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• (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the 24th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the motion adopted by the House on January 25, 2020.

The committee will spend the first hour on a briefing on the Government of Canada's public reform document for the modernization of the Official Languages Act. The committee will spend the second hour on its study of the government measures to protect and promote French in Quebec and in Canada.

[*English*]

This is a reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of a headset with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. With us for the first hour is the Honourable Mélanie Joly, the member for Ahuntsic—Cartierville and the Minister of Official Languages, as well as Denis Racine, director general of the official languages branch at Canadian Heritage.

I see someone's hand is raised. Before we hear from the minister, I'm going to give the floor to Mrs. Lalonde.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll make it quick. I want to raise a deeply concerning issue that has clearly been making headlines these past few days. I am talking about Black Monday at Laurentian University.

On behalf of everyone, I think, including Mr. Lefebvre, Mr. Serré and other members with whom I've had the pleasure of speaking, I want to share a letter, in both official languages, that the minister wrote to her counterparts in the Ontario government, specifically Mr. Romano and Ms. Mulroney. I think it's important in light of what's happening. I will send it to the clerk right away.

It would be appreciated if the clerk could send it out to the committee members.

The Chair: We will now carry on.

Minister and Mr. Racine, you have seven and a half minutes for your opening statement. Committee members will then have an opportunity to ask you questions.

Please go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to be here, and I'm glad to see you are healthy.

Thank you, honourable members. I'm pleased to have this opportunity, so thank you for inviting me. I hope you are all healthy as well. I'm joining you from Montreal.

As you know, on February 19, I presented a public reform document for the modernization of the Official Languages Act, entitled "English and French: Towards a Substantive Equality of Official Languages in Canada". A lot has changed in a year, and when confronted with change, we can either stand in its way or be open to the opportunities. The Canada we know was shaped by people who seized opportunity in a changing world. Canada takes pride in being a diverse country, a bilingual country.

Having two official languages is one of our greatest strengths. The French language is alive and well in North America because Canadians—specifically, Quebeckers, Acadians and French speakers all over the country—made a commitment to protect it throughout our history. More than 50 years ago, we chose a modern vision of our country, a country where our two official languages would play a prominent role. The Official Languages Act gave millions of francophones from coast to coast to coast the right to access federal services in their language. English-speaking Quebeckers also have that right, and young people in official language minority communities have the right to attend school in their mother tongue.

In Canada, language is more than an abstract notion. It is our connection to the past and the vehicle for telling our stories. That is true not just of English and French, but also of indigenous languages, which our language policies must take into account.

Our world is changing. Globalization has imposed certain languages to facilitate trade. At the same time, international trade and digital technologies are promoting the use of English. In the face of these changes, our two official languages are not on equal footing. There are eight million francophones in Canada, within North America, a region of over 360 million inhabitants who are almost exclusively anglophone. It is our responsibility to protect French and to offer a modernized vision of our linguistic duality. We must take action so that all Canadians can identify with the objectives of the Official Languages Act. Our two official languages must stand on more equal footing. The government has a responsibility to ensure that everyone in the country has an opportunity to learn French, speak French and live in French, as is the case for English.

For a language to be living, it must have a strong culture. Francophones must be able to make their voices heard, especially in the digital world, where English is dominant. To that end, federal cultural institutions must promote French content.

The government also recognizes that, in order to protect and promote French, the private sector must be mobilized. People should have the right to be served and to work in French in businesses under federal jurisdiction in Quebec and in regions of the country with a strong francophone presence. A committee of experts has already been created to examine how best to formally recognize these rights and provide recourse under federal legislation, in consultation with the affected sectors.

Nevertheless, when it comes to respecting bilingualism in the workplace and an individual's right to work in the official language of their choice, the federal public service must lead by example. The government will put forward concrete measures to ensure greater compliance with language obligations.

● (1540)

[English]

The English-speaking community in Quebec must be able to protect its rights and also to have access to key institutions that are clearly vital to the future of the community. We will stand by their side.

[Translation]

We will also be strengthening the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages and continuing to promote the use of French abroad, particularly in international organizations. The Government of Canada will make it its duty to attract and facilitate francophone immigration outside Quebec.

Moreover, all of our institutions must be bilingual, including the country's highest court. The Official Languages Act [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], at the Supreme Court, judges must be bilingual. In our efforts to modernize the act, we will promote bilingualism by eliminating waiting lists for French immersion programs. We will also continue to support communities and all those looking to assert their constitutional language rights.

Our government's vision is rooted in the studies conducted by this committee, so I thank you. I also want to thank you for examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to deliver information in both official languages. I know you

met with my colleague Mr. Duclos, the President of the Treasury Board, and Health Canada officials on the subject, so I, too, would be happy to answer any questions you may have in that connection.

Lastly, I want to thank the department official who is with me today, Denis Racine. He can answer more specific questions related to the official languages branch at Canadian Heritage.

[English]

Thank you, all.

It's going to be a pleasure to answer your questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you for your opening statement, Minister.

Will now begin the first round of questions with Mr. Blaney, the committee's vice-chair.

Mr. Blaney, you may go ahead.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be sharing my time with our heritage critic, Mr. Rayes.

Go ahead, Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, as well, to my fellow member Steven Blaney for giving me this opportunity to speak with the minister, since the committee is lucky enough to have her for a whole hour.

Ms. Joly, thank you for being here to answer the committee members' questions. I think we all agree that anglophone and francophone minority communities around the country are important. No one can be against virtue, so we agree with the fine statements you have been making here and there, in various forums.

I have a few simple questions for you. I would ask that you keep your answers brief, so that I don't have to interrupt you, given the limited amount of time I have.

How long has your party been in power?

● (1545)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I'm not sure why the honourable member is asking that when he knows the answer.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'd like to hear it from you.

Has it been just over five years, coming up on six years that you've been in power?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: What do you think?

Mr. Alain Rayes: Could you please confirm how long?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: It's public information.

Mr. Alain Rayes: That's fine. Thank you.

As minister, you've been mandated to bring forward legislation on both official languages. In recent years, most of the country's francophone advocacy groups, the Commissioner of Official Languages and the Senate have all been consulted on the issue and released reports.

Would you agree with that statement?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes, I would agree.

I would also agree that the honourable member is asking me a question to basically find out whether we will be introducing a bill or not.

Mr. Alain Rayes: No.

Mr. Chair—

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We will be introducing a bill, but I just want to let the honourable member know that—

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair—

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I would like to know what the honourable member thinks of the reform document we presented. We have yet to hear the Conservative Party's position on it.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, I have the privilege of asking questions, not the minister.

The Chair: Pardon me. To help the discussion flow better, please give the minister time to answer and the interpreters time to do their job. Kindly wait your turns, both of you.

You may carry on, Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you.

I hope I won't lose any time because the minister interrupted me.

Minister, did you have a mandate to introduce legislation on both official languages, yes or no?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes, and I still do under the mandate letter given to me by the Prime Minister.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Great. Thank you.

What is happening in Ontario is appalling, as we all know. One of your fellow Liberals even mentioned a letter you sent to the Government of Ontario underscoring the importance of Laurentian University, a bilingual university, and its French-language programming.

Tangibly speaking, what have you done to support Laurentian University and its French-language programming in this situation?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We've actually provided \$12 million to Laurentian University in recent years. My department official Denis Racine can give you more information on that if you'd like, but one thing is for sure. I had the opportunity to speak with Ontario's Minister of Education and Minister of Francophone Affairs just two weeks ago and I asked them what their plan was, given the need to act quickly on this issue.

What I want the committee members and all those watching the proceedings today to know is—

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Minister. That answers my question.

I have a question about the \$12 million.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, I would like to finish my answer.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Pardon me.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: This is a bit tiresome.

I appreciate that the honourable member would like me to answer his question, and I am trying to co-operate. This would go smoothly if the honourable member would just let me finish my answer.

Basically, when it comes to Laurentian University, the goal is to make sure northern Ontario has a post-secondary institution and to work with the Government of Ontario on solutions. We are willing to support that through investments.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, I think Mr. Beaulieu has a point of order. There may be an issue with the interpretation.

The Chair: I'm listening, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Rayes' last comment was interpreted in English. The French interpretation wasn't working.

The Chair: If everyone speaks at the same time, the interpreters can't do their job, so I would kindly ask that you follow the rules.

Mr. Arseneault, we now go to you.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): I won't repeat what you just said, but the discussion certainly sounds jumbled and the poor interpreters can't do their job properly.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, I don't think it's the talking over one another that's the issue. That part is terrible, but when—

The Chair: Just a minute, Mr. Rayes. Mr. Godin has a comment, and then, we'll come back to you.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, Mr. Beaulieu's point of order had to do with an interpretation problem. It wasn't all the noise that was causing the problem, as you suggested. Mr. Beaulieu's point of order was extremely appropriate.

We must show respect for the interpreters and do our best to get any technology issues fixed, so that members can hear the discussion clearly in both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Madam Clerk, is there a technical issue with the English interpretation?

• (1550)

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): As I texted you earlier, there was a minor issue, but it's been fixed now.

The Chair: Very well. Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You did not recognize me earlier, so that's why I spoke over another member.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Rayes, we now go back to you. I stopped the clock. You have two minutes left.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, can you tell us whether the funding provided to Laurentian University in the past five years has been indexed at all?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We can get back to you with all the details, of course. My department official Denis Racine can give you more information.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I can confirm that there was no indexing. The government never increased its funding for Laurentian University despite the financial strain the university is currently under.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I don't think I can confirm that. I know additional funding was provided to the Government of Ontario. We increased funding for the French-language education system. Did the Ontario government give that money to Laurentian University? That I don't know, so I can't answer your specific question.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Do you realize it is the federal government's responsibility to protect members of minority language communities all over the country?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: It's a constitutional obligation, but it's also a shared obligation, particularly in the area of education.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Do you agree?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We've seen this before. When the Ontario government has education problems, it has to meet its obligations. It eventually did in the case of Université de l'Ontario français, after the federal government pushed the province to do something. Ontario has to step up in the case of Laurentian University as well.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Let me stop you there, Minister Joly. We keep coming back to the provincial governments, when the Constitution says that the responsibility lies with the federal government. All we're seeing, even in the letter that you brought, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] I wasn't consulted regarding the university or the government for help. You have a responsibility.

We have already promised that, within the first 100 days of a possible Conservative government, there would be a new Official Languages Act and a budget to help francophone universities outside Quebec.

Will the federal government provide financial assistance to francophone universities, such as Laurentian University?

The budget will be tabled on Monday.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Rayes. Your time is up. You can ask your question again in the next round.

We'll move on to the six-minute question and answer round with Mr. Arseneault and Mrs. Lalonde.

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Joly, thank you for being here.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault: I hope that you're doing well.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes. I hope that you're also doing well.

Mr. René Arseneault: In Acadia, in New Brunswick, there was some concern not too long ago about certain provisions that couldn't be found in the white paper. This concern started to grow a bit and spread to francophone communities outside Acadia and Quebec. What can you tell us about this?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Arseneault, I think that you're referring to the specific nature of New Brunswick and its status as a bilingual province. The reform document acknowledges that New Brunswick was the only bilingual province in the country. As a result, the federal government had to adapt its approach.

I'm very open to the issue of francophone immigration in New Brunswick. I'm fully aware that it concerns the future of Acadia and that the future of francophones in New Brunswick is certainly at stake. I'll gladly work on this issue. That's why there will be a strategy. It's necessary to include a francophone immigration strategy in the Official Languages Act.

I'm also aware of the desire to increase the number of bilingual services in the province. The upcoming amendments to the regulations under part IV of the Official Languages Act will certainly help in this area.

Lastly, we also acknowledge the importance of language of work and the right to work in French in federally regulated undertakings in regions with a strong francophone presence, such as northern New Brunswick.

These were the key points discussed in my conversations with the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick and several other francophone groups in New Brunswick.

● (1555)

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

We've created a committee, which is currently working hard on developing recommendations.

What's the committee's mandate and what purpose will the recommendations serve in the planned reform based on the white paper?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I want to point out to my colleagues on the committee that my colleague René Arseneault has worked very hard on the modernization of the Official Languages Act and the white paper. I want to thank him, in front of the committee, for his work and his passion for official languages.

To answer your question more specifically, Mr. Arseneault, the committees have 60 days, meaning until the beginning of May, to give me clear recommendations that would establish two things: first, the recourse options available to francophones working in federally regulated undertakings with regard to the recognition of the right to work in French, receive service in French and not be subject to discrimination on the basis of language in regions with a strong francophone presence outside Quebec; and second, the criteria for designating regions with a strong francophone presence and for establishing their boundaries.

Distinguished Acadian Donald Savoie has been appointed to serve on this committee, along with six other individuals. I look forward to their recommendations on this matter.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Minister Joly.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Arseneault. You have two and a half minutes left.

Mr. René Arseneault: Minister Joly, I'd like you to talk about the central agency and everything that we've heard over the years from francophone stakeholders outside Quebec or from anglophones in Quebec.

In concrete terms, what does this mean for the future of official languages in Canada?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We all acknowledge that the Official Languages Act needed more teeth. To achieve this, the federal government needs to acquire more official languages reflexes, while giving more power to the Commissioner of Official Languages.

By having a central agency within Treasury Board, the public service will be able to sharpen its official languages reflexes. The challenge right now is that departments operate in a vacuum. A great deal of work is done at the political level. I must contact my colleagues personally to follow up, whereas the reflexes would be simpler if they came directly from the public service. We want to create this central agency within the Treasury Board to maintain this approach and to ensure that it doesn't change from one government to the next.

In the past, under my predecessor Stéphane Dion, there was a central agency within the Privy Council. Unfortunately, when the Harper government was elected, it was eliminated. This undermined language protection in the federal public service.

If we incorporate our approach into the Official Languages Act, the approach will be much stronger. This will enable us to increase monitoring within the public service and thereby strengthen the Government of Canada's official languages reflexes.

• (1600)

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Arseneault. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister Joly.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you, Minister Joly, for joining us today.

I'll pass on some of the Quebec government's requests regarding the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

First, do you agree that French should be recognized as the only minority official language in Canada?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We acknowledge that there are eight million francophones in Canada in a sea of over 360 million mainly anglophone people in North America. As a result, English dominates in a number of areas of activity. We need to do more to achieve real equality.

That's exactly why we're acknowledging, for the first time in our history, that the two official languages aren't on equal footing and that we must do more to preserve the French fact.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, but you didn't answer the question.

Do you agree that the modernized Official Languages Act should explicitly state that French is the only minority official language in Canada and, of course, in North America?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: The Constitution recognizes language rights for our language communities [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We acknowledge that French needs more support to achieve equality between the two languages.

The Supreme Court recognized this again last summer in the *Chilliwack decision*, *Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique v. British Columbia*. We must do more to support the institutions of our language minority communities. This was recognized in *Lalonde v. Ontario* (Health Services Restructuring Commission), a case decided by the Court of Appeal a few years ago. We all remember the *Montfort Hospital* saga that took place when the Ontario Conservative government made cuts to health care services.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The issue is that this model doesn't reflect reality. Even in Quebec, French is really a minority language. We're subordinate to the federal government, unless you concede that we're independent, which isn't the case. So French is threatened in Quebec.

For 51 years, the Official Languages Act has only strengthened English in Quebec.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I don't agree with you on that.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's a fact. The Official Languages Act and the official languages support programs advocate for francophones and anglophones in minority communities. You said that this was historic and that you acknowledged that Canada must also advocate for French in Quebec.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We acknowledge both. The French language is in decline in Quebec and across the country. We agree on this point.

I disagree with your statement because the federal government is the level of government that funds the francization of immigrants in Quebec. Hundreds of millions of dollars are sent to the Quebec government so that it can proceed with the francization. In this regard, we're a major driver of language transmission. We'll continue to be a driver, because we've been funding francization for many years.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Quebec also funds the francization of newcomers. You fund it with the taxes sent to you from Quebec.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: These are taxes from across the country.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The issue is that, to ensure the future and vitality of a language, it must be the common language in a given area. This is the case for English in Canada. In Quebec, Bill 101 is trying to accomplish this.

Do you agree that French should be the common language in Quebec?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: In our reform document, we acknowledge that the recognized official language in Quebec is French. We also acknowledge that there are two official languages in Canada. As I said earlier, we acknowledge that, under the circumstances, we must do more to protect French. This applies to immigration. However, this also applies to many other areas that fall under our jurisdiction, such as broadcasting, support for the digital world and culture.

In short, we're doing our job. We're making sure that we determine our responsibilities.

• (1605)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If you agree that French should be the common and official language in Quebec, do you agree that the modernized Official Languages Act should include interpretation provisions to ensure that no interpretation of the act undermines the use of French as a common language in Quebec?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We're doing our job within our jurisdiction. The Official Languages Act is a quasi-constitutional statute in the sense that it supplements the interpretation of the Constitution. It also takes precedence over other legislation. This legislation has a strong impact. We'll always be there to protect the long-term vitality of the French fact in this country. We'll act within our jurisdiction to protect French and, in general, language laws in Quebec and across Canada.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, this means that some principles of the Official Languages Act or the Constitution—it was forced on Quebec and no Quebec government has signed it, which shows that we're a minority in this country—have undermined Bill 101 and that you don't mind.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Basically, Mr. Beaulieu, we don't necessarily share the same point of view. However, I respect your position. In my opinion, the federal government can play a role in protecting French. It can ensure that, within the Canadian federation, for generations to come, in Quebec and across Canada, we can continue to pass on our language and be proud of our heritage.

Under the current circumstances, the federal government's recognition for the first time that French is under threat and that we can take further action on this matter is historic. This is the result of a

great deal of good work done by francophones across the country. That said, there are new threats now. The threats are found in the digital world.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, you're acknowledging something obvious that was previously denied. We've known for a very long time that French is under threat in Quebec. All studies show this. It's more or less the same thing. You have good intentions, but you're saying that the Official Languages Act will continue to take precedence over French as a common language.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. Your time is up.

I'll now turn the floor over to Mr. Boulerice for the next six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the minister for being with us this afternoon. We appreciate it.

We will be able to discuss your reform plan in detail. Unfortunately, I confess to having had some difficulty following your government's intentions over the past few years, simply because they reveal a lack of consistency. In this regard, may I remind you of the following two facts.

With respect to the right to work in French in federally regulated businesses in Quebec, the Liberal Party of Canada voted against our bill, which was aimed at precisely that objective. You say you now want to impose bilingualism on Supreme Court judges. Yet you voted against our bill, which also required the application of this principle.

After multiple failures, instead of correcting the course by introducing a bill to modernize the Official Languages Act, you are seeking to buy time by releasing a document that provides no funding, no timetable, and no additional consultations. For years, there has been much rhetoric about francophones and the francophonie, but little action to protect French.

Here today, Ontario's francophones are being dealt a new blow. Laurentian University, a flagship institution, has just cut hundreds of positions and dozens of programs in French. Political scientist Stéphanie Chouinard has even called the situation at this francophone university a "bloodbath".

Francophones in Northern Ontario are therefore very worried. That is why the University of Sudbury, with the support of the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, has announced a plan to transform itself into an independent French-language university. This is a proactive and crucial step that we in the NDP are championing.

Since the question is clear, I would like your answer to be fairly short.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I took copious notes, dear colleague.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Will you announce federal funding for French-language post-secondary education in Northern Ontario?

If so, when will you do so?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: My colleague asked me a good number of questions and I took several notes.

With respect to the different positions of the government, we presented an ambitious reform document that was well received by stakeholders across the country. It keeps a good balance on the language front, while recognizing that French needs more support. I still do not know if the NDP is for or against this reform document. I am waiting for confirmation from my colleague. It would be nice to know his position.

To reassure all my colleagues, most certainly, our goal is to introduce legislation as quickly as possible. There is a sense of urgency and we need to move forward.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Why didn't you introduce a bill instead of a reform document?

That's the question we're all asking ourselves around the table.

Why wait again, create a new committee and do new consultations?

They've all been done, those consultations.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: No, I don't agree.

Particularly on the issue of the right to work in French, I think this is the first time there has been consultation related to the private sector in particular. In less than a month, I will have the recommendations from the committee, and then I can proceed. As I told you, my goal is to introduce legislation quickly.

The other thing is that the reform document goes much further than a bill, because there are things that will not be in the bill, such as the powers regarding francophone immigration, which are more the responsibility of the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

• (1610)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: It would be nice to have more francophone immigration, but that's not the question I asked you. I made a lot of assertions, but I asked you one question.

Will you announce federal funding for francophone universities in Ontario?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes, your question was about Laurentian University. All right.

Since I've been in office, I've seen that every time Conservative governments are in power, there are budget cuts at the post-secondary level. Two and a half years ago, I had to speak with my counterpart, Ms. Caroline Mulroney, at 3 a.m. to finally get the Franco-Ontarian university file resolved. I am trying to settle the Campus Saint-Jean file at the University of Alberta with the Government of Alberta, which is unfortunately turning a deaf ear.

At the moment, I am in discussions with the Ontario government, again. It's not right that Laurentian University is in this situation. As allies of the Franco-Ontarian community, we want to act, and we will most certainly start looking for solutions.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I see.

I understand that there are also problems at Campus Saint-Jean in Alberta. We in the NDP are looking at that as well.

However, in the letter you sent to the Ontario government, you say that you remain willing to look into the possibility of funding. Remaining willing to perhaps explore an opportunity is not very proactive or clear.

The question is, will you provide funding for the maintenance of French-language programs in Northern Ontario and in the universities?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Dear colleague, my position is clear. Post-secondary education is not an area of federal jurisdiction. Therefore, the plan must be tabled by the Ontario government. There is an urgent need to act, which is why I questioned my Ontario colleagues a few weeks ago on this issue. I have yet to hear back.

In the meantime, on our side, at Canadian Heritage, we are making sure that we have the necessary money, in case a solution is proposed by the province. That said, the federal government will not prevent the creation of a new French-language university in Northern Ontario or the maintenance of an existing one.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I would have liked to hear a clearer commitment.

I have time for one last question in this round.

To your knowledge, what was the increase in complaints against federal institutions between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I think there was an increase, because at the same time there were budget cuts on the ground by conservative governments. The increase in complaints were particularly due to the issues surrounding the francophone university in Ontario.

There have always been a lot of complaints about Air Canada as well, but you should know that in the reform document we have increased the powers of the commissioner to deal with issues related to Air Canada.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You should have mentioned official languages in your agreement with Air Canada, by the way.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I discuss this in the reform document.

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

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Good afternoon, Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Good afternoon, Mr. Dalton.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I am a new member of Parliament. I notice that when you have the opportunity to answer questions from members of the official opposition, you often attack them by saying that premiers are cutting funding to francophone institutions, like Campus Saint-Jean in Edmonton. My family is Franco-Albertan. My father attended Campus Saint-Jean in the 1940s. I have two sisters, cousins and many other relatives who were educated there. It's all well and good to blame Doug Ford and Jason Kenney, but what will the Liberal government do to help these francophone institutions?

You have the power to support these institutions; you have the portfolio. I know it's a collaboration, but what are you going to do to help them, other than pointing fingers?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you [*Technical difficulty-Editor*]. I am very pleased that you have been faithful to your family's Franco-Albertan heritage. This makes us both allies of Campus Saint-Jean.

In fact, the answer is simple. We're here to provide some of the funding, and that's why we've increased funding to the provinces for French-language education by \$40 million. That's why we've provided more money to provinces and groups across the country for the training and retention of French-language teachers. That's why we've also increased funding for construction projects, that is, for any additional funding for buildings or infrastructure for universities and community centres in francophone minority communities.

So the funding was increased through the Action Plan for Official Languages three years ago, a plan that was robust, ambitious and that...

• (1615)

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Minister.

I have more questions for you and would also like to share my time.

You have had five and a half years to introduce a bill to modernize the Official Languages Act. Now we have a white paper that, while nice and allowing for discussion, is not binding. There are essentially two paths to take. First, there is the responsible path, which is to bring a bill to the House that actually modernizes the act, which we have asked for as a committee. Second, there is the insincere, partisan path, consisting of promises made during an election campaign that may be in the near future, perhaps within a few weeks.

Which path will you choose?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Dalton, do you support the reform document or oppose it?

Does the Conservative Party support the appointment of bilingual judges to the Supreme Court?

Mr. Marc Dalton: That's a good question.

My sister, who is a judge in Alberta, is perfectly bilingual. In fact, she speaks French better than I do.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: This is good news.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I will now yield my remaining time to my colleague Mr. Blaney.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you, Minister, for being here with us. I'm going to follow up right away with the question that my colleague Mr. Rayes asked you that you did not answer.

The budget will be tabled soon. There is an emergency situation in post-secondary institutions and you have the responsibility. You're a lawyer, so you know that; it's in section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Your mandate is to support the development of communities and protect their institutions. You have the opportunity to do that and there is a motion that was passed in that regard to encourage you to fulfil your responsibilities.

As federal Conservatives, we feel our leader was clear when he said that in the first 100 days we would increase funding for post-secondary institutions.

My question, which was also Mr. Rayes' question, is this: in the budget that will be tabled next week, do you have any money dedicated to post-secondary institutions and, in particular, to Laurentian University, which right now is in crisis and is looking for action and leadership from the federal government?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes or no, Minister?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I will forward your question to the Minister of Finance.

In fact, we will always be there to help minority post-secondary institutions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Lattanzio, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me say at the outset that I will be sharing my time with my colleague Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

[*English*]

Minister Joly, thank you so much for joining us today and for contributing to the present study.

Our government is proposing a systemic shift in its approach to official languages, with the protection and promotion of French at its core all the while fulfilling its constitutional obligations to the English linguistic community in Quebec. However, we have heard and read some serious concerns from the stakeholders of the English linguistic minority community in Quebec.

Can you inform us today as to how the government intends to support, promote and protect the rights and vitality of the English-speaking community of Quebec through a modernized OLA?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you, dear colleague.

Obviously, we want to make sure all official language minorities, including the English-speaking community in Quebec, are protected. We have constitutional obligations towards them, and we will abide by them and protect them.

That is why, for the first time, in this reform document we are making sure that first and foremost there will be an obligation on the part of the federal government to protect [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] institutions that are really vital to the future of a given community. Obviously, we're thinking about universities, cultural centres and the importance of a health care system and a school system, etc. That's the idea.

The second point that is fundamental also for the English-speaking community in Quebec, and for all official language communities, is the court challenges program. We want to make sure that the court challenges program is protected under the Official Languages Act, therefore we'll continue to do that.

Finally, we recognize that the English-speaking community has specific needs when it comes to funding its different organizations. It is also the case for official language minority francophones outside Quebec, and we'll continue to play a role in supporting their operations and their different projects.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Martinez Ferrada, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

I would like to return to the issue of immigration. We also had Senator Joyal here at the committee, who gave us a long presentation on the challenges of francophone demographics in Canada, but also in North America. I would like you to remind us what is in your reform plan regarding the issue of immigration and francization.

What are the key measures in your reform plan?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you, dear colleague.

I know that you have worked very hard, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, on the issue of francophone immigration in the past.

The reality is that the demographic weight of francophones outside of Quebec is declining. We have to make sure that we maintain it at 4%, and I hope that we can increase it in the future. This will require an immigration policy that recognizes that there must be francophone immigration. We must attract francophone immigrants to our country, welcome them and, ultimately, integrate them. These francophone families who come to settle here and who may come from North Africa, Lebanon or Europe must have the reflex to send their children to French-language schools, even if they are outside Quebec, in a minority situation.

The objective of the reform document is to ensure that the Official Languages Act recognizes the federal government's obligation to establish a national francophone immigration strategy. This is

going to be a game changer, because the federal public service is going to find itself with the obligation to integrate this into all national immigration strategies.

We will also continue to respect the agreement between Quebec and Ottawa on the francization of immigrants. This is fundamental to the future of the French fact in Quebec. Moreover, I will be happy to continue to work with my counterparts in Quebec on these issues.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: I only have a few seconds left, so I would like to remind people that under the Canada-Quebec agreement, Quebec is solely responsible for francization in Quebec and its immigration, and receives financial support from the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

I now yield the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

The Government of Quebec considers it appropriate to require that federal financial contributions granted to Quebec under the Official Languages Act not be made without the agreement of the Government of Quebec. In other words, it should not be done unilaterally.

What do you think, Madam Minister?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I'm sorry, but my connection was briefly interrupted. Can you repeat the question?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Yes, but I would like my speaking time to not be cut.

The Government of Quebec considers it appropriate to require that federal financial contributions to Quebec under the Official Languages Act not be made without the agreement of the Government of Quebec. In other words, it should not be done unilaterally.

What are your thoughts on this?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: As several colleagues have mentioned, the federal government has constitutional obligations regarding language rights. It will continue to honour them. Under these circumstances, we will continue to play our role and provide funding.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You are not answering my question at all. For example, 51 years ago, anglophones in Quebec had an entire educational system that was very comprehensive and very well funded. A large part of the funding was used to strengthen anglophone institutions. The proportion was less for francophones outside Quebec.

For a period of time, in Quebec [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] continued to contribute, year after year, to the overfunding of English-language institutions. Quebec, on the other hand, already provides more than adequate funding to all health institutions, universities, and so on.

Why are you interfering by imposing funding on Quebec, without its agreement?

• (1625)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I'm sorry, dear colleague, but this is not the way things work in real life.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I know.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Last week, I spoke with Quebec's Minister of Education, Jean-François Roberge. We agreed on various points, and funding was sent to Quebec. It was indeed to support the English school system, but also to support the francization of anglophones, in this case, through French immersion within the English system.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I don't understand why the Quebec government is asking you for this if you are already doing it. That's not the case at all. That is not what is being done.

On the other hand, for federally regulated businesses, you have refused to apply Bill 101. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] With respect to federal institutions, francophones told us that they had difficulty working in French. A study by the Commissioner of Official Languages even showed that 40% of people were not comfortable doing so.

What steps will you take to make French the common working language in Quebec?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

I apologize, but your time is up.

Interventions will be shorter in the next round. I will now turn it over to Mr. Boulерice for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: I understand that the minister wants to blame the provincial governments and the Conservatives, but the increase in complaints [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] was really about federal institutions. There was a 25% increase in just one year. In the Commissioner of Official Languages' report last year, the commissioner's findings were really alarming. Among other things, the commissioner said this:

federal institutions are not complying with the Official Languages Act;

As we have seen over the past year, the Privy Council Office still sends documents to the Standing Committee on Health in English only. Senior officials have been forced to attend meetings that were conducted only in English, without simultaneous interpretation. There were also working documents that were not translated.

What can you do, Minister, to change that? These problems never seem to get resolved.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: When the Official Languages Act is not respected, it is really very frustrating. We all agree as allies of the cause. That's why we have to change the system from the inside. That is also why we are proposing a new reform document that changes the approach.

First of all, we plan to create a central agency. This way, the monitoring will be done. This is related to my colleague Mr. Arsenault's question.

Second, we intend to increase the powers of the Commissioner of Official Languages. These are not just ombudsman powers, but also decision-making powers. It will allow him to go to the Federal Court to obtain orders to ensure that the Official Languages Act is respected. We're going to strengthen the role of commissioner.

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: Will there be an administrative tribunal to handle complaints?

Will the commissioner be able to impose fines or financial penalties?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: In fact, giving the Commissioner of Official Languages the power to enforce orders is comparable to creating an administrative tribunal. Instead of creating a new approach by setting up such a tribunal, we decided to strengthen the commissioner's powers. Basically, the idea is to allow him to manage complaints and enforce his authority.

Finally, it goes without saying that we need to increase the criteria for bilingualism in the public service. To achieve this and to get our public servants to become more bilingual, we must also support them. So we also want to increase the availability of training.

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: I would so much have preferred to hear you say instead that you wanted to increase the bilingual bonus.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I've taken note of the Borbey-Mendelsohn report, but we certainly need to strengthen the bilingualism reflex within the public service.

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: With respect to the bilingualism of Supreme Court judges, we have lost four years. I'm glad you agree with us now, but I feel like the election has a little something to do with it.

• (1630)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: You've given me the opportunity to remind you that your leader, Jagmeet Singh, had not said that, until he changed his position again.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the final five-minute round, we'll go to Mr. Godin.

Can Mr. Godin hear us?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Godin seems to be busy with other things.

The Chair: Mr. Godin is next on the list.

Mr. Blaney, would you like to speak?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Godin, I will be happy to answer your questions.

Hon. Steven Blaney: We'll give him time to join us, Minister.

Mr. Joël Godin: I am here, Madam Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Very well.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. The schedule has been changed and I was not aware that I had a right to speak today.

I am very pleased to speak to you, Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I am happy to answer your questions.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you for taking the time to do this. You know I have great regard for you as a person.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I have a lot for you too. The feeling is mutual.

Mr. Joël Godin: Now, Madam Minister, I will tell you what I find distressing. Since you have been the Minister of Official Languages, you have said that you are going to reflect, consult and always be there, but what can you present to me today that is concrete?

As my colleague Mr. Rayes said, it has been six years since the Liberal Party has been in power. What concrete steps have you taken?

Don't talk to me about Ontario's French-language university, because it was the leader of the Conservative Party who wrote to the leaders of the other opposition parties and the leader of the government to have a...

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Oh, oh!

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Minister, what I'm telling you is true.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: No, that's not true.

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: That's not true.

Mr. Joël Godin: What's not true?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We're not going to rehash history...

Mr. Joël Godin: The past is an indication of the future.

The Chair: Order, please. Each in turn.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I'm not done. I didn't ask a question.

The Chair: All right.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I'm listening, Mr. Godin. I look forward to your question.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, here's what I want to know: what concrete steps can you present to us today?

The white paper, in my opinion, is just more smoke and mirrors to make us believe that you are going to act later, as my colleague said earlier. There is nothing concrete today.

What is the Liberal government's record on official languages over the past six years?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: First of all, dear colleague, just because the Conservative Party thinks we are going too far with our Official Languages Act reform document does not necessarily mean that we are doing nothing. I look forward to hearing the Conservative Party's position on the reform document, because I think it is a major change in the country's language policy. A white paper like this is something that is rarely done. I think it's a step in the right direction, and I hope the Conservative Party will endorse it for the future of the French fact in this country.

Secondly, when I was assigned this file, there was a lot of work to be done, because there had been a lot of budget cuts in the area of language rights in the country and there was a crisis. The organizations were underfunded and there were problems in general, par-

ticularly with the Court Challenges Program, which had been abolished. So I wanted to fix the mess quickly.

Then we introduced an action plan for official languages that provided \$500 million in additional funding to support official languages in this country.

So we addressed crises generated by Conservative budget cuts, and the French-language university of Ontario is the best example. However, beyond that...

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair...

Hon. Mélanie Joly: We were able to find solutions, and in the end, the francophonie was strengthened. So I hope that I will be able to work with my colleague, whom I like very much and who is a very good member, and with the other members of the committee, to defend language rights, as francophones and francophiles, particularly those of francophones in this country.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Minister, I want to assure you that you can count on my support, but I look forward to your action.

For our part, we are ready to act. We have not been around for the last six years, but I can still talk to you about that time. I would like you to accelerate the process to really protect official languages and, especially, the French fact in Quebec and throughout Canada, because it is important. You can count on me.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Minister, since the beginning you have been mentioning Conservative MPs, parties and governments, but it should be made clear that you have a responsibility as a federal minister and that you must respect provincial jurisdictions.

We in the Conservative Party make that an obligation. As far as you are concerned, you tend to shovel responsibility into the backyard of the provinces.

As a federal minister and head of a body that is responsible for achieving results, are you prepared to say today at this committee that you will move quickly to ensure that you provide the necessary tools—not a white paper—and that you will do so through concrete action rather than offloading responsibility? When will you take action and bear witness to your actions?

• (1635)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: May I conclude that the Conservative Party will support me when I introduce my bill?

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Minister, as I said, in the interest of all Canadians and all francophones, I will work with you, but as far as the bill is concerned, I have not seen anything yet.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: You did not answer my question, but I will gladly work with you to introduce legislation.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Minister. You can count on my support.

The Chair: Thank you both.

The last speaker is Mr. Duguid, who has five minutes.

[English]

Monsieur Duguid, the floor is yours.

Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister. It's great to have you with us.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: It's good to see you.

Mr. Terry Duguid: Minister, we have two Manitobans in the committee today, Mr. Mazier and myself. As you know, we have a vibrant francophone community in Manitoba. You'll remember that because I took you to École Noël-Ritchot—

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I know.

Mr. Terry Duguid: —a French school, K to eight, where the students spoke beautiful French and where we were opening a French child care centre.

Minister, French is declining in the west. We know there's a shortage of both French teachers and French immersion teachers, with the demand [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] really growing. We have evidence—my daughter, for one—that even though they've been through French immersion, they're losing their French because they don't have the opportunity to use it. I'm wondering how your reform document will address these and other pressing issues.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you, dear colleague.

Thank you for your advocacy on this file. I think we can definitely count you as an ally.

Obviously, we want to make sure that we get rid of waiting lists when it comes to French immersion. Too many parents are putting their kids on waiting lists across the country, and that's unfortunate. Every time we lose a child who can't go to French immersion, we lose a citizen who can become bilingual.

One of the reasons for that is definitely the lack of French teachers. We want to do two things. First and foremost is working with provinces and territories to recognize diplomas, and particularly French teachers with diplomas. That's the first one.

The second one is working with the Minister of Immigration to create a new immigration pathway to be able to provide permanent residency to French educators coming from around the world who want to offer their knowledge and expertise to our kids. I think that will be welcomed by our colleagues across the country.

I had the chance to talk to the Manitoba ministers of education and francophone affairs yesterday; Mrs. Squires is one of them. They particularly saw that as good news for Manitoba. I think we can all work in the right direction to make sure we can offer more French teachers to our French immersion system, to French second language but also to our French schooling system itself—the French education system, which is the system for the minority in Manitoba and across the west.

Mr. Terry Duguid: I look forward to working with you on those improvements, Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Do at least say “hi” to Franco-Manitobans for me.

Mr. Terry Duguid: I sure will. Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll stop here. We have a minute and a half left.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: May I thank my colleagues?

The Chair: Please do so.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you.

It is my pleasure to...

[English]

Mr. Terry Duguid: Mr. Chair, I know that Marie-France [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] opportunity earlier so perhaps I could give her that opportunity. No?

[Translation]

The Chair: Your caucus has one minute and twenty seconds.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I can continue the discussion, colleagues.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde, my parliamentary secretary, will certainly be able to follow up with all of you as well if you have any questions.

Just so you know, our goal [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] their point of view. I've already talked to seven of the thirteen provinces and territories. Finally...

• (1640)

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Beaulieu would like to speak.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I don't know if the minister will agree, but I was wondering if the two opposition parties could also have a say, as in a third round.

The Chair: I don't think that's possible.

We have witnesses for the second hour of the meeting. One of the things we need to do is test for sound quality.

The time that was allotted for this meeting hour is over.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: How is it that everyone has had three turns to speak but us?

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, these are the rules of the Board of Internal Economy. This is the speaking order that is followed for this meeting hour, as usual.

Madam Minister, you have the floor for the remaining 30 seconds.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: As you know, we are in a minority government. In order to pass an official languages bill, we're going to have to work together. I look forward to working with you. We all know that this is legislation that will have a huge impact on the future of our young francophones and francophiles across the country.

We also need to craft it in a way that maintains a balance, that protects the rights of English Canadians to have access to French-language instruction. We also need to ensure that English speakers in Quebec have access to their institutions. We must think about our francophone minority communities and ensure that they are able, in one generation, two generations and three generations, to speak French. Finally, we must think about French-speaking Quebecers who are also concerned about the future of their language.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That is all the time we have for this meeting. On behalf of the committee and myself, I would like to thank the minister for coming to discuss the modernization of the Official Languages Act with the members of the committee. I would also like to welcome Mr. Denis Racine, director general at the Official Languages Branch.

We will suspend for a few minutes while we do the connectivity checks with our next witnesses.

• (1640) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: The committee is resuming.

Today, the committee is meeting on its study of the government measures to protect and promote French in Quebec and in Canada.

[*English*]

I'll remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Interpretation is provided.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses, who will begin our discussions with seven and a half minutes of opening remarks, followed by rounds of questions.

This afternoon, we have Sheila Risbud, president of the Association Canadienne-française de l'Alberta. With her is Isabelle Laurin, the executive director.

We also have Alexandre Cédric Doucet, president of the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick. He is accompanied by Ali Chaisson, the executive director.

Ms. Risbud, you have seven and a half minutes for your opening remarks. The floor is yours.

Ms. Sheila Risbud (President, Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. My name is Sheila Risbud, and I'm the president of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, the ACFA.

Founded in 1926, the ACFA [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]—

The Chair: Please wait, Ms. Risbud.

We've lost the sound.

Since we're having technical difficulties, we're going to start instead with the presentation by the president of the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, Alexandre Cédric Doucet.

You have seven and a half minutes for your opening remarks. Please go ahead.

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet (President, Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick): Thank you, Mr. Chair, dear committee members, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before this committee to discuss government measures to protect and promote French throughout Canada, particularly in Quebec, as well as in Acadia and the Atlantic provinces.

The entire Canadian Francophonie is pleased that, at this time, the federal government is showing a genuine desire to focus on promoting the sustainability of French in Canada. We have every right to hope that Minister Mélanie Joly's vision will finally, once and for all, chart a course towards real equality.

At the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, or SANB, we believe that the protection and promotion of French across the country cannot be achieved without the actual implementation of Part VII of the Official Languages Act.

In preparing for this appearance, I came back to reading a brief by the late Acadian Senator Jean-Maurice Simard entitled “Bridging the Gap: From Oblivion to the Rule of Law” published in 1999. As Senator Simard pointed out:

[In] ... his 1998 Annual Report, the Commissioner of Official Languages demonstrates that the strategy for implementing Part VII of the *Act*, more than 10 years after it went into effect, is inadequate throughout the government as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen, 22 years later, we must admit that the strategy for implementing the act is still inadequate.

As part of the current modernization of the act, it is essential that we aim for innovative and structural solutions by the communities themselves a greater say in their own future. In 2021, more than 50 years after the adoption of the Official Languages Act, francophone minority communities should be able to stand on their own. However, for several reasons, that's not currently the case. With some exceptions, there has been no change for many years in the funding model for programs designed by, for and with Canada's francophone and Acadian communities.

For the SANB, given the thousands of taxpayer dollars invested over the past few decades, we say that the Canadian francophone, but even more so the Acadian, taxpayer deserves better. Senator Simard, with his great foresight, understood that there were problems with the application of the positive measures in Part VII and the funding regime for advocacy organizations. He also suggested that the Privy Council Office should be the one in charge of Part VII of the Official Languages Act, because its authority is cross-cutting and applies to various departments. We agree with him. In fact, the SANB made the recommendation in its brief to the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages in 2018.

Several issues could benefit from the federal government's reappropriation of the spirit of Part VII. The federal government can, but above all must, renegotiate trilateral agreements with the provincial governments and with the communities themselves that would provide a lasting framework for the vitality of the French language across the country. This includes rural economic development, immigration, post-secondary education, new technologies and digital technology. This redefinition of our relationship would allow us to move beyond a sterile logic of consolidating gains through endless court battles.

Before concluding with a few concrete recommendations, I'd like to emphasize the crucial importance of continuing to talk more about official languages in order to combat disinformation and strengthen national unity, especially in the context of health crises where we all need to come together across the country.

Senator Jean-Maurice Simard said it well:

... the Government of Canada specifically has a duty not only "to correct the (multidimensional) erosion of the minorities", but also to promote their vitality and actively support their development so as to that strengthen an important (and the most fragile) part of the foundation of Canada's linguistic duality. In so doing, it would also strengthen Canada's national identity and prospects for unity.

In 2021, how do we get to the point of real implementation of Part VII of the act? To answer that question, the SANB humbly recommends that you first create a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on official languages to oversee the process of modernizing and implementing the federal Official Languages Act; the revision of provincial-federal agreements to ensure that funds for the promotion of official language minority communities don't end up in the general funds of the provinces; the signing of direct agreements between the federal government and community institutions such as school boards through the official languages in education program, without the intervention of the provinces; the implementation of an asymmetrical funding regime that would give small francophone communities across the country the opportunity to flourish in an equitable manner, while recognizing that some provinces, including New Brunswick and Ontario, have special needs because of their francophone critical mass.

• (1655)

Moreover, the SANB reiterates its recommendation regarding the distinct character of New Brunswick in the preamble of a modernized Official Languages Act. New Brunswick and Quebec are the only two provinces that have a specific language regime.

Finally, the last recommendation is to sustain our post-secondary institutions in francophone minority communities. On that point, I would add that it is not because we don't hear publicly about the Université de Moncton and the Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick doesn't mean that their funding, admissions and sustainability aren't issues.

With all of this in mind, the SANB asserts that the implementation of Part VII of the Official Languages Act must be seen as the real driving force behind the role that the Canadian government must play in order to give communities the tools, autonomy and institutional freedom necessary to ensure the continued development of French in Canada.

Thank you, and I will be happy to respond to any questions or comments.

• (1700)

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

Now we'll go back to Sheila Risbud for seven and a half minutes.

Ms. Risbud, you have the floor. You can start from the beginning.

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Thank you.

My name is Sheila Risbud, and I'm the president of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, the ACFA.

The ACFA was founded in 1926, and today it represents 268,000 French-speaking Albertans, a number that increased by more than half between 1991 and 2016.

Today, I'd like to focus on the situation of Campus Saint-Jean, the only French-language post-secondary institution in Alberta and west of Manitoba.

Founded in 1908 by the Oblate Fathers, the institution became a faculty of the University of Alberta in 1977 as a result of an agreement between the University of Alberta, the Government of Alberta, the federal government and the Oblate Fathers. The role of the Oblate Fathers in this agreement is now assumed by the ACFA.

The Campus Saint-Jean is essential to the vitality of the francophonie in Alberta and western Canada.

In recent years, Alberta's French-speaking community has experienced some of the largest growth in the country. This growth is creating an increased demand for French-language services in a variety of areas, but especially in education, as you mentioned earlier. For example, over the past 20 years, enrolment in French-language schools and French immersion schools in Alberta has doubled.

Alberta is therefore facing a significant need for a qualified workforce and a shortage of French-speaking teachers and other education professionals. It is also important to remember that it is these teachers and professionals who are needed to provide French-language education guaranteed by section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Campus Saint-Jean therefore plays a fundamental role. To do this, it welcomes more than 900 students per year, an increase of more than 40% since 2014, despite the two increases in the average number of students required to be admitted.

However, Campus Saint-Jean suffers from a severe operational and structural financial deficit, which affects its ability to meet this demand. In terms of operational underfunding, Campus Saint-Jean receives provincial grants for only 70% of its full-time students. In Alberta, faculties have enrolment quotas and receive funding based on those quotas. However, for Campus Saint-Jean, registrations and demand far exceed the quota.

While for other faculties, the quota allows for a certain amount of allocations and students can always enrol in another university, the situation is completely different for Campus Saint-Jean, because there is no other similar French-language institution in Alberta. So denying enrolment is contrary to Campus Saint-Jean's mandate to ensure the vitality of the francophone community and is therefore intended to assimilate and weaken the French fact in Alberta.

Last year, the Government of Alberta also made further budget cuts of 13.3%. As a result, Campus Saint-Jean was forced to reduce its course offerings by nearly 20%. The ACFA had to launch the "Sauvons Saint-Jean" campaign to take legal action against the Government of Alberta and the University of Alberta. I would also like to mention that additional cuts are expected in the new fiscal year and that there are still concerns in the francophone community about the restructuring initiative undertaken by the University of Alberta to clean up its spending.

● (1705)

In addition, the federal funding received by Campus Saint-Jean under the official languages in education program, the OLEP, hasn't changed since at least 2009. In real dollars, this funding has been gradually reduced, despite the increased demand for education services offered by Campus Saint-Jean.

Campus Saint-Jean is in dire need of renovations if it is to maintain its infrastructure. However, in recent years, the Government of Alberta has repeatedly refused to address these needs and has provided no provincial contribution equivalent to that offered by the federal government. The most recent stalemate is an \$8 million infrastructure project that has been approved by the federal government but is currently on hold due to the provincial government's failure to contribute to the project.

In recent years, the Government of Canada has made several commitments, whether in the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-23, in the mandate letters to Minister Joly or in the recent language reform document. While these commitments are much appreciated, they are not yet accompanied by concrete measures, which we fear are too late.

Investments in French-language post-secondary institutions, and particularly in Campus Saint-Jean, are needed now to maintain and develop a network of institutions that protects and supports French in Canada, strengthens the vitality of our communities and increases bilingualism among Canadians.

Over the past year, the ACFA has proposed various solutions to the federal government to save Campus Saint-Jean, including a complementary contribution to Campus Saint-Jean under the OLEP funding; the creation of a French-language post-secondary education fund for western Canada, as demand is on the rise; and finally, the increase of funding for French-language post-secondary institutions and its indexation, under the OLEP.

While education is a provincial jurisdiction, the ACFA also believes that the federal government should use its spending power to protect linguistic minorities and, in so doing, protect French in Canada. For example, the Government of Canada could make exceptions for funding initiatives in the area of post-secondary educa-

tion without parallel provisions. The paralyzing framework created by this type of provision hinders positive action towards our community. This type of provision should be eliminated or, at a minimum, provide more flexibility and discretion for the Government of Canada.

In conclusion, the need for concrete action is urgent. Campus Saint-Jean can't wait for the modernization of the Official Languages Act, which is dragging on, or for the release of the next Action Plan for Official Languages, which is scheduled for 2023.

The ACFA hopes that concrete measures will be included in the next federal budget, which will be released on Monday, and counts on the support of committee members.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Risbud.

We will now proceed to questions from members of the committee.

However, I want to advise members that, given the time, we can either do one full six-minute round per parliamentary group represented. Alternatively, if you have no other commitments, we can extend the meeting by a maximum of 10 to 15 minutes.

Is there consensus to extend the meeting?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will start the first six-minute round of questions.

Mr. Blaney, you have the floor.

● (1710)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, let me welcome the witnesses. Their testimony was very interesting. I would have liked Minister Joly to be able to hear them.

If there's one word I took away from those two excellent statements, it is "now". We need money now. Yesterday, at Laurentian University, we saw the urgent need. We can see it again today at Campus Saint-Jean, and in the Atlantic provinces.

I want to congratulate Ms. Risbud for her efforts on behalf of Campus Saint-Jean. She has specifically requested that the committee look at funding for post-secondary institutions.

I would like to inform the members of the committee that, as a result of my conversation with Ms. Risbud, I introduced the motion, which was unanimously passed, asking that the committee call on the federal government to take responsibility for section 23 of the charter, as the witness mentioned. The Minister's mandate letter also mentions the need to support post-secondary institutions. It is important to stop making excuses for not participating because the provincial government does not want to participate.

Enough is enough. It is our responsibility as a federal government. We, the Conservatives, want to help you and we are committed to doing so within the first 100 days following an election. Minister Joly came to us promising us the world in a white paper, but we are not sure when such promises will be fulfilled. It talks about consultation, but we have been asking for a modernization of the Official Languages Act for five years.

Ms. Risbud, my question is very simple. You have asked the federal government for additional funding for Campus Saint-Jean, which is a pillar in the west. What is the Minister's response to your request for a contribution to support Campus Saint-Jean?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: At this time, it appears that the federal government is open to the idea of providing additional funding. Unfortunately, the mechanisms available to the minister require matching funds from the province. We are currently at an impasse because the provincial government does not want to participate.

There is a willingness on the part of the federal government to help. We need to remove this requirement for matching funds or find another way to transfer federal funds without requiring the province to contribute.

Hon. Steven Blaney: You raise a very good point.

My second question is about indexation. You talked about the decrease in your funds, which have been frozen for years.

There will be a budget next week. Would you be in favour of the government announcing that budgets will be indexed to correct the situation before embarking on other ventures? Would you support that?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: At this point, it would help us tremendously in the west.

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's pretty simple to do.

I'm going to share my time with Mr. Dalton. Almost all of his family went to Campus Saint-Jean. I would be remiss if I did not let him speak.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much, Mr. Blaney.

My thanks to the witnesses for their presentation.

My family and I are connected to Campus Saint-Jean. My father took courses there in the 1940s. In addition, I am Franco-Albertan through my mother, whose last name is Beaudoin. You could say it's in my blood.

This situation is very important. You are here before a federal committee. We are discussing how the federal government can help you, and you have made some very good suggestions. I hope they are implemented. There is also a lot of talk about the white paper.

As my colleague has already said, there are a lot of fine words, but we want real action.

I was very pleased to hear about the increase in the number of people who speak French in Alberta. That is very encouraging. You mentioned that there are more than 46,000 students in French immersion.

In Alberta, the training of francophone teachers who wish to offer courses at the elementary and secondary levels is a major problem.

Can you tell us about the training of teachers in Alberta for these programs?

● (1715)

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Campus Saint-Jean is actually the only place in Alberta where teachers can be trained to teach in our franco-phone schools and immersion schools. Without Campus Saint-Jean, we cannot train local people to teach in our schools. We have noticed that people who come from elsewhere to teach in Alberta do not always stay. They don't necessarily feel at home. So it's important to train local people to meet those needs.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I am a member of Parliament from British Columbia. I have discussed French immersion and the competition among French immersion teachers with people from the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique. Campus Saint-Jean is really important, not only in Alberta, but throughout the west and in francophone minority communities.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dalton. You stayed within the time allotted to you.

I'm going to turn the floor over to Mr. Arseneault for six minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Ms. Risbud, we have met before in this committee virtually, but also in your region, in the west. As Mr. Dalton and Mr. Blaney have pointed out, Campus Saint-Jean is very important. That's why it is important to know what the situation is and what the position of the provincial Conservative government is. We need to talk about it.

Before I get into that, I want to go back to some of the things you said that I didn't understand. You talked about 70% of the provincial grants for Campus Saint-Jean, but I didn't understand the rest. What did you say?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: The province of Alberta provides funding on a per student, per faculty basis. In the case of Campus Saint-Jean, it provides funding for 70% of the students. In other words, for 30% of the students enrolled at Campus Saint-Jean, there is no funding from the province. Campus Saint-Jean is operating at a deficit. It is doing what it can to provide a quality program and courses, despite the fact that it is not funded for all the students enrolled.

Mr. René Arseneault: Are the other post-secondary institutions in Alberta 100% funded?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: It depends on the faculties and the quotas. In the case of Campus Saint-Jean, the effects are more noticeable because of two factors: the increase in enrolment, which has gone from 500 to 900 in five years, and the fact that studying in French, especially in a minority situation, costs more.

Mr. René Arseneault: To reassure my colleagues Dalton and Blaney, could you clarify the following? You mentioned the \$8 million advanced by the federal government for an infrastructure project. The Government of Alberta refused to add its share. Did I understand you correctly?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Actually, the total cost of the project is \$8 million. The federal government was prepared to put in half of that, about \$4 million. It's up to the province to come up with its share.

Mr. René Arseneault: Once again, I would like to point out to my colleagues that this government has taken steps to support the Campus Saint-Jean. You are aware that we have announced an investment of \$3.7 million for renovations to the Lacerte and McMahon buildings. The province of Alberta was supposed to make a contribution.

Can you tell us about the funds that the federal government wanted to allocate to Campus Saint-Jean?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: It's the same announcement. It's for the same infrastructure project.

Mr. René Arseneault: Okay, thank you.

I don't have a lot of time, but perhaps I will come back to the situation of Campus Saint-Jean, since it is very important.

I would also like to speak to my fellow Acadian from New Brunswick, Mr. Doucet.

Earlier, you talked about what you remembered from a speech by the late Senator Simard, who was quite a strong and emblematic figure in our country. He was talking about the Privy Council Office and the fact that it was supposed to be responsible for implementing Part VII of the Official Languages Act. I would like to draw a parallel with the central agency.

If this central agency makes it possible to follow up on Senator Simard's thoughts, how will it help the Francophonie outside Quebec in concrete terms?

• (1720)

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: According to the white paper presented by Minister Joly, the recommendations have been followed. We are not the only organization that proposed this. In addition to the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick (SANB), there was also the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta (ACFA), and other advocacy organizations.

To my knowledge, the purpose of the recommendation was to improve the processes in the federal government to implement the provisions. If the act were modernized, we could implement new provisions, which would make our job easier, because the Privy Council Office coordinates the work of several departments.

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

The Chair: You have one minute and 20 seconds.

Mr. René Arseneault: Time is going by too quickly.

Mr. Doucet, New Brunswick has a special status in terms of official languages in the country; it is the only province that is constitutionally bilingual.

Is there any sort of overlap between the federal reform project and the current situation in New Brunswick with respect to the revision of its provincial legislation? Is there a positive parallel? How is it working on the ground?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: There could be a totally positive effect if the act were modernized and if the review of the act in New Brunswick were fully implemented. We can perhaps think that we are heading towards [*Inaudible—Editor*] in New Brunswick.

There's modernization first, and implementation second. So I don't want to put the cart before the horse, but there is an urgent need to move forward to introduce a bill and then implement it.

Mr. René Arseneault: Right now, how is the modernization of New Brunswick's Official Languages Act progressing?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: We are in the process of reviewing it. We are currently in discussions with the government. Our discussions are going relatively well, but I must admit that they are much more productive with the federal government than with the provincial government. However, we are used to being patient.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you very much. My time is up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doucet.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Mr. Doucet, in your presentation, you quoted Mr. Simard, who said that the leaders of the community associations network spend half their time justifying their existence and the value of their actions to the Department of Canadian Heritage.

What do you think is causing this situation and how could it be improved?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: This situation is caused by the fact that we are funded directly by the federal government. There are actually advantages and disadvantages to being directly funded by the government.

What Mr. Simard recommended in the past, and which is perhaps even more relevant today, was to create a trust fund that would be managed by a Crown corporation, predominantly made up of members of community organizations from each province. The fund would then be managed by the organizations themselves. Of course, a trust fund earns interest. That model was advocated in the past.

Would the federal government want to adopt that model now? That would be very helpful.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That would indeed be very helpful.

You say that this is probably in keeping with the spirit of part VII, that the federal government can and must renegotiate tri-lateral agreements with the provincial governments and the communities themselves when it provides a lasting framework for the development of the French language.

Can you tell us more about this principle of asymmetry, which would respect the specificity of New Brunswick?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: I think that the federal government really needs to show leadership on official languages.

In a relationship involving three parties, all three parties must be at the negotiating table. In the case of New Brunswick, you really have to implement section [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and make sure it is implemented. The provincial government needs to be at the table as well.

That's the sort of message we are sending today.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Exactly.

During your last presentation, you said that you considered Acadians to be a people. Quebeckers make the same point, namely that we must respect the right of peoples to self-determination. Fundamentally, we have the right to ensure the future and the development of our language, of our particular culture.

I think your proposals are completely in line with that. What is unfortunate in Quebec is that we are asking to be consulted so that positive measures are not imposed unilaterally. This seems to be somewhat in line with your requests.

Do you think we will get there? Earlier, Ms. Joly did not seem receptive to the idea of giving the Government of Quebec a say in the positive measures to be taken in that province. Do you think we will get there in New Brunswick?

• (1725)

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: In the past few years, all in all, New Brunswick's provincial government, Progressive Conservative or otherwise, has lacked the political will to implement concrete measures on official languages.

We are now looking to the federal government to take the lead. The only thing we're asking is that they modernize the Official Languages Act so that we can remain Acadian and francophone within New Brunswick. We need urgent action on this, because our institutions are crumbling.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's a tall order.

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: It is.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We fully support you on this.

In your news release entitled "L'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick: la grande oubliée de la réforme linguistique de la ministre Joly", one request you listed was that services be provided in both languages everywhere in New Brunswick, and not only based on the criterion of significant demand, meaning where numbers warrant. Otherwise, I believe your development could be compromised.

Do you believe that could be considered in modernizing the Official Languages Act?

Is it very important to you?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: It certainly is, because the requests only aim to align the Official Languages Act with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Ensuring that services and communications are in both official languages is simply implementing section 16.1 of the Charter. So I feel that the next version of the Official Languages Act, which will likely be modernized, must include those items. That has been a recommendation by the SANB since 2018.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You spoke briefly of the Université de Moncton. I feel that New Brunswick has the most advanced French-language post-secondary education system of all of the predominantly English-speaking provinces. You seemed to be saying that there are problems and it isn't as simple as that.

Can you tell us a little more about it?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: Actually, New Brunswick has a huge demographics problem. Immigration will likely play a crucial role in saving Acadia in New Brunswick. That might be a little strong, but we're seeing post-secondary institutions crumble across the country right now, and New Brunswick is no exception.

To somewhat paraphrase the Montfort ruling from the 1990s, the role of post-secondary institutions in New Brunswick is not only to provide post-secondary education programs; it's also a way for our communities to grow and thrive. The Université de Moncton has three campuses in northern New Brunswick, which helps the linguistic minority to grow.

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

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank our witnesses for being with us.

My first question is for Ms. Risbud of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta.

Ms. Risbud, I'm very pleased to learn that the francophone population has increased, and doubled in schools in recent years. Unfortunately, the shortage of teachers and the problems with Campus Saint-Jean, which trains teachers for those schools, seem to be creating a vicious circle.

You said that the federal government seemed open to increasing operational funding for Campus Saint-Jean. Apparently, however, they are facing resistance from the Alberta government. If you have to rely on Jason Kenney to make the right decisions, it's a little like the play *Waiting for Godot*: you might be waiting a very long time.

Do you think there's any way to get around the dollar-for-dollar matching contribution rule, and that the federal government could do what it did with the Université de l'Ontario français and provide the funding itself? The funding is absolutely crucial to ensuring the sustainability and survival of Campus Saint-Jean in Alberta.

• (1730)

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Yes, absolutely.

I believe there's definitely a way around that matched funding requirement. I am not familiar with all the funding programs, but in the case of the Université de l'Ontario français, the province did make a commitment afterwards. Certainly the commitment [*Technical difficulties*]. However, even if we're unable to get a commitment from the Alberta government, something has to be done about Campus Saint-Jean. If nothing is done in the next three years, we're going to have major issues. We can't wait for the Official Languages Act to be modernized.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I'm very happy to hear that. We also hope that the Official Languages Act will be modernized as soon as possible. However, the bill was tabled at the 11th hour.

Mr. Doucet, it's good to see you again.

You mentioned funding for advocacy organizations. In terms of funding for the core missions of organizations like yours, are things going fairly well, in your opinion? Or are Acadian cultural groups, for example, or New Brunswick groups in general, facing problems? I ask the question because I don't know the answer.

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: Things are going well in general. Our funding was just renewed for three years.

However, we often forget what happened in the past. During the last economic crisis, we faced significant cutbacks. Funding for organizations was affected, especially for advocacy organizations. Right now, we are in a pandemic, but the post-pandemic period is coming, and my biggest fear is that funding for organizations will be affected at that time.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: The last time you appeared before this committee, you said that your organization, the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, felt that the Official Languages Act needed to recognize the specific nature of New Brunswick. They seem willing to move in that direction, but they will have to produce a bill some day.

Do you feel the bill should include other characteristics, specific to the Acadians of New Brunswick?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: Yes, we have always asked that the specific nature be included in the preamble, so as to tie this in, as I said earlier, with Part IV of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which covers the provision of services, as Mr. Beaulieu said, and with Part VII, which covers immigration. Let's not forget that section 95 of the Constitution Act, 1867, provides that immigration is a shared jurisdiction. So we have always pushed for New Brunswick to have its own department, as is the case with Quebec, which created its own in the 1990s.

As for Part VII, we are asking that the specific nature be added with respect to post-secondary institutions and educational institu-

tions in general, such as the Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick or the Université de Moncton.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You would be amenable to an immigration system similar to Quebec's, that is, the province would select economic immigrants, but refugee and family reunification cases would continue to be processed by the federal government. Is that correct?

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: We are looking at that model, yes, but we have no agreement at the moment to go out and get more funding. The office responsible for immigration in New Brunswick has only six or seven employees, so it can't even handle francophone immigration files separately. They have to process English and French immigration files at the same time, and they are not at all alike.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Right.

Earlier, you mentioned that people have recently been talking, and rightly so, about the massacre, the fiasco, at Laurentian University in Northern Ontario. I talk about it a lot myself. But you reminded us that the Université de Moncton, as well as another educational institution that you mentioned, for example, were also facing difficulties and challenges.

I have about 45 seconds left. I'd like you to use that time to elaborate on your thoughts about this.

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: First, demographically, we are going to have some challenges. Today, admissions are not a major problem. In five years, however, we will have a major issue. That's what the studies that have been done on this are already telling us.

In addition, the current infrastructure is very outdated.

Finally, I could go on for hours about all the problems within our institutions.

With respect to the Université de Moncton, it's only a matter of time before programs are eliminated there. It's just that the public isn't aware of this state of affairs. I'm graduating from there in a week, so I know what's going on. We have been talking about this behind the scenes for a few years. Unfortunately, it's going to start happening soon.

• (1735)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Congratulations on your graduation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doucet and Mr. Boulerice.

We now begin the final round of questions, starting with Mr. Godin.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses for joining us. Please know that I appreciate you taking part.

Mr. Doucet, earlier in your presentation you said that, "Francophones across Canada are pleased that, at this time, the federal government is showing a genuine desire to focus on promoting the sustainability of French in this country". I was pleased to hear that comment. However, I would like to know what you based that statement on.

Mr. Alexandre Cédric Doucet: We at the SANB are represented by the FCFA. They submitted a proposal for a bill two or three years ago. I believe that over 80% of the recommendations were accepted. The SANB also submitted a brief, and most of the recommendations were also accepted. That's why I said in my presentation that we were very happy to hear about the desire, or at least the intentions, that Minister Joly expressed.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Doucet. I'd like to think that concrete measures will be taken quickly. I hope it will reassure you to know that, should there ever be a change in government, we Conservatives would be ready to act very quickly, within our first 100 days.

I will now turn to Ms. Risbud.

You stated that, from 1991 to 2016, the number of Franco-Albertans increased by 50%. I feel those are great results. However, I found some of your other comments disturbing, and I will rephrase them in my own words: They have a foot on the oxygen line. By cutting off supplies, they are keeping the number of francophones using the language outside Quebec from going up. I feel that the current governments are using that approach. Not increasing a budget means decreasing it, given the cost of living index. The demand and the enrolment are there, but unfortunately, we don't feel that current governments are willing to [*Technical difficulties*].

What should be done most urgently to get results and stop the bleeding? In the past, it has worked. The numbers from 1991 to 2016 are proof of that. But right now, in Quebec and everywhere else, you can feel that French is declining. It's urgent that we take action. In your opinion, what would the top priority be? How could we get through to our governments and convince them to act swiftly?

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Once again, I will focus on post-secondary education and Campus Saint-Jean. The priority there is to review the funding the federal government provides to minority post-secondary institutions. Saying that it's in provincial jurisdiction and therefore a provincial responsibility will not work in a context where, as you say, the provincial government may not be ready to help us. The top priority would be to review the funding formula and increase funding for our post-secondary institutions.

I'd like to correct something. The growth that I talked about is in people who speak French. It's not just people whose first language is French, but also people who have learned French as a second language. That group has grown significantly in Alberta.

● (1740)

Mr. Joël Godin: You are actually talking about francophiles, those who are attracted by the language and are learning it. You may be aware that, in other countries, speaking French is very much in vogue.

We shouldn't pit English and French against each other. We need to promote French and create pride. That is how things will move forward.

Ms. Risbud, do you feel that—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Godin, but your time is up.

Mr. Joël Godin: I hadn't noticed, Mr. Chair.

Thank you.

The Chair: You don't have time to ask another question.

I now give the floor to Mrs. Lalonde and Mr. Duguid for five minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Terry Duguid: Mr. Chair, I will be speaking first, and I'll be sharing my time with Ms. Lalonde.

As I said earlier, I am from Manitoba, as is Mr. Mazier. As is the case in Alberta, demand for French education is growing rapidly and our education system is not keeping up. From what we've heard today, it's been a difficult year for Franco-Albertans and the ACF over the issue of chronic underfunding.

What future do you see for the Franco-Albertan community, and more largely, francophones in western Canada, if provincial governments seek to undermine the rights of franco-westerners through underfunding?

In response to some of the comments I've heard, I would be very worried if provinces abandoned their responsibilities with respect to higher education in this way. It could be a very slippery slope, and that, thankfully, hasn't happened in Manitoba.

Could you comment on that? I know there are former colleagues of Mr. Kenney's on this committee. What would be your message to him, through them, and how can all members of this committee forge federal-provincial co-operation in this area of French higher education?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sheila Risbud: I will answer in French.

The assimilation of Canadian francophones outside Quebec is not a new phenomenon. We are seeing very high rates of assimilation in Alberta. If you speak French here, you are now part of the resistance.

We need the federal and provincial governments to support our efforts. That means the provinces must sit down together at the table to negotiate, but it also means that the federal government needs to play a bigger role than it has contemplated in the past. That's my opinion.

The message I would like to send to Mr. Kenney's government is that they must stop fighting the linguistic minority. Once they understand the importance of French and of bilingualism, they will have to support an institution that helps people become bilingual or improve their French.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Lalonde, if you want to comment, you have two and a half minutes left.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: That's great, thank you very much.

My dear witnesses, thank you for joining us today. I am taking notes as you share your ideas and suggestions with us.

Ms. Risbud, I would like to go back to something you said: the provincial government is not prepared to help you. Personally, I find it interesting to see that, when provinces become conservative by democratic means, my colleagues in the Conservative Party try to find excuses instead of ways to work together. Since 2015, the Francophonie outside Quebec has seen no one but the federal government.

I'd like to hear you talk about your own experience. I feel that you are going to say the same thing as I do, that postsecondary studies in French are a fundamental pillar supporting the long-term viability of the French fact outside Quebec.

In your experience, therefore, and in terms of postsecondary studies in French, how can provincial governments cause negative consequences for the long-term viability of French in minority situations? That is what you are experiencing in Alberta, despite an increase in the number of francophones and of those who want to study in French.

• (1745)

Ms. Sheila Risbud: I was talking just now about the importance of the Campus Saint-Jean in training our teachers. So if we cannot train teachers, we won't have qualified staff in our schools. That's the first consequence. You can see what effect that can have.

The Campus Saint-Jean also trains people in other areas, health care professionals, for example. Others take political science there, as I did, or other subjects. If we are not able to study at home, we either go somewhere else to study in French or we stay in Alberta but study in English. I am not saying it's a bad thing to go somewhere else to study. But what often happens is that people do not come back to contribute to the vitality of their communities. Those who stay in Alberta but study in English will not perhaps choose to live in French or to raise their children in French.

Those are some examples of how important postsecondary institutions are in minority situations.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Risbud.

Mr. Beaulieu now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Risbud, in a news release you issued in July 2020, you said that the Government of Alberta had recently announced a commitment to invest \$98 million to improve the province's postsecondary infrastructures, but that no funding had been announced for the Campus Saint-Jean. Subsequently, the Government of Alberta turned down an amount offered by the federal government for an infrastructure project at the Campus Saint-Jean because it did not want to provide a contribution itself. That is really astonishing. How do you explain that?

It reminds us of what happened at the Montfort Hospital. It is almost as if they want to assimilate francophones or weaken French-language postsecondary education institutions.

Ms. Sheila Risbud: Yes, of course. It is difficult to understand the logic of that decision. The amount we were requesting for the

Campus Saint-Jean was very modest. The government decided to spend money on other postsecondary institutions, but ignored the only French-language postsecondary institution in the province. It really is difficult to swallow. I cannot explain it.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Let me appeal to my colleagues, because I think we have a role to play. A number of provincial governments are deciding to do nothing and not to fund French-language educational institutions. In British Columbia, francophones have to go to court to defend their interests. Even when they win, their language rights are not always upheld and they have to go back to court.

We have to acknowledge that Canada is far from being a model in its treatment of linguistic minorities. We have to insist on that strongly, because, if the situation does not change, francophones will be assimilated.

What do you think?

The Chair: Ms. Risbud, you have 15 seconds left.

Ms. Sheila Risbud: I completely agree that the situation is dire. As I said, we are part of the resistance.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

Let me encourage you to continue your work. We will support you as much as we can.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Now last, but not least, we have Mr. Boulerice.

The floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to our guests, Ms. Risbud and Mr. Doucet.

I want to take the time I have been given to remind committee members that, last week or the week before, I gave notice of a motion asking for the Minister of Official Languages to appear for a second hour. She set aside an hour for us today, which is very good. But I have to admit that I was not able to ask her half the questions I wanted to. I am sure that the working document, the white paper or the draft bill on the modernization of the Official Languages Act is, just like the situation with French-language postsecondary education institutions, an important enough subject to call for the minister to appear before the committee for a second time. So I respectfully ask that we vote on that motion. Since notice of motion was given at least a week ago, I feel that the motion is in order and can be dealt with today.

• (1750)

The Chair: Your motion is certainly in order, Mr. Boulerice.

Does anyone wish to use the time remaining in this meeting to discuss the motion that Mr. Boulerice has introduced?

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor.

Mr. René Arseneault: May I also take this opportunity to recognize the witnesses. Their presentations were excellent.

Now, does Mr. Boulerice's motion deal with the white paper?

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Yes, it does.

Mr. Joël Godin: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, before we debate Mr. Boulerice's motion or discuss any other committee business, we should finish the meeting with our guests. We should not leave the witnesses hanging, so to speak.

I too would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their wonderful testimony, which will help us to do our job well.

So I suggest that we release the witnesses before we discuss our internal business.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We will finish the meeting properly, but the fact remains that Mr. Boulerice's time is not yet up. I have to respect that. He has 20 or so seconds left.

Are there any further comments on the motion?

That being the case, I am going to call the question on Mr. Boulerice's motion.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1755)

The Chair: That does end Mr. Boulerice's time.

Now the time has come to acknowledge the witnesses and to thank them for their significant contribution to this study.

So my thanks go to Sheila Risbud, President of l'Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta. She was accompanied by Isabelle Laurin, the organization's executive director. Thank you also to Alexandre Cédric Doucet, President of the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, and Ali Chaisson, its executive director.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank the entire technical team.

The meeting is adjourned.

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