask for the gifts they wanted to have for themselves, and thus he made treaties with all life on earth. Many of them asked to serve mankind, but they were warned about mankind and what he would be like as the best and worst of all creation. They accepted and understood his warnings. For their understanding and sacrifices, they were granted a place in the hereafter. They would and should be honoured by man in ceremony, which indigenous peoples still do to this day.

It is for these teachings that we respect air, fire, and water in a sacred way. They are included in all our prayers and ceremonies. It is a good way to live.

We all have our own languages, understandings, and ceremonies. As indigenous peoples, we respect the earth and all the children of the feathered, furred, scaled, two-legged, four-legged, and winged citizens. We know mankind is the only creation that breaks treaties continuously. The others have never broken their sacred treaty with us.

● (1155)

By our own common sense, we must pray for the earth and all who dwell here. For over a hundred years, we have signed treaties between our different peoples and countries. The original idea was not about subservience, but rather respect.

Languages must be used to be useful. They must be used by our children in schools, in the homes, and in the rest of society. Our languages must be on TV so that we can see and understand why, where, and when, and see what is happening in our Parliament. It is important to have language.

I saw a written sign on the entrance to a graveyard in Lac la Ronge in northern Saskatchewan. It said, “If we could not as brothers live, let us here as brothers lie”.

Man is represented by fire. Interestingly enough, women are represented by water. With just a single word or a single glance, she can destroy or elevate us. Personally, I would rather be a brother to my fellow mankind than perish in a dirty flood of prejudice, jealousy, anger, and fear.

Language can convey respect and meaning. It represents culture and it defines who we are, our self-identity. It is about learning, education, and knowledge.

Elder Winston Wuttunee asked me to talk about how language is important and related to our belief structure. There are four elements —water, air, land, and fire. Language is related to these four elements. When you take a word in Cree and break it down, there are additional meanings within that word.

Let us take water as an example. Water is women, life, connection to all of creation. It is beauty itself.

Let us look at air. There's fresh air and dirty air. It all has an impact on how healthy we are. It is life, breath. Animals fly in air. We need good air to be healthy.

Let's look at land. We live and we die. When we die, we become the land, and the land is our relatives. It feeds the grasses. It feeds the bison. It feeds us. It is us.

Think upon fire. Fire is also life. It keeps us warm—to cook, to survive. It cleans the land. It is also men. It works best with water.

Let us take one word of the Cree language, *nikamoun*, which means “to sing”. *Nika* means “in front”, and *moun* means “to eat”. *Nikamoun,* therefore, means “to be fed song”, as it is. If you break it down further, it could mean “to be fed food by the one in front”. This could also be the Creator. To take it a bit further, it means “whoever is in front is feeding us”. This is where the greed for money becomes our sustenance. This has quickly become a starvation diet for us all —nature and mankind too. Do we have the responsibility and the ability to respond, to learn and save ourselves, our children, our mankind, and our world?

Without language, who are we as individuals? We become without a past, unable to understand the thoughts of the past, unable to understand our ancestors in ceremony. They in turn are unable to understand us when we can't communicate in our own language.

Our modern Parliament has a role to play in helping indigenous peoples. You can add to the scales of justice, ensuring that our Canadian languages, our indigenous languages, do not become museum pieces relegated to the back of anthropological shelves on linguistics but are living, alive, and adapting to a modern world—yet they must always remain spiritually connected to the past.

I dream of a moment when the Canadian state, which has for too long tried to ignore and terminate these languages, is part of the process in Parliament of breathing life into our common languages.

Tapwe. Thank you very much.

● (1200)

The Chair: Thank you for your eloquence. It's a very historic moment here, starting this process.

We'll now go to Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

Mr. Ouellette, thank you for being here and for bringing this forward in the House. It is entirely to your credit that we're having this study. I want to make sure that's very clearly on the record.

That said, I'd like to know about the process you went through that brought you to bring a point of privilege in the first place. Can you tell us what happened, what steps were taken, who you contacted, and how we got here?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Thank you very much.

On May 4, I rose in the House of Commons on an S. O. 31. It was an important issue because there was violence occurring against indigenous women in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Some had been killed and burned alive, set afire during parties, by people who did not respect women. In order to have perhaps a deeper impact—because a lot of politicians will raise these issues, but sometimes we're ignored and not everyone hears the message—I wanted to make sure that the people who needed to hear it most, especially some young men, would hear that message, so I decided to speak in Cree.

I expected when I wrote the little one-minute speech that it would be translated in the House that I would have the simple courtesy of one minute to be able to express that language so that all people could understand what I was saying. Unfortunately, the interpretive and translation services were not able to provide that service because we can't do it under the current Standing Orders. I understand. Bureaucracy has a way of functioning and working, and bureaucracy is important, but at the same time it's important for that message to get out.

I was dismayed when other MPs could not understand what I was saying, nor were my words recorded within the *Hansard*. I have spoken many times in Cree in the House, and it's not even an accurate representation of some of the speeches. It simply says the member has spoken in Cree. I might have spoken for over a minute —two, three, four minutes—in Cree, but no one knows what I said.

I brought this issue up as a point of privilege to the Speaker a few weeks after that. I spoke to a number of lawyers and people involved in language issues across Canada, especially people involved in francophone language issues for minority linguistic rights across Canada, learning from them about some of the processes that they had gone through and trying to find out what would relate to indigenous peoples.

I believe one of our colleagues spoke previously to section 35 of the Constitution Act, which states: "The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed."

A friend of mine, Karen Drake, has written about this extensively. She believes that they do fall within this provision. Some people have even launched a constitutional challenge, arguing that not only does the federal government have a negative obligation not to stifle aboriginal languages or to simply just ignore them but that it has a positive obligation to provide the resources necessary for the revitalization of those languages.

I could go on perhaps in another section. I don't want to take up all of your time.

● (1205)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have one more question and then I will pass it to Mr. Simms, who has questions as well.

In the process of what you went through, did you offer to provide translated text to the translation booth that they could then read into the record as you spoke?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Of course. I provided English, French, and Cree versions, lined up within a chart so that it was very easy to follow. Unfortunately, although it was said that as members we are all honourable, they had to have the assurance—because it is a very professional organization and it does need to have a very high standard in interpretive services—that what I said was accurately represented. They needed assurance that if I had said something a little different, it would be recorded as such in either English or French to make sure that it was proper parliamentary language and also that it was an accurate representation of what was said.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: They were saying "spoke in Cree" is more accurate than what you actually said.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Before we go to Mr. Simms, to follow up on that, we're not having the four provinces because they don't do translation, but one of those provinces puts in their *Hansard* "translation as provided by the member", so if it's not accurate, that would be your problem. People would know that it's your translation. That's the way they've handled that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Translating for *Hansard* should be reasonable, because you can translate after the fact.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): It's something to consider for our Standing Orders, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Robert. This was really good. I enjoyed that. You were as eloquent as always.

We were just talking about the House, the parliamentary precinct. I want to talk about your riding. This is the same questioning I had for Mr. Saganash when he was here. He brought in an absolutely startling fact, which was that there was no word for "member of Parliament" in Cree until he showed up in 2011. In translation, it's "someone who represents". They use those words. I find that astonishing. I would like you to comment on Mr. Saganash's situation.

Also, how do you communicate with your community, your riding, householders, social media? How do you do that in the languages?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Mr. Saganash had an excellent point. One of the issues I faced when I arrived here on Parliament Hill was that there was no word for "MP" in the dialect in the west, so after much consultation with a number of elders and going back to some linguists at universities, the term *otapapistamâkew* was chosen —

● (1210)

Mr. Scott Simms: That's totally different from what he told us.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: That's one who represents or speaks on behalf of others.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay. It's the same concept.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: It's the same concept, yes. It's *otapapistamâkew*. It's a wonderful word, but it was difficult. Even when I arrived I wanted to have that title on my door, and I spent a long time, probably about one year, arguing with the House of Commons administration about whether I was allowed to have that one Cree word with English and French—MP, *député*, *otapapistamâkew*—at the same time, and I'm not allowed. My staff held my hand back from taking a marker to write it on the sign, but I will wait for the process to come to a conclusion.

Mr. Scott Simms: My constituents do that to mine all the time, so go for it.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: About 22% of my riding is indigenous, composed of many different nations. I have Oji-Cree, Dakota, Michif Métis, French Métis—many different groups from across Canada. I have Inuit people as well, but I also represent Filipinos. Generally we work in English.

For me, the issue that we need to look at is that the state has a certain role to play, and if Parliament is to be representative of people in this country and about what we are as Canadians and what we want to be, then all languages that are native or indigenous to this land should have the opportunity of being heard in the House at some point, if it's required by an MP.

It's important because if people can't see themselves in the institutions of the state, then why should they be part of or participate in that state? I still hear many elders say they are not Canadian citizens because indigenous peoples only received the right to vote in the 1960s. It's still very difficult to convince people in many first nations communities that the state, Canada, is here for them and that we all work for everyone, because they don't believe that yet. They don't see it.

This is why I say Parliament does have this role to play in trying to demonstrate in a most symbolic way that we are all in this together.

The Chair: Mr. Richards is next.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks. Welcome.

Going to your question of privilege and how it all came to be, obviously I know the basis of it, but in preparing that question of privilege and thinking about it and making a decision to come forward with it, did you reach out to other members for discussions about that, either before the question of privilege was raised or with anyone afterwards in arguing it with other members before the ruling was made by the Speaker? Can you maybe just walk me through what kinds of conversations or discussions you might have had?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I had a conversation with some members and the House leader's office to find out some of the procedures I could use, as I'm a new MP. I could have submitted it to a committee, but obviously some committees are sometimes very busy. I understand that you have an awful lot of work to do. Would you have the time to study it? At what point would I gain enough support?

I thought it was important for me to raise in the House because it was one of absolute privilege, I believe, about being understood. If I speak in the House, I expect to be understood by others, by my fellow MPs, because otherwise it negates what I'm saying. It's as if I'm not even there. It's like dead silence or a black hole of time and words, and no one understands what I say, and if you can't debate me, whatever our ideologies are or whatever our different ideas are, then that would serve no purpose. It's important that I have the ability to be understood.

I learned that the Senate has been doing this for a number of years, that other legislatures in Canada have been doing this, that there were other legislatures in the history of Canada that have been doing this. When you read the parliamentary procedures, you learn that there is a strong history and tradition about how we conduct ourselves in our legislature, and if other Parliaments can do this, like the Manitoba legislature in the 1870s, I don't understand why we can't do this here in the Canadian Parliament, which has access to a large number of resources.

I'm not asking for a billion dollars or even a million dollars. I'm asking for a few translators to have the opportunity to come when it's appropriate and when it's needed to offer translation.

● (1215)

Mr. Blake Richards: You mentioned the Senate and the process that they have in place. What's your knowledge and understanding of it? Was that the type of approach you were looking for in the House of Commons, or what is your position on that?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: The Senate uses translation once in a while, as required. It was actually Senator Charlie Watt—who is not quite retired, or perhaps he has retired—who fought for this around 10 years ago. He spent a considerable amount of his own resources. One issue they faced was around dialects. We all speak a bit of a different language, and we don't have a central state structure. As we know, indigenous nations in Canada do not have a central state structure. There is no central indigenous government with an Académie française that everybody can consult to find out the correct word.

[*Translation*]

How is French supposed to be spoken? That institution determines that we speak it in a certain way. We speak French. The right word is "*ordinateur*", not "computer".

[*English*]

They decide what the words are. They decide what the word for "MP" is. Perhaps Monsieur Saganash's word and way of saying it is better than *otapapistamâkew*. Perhaps it's his word we should be using, or perhaps my word is the better word, but if you don't have the resources of the state, a central government helping people, working in collaboration, allowing people to come together, and the experts who actually come up with these terms, then these languages will die. Indigenous languages are actually dying in this country.

I heard the previous witness say that perhaps they are endangered. They are all endangered. Cree is endangered. It's one of the most spoken languages on the prairies, and the statistics do not tell the entire story. Statistics Canada, I believe, gets the wrong thing, because people feel an awful lot of shame because they can't speak their language. I don't speak the language very well. I feel an awful lot of shame about that. My parents didn't teach me, and my grandparents refused to teach me, saying, "It's not useful. You don't need it. It's going to cause lots of problems."

There are also a lot of people who say, "What makes me a man? What makes me an indigenous man?" When I go to ceremonies and I can't understand what's being said all the time, what does that do inside? I sing the songs and I have to think, yes, that word means this, and what does that word mean? If you have to translate for other people, then they have say, "Well, you're pronouncing that word wrong." Your ancestors can't understand what you're saying; you're asking for their help, but they can't understand you.

In Parliament, the role that I see—my dream, actually—is that in fact perhaps we're not going to be able to save every language out there—let's be realistic—but maybe we can save Inuktitut, maybe Cree, maybe Dene, maybe Anishinaabemowin, maybe four, five, or 10 languages. There are others that are so far gone that the critical mass of speakers is just not there in society to even offer the professional translation services and interpretive services that would be required in a large institution like Parliament.

This is what is needed.

Sorry. I don't mean to take up all your time.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a colleague here who wants to get a question in. Would that be okay, Mr. Chair? I have one more question, but would it be okay to allow Mr. Reid...? It might need a little extra time.

The Chair: Okay. Sure, go ahead.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I dream of the day when an indigenous grandmother can turn on the TV at home and not have to watch an English-language program with her grandchildren that she's trying to look after. Instead she can turn on CPAC and watch the great debates of Parliament, because there are great debates that go on every day in our legislature. She would be able to hear it in Cree, to hear it on a channel in Inuktitut, in Dene, and watch those debates and be informed about what's going on in our public institutions. She can feel proud that they can hear their language there. The little children will be able to hear it in the background and say, "That language is important. I should try to speak that language."

● (1220)

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes.

I think I have a better understanding of where your position is now. It ties into the next question I wanted to ask.

I know when the Speaker made his ruling, Mr. Saganash indicated —I think it was to the CBC—that he had been working to try to negotiate a solution. From what I've heard from you today, it sounds like your goal is maybe different from what I had understood it to be, and it's not simply about having some interpretation provided.

I asked you about the Senate model. It is actually a broader goal than that: it's to make sure that you're preserving some of the languages and encouraging their use elsewhere as well.

I just wanted to know whether you were aware of the negotiation that was taking place that Mr. Saganash referred to. What do you know about that, and what are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I don't specifically know too much, but I will say is that everything has to start somewhat small. I can't expect tomorrow that we have a full interpretive service and linguistic service with 10 Cree linguists who understand every dialect at the snap of the fingers, but what I'm hoping is we build something over time. I know there have been indigenous MPs who have been in the Conservative Party who are Cree, and who have been in the Liberal Party, and even the NDP. I'm hoping that as more indigenous MPs become elected over time, it builds up. I hope that the more we use it, the more there becomes the opportunity. We're using it maybe 1% of the time, then 5%, 10%, and it becomes something more casual and we become used to it. Then it doesn't count as something that's exotic or different or strange, but something about which people then say that maybe we need to offer this on TV or online on its own little channel. These are things that build up over time.

What I'm hoping is we take our time to actually do it properly, to lay an excellent foundation, because I really do want to save these languages. We are nearing the end. This is it for indigenous languages.

I meet people who come into my office all the time. They say they speak Cree, and I start speaking with them a little. They can't carry on a conversation, yet they say they speak Cree. They want to speak it, and they understand it. The grandparents can speak it and understand it. Their children can only understand it, and our kids can't do any of it.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the indulgence.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the indulgence.

As a fellow vest wearer, I have to start by saying how envious I am of that amazing vest you're wearing.

A really long time ago, 25 years ago, I wrote a book on languages in Canada. It was dealing with official languages, not with aboriginal languages. One of the things that really sank in to me was how remarkably little government measures are able to assist languages to survive and prosper, or alternatively, how they can crush out a language that has vitality. There are many examples one can look at, and an obvious one for me is the attempt of my own...

My ancestors come from Ireland on one side. There are attempts to save the Gaelic language. They made it the official language of the country and they still have great difficulty in overcoming this problem. It's an interesting story to look at.

I'll throw out one of the things I observed with languages for you to think about. It may not be a good idea, but one of the things to think about is that a language that is divided into many subsidiary dialects within the language seems to have less ability to survive. Looking at a European example of this, I look at the fourth official language of Switzerland, which is Romansh. The Romansh romance language is divided into three dialects, which seems to have greatly weakened its ability to survive. In other areas they've tried to make the languages more homogeneous, and within the language itself that involves a certain amount of internal compromise.

I'm wondering whether if that second route was chosen it would help with the survival of the Cree language, which I gather has significant internal distinctions. I simply ask that question to hear what you think about that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I agree with that.

If you go to France, you can see that the Langue d'oc still exists. It is a kind of dialect, but it is a different language that includes a lot of French words. But ensuring the very survival of the language is extremely difficult.

[*English*]

You're right, it is very difficult, but I think the great thing about a centralized state that we have, a federation, is that there are the resources of the state to allow the linguists to sit down together to come up with the common terms.

The great thing about Parliament is that we deal with everything. We have debates about everything. We talk about transportation, about security. We talk about health. Do those terms always exist? Are they always the same? If they're not, it's going to force people, the experts, to sit down somewhere and decide on the term that we want to use. Then it's going to take the education system, with Indigenous Services, to make sure these words get out to the communities and the schools and that the teachers in the schools use them.

Then if also we know that there is employment for interpreters, the universities will have the opportunity to end up training people to a professional standard to offer those services. I used to have a program at the University of Manitoba. I was a program director there in the aboriginal focus programs, as a university professor, and one of our certificates, combined with Red River College, was aboriginal languages, but we couldn't run the program because we didn't really have any jobs for people to go to, because there was no need. We don't need Cree.

However, I think if there was an opportunity, people might take up that language and be a language defender, a language warrior, and go out there and promote it and use it every day, and use it at home and in their workplace. We all know what Quebec did in the 1960s. It was quite incredible. They went from having....

● (1225)

[*Translation*]

No French was spoken on the island of Montreal. A lot of people did not like Bill 101, but it still forced the state and the businesses to recognize that speaking French was important.

I lived in Quebec City for 13 years and I understand the mentality. Language structures our thoughts. It is incredible. When I speak French, I think completely differently than when I speak English or Cree. It is really fascinating. If we lose the indigenous languages, we will never get them back.

Words can describe important things. At one point in the year, a flower can be different, although technically it is the same flower. But the word used to describe it may vary with the time of year. The elements that make it up can be useful to a physician at some points of the year but not others. We would lose all that knowledge of the elders because young people do not understand all those words.

Something has to be done, but no one is doing anything. That's why this is historic.

[*English*]

It's historic because you have the opportunity of doing something that no one else has done before. We always talk about the importance of language, but no one actually takes any action in this country. There are very few resources. Everyone says, “Well, you know, maybe we'll write a little children's book here, a little children's book there, with a couple of Cree words and a couple of French words and a couple of English words, so maybe people may understand what's going on”, but it's not enough. We need the state. We need the instruments of the state to help, because it is an important and symbolic way of supporting and making sure that some of these languages survive. Not all of them will, I kid you not, but at least a few will, and that's your importance here.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Thank you very much, Dr. Ouellette. You give me a lot to think about, and about my own identity too.

I'm a Canadian. I believe in intrinsic equality, and I think that's reflected in our constitution, but what you're making me think about is that I thought forever of indigenous languages as your language. Now I'm thinking of it as my language; I just don't speak it. Since it's my language and I don't speak it, perhaps I should try to protect it.

That's really the value of what you're doing here. You're providing Canadians with a chance to reflect on who they are and what it means to be Canadian, that Canadians are people who speak indigenous languages, and they're part of that discussion. The state should reflect that, because that's what the state does. It's directed by the Constitution. It's directed by the will of the citizens. I think you're spot-on and I really support what you're doing here, as I have told Mr. Saganash as well.

I support investing in this, and I really like your idea of a CPAC channel. I think I'd probably watch that one, because as a Canadian I'd like to learn that language that is mine but that I just don't speak.

You talked about your elders who don't feel Canadian. They don't know that they've invented a word for MP now because you represent them. I think that's what Canada has to mean in the future if we're going to move ahead.

Could you elaborate on what you think are the first steps we have to take to recognize what you've expressed as your dream?

● (1230)

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Well, obviously, you have to come up with a report to make a recommendation to the House. That's the important thing.

Then you need to submit it to a vote in some form of motion to the chamber, as in 1956, when they decided to have simultaneous translation or interpretation of the French and English languages in Parliament, and make sure that when we sit in the new West Block chamber, the people's House, the opportunity exists for interpretive services there.

Then the interpretive services need to get to work to convene tables where linguists in Cree, for instance, from across Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, northern Ontario, and even Quebec sit down to see what the common terms are. If someone decides to say “health care”, how do we say it?

[*Translation*]

What is an MP?

[*English*]

How are we going to say it? How are we going to write it out? Are we going to use syllabics or are we going to use something else? Let them come up with a solution. That's, I think, the first step, and we must take the time to get it right.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Could I ask if you think we should try it with one language first? Do you think that would be acceptable, almost as a pilot to see if we can move it through? Do you think that would be too offensive to others to do it that way?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Well, I'm not sure if there.... I'm sure I'm going to have a bunch of emails and texts from people who speak various languages, but if you look at the Michif language, the Métis language, there are very few speakers left. There are a couple. It's on its last legs, with 500 speakers. Many are very elderly. I'm not sure they have the time. Some might have the time to come up with some terms.

I think we really need to find a couple of languages—maybe three or four—and start to blaze the path with them. I would suggest Cree, Inuktitut, Dene, and Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwa, which is a common term used to describe Anishinaabemowin, to kind of blaze that path.

Then after that, as more MPs also become elected, that would serve as an incentive to people to become involved in the political process, to hear their voices in Parliament, to hear their language in Parliament. Someone might think, "We need a Salish speaker in Parliament. We want to hear the Salish language. Maybe we should become involved in the political process and get one of our people elected to the Conservatives, the NDP, the Green Party, the Liberals —pick a party."

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Thank you.

The narrative you're suggesting is perhaps a four-language pilot?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I'm suggesting four, yes.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Then what would be the first step we'd do with those? I know you started to touch on it, but perhaps you could elaborate a little more.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Well, I think you'd need to get a group of linguists together to sit down and come up with the terms. Then do some practice runs to find out how it would sound and how much it is requested.

Obviously we have a little bit of a practice run going here. I tried to do something here today. I spoke in French and in English, and I ensured that the gentleman was hopefully doing translation into Cree at the same time, and listening to the French translation into English and then into Cree, trying to find a way of coordinating that. These are the things that are going to have to start at some point, or could start.

It's up to you. Obviously I don't want to presage your—

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Could I ask you one more question?

You're saying we have to narrow it to perhaps four languages to begin with. Could we start with a certain procedure, such as the S. O. 31s, and try it out through that, or would you suggest we have to do a much broader swath of interpretive...?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: If someone is going to speak in Cree, I think they should probably come up with the speech a little bit beforehand as well. They'd sit down with some of the interpreters and perhaps a linguist and say, "What are the terms you would like to use? What is an appropriate term if I said this and then talked about this? What would you be able to say? Would you understand what I'm saying?" Give some appropriate lead time to people to have those discussions, because it is brand new and it's not been done, and take the time to get it right.

● (1235)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Okay. Thank you.

Do I still have some time? Okay.

I'd like to be at the first speech. If you give us a little leeway, we can all sit there and listen, which would be great—and respond, I would hope.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Yes, an S. O. 31 sounds interesting.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Okay. You're suggesting an S. O. 31 and an advance lead on a speech for a government bill or something. You'd be able to say, "I will speak next week to this", or something like that.

Do you have any other suggestions for how we might practically try this?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I think you have to give a certain.... I think the Senate right now has a nice system, the 48 hours' notice. Obviously interpreter services still have to compile a list of approved interpreters who can offer this service and who are around to offer this service.

You also want it to be cost-effective in some way. It's good to fly people in from different parts of the country for a few moments, but you want it to be done in a way that is also good on the public purse. This is not a....

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Perhaps we could have a question period when we use all indigenous languages to ask the Prime Minister a question—which he knows well in advance, of course.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: Perhaps someday. You never know. That might be very interesting. Take the dream even further.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

As you said, in different languages it's different. The people of the Arctic have a whole bunch of different words for "snow" in Inuktitut. It's not a simple procedure, but you've opened a very important discussion for this nation, and we really appreciate it.

We also appreciate your interpreter, Darren Okemaysim. *Mahsi cho. Meegwetch.*

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: He's from Beardy's and Okemasis First Nation, and from the First Nations University in Saskatchewan.

The Chair: He's from Beardy's and Okemasis First Nation and the First Nations University. Great. Thank you for being here on this historic day. *Meegwetch*.

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: [*Member speaks in Cree*]

The Chair: Do you have any closing remarks?

Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette: I just appreciate everything that you're doing.

I must say you probably didn't expect to be dealing with this at the PROC committee, and I apologize for that. I appreciate the Speaker trying to find a path forward for it. You know there were lots of things I could have done. I could have challenged the Speaker's ruling and tried to push a vote in the House, which would have been dramatic and perhaps burned a lot of bridges at the same time.

I really appreciate all of you and the work that you're doing in trying to help make this country a very inclusive and better place for all of us.

Thank you very much.

[*Member speaks in Cree*]

The Chair: And reconciled.

Merci. We will suspend for a minute while we change witnesses.

● (1235)

(Pause)

● (1240)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. We now resume the 94th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This afternoon, we are going to examine Bill C-377, An Act to change the name of the electoral district of Châteauguay—Lacolle. The sponsor of the bill, and the hon. member for Châteauguay—Lacolle, Brenda Shanahan, is with us today.

Thank you for joining us. After your presentation, there will be a period for questions from members of the committee. Thereafter, the committee will study the bill clause by clause.

Mrs. Shanahan now has the floor for her presentation.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you, Chair.

Let me just say that as a first-time member of Parliament, it's been my honour to serve as an official member on—I was just counting—four committees to date, including my current one, but this is the first time that I am appearing as a witness. It's really a thrill. Thank you so much.

Of course, it's about my private member's bill, Bill C-377, An Act to change the name of the electoral district of Châteauguay—Lacolle to...well, you'll soon find out. We've got to keep a little suspense here.

[*Translation*]

Today marks an important milestone in my first initiative after my election, to change the name of our riding from Châteauguay—Lacolle to Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville. I have undertaken this initiative at my constituents' request.

The reason behind the initiative is that the name Châteauguay—Lacolle is inaccurate. If you consult the map of our constituency that you have before you, you will see Châteauguay. On the border to the south, you will also see that the municipality of Lacolle is located outside the constituency of Châteauguay—Lacolle.

I have a theory to explain why the commission chose the name at one time. The fact remains that, for people who live in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, which is a completely different municipality, there is a major difference between Lacolle and Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle. The municipality located in our territory is Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle. That municipality has its own history, its own institutions and its own raison d'être.

Even before I took office, the residents of Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle had talked to me about this concern, and I pledged to do whatever I had to do to remedy the situation. It is not easy when one is new in politics, given that one doesn't know the system through and through. Nevertheless, I did my research. With that in mind, I am honoured to present my private member's bill for study in committee.

As if it were not enough that the name “Lacolle“ is being erroneously used to designate Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, we have also noticed several times that, even today, for the constituents of both ridings, the name Châteauguay—Lacolle leads to confusion. It also creates misunderstandings for certain stakeholders. The names “Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle” and “Lacolle” are often used interchangeably by various stakeholders, including the national media. This is mainly because the Lacolle border crossing, Quebec's busiest crossing into the United States, is located in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, not in Lacolle.

Many citizens of Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle have told me that they do not like the name Châteauguay—Lacolle. It hurts their municipal pride and their sense of belonging. We can all understand that.

After much thought and many conversations with citizens and stakeholders in the region, the name Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville emerged as a logical and meaningful choice for a number of reasons.

First, Les Jardins-de-Napierville is the name of a regional county municipality that includes nine of our 15 municipalities. Yes, there are 15 municipalities in my constituency and nine of them are in the RCM of Les Jardins-de-Napierville.

Second, all citizens could identify with the name Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville because the residents of Châteauguay and the five surrounding municipalities in the northwest of the riding can identify with the Greater Châteauguay area. The municipalities of Mercier, Léry and Saint-Isidore are in that Greater Châteauguay area.

Third, the RCM of Les Jardins-de-Napierville is the most important region in Quebec for vegetable production. Vegetables—such as lettuce, carrots, and onions of all kinds—grow very well there. That makes it relatively well-known.

● (1245)

Lastly, the name “Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville” is a good representation of the semi-urban, semi-rural nature of our riding.

I must remind you that I am sponsoring this bill for my constituents. A petition calling on the House of Commons to make Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville the new name of our riding is also circulating in the region. People are happy that I am already working on the project.

The petition already has several hundred signatures, including those of the mayors of Napierville, Saint-Cyprien-de-Napierville, and the neighbouring towns.

As elected officials, those mayors are happy to support my initiative on behalf of their citizens, as are my colleagues from the neighbouring ridings: Jean Rioux, MP for Saint-Jean, who is also happy that Lacolle is in his constituency, Anne Minh-Thu Quach, MP for Salaberry—Suroît, and my colleague Jean-Claude Poissant, MP for La Prairie.

As indicated in my bill, Châteauguay—Lacolle was created in 2013, following the redistribution that came into effect with the dissolution of the 41st Parliament in 2015. The current riding was formed from the former ridings of Châteauguay—Saint-Constant and Beauharnois—Salaberry.

Those who were here during the last Parliament may well know and understand the system much better than I do. That said, it seems that the Quebec electoral boundaries commission made an error in naming the new federal riding in the province of Quebec. The fact that Lacolle was already in the constituency of Saint-Jean at the time of the last redistribution probably went unnoticed.

[*English*]

I'm now going to get to the more technical part. The committee has heard my reasons for changing the name of my riding. Let me outline a bit how name changes for federal ridings come about in the first place, and the criteria that any name change must meet.

First of all, given the practice of reviewing electoral district boundaries every 10 years following a new national census, Elections Canada provides the 10 provincial electoral boundaries commissions with guidelines on riding name conventions and best practices.

While Elections Canada will enact any name changes legislated by Parliament, there are practical and technical issues, such as the limited capacity of databases, that must be considered. Thus, riding names must be limited to 50 characters. That may come as a surprise to my colleagues, because we certainly have some with quite interesting and long names. As long as it's 50 characters or less—including hyphens, dashes, and spaces—it meets the criterion. That's so they can fit it onto databases and maps and so on.

“Chateauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville”, I'm happy to report, has 38 characters, including hyphens, dashes, and spaces.

As well, the names selected for ridings should reflect the character of Canada and be clear and unambiguous, and I believe that these criteria are met in the bill, as the names refer to a municipality and an MRC region.

A distinction must also be made, in the spelling of names, between hyphens and dashes. Hyphens are used to link parts of geographical names, whereas dashes are used to unite two or more distinct geographical names. This convention has been respected: a dash is used to separate “Châteauguay” and “Les Jardins-de-Napierville”, with the hyphens in “Les Jardins-de-Napierville”.

On the map, we see that Châteauguay and Les Jardins-de-Napierville are two geographical names that correspond almost entirely to the territory and also conform to the reading of the map from left to right. That's for simplicity and clarity and to respect the geographical locations.

Moreover, the name of an electoral district must be unique, meaning the components of the name are to be used only once, which is indeed the case for the elements of the two names in question.

The guidelines also contain negative characteristics to be avoided, and this is also the case with the name that we have chosen. For example, the name of a riding should be clear in both English and French and, as much as possible, be acceptable without translation into the other official language, so that you don't have multiple versions of multiple translations of the name.

● (1250)

The other characteristic to be avoided is the use of cardinal points, such as east or west. You may think, “It seems to me that we do have some names using those cardinal points”, but again let me remind you that Parliament is the ultimate authority in passing these name changes. The guidelines say it is to be avoided because of clumsy translation.

Lastly, the use of actual names of provinces, personal names, and names that are imprecise or contrived from non-geographical sources is also to be avoided.

I think I've raised all the relevant arguments for requiring the name change as proposed by my private member's bill, Bill C-377, as well as demonstrated how the new name respects the guidelines as laid out by Elections Canada.

I'm honoured to have the trust of my constituents in ensuring that a wrong will be righted. I'm confident that the bill will find the support of all my colleagues for our new name, Chateauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville.

I'm now delighted to take your questions. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I am going to give each party three minutes.

[*English*]

Hopefully they won't use all that time.

Go ahead, Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you, Brenda.

My riding has a lot more than 50 characters in it, but the title is shorter than that. Also, I'm sure we'll all agree, except for a couple of people, that this Bill C-377 is far better than the previous Bill C-377.

I have a couple of quick questions.

Who was your predecessor, and why did they not object to the name change at that time?

When the last redistribution happened, I was working for the member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, who might be in the room at this time. They wanted to change the name to Bay d'Espoir—Central—Notre Dame, which in French is Bay d'Espoir—Central—Notre Dame, which is another whole issue. We petitioned the committee at the time—I think it was PROC—and it was changed.

Why wasn't it done at the original change in 2013? Do you know?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: We did our research. It's all available, of course. The commission reports are available online, as well as some of the discussion that happened in Parliament.

There are two things. My new riding was created from two other ridings. The initial report from the commission for Quebec suggested the new name change to Châteauguay—Lacolle. They list it there with all the other name changes, and there are no other comments. However, the second report indeed addresses interventions, consultations, and comments that had come from the public and from MPs about the changes. That report also lists in detail all the different suggestions that were made. They accept some and reject others.

If I just take as an example the riding beside mine, originally the commission had recommended "Salaberry". Clearly the MP at the time...or consultations were done or citizens spoke up, and they had the name changed to Salaberry—Suroît. I don't have the reasons, but that's an example.

However, in the case of Châteauguay—Lacolle, there's no evidence that any intervention was done.

● (1255)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds left.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's okay. I can use that time.

You mentioned that you discussed it with your mayors. Is there any opposition? Does anybody in your riding say this is a terrible idea?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Absolutely not. For sure, people were floating a few ideas, such as basically just every municipality. Everyone thought, "Well, it should be Châteauguay—Saint-Urbain," and so on. That was a great topic of conversation and continues to be so.

The first mayor that I spoke with about this was Jacques Délisle, the mayor of Napierville at the time. He suggested Châteauguay—Les Jardins-de-Napierville. I was floating that around the region, and it's neither here nor there, but he died very suddenly, still a young man. He died playing basketball. Because of the fact that Jacques had suggested the name, people liked it. It really reinforced that name choice.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you. My time is up.

What was his name?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Jacques Délisle was the mayor who died.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Nater is next.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Madame Shanahan, for joining us as well.

I'm just curious about what made you decide to go ahead with this bill, rather than your original motion M-125 on financial literacy. I understand you have a background in the banking industry and social work. It seems that financial literacy would have been a logical one to go ahead with, especially considering there is a parallel process going on right now with the House leaders in terms of a unanimous consent motion to change multiple riding names.

Was there intervention from anyone encouraging you to not go ahead with the financial literacy motion and instead go with this? I'm just curious about why that decision was made.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: That's an excellent question, because, of course, I had a whole reflection period to go through.

First of all, you have to find out about how one presents a private member's bill and the lottery and where you are in the lottery and how long it takes. I'm number 86. Does that mean I'm only going to show up in three years or I'm going to show up in 86 days? I had no idea.

I had to get my head around that. Naturally a subject like financial literacy is something I've been working on for many years, so I had a lot of ideas about what I wanted to do there, but then there was this thing that was more than a request: it was to right that wrong. That's really what my constituents were telling me.

[*Translation*]

That had to change. They were asking me what was going on in Ottawa and emphasizing that Lacolle was next door.

[*English*]

I think all of us can understand. It's like saying Lacolle is the border crossing. It's like saying that if you have a riding named Pearson, you live at Pearson airport. It is not the case.

So I had that compelling me. I did my research. How could we get about doing that? This is the kind of thing I was learning about. Yes, it could be done as an omnibus bill, and I was learning about omnibus bills. Apparently people don't like to use them. To me, they're a tool. Whatever is a tool, I say great, that's fine, but I was still hearing a lot from my constituents, and I was learning more about how Parliament operates. It was getting later and later. I was concerned with the timing. I could see how things work, how things can be delayed. Other priorities can arise. We would not have what I understood was sort of my soft deadline, which is royal assent by January 2019, so that the name would be effective for the elections in 2019.

I had to make a very tough decision, but I think any one of us here would understand. What do you go for? Do you go with your own personal thing that you want to do, or do you go with what your citizens are asking you to do? I had to make that decision.

There are other ways to work on financial literacy, and I'm certainly continuing to do that.

Mr. John Nater: I don't see any reason why this won't pass through the House. Do you have a sponsor in the Senate when it gets to the Senate?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I don't know how much I can say about that. I've certainly been talking to senators. In Quebec we have senators who are actually attributed to different regions, so naturally there's an interest there.

The Chair: Mr. Stewart is next.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: I don't have much to say, other than you're obviously a quick study, because your presentation here is excellent. I think this should go through. It makes logical sense to me. I congratulate you on a successful presentation.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much, Mr. Stewart.

The Chair: Is the committee ready for clause-by-clause consideration?

Shall clause 1 carry?

(Clause 1 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the chair report the bill?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Congratulations.

The meeting is adjourned.