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• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the 49th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[*English*]

We acknowledge that we meet today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting will be held in a hybrid format.

[*English*]

For those participating virtually, I'd like to outline a few rules to follow.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen, using the globe icon, of either floor, English or French audio. Please select your language now. If interpretation is lost during our meeting, please let us know and we'll try to fix it right away.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

[*Translation*]

Please make sure your interventions are made through the chair.

[*English*]

When you are speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain the consolidated speaking order.

I have just one housekeeping matter before we start. The next study, as you all know, per the motion adopted on November 21, 2022, is a study of improving graduation rates and successful outcomes for indigenous students. It's also known as the education study. I would just remind you to please submit your witness lists, organized by priority and by party, to the clerk by noon on February 8. That is this Wednesday.

We will now begin our fourth meeting on our study of indigenous languages. This is pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on November 21.

On our first panel today, we welcome Ronald Ignace, the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages. He is with us in person.

Welcome, Commissioner. We will begin by providing you with five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will have a period of questions for you.

If you are ready, the floor is yours for the next five minutes.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace (Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages): [*Witness spoke in Secwepemctsin*]

[*English*]

Thank you for honouring me here to speak to this esteemed committee and to talk about the work of the commission.

[*Witness spoke in Secwepemctsin*]

[*English*]

As well, I would like to honour the lands and people of Kitigan Zibi for us being here.

Good afternoon, and thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.

As you all know, on July 12, 2021, I took office as commissioner and chief executive officer of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages. The three directors representing the interests of first nations, Inuit, and Métis took office at the same time as I did.

The directors and I serve as the governing board of the commission. We feel privileged, humbled and honoured to have been selected as the first commissioner and directors of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, but we are also aware of the enormous task before us in implementing the mandate with which we have been entrusted.

As chief executive officer, I am responsible for the control and management of the commission. Over the past 18 months, our primary focus has been on establishing the commission. There was no such entity or organization prior to the act, so we have been working to build the organization from the ground up. The complexity and significance of our mandate and responsibilities require us to take the appropriate time and steps needed to establish a solid foundation for this organization. We're also working on long-term planning and strategies; we have begun baseline research to better understand the status of indigenous languages in Canada and the funding in place to support language revitalization, strengthening and maintenance. We expect the commission to be fully operational and staffed by the summer.

The Indigenous Languages Act is clear that the commission is an independent entity. The independence is critical to the integrity and credibility of the commission. It is what ensures we can carry out our mandate freely, objectively and without undue influence.

By the end of July each year, the commission must report on a number of things, including the use and vitality of indigenous languages in Canada, the adequacy of federal funding provided by the federal government, and, of particular interest to this committee, the implementation of the Indigenous Languages Act.

The act also sets out the requirement for two statutory reviews. The first is a three-year preliminary review of the act and of its administration and operation, to be commenced by the Senate, the House of Commons, or by both houses of Parliament.

The second is a five-year review requiring the Minister of Canadian Heritage to initiate an in-depth review by October 1, 2025, and within every five years thereafter.

Again, this will include a review of the act and of its administration and operation. Although the act received royal assent in June 2019, the provisions of these reviews did not come into force until some time later, to allow time for the implementation of the act.

We understand that, much like the impacts on the establishment of the commission, the COVID pandemic has also impacted the act's implementation. Given that the timing of the first review will commence soon after October 1, 2023, there is a potential that the implementation of this act will be studied by four separate parliamentary entities within the year or so, including by this committee. We intend that at the time the statutory reviews are under way, beginning in late 2023, the commission will be in a better position to provide an assessment on the implementation of the act.

Kukwststésemc.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

We'll now proceed with the first round, each speaker having six minutes, starting with Mr. Melillo.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being here today to be part of this important discussion and this important study.

I'll start, Commissioner, by going to the Indigenous Languages Act. We've heard a from quite a few witnesses so far, with some comments around the fact that the act maybe could have more teeth to it, so to speak. There's a belief that there are a lot of good intentions within the act, but not necessarily...some of the methods within it need to be taken to make it more substantive. To start off there, do you have any comments on that, or any suggestions on some potential amendments that might improve the act?

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: On the implementation of the act, the commission is not to prescribe what the Indigenous Languages Act ought not to do. Our mandate is to support indigenous languages. Now, if indigenous peoples, in the consultation process between the federal government and indigenous peoples, recommend certain changes and amendments to the Indigenous Languages Act, we will support that and uphold that and continue on with our mandate to support and promote indigenous languages and to support the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of indigenous languages.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I can appreciate that. In that same spirit, I think, we heard from a witness, Dr. Megan Lukaniec. She said, and I'm quoting her words:

As of right now, for our nation, there has been no positive impact of the passing of the Indigenous Languages Act. No funding model has changed, this funding was and still is project-based. Furthermore, we have not been contacted by or in communication with the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages.

Commissioner, could you maybe provide some insight from your view on what work is being done to ensure there is more communication, as you mentioned, and perhaps on some issues or concerns that people have with the act and that you will work on within that mandate if there is a movement to see those changes come to fruition? What work is being done by your office to ensure there is greater contact with indigenous peoples at the grassroots level across the country?

• (1550)

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Let me preface my remarks by saying the Indigenous Languages Act and the commission have just been recently appointed—on July 12, 2022—and in our focus we're mindful that we're building a national entity with a very complex mandate, so we've been working very hard to establish the solid foundation, mindful of future generations, for the commission to be able to address its mandate. Our focus primarily has been on that building of the foundation of the commission.

Where and when we've been able to speak at events in person or via link, we have done so. We did presentations to chiefs, to regional organizations and to various entities, and our directors and I did presentations to all communities, but in a very short time. Canada, as you know, is a very big country, with a lot of communities across the country. We will continue to push on in doing that, because one of our mandates is the promotion of the Indigenous Languages Act.

We've met with various parliamentarians from all parties. As well, we were invited via video link to have a breakfast meeting with the deputy ministers. I understand that it's quite rare to be invited to their meeting. Via video link, we've met with and done presentations for 6,000 civil servants across the country to inform them. It's important for such people to know about the act. We've done meetings with indigenous people across the country, but our primary focus has been to build the commission. Without the commission, we won't be able to appropriately address our mandate. We are making every effort to push forward, and we'll continue to do so.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Absolutely, I appreciate that.

In the short time I have left, let me ask you this. I can appreciate that you haven't had a lot of time, necessarily, in the past, but going forward with that in mind, can you speak to any specific further measures you'll take in the spirit of consultation?

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Well, we will continue to strengthen the fundamentals of the commission, to build up our full-time staff to push forward with the legislated mandate of the commission and to push forward on conducting outreach to the communities.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Melillo.

We'll go to Mr. Battiste.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): [*Member spoke in Mi'kmaq*]

[*English*]

Thank you for joining us, Ronald. Congratulations on being the first-ever indigenous languages commissioner. As a fluent Mi'kmaq speaker, I'm very proud to see an indigenous language commission in place. You once told me something very powerful at an AFN language conference, and it has always stuck with me. You said, "Our indigenous languages are the bolt cutters on the chains of colonialism." That stuck with me; I always remember that quote, and I've always shared that quote.

As Mi'kmaq people, we're very lucky to be advanced in our stages of promoting indigenous languages—we have Mi'kmaq immersion schools, Mi'kmaq apps, Mi'kmaq resources and songs in the Mi'kmaq language, new and old—but there are two things I'm concerned about. First of all is that we've put too much of a burden on the educators to save our languages. We're putting so much of a burden on the teachers to save the language, and sometimes we don't have the incentives required to make sure our youth want to speak the language in our future, not just for the culture but also because it's going to do something for them later on in life.

Can you speak to what some of the things are that we need to do to create incentives for our indigenous youth to continue speaking their language? What lessons can we learn from maybe the franco-phone community in terms of what they're doing right, to make sure there are reasons to speak the language moving forward?

• (1555)

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: That's a good question, and I think that's one of national concern for all our mothers and fathers across the country. I for one have that concern with my children. One of the problems we have with the lifestyle we live today is that we're all busy and we have jobs we have to go to. As well, there are historical, systemic racist policies and laws that have led to the delegitimizing, stigmatizing and shaming of our languages. We've talked here about how our peoples across the country need to heal from that, so it's an area to which we have to give serious consideration.

As well, we have to redevelop a sense of pride and understand the significance and importance of getting our languages back into our lives. I've heard—and I believe it was stated here in this commission—people talk about paying our students to go back to relearn their language, incentivizing them that way to relearn their language. There are also systemic problems regionally, though, that disincentivize our children from speaking the language, and we need to understand and look at those so we can help promote the positive aspects of our languages that will lead to a better understanding of why our languages are important.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I agree.

In my own personal experience, I have seen something amazing, which is children not wanting to speak the language, but the same children walking around the house singing songs in their language if they've heard them. I'm wondering if you could speak to me a bit about the power of indigenous songs and indigenous ceremonies and the role they play in promoting our languages moving forward.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: A song is an important component in our life, and it's really easy. When I'm teaching an indigenous language and I find the person having trouble pronouncing a word, I tell them to sing the word and they'll overcome the difficulty of their pronunciation. A song is an important ingredient that lifts up one's spirit and develops a sense of pride in our children. I think that's what we have to rebuild, and sometimes it may take song to get us back into speaking our language.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: We will be hearing from the Minister of Heritage in the next hour, but I'm wondering if you could just summarize what you think are the biggest things we need to do to promote and revitalize the language in Canada—in 50 seconds.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Realistically, we're at a pivotal point in this country, and I'm really proud and honoured to see that Canada has listened to our calls for an Indigenous Languages Act, and that it has been given royal assent by all parties.

That's a good start. It legitimizes us in the eyes of Canada. I think we have to build on that and move forward with that.

• (1600)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you. *Wela'lin*.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: *Meegwetch*.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you Commissioner, for appearing before us today.

We are, of course, speaking with the commissioner and we know that establishing the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages is a requirement of the Indigenous Languages Act, but we are interested in more concrete aspects of the act as a whole. Even though it could be improved and there will be a three-year review, to begin next year, people are interested in its implementation.

I would therefore like to ask you for more specific details about what has been done so far. You said that there was a lot of work remaining, and I agree, but I'd like to have a better idea about what, concretely, is being done. For example, you mentioned that the office would be fully up and running by the summer. The directors were appointed in 2022, and you were appointed in 2021. That means that work on setting up the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages has been under way for a year and a half, or almost two years.

There are several aspects to the office's mandate. On page 10 of the Indigenous Languages Act it is stated that the office's role is to promote indigenous languages, support the efforts of indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen indigenous languages, facilitate the resolution of disputes, promote public awareness, and support research projects in cooperation with indigenous governments, not to mention funding.

In five minutes, I'd like a brief rundown of the activities planned to address each of these points. If there are none, that's not a problem, but I'd like to have some idea of what the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages is doing concretely, and which could be mentioned in a report.

I can briefly repeat each of these points. For example, with respect to helping to promote indigenous languages, what, concretely, has the office done thus far?

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: As you know, our primary focus has been on establishing and building the fundamentals of the commission. We've established and implemented an operational plan for the building of the commission, including governance structures, policy and procedures. Important financial, administrative and human resource systems have also been established.

Additionally, the—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I apologize for interrupting you, Commissioner, but I have only six minutes.

Am I to understand that you haven't been able to address those aspects of the mandate set out in subsection 23(1) of the Indigenous Languages Act owing to a shortage of time and resources?

Is that right?

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: I'm sorry. I didn't get the question.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: No problem. I'll repeat my question, Commissioner.

My understanding—and tell me if I'm wrong, Commissioner—apart from setting up the office itself, human resources and so on, there has not been any work on those aspects of its mandate that I mentioned, owing to a lack of time or funding.

I'm just suggesting possible reasons, but you can give me the details.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: We've been engaging in research to frame the costing study for the revitalization of indigenous languages. Likewise, there's a baseline study to clear a picture on the status and the vitality of indigenous languages, which will assist in giving us a better perspective on how we can support the promotion and revitalization of indigenous languages, so our primary focus has been—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: So it's been research, for the time being.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: —on establishing the foundation of the commission.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Commissioner, with respect, does that mean the government did not have any solid data that would have enabled you to get on with your work?

You're giving an overview of the situation. That means the government, and more specifically the department, does not have the data required for you to be able to do your work properly.

Is that right?

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: You have to understand that the commission is independent from the government, so we are.... Our mandate right now is to establish the fundamentals of the foundation, and we will be moving forward to address—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'll be the devil's advocate here.

Let's take the residential schools issue, for example. I would imagine that if information were available, action would be taken quickly.

And for indigenous languages, people want to get things moving. We're talking about revitalizing some languages, but there are also some dormant languages and others that are going to disappear.

Even though the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages is independent from the government, shouldn't it have access to scientific, factual data and to something substantial, so to speak? That would enable it to do its work properly and rapidly.

The government hasn't given you any information. Have you requested any information that would help get things done faster, with no risk of duplication?

• (1605)

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: I don't quite understand your question. I will look into it and get back to you on that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'll send him the question in writing. That would provide the committee with a written answer. And, of course, it would be useful to the whole committee.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Yes. I apologize.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: There's no need to apologize, Commissioner. That's why we're here.

Mr. Chair, I think I have 10 seconds of speaking time left.

Is that right?

The Chair: Yes, just about.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Approximately \$50 million was allocated to the commissioner's office for 2020-2023, but only \$4 million has been spent.

Is that related to what you said earlier? Could the funds have been used in a way that would have enabled the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages to get on with the work more quickly?

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: The commission is unaware of any explicit analysis that has concluded and pinpointed numbers. The commission's credibility lies in fact and analysis.

In any event, the number is only one part of the issue. How funds are provided, the flexibility around the funds for their recipients and the terms of those funds, as opposed to being project-based or proposal-driven, are important. Flexibility around the funds for recipients and the terms of those funds are equally important considerations, but also, there are regional structural issues that need to be addressed, and we need to understand those. I hope that through our—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Commissioner, I was speaking about the amount allocated to you.

I wanted to know whether you could have spent the funds more quickly to move farther forward with the work. Nevertheless, I would imagine that your office has many challenges to deal with.

Thank you, Commissioner.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Well, one thing I need to clarify is that we as a commission are not a funding agency. We don't do funding. We are there to promote and support indigenous languages and—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: However, a budget was allocated to the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Ms. Idlout, go ahead. You have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*] Thank you.

First of all, I'd like to welcome you. I'm happy to see you. You and I have met each other quite a few times now.

My questions will be from my understanding, because I'm getting into language history and commission work now. I'm getting orientated. It's a new organization that's just getting started and implemented. My questions will therefore address your future plans.

For instance, when it comes to indigenous people and the languages, and the indigenous peoples' languages act, they say that it's missing components. They do not have protection rights of their indigenous languages. We have no protection rights.

Have you considered protection rights for indigenous languages in Canada? Have you considered whether indigenous people and their languages can be supported more now than they were before? Because we do not want to lose our languages...

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: You're talking about having our indigenous languages supported. My understanding, if I look at the Constitution, is that the rights that are recognized and affirmed in the Constitution are undefined rights, unlike the indigenous languages legislation, which recognizes, names and defines our indigenous languages rights and enacts them into law.

As far as I understand—and I appreciate that the Indigenous Languages Act is now the law of the land to protect indigenous rights—now it's how we go about implementing those rights going forward that will determine what or where there might be changes to the legislation.

My position is that we should not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good.

• (1610)

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNDRIP, states that indigenous people have the rights, and Canada has supported UNDRIP. Article 14 states that indigenous people's languages shall be taught in the school system if the people wish them to be taught.

When you look at article 14 of UNDRIP, have you looked at how policies and programs might address that in Canada?

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: As I stated, we are building up and we will be looking forward at those issues with respect to how they impact the work of the commission. We'll be using those as guiding principles for how we conduct our work in the promotion of indigenous languages and the supporting of indigenous peoples going forward.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

I don't have much time left, but I have one question.

I support the work you do, and the commission is very important. I support you. Could you tell us about the problems and challenges you may have encountered in the beginning? How can we be more supportive to make sure your work is a success? How can we further support you to make sure your work goes smoothly, and what would you recommend we do to help it go smoothly?

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: What work could you do to help us?

Listening to the presentations to this committee, I have found them very important to informing us about what the people on the ground are thinking, and we will be looking to the government and its process and procedures going forward with respect to implementing the act.

Because our focus has been primarily on establishing the commission, we're only halfway through that work, so it would be premature for us to comment on that, but we have a legislative mandate to report on the efficacy of the implementation of the act by, I believe, the end of 2023. We'll be moving in that direction to be able to present those types of ideas.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We have time for a shortened second round, beginning with Mr. Zimmer for five minutes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for being here, Commissioner.

You started off by saying that independence is critical to the work you're doing, but I'll just read this out, on clause 12. It says, "Clauses 13 and 16 stipulate that the commissioner and directors are appointed by the Governor in Council on the recommendation of the minister".

That leads me to believe that there's a bit of guidance—maybe unnecessary or unwanted guidance—to your independence and the work you do.

Can you speak to that? Has it been a problem in the past?

• (1615)

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: No. It hasn't been a problem for us, but we've been very definitive that we won't allow interference in our work, because it's critical. Especially when we move towards managing the dispute resolution process, we cannot be seen to compromise the independence and the integrity of commission in that situation. We have to have balance. We cannot take sides. That's crucial for us.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you for that.

The one thing we've heard about from many witnesses—you've probably heard it and have been watching the testimony as well—are the challenges.

I was in some first nations communities on the west coast—specifically, the Kitselas—and, first of all, they said, one of the challenges is capturing the language and knowledge from the elders. The elders are starting to pass away. Over time, the elders who are still able to speak the language just aren't there anymore, but the second challenge is to pass it on to the younger generation. That challenge is in finding those who are interested, who want to take up the language. How do you deal with both of those challenges?

That's a big answer to give in about 30 seconds.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Yes.

At the commission, we're ramping up our staff, and we will push forward on implementing our mandate and strengthening our support for indigenous peoples and the promotion of indigenous languages across the country, but I think that with the burden of the work there has to be a whole government approach, as well as a whole Canadian engagement in the reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

I say that, and I heard Murray Sinclair state that reconciliation is not an indigenous issue—it's a Canada issue. The whole country has to be mobilized to lift and rebuild indigenous communities and indigenous languages going forward, if we're to succeed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

Next is Ms. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I think I'm going in, Marc. I'm taking her place because she's having a problem with her headset.

The Chair: Very good, Mr. Powlowski. It's over to you.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Over the years, I've talked to quite a few people who went to residential schools. Almost universally, when I asked them about it, the first thing they said was, "I got beaten for speaking my own language."

In thinking about why that is, I mean, it's because probably the people who worked in those places weren't very nice—they were cruel and maybe they were sadistic—but I would have thought that the other reason was that they must have seen some connection between language and culture. If you wanted the kids to become European, then you had to get them to speak English, not to speak their own language. I wonder if you could talk to me a bit about the connection between language, culture and identity.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: First of all, I don't think it was merely the individuals who took that position in residential schools. It was supported by government to "take the Indian out of the child", as has been stated.

I for one am a residential school survivor and an escapee from a residential school. I've taken the opportunity to re-establish my sub-office back in the residential school, to symbolize the reclamation of our languages across the country.

No, our language comes from the land. Our languages are embedded in the land. If I may say so, when you lose the resource, you have no opportunity to speak about that resource or about your history. Our languages are connected to who we are [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

• (1620)

The Chair: I beg your pardon, Commissioner.

Somebody has their microphone on. Please turn off your microphone.

Excuse me, Commissioner. Please continue.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: I've lost my train of thought.

If I misspeak and I [*Witness spoke in Secwepemctsin*]

[*English*]

I apologize if I caused anybody any heartache. I'm just here to try to best explain what the commission is trying to do to support the reclamation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

What was your question again...?

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Following up on that question—you started to talk about it—how close a connection do you think there is between the language and the land, and how much is relearning the language something you can do in the city, in an urban environment? How much do you have to be back on the land?

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: I lived in the city for a while, in Vancouver. I ran away from residential school and I went to and stayed in Vancouver, but I went home.

I think all our people go back to their home. There, they have the opportunity to learn about and engage in the traditional practices that we have. I know we have people from the city coming to our community to engage in our traditional games, our traditional ceremonies and cultural practices, and our funeral services. There's always a connection—a deep connection—between our language and our culture, our lands and our customs and traditions. It's indivisible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to get back to the purpose of the study, because I get the impression that we are straying from it a little, even though I acknowledge that language and culture are inseparable.

Commissioner, I'd like to comment on consultation. You said that in connection with your activities, you spoke with some ministers and parliamentarians. However, the thrust of the mandate is of course that it should be carried out in collaboration with first na-

tions. I would therefore like to know whether you consulted first nations people, whether chiefs, band councils or organizations.

If so, where was this done? Did you consult anyone in Quebec?

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: We have had invitations to speak at events in person or on video link, to provide interviews for local media and to meet with—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Excuse me, Commissioner, but...

[*English*]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: If you'll allow me—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, please allow the Commissioner to finish what he started. You keep interrupting him.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I know, but it's because he's not answering my question, Mr. Chair, and I only have two minutes.

The Chair: Yes, but you're the one doing most of the talking. Let him say something, please.

[*English*]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: When we've had the opportunity and the time, because of our focus, once again.... You can understand that we're building a complex organization here, and it's not easy work to conduct this. It takes a lot of effort and time, and we want to do the right thing.

Yes, we've met with indigenous organizations and indigenous chiefs and engaged with communities wherever and whenever we had the opportunity and—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but I am going to have to interrupt the witness because I haven't had an answer to my question.

I wanted to know whether he had carried out consultations, and specifically whether if people in Quebec had been consulted.

Could you answer that question, Commissioner?

And could not some of these requests come from you and not the press, for example? As the indigenous languages commissioner, do you, in connection with your work, want to meet representatives from band councils, chiefs or indigenous organizations, including in Quebec?

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Again, we've been able.... Whenever and wherever we can, we've been able to meet with indigenous organizations and go to indigenous communities. Our Inuit representative is from northern Quebec, and he has met with and spoken with Inuit people in Quebec, but we are not in a position to fully engage with communities at this stage. We can't get ahead of ourselves in the construction and the building of the commission. We have to be mindful of that, because that is our mandate: to establish that and to get our work done, so that we can get out and do these things.

We are—

• (1625)

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: You should also do it in collaboration with the first nations.

[English]

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: We are eager to get out and meet with indigenous people and get their perspective on what needs they have, so that we can properly promote and support indigenous people across this country.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Ms. Idlout, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

I tried to ask earlier, and I'll try again. Regarding the commission that you are working in, I know it is a new organization. As a new organization, are there any barriers or challenges your office has experienced that we, as parliamentarians, can try to address to make doing your important work easier?

What can we do to assist you? We need to have a better understanding of the challenges that you may have run into or that you may be facing. If we know what they are, we can support you.

If you require supplementary funding or additional support, let us know—if you could—what your needs are at the moment to make your work easier.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: Thank you for that offer.

[*Witness spoke in Secwepemctsin*]

[English]

Thank you for the generous offer of supporting us to be able to do our work more importantly. When and if we need it, we will and have been reaching out to various members of Parliament and letting them know about the indigenous language legislation, the mandate of the commission and where we are in building up the commission.

They have all indicated, much like yourself, the willingness to support us. We know that the willingness is there, and we are very

grateful for it. When we need it, we will come forward and seek that support, while protecting the independence of the commission and the integrity of that independence.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

This brings our first panel to an end.

I would like to thank you, Commissioner Ignace, for coming today and providing us with opening remarks, as well as for answering our questions. As you can see, we are very interested in the work you are doing. We realize that you are setting up shop, but we are eager to see how things develop in the coming months and years.

Thank you for taking the time to come today.

Mr. Ronald E. Ignace: I'm very grateful for the work you are doing.

As I said, the witnesses have come forward and made statements here. We're going to be reviewing them. They will be very helpful in informing the commission on how to better do its work going forward. We are grateful for that.

Thank you all for your interest. Let us strengthen that interest going forward, with a whole-of-government approach and the engagement of all Canadians in this work. It's going to take a whole-of-Canada approach to be able to revitalize and strengthen indigenous languages that have been under attack for the last 500 years.

It's going to take long, hard work to accomplish that objective.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

We will now suspend briefly as we await the Minister of Canadian Heritage for our next hour.

Thank you.

• (1625)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Committee members, we will now resume.

On our second panel, we welcome the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez,

[Translation]

the Minister of Canadian Heritage, and Mr. Paul Pelletier, Director General, Indigenous Languages, at the Department of Canadian Heritage.

[English]

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French audio.

Please select your language now. If you have interpretation problems, let us know and we'll interrupt momentarily to fix it.

[Translation]

Minister, the meeting will be conducted as usual. As you know, you have five minutes for your opening address. After that, we'll move on to the round of questions.

Welcome to this discussion on indigenous languages. You have the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, dear colleagues, good afternoon. I am truly pleased to be here with you.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathering today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

It's truly an honour for me to be here to discuss this subject and to field your questions. It's not only important from a general standpoint but also personally. I'll explain why afterwards.

In Canada, over 70 languages are spoken by first nations, Inuit and Métis, but none of them are protected. In fact they are all threatened, in one way or another.

Our job is to continue to take concrete steps to maintain, revitalize and strengthen them. We want these languages to be strong, and we need them to be so.

[English]

It is our duty to listen and to take our indigenous partners' lead on their language priorities, because it's not about us. It's about them.

We cannot afford to lose the wealth of knowledge, wisdom and beauty that is held in each of the indigenous languages spoken in Canada. This is why we developed the Indigenous Languages Act, which I have had the honour of tabling during my time as Minister of Canadian Heritage. It is, sincerely, one of the things I'm most proud of. At this moment, as you know, we're working very closely with indigenous partners to implement that bill.

[Translation]

We have done much since June 2019, in spite of the problems caused by the pandemic. We established a joint implementation steering committee with representatives from the three national indigenous organizations. We have been working together on it. We have held 26 consultation sessions with indigenous peoples across Canada. We organized a symposium that had more than 800 participants.

We made the initial appointments to the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages. You have had the opportunity to meet the people in question.

And of course there was our support to the international Decade of Indigenous Languages, through the development of a national action plan specific to Canada.

[English]

We have also worked toward advancing access to federal services in indigenous languages. In particular—I know how impor-

tant this is—we're working with Inuit partners to identify pilot projects that can help us develop regulations for access to federal services in Inuktitut. We have established a cross-government steering committee that will work toward this goal, as the act intends.

[Translation]

Since the adoption of the act, we have funded more community indigenous projects than ever before. Everything is moving ahead quickly. We went from only 180 projects in 2018-2019, which is not insignificant, to over a thousand projects in 2022-2023. The number is still growing.

By increasing funding, we were able to support all eligible Inuit and Métis language projects since 2020, through investments from the 2019 and 2021 budgets, totalling more than \$840 million over a seven-year period, and \$118 million per year afterwards.

That's a lot, although it will never be enough. The needs are huge, but if we compare current funding to the \$5 million available for indigenous languages in 2016-2017, it's a giant step forward.

• (1640)

[English]

Indigenous partners have consistently told us that funding for indigenous languages must be long term, stable and predictable, and we agree. They've said that the processes for receiving funding must be indigenous-led, accessible, responsive, timely and transparent. We totally agree once again.

What do we do to make this a reality, to make it happen? We already have been working with communities to take the lead in decision-making and to increase flexibility in their funding. We're also working in developing new distinction-based funding models, being implemented this year, that would better meet the respective needs and goals of the communities, no matter where they live across the country.

This will allow for long-term funding agreements with indigenous governments, organizations and communities. It will also put funding decisions in the hands of indigenous people and ensure that they can make decisions based on their specific and unique priorities. So far, we have also been able to support six innovative agreements through sections 8 and 9, and we're working on more.

[Translation]

In spite of the rather negative picture I painted at the beginning when I said that all of the indigenous languages were threatened, there are some positive factors too. Indeed, the 2021 Census gives us some hope. Since 2016, for example, the number of indigenous people whose mother tongue was not an indigenous language and who can now speak one of these languages, grew by 7%.

There are therefore 7% more indigenous people whose mother tongue is not an indigenous language who have now learned one of these languages. More and more indigenous people are therefore speaking an indigenous language as a second language.

[English]

We've made much progress together, but there's definitely a lot of work to do. It takes years to properly implement a law like this one, and we're definitely—definitely—committed to this journey in true partnership with our colleagues and friends from across the country.

I'm ready to take your questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll start with Mr. Vidal for six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here today and for having this conversation with us. This is an important discussion.

I want to drill into a couple of numbers that I've been digging through in the last few days and see what you can offer as an explanation for some of them. Although the act wasn't passed until 2019, there is some history in the program for funding. If I go back over the program from 2018-19 all the way through 2021-22, there's a significant amount of money each year, and that number grows every year in what are called "transfers". It's transfer payments. For example, in 2021-22, out of a total of \$113 million in this program, \$105 million of that was transfer payments.

Do you know where all those transfers went? I did some digging today, and I can't find where they went. My question is really around this: Is that getting to these programs on the ground, or is it for stuff happening in Ottawa? Is that money actually getting...? We've heard from a number of witnesses who are saying that they're struggling to have access to enough dollars to do the work they want to do. Personally, I would love to see this money getting to those people who are working on the ground, so to speak.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I totally agree with you, and it is the case, as I've mentioned before. Now we're up to about a thousand projects, community projects, that are financed by Heritage, but in collaboration with our indigenous partners. They are part of the process in approving the projects. It's not us saying, "We know what is good for you and what is not." They're part of the decision, and the money is definitely going to them.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Would you be able to provide a breakdown of that money for us?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Sure, absolutely.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Could the department provide that to us going back a couple of years, even if you went back to 2019-20, say, and broke down those transfers for us?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Sure. On the implementation of the bill, we voted royal assent in June, and then it went into effect in August, I think. Sure, with pleasure.

Mr. Gary Vidal: If you could do that, that would be great for us as we do our report, just to see where that money is being spent.

Then we can account for some of the comments made by other people in the program.

You talked about the bill being passed in June 2019. We just heard from the commissioner of indigenous languages here, in the hour prior. He hopes to be fully up and running this summer. I believe that was his target. Back when we looked at Bill C-29, one of the patterns or one of the things that we were challenged with was the time frame on getting the work done.

This was approved in June 2019. We are now in February 2023, and he's still.... I think that in his words he called it "setting up shop". He's still working at setting up shop. I guess my question for you is, do you feel that's an appropriate time frame? If we're going to place importance on reconciliation and if we're going to place importance on languages, that seems like a long time to get the aspects of the bill that seem very important up and running.

• (1645)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We would love to see things go faster. I fully trust the commissioner. I think we're lucky, and I think it's a privilege to have Ronald Ignace as a commissioner and a director.

I had the chance to go to the United Nations with Mr. Ignace, and I spoke in front of the United Nations on indigenous languages. He was there. We had many meetings. He has devoted all of his life to this.

I'm sure, Mr. Vidal, you understand that we're starting from scratch. There was no commissioner's office. Even just getting an office, a physical office, and getting toilet paper and getting everything started—there was a pandemic that we had to deal with. I fully trust him to move ahead with that.

Mr. Gary Vidal: In fairness, though, Minister, we're coming up on four years here. By the time we get to June 2023, we're going to be at a full four years. I get that, but I still struggle with the pace, I guess.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: If I may, though, Mr. Vidal, this doesn't change the fact that we've increased the number of projects. We're not funding the projects through the commissioner. His role is different, isn't it?

We went from having 180 projects before to about 1,000 projects that we're financing now, working with our indigenous partners. As we do, they are putting the office in place, which will give reports of where we are, the status of the languages and all of that.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate that.

When you provide that information on where some of that money is going, we'll get a better sense of—

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Sure.

Mr. Gary Vidal: —how much is getting to people on the ground.

I have one final question. You're very quick with your answers. I appreciate it. I'm getting through my whole list here in one slot, so that's perfect.

When I look at your departmental results reports, specifically around this program, there's a target in there, which is that 83% of participants in the program should report improvement in their ability to use their indigenous language—and I'm paraphrasing here—in their everyday lives. That target has been there for four years. It had a measurement date of March 2021, and now, again, we're a couple of years past that and no results with respect to that target have ever been reported in any of the departmental results.

People on this committee know that I'm always pushing for outcomes and results from the work we do. That target doesn't seem to be getting measured, or there's nothing reported on the outcomes. I'm just curious as to whether you have a comment on whether you can provide that information, and if you don't have it today, maybe you could provide that for us along with the other information I asked for.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a very good question.

Part of that information will also be gathered by the commissioner, because he has to report where we are, the needs and the status of different languages. Statistics Canada will report on this after five years.

Mr. Gary Vidal: The target was supposed to be reported on in March 2021, though. For your departmental results, that was the target date. We're almost two years past that, and we still have no outcomes.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We'll get back to you on that.

Paul here says—

Well, you can say it.

Mr. Paul Pelletier (Director General, Indigenous Languages, Department of Canadian Heritage): The target was set for 2021, recognizing that it was when the next census release was going to be. Stats Canada have just released their findings from that gathering in 2021. That's why there's been a delay in reporting that. Now we're able to report the status as of 2021.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Do you have that data now?

Mr. Paul Pelletier: We have that data now.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Can you report that to the committee?

Mr. Paul Pelletier: Sure.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now go to Mr. McLeod for six minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I hope Gary wasn't using my time for his questions.

This has been a very interesting discussion, Mr. Chair, on this indigenous language study.

I want to say *marsi cho* to Minister Rodriguez for appearing today to speak on this very important topic.

You were the minister who sponsored the Indigenous Languages Act way back in 2019, and you may have touched on some of this stuff I'm going to ask you, but since that time, what are some of the

government's key accomplishments on supporting indigenous languages and implementing the legislation?

• (1650)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: As I said, this is the thing I'm most proud of from the first time I had the privilege of being the Minister of Canadian Heritage. We've worked on co-developing this bill. We didn't agree on everything all the time, which is also normal, but I think we got to a pretty good bill that allowed us right away to start increasing our actions.

To answer your question directly, we've put in place, for example, \$840 million for the financing of the projects. If you add to that the fact that we're putting in another \$118 million per year, we're getting close to a billion dollars.

Is it enough? I would say that for languages, it will never be enough, because language is who we are. It's our identity. It's our past. It's our present. It's our future. It's how we tell our stories. We pass those stories on to our children.

I'll give you an example. When I came from Argentina.... That's why I have such a strong accent in English—we were political refugees, and I didn't speak a word of French or English. My dad said, "From the door, outside, you speak the language you want. Learn French. Learn English. Learn everything you want, but on this side of the door, inside, it's Spanish." It was important to him that we keep our culture, just as it is for all of you.

That's what I'm saying. There will never be enough money, because the needs are so big. Of course, we are accelerating the pace, there are more projects, we're financing faster and we're putting in place agreements whereby we're going to transfer that to our friends—the Inuit, the Métis and the first nations—so that they make the decisions and we're not involved anymore.

However, there's so much to do in that, because we have to bring this to another level. It's not only teaching the language. It's also eventually having more music in indigenous languages. It's having more books in indigenous languages. It's having more television shows, more music and more movies at the movie theatre in indigenous languages. That's my dream. That's what I hope for.

We have to start somewhere. I think the start is not that bad. We've funded, I think, 77 different indigenous languages up to now in the different projects.

We appointed the commissioner. We're working with him. He's independent. We're there to support him.

Now we're working on these long-term funding agreements whereby we will transfer a big amount of money to the indigenous organizations. They will be the ones accepting the projects and taking us away from that decision, and I think it's the right thing to do.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Last fall, I was in Dettah, and I was very excited to announce almost \$40 million to support indigenous languages across the territories. The money was going to indigenous governments. It was going to friendship centres. It was going to broadcasters. There was the literacy council. A lot of people were saying that the right way to do it is to provide it and put it in the hands of different stakeholders.

Can you speak to the work done by Canadian Heritage to move away from a centralized approach to funding, and how indigenous governments and organizations can play a bigger role in decision-making in the design and delivery of indigenous language programming?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a very good question.

That is what we've wanted to do since day one. When we came up with the bill, we said the structure is within Heritage. We're going to work at co-developing it, but at the end of the day, the people are the ones who know what is best for them. They're the ones who know what they need.

I'm not going to go and tell one first nation, "I think this is good for you in terms of indigenous language." No. Never. How would I know that? It's not up to me to say that.

That's why it's so important for us to finance those long-term agreements with the Inuit, the Métis and the first nations. It's so we can transfer those amounts, and they can select the projects and have those discussions. We already have those discussions, in a way. We don't go by ourselves and say we're going to finance this project or that one. It goes through different groups. Maybe you can explain exactly how we do that, but we're going one step further, transferring the money and saying, "Okay, you know better than us what to do."

Do you want to quickly add to that?

• (1655)

Mr. Paul Pelletier: Currently, we have set up first nations, Inuit and Métis committees. For most projects, they look at the proposals coming in. Based on their expertise on revitalization work, they make recommendations back to the department on who should be funded and how much, and the department has followed those recommendations ever since we set up these committees three years ago.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

[*Translation*]

We will now go to Mrs. Gill.

You have the floor for six minutes, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you Minister, for appearing before the committee today.

You are aware of my interest in languages, generally speaking. Needless to say, the link between culture and language was raised earlier.

I have questions about what was done by the department.

You said that more money was allocated. More money will always be needed, of course. People have been telling me that even though we are being told that there is more money, they are not necessarily feeling a difference and they get the impression that there are barriers in terms of accessing and using the money.

Was additional staff hired by the department specifically for the needs of this process?

Can you tell us how many people were hired to provide more services to these people? I could, if you wish, give you a list of the grievances I've heard about, which were also presented to the committee.

How many additional people were hired to meet requirements?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'll give you an overview, and then give the floor to Mr. Pelletier.

There are several ways to support the strengthening, preservation and protection of indigenous languages. One such way is through the Indigenous Languages act. An increase in funding now allows us to do that. As I mentioned earlier, the budget is \$840 million...

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but once again I'm going to interrupt, because he is not answering my very specific question.

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I am answering it, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I asked you to give us a number.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm answering. I told you that Mr. Pelletier would be providing the specifics...

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'd like you to give me the number of people. If you can't do that, Mr. Pelletier could tell me right now.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't interrupt you when you're asking your questions...

Mrs. Marilène Gill: All my available time is going to run out.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Please be polite. I let you speak and I would expect you to do the same.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm being polite, but I'd like an answer.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm giving it to you, and for further details...

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm not trying to stir up trouble; I just want a number.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Please, let's not get into an argument. I have something to say briefly.

Bill C-11 provides opportunities for indigenous people, through indigenous languages programming that reflects indigenous cultures and will enable our indigenous communities to receive more money for culture.

Bill C-18 will provide them with more money for journalism.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I am asking you to give us a specific number of employees, Minister.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I will now ask Mr. Pelletier to provide a more specific answer to your question.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

Mr. Paul Pelletier: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I would say there are a few reasons to offer. One is that every single year for the last five years, we've seen increasing demand for the program. Funding has increased year over year, but demand has exceeded that. What happens is that we are oversubscribed, and many projects are not able to be funded every year.

In terms of your question about whether there have been more resources, we did receive an increase in money in budget 2021 to support more projects, and we received some extra human resources to process that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Pelletier. Thank you, Minister.

If you have those numbers, you could send them to the committee.

I mentioned some of the problems. We've been told that it's hard for people who want to make requests to have direct contact. Of course the matter of human resources is important, as are the delays. People told us that they had tried to get in touch with someone, but that it was impossible. It took far too long. In some instances, it was up to 11 months or even a year. That's a problematic situation.

There is also the whole issue of resources. I know that the will is there. Things improved from 180 projects to approximately 1,000. That covers all the Inuit and Métis projects. Nevertheless, people are talking about the situation, including the communities themselves, which were making requests through organizations. They don't have the resources that a very large band council would have, for example. I have even seen disparities on the North Shore, where I come from. These people need more than resources, and that's the reason for the question. I thought to myself that might be one of the first things to take into consideration if we want to give people access to the available funds.

I'd like to raise a completely different subject with you, Minister, about dormant languages.

I am aware of Huron-Wendat, a language which is not being spoken. I know that we're going to return to the review of the Indigenous Languages Act, but would nevertheless like to know how, in Bill C-91 or in the indigenous languages and cultures program, the issue of research or revitalization will be dealt with. That's really pushing it, given that this language is not even being spoken. Several activities will be funded to get people together so that they can talk about it. But in some communities, people are no longer speaking their language, even though they want to reclaim it.

How will things proceed? What will be the minister's responsibilities? We have seen interest and determination from the commis-

sioner, but we know that it will require effort over the long term, as well as enormous resources. I've discussed it with him. However, it would appear that there are only three people at the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages at the moment. Clearly, between now and full implementation, all of the emphasis will be on the department itself.

• (1700)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The commissioner's role is performed independently. The commissioner's work is carried out independently of project funding. The two are not connected. I know that the commissioner is doing everything possible. He is a remarkable man for whom I have an enormous amount of admiration and respect.

During this time—as you yourself pointed out—project funding has been increased. I'm somewhat surprised to hear that there have been so many. Generally speaking, we have been succeeding in reaching out to a lot of people. We'll be only too happy to take down names and see what we can do for them.

You're right. You've put your finger on something. We're saying that we're going to increase the number of people who speak the language. In some instances, the current number is zero, while for others, there are only three or four speakers remaining. This is not specific to Quebec. I've seen it everywhere, in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

The Department of Canadian Heritage is not about to dictate how they ought to go about revitalizing their languages. It's up to them to figure it out. What we need to do is give them financial support through training, pedagogical assistance, and creating dictionaries and resources to help them learn how to pronounce the words.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: There's also the research component. I know that's not the responsibility of your department, but rather Mr. Champagne's.

At the moment, some researchers have been unable to qualify for research projects at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the SSHRC. I wanted to inform you of that.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The commissioner's office is also going to do a lot of research into the status of languages across Canada.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

It's Ms. Idlout's turn now.

Ms. Idlout, You have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you.

Today, as we talk about indigenous languages, I am going to speak Inuktitut, my language.

We all understand and know that the people who were sent to residential schools have a lot of pain and have a lot of healing to do.

There are 13 communities in Nunavut. Their schools were managed by the federal government, which hired churches and other agencies to manage them. In Chesterfield Inlet, since 1951, it was the Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School. It was the last, and the residence itself, Kivalliq Hall, was closed in 1997 as the last residential school in Nunavut.

In Nunavut, there are 13 communities. They tried to do away with our culture and our language by taking us to residential schools from 1951 to 1997. For 46 years they tried to destroy our language and our culture.

There are 42 schools in Nunavut, from preschool to grade 12. The elementary schools teach the English language. We have one French school in Nunavut, but we do not have an Inuktitut school up to grade 12. We do not have an Inuktitut curriculum or courses up to grade 12.

I am asking you, Canada, can the Government of Canada provide for 13 communities to teach the Inuktitut language inside of Nunavut? We feel that you could also teach the language and the culture of the Inuit. For 46 years, they tried to do away with our language and culture. Can you reply, please?

• (1705)

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you for the question.

What was done to indigenous peoples, including the Inuit, was horrible. People were uprooted and prevented from speaking their own language.

As I was saying earlier, language is how we express what we basically are; it's our identity. It's our way of transmitting our history to our children. When children lose their language and can no longer communicate with their parents and grandparents, they lose some of their identity. Something inside them has been broken.

I myself worked for a long time in international development around the world, and I always said that change and progress come through education.

All the departments have a role to play in this, and it varies from one to the other. What our department does is provide kindergarten to grade 12 classrooms with educational materials like dictionaries and software to help with word pronunciation.

Other departments work more closely with the provinces and territories on other aspects.

In fact I'm going to ask Mr. Pelletier to provide more details on this.

[English]

Mr. Paul Pelletier: In the north, our program, as the minister said, supports books, pedagogical resources and the development of indigenous language training materials, as well as adult courses and preschool language nests for children and their parents.

We have also entered into a tripartite agreement with the Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. It is a five-year commitment whereby we are supporting an increase in the number of Inuktitut-speaking Inuit educators in the Nunavut education system.

It's one of the ways in which we are testing what can be done under the act to better support education in the language of Inuit children.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Thank you.

What I heard was piecemeal—pieces of small projects here and there, but I asked this quite specifically: Will Canada build and staff 13 Inuktitut schools in Nunavut, or pay a third party, the territorial public government, to restore and support Inuit culture and language for the next 46 years, given that in the past the federal government paid for residential schools to exist for 46 years in Nunavut?

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm personally in favour of that, but it's not part of my department's mandate. I don't want to speak for my colleague.

As I said earlier, progress comes through education. If we want to set things right and correct the horrendous injustices committed, then children, your children, have to be able to learn their own language.

Collaboration is important. Agreements are also essential. As it happens, we have already signed eight education agreements with provincial and territorial governments.

I think that you should have this conversation with the Infrastructure Minister or the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, because that's their area of responsibility. I can't speak for them, but as far as we are concerned, we will certainly continue to provide all the required pedagogical materials.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We are now beginning the second round of questions.

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

[English]

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): That's perfect. Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here for this important discussion we're having today regarding indigenous languages and culture.

Minister, I'm going to point out a headline from the Hill Times that is dated June 6: "Online streaming bill risks pushing out Indigenous voices, says APTN", the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. According to the article, members from the APTN were not at the table when discussions were taking place regarding this online content bill.

Given the fact that, according to the National Post in this article, you are rejecting the Senate's amendments to Bill C-11, including this clause in the bill that one senator described as giving "extraordinary new powers to the government to make political decisions about things", what guarantee can you give this committee and the indigenous community in general that their content will be able to be seen online and not regulated by the CRTC?

• (1710)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a very important question. It's important to mention that we've been working with indigenous partners such as APTN. We've been consulting with them. We're looking at different measures, but one thing is sure, which is that after Bill C-11, there will be more money for indigenous voices. That is clear in terms of music, film and movies. The bill is there for that, actually. We're asking the streamers, the big players that we all love—I have them at home: Disney, Netflix and Prime—to contribute to Canadian culture so we can use that money to support different voices, like indigenous voices. There will be more money for them.

As for the amendments, to answer your question, I'm not going to reject any amendments that have an impact, but we'll see which ones may have a negative impact on the bill. I want to thank the senators, because they did important work on this. I'm sure we'll be able to support a lot of them, but we're not there yet.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: There was a National Post headline: "Liberals 'won't accept' any Senate amendments that 'impact' online streaming bill: heritage minister". That was on February 2.

We still have an issue regarding online streamers, about those who are creating content in their communities—local content, Canadian content—who want to have their voices heard. Many people in testimony before the heritage committee—and I'm sure you and your team have followed that—have raised concerns about voices being able to break through the government barriers.

Again, most streamers aren't asking for money. Most streamers are saying, "We can do the job. Just get out of the way." Are you going to change your mind and start accepting some of these Senate amendments that appear to improve this absolutely terrible bill?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, I have to say I think it's a very good bill. Actually, the world is watching Canada. I'm having conversations with counterparts in Europe and Australia who may follow the same path, because it's about our culture. Our culture is also who we are as a society.

We don't yet know which amendments we'll accept. I'm sure we're going to accept a lot of them. They were well thought out, and there was a lot of work. I had a chance to appear at the committee and I know our colleagues in the Senate did a very good job, but sometimes an amendment may go against the intentions of the bill. If that's the case, then we may not be able to support it. We'll see. We're not there yet, but—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. I appreciate it. I am short on time.

You are right that the world is watching, Minister. According to this National Post article,

The bill has also caught the attention of the United States. Its embassy in Ottawa recently said that it is holding consultations with U.S. companies that it is concerned could face discrimination if the bill passes.

In fact,

Last week, two U.S. senators called for a trade crackdown on Canada over Bill C-11....

So, yes, the world is watching, but is the government listening? There were legitimate concerns raised in committee by witnesses

with impeccable backgrounds, who are saying that this is a step way too far.

Now, according to this article, you're saying that the government is not going to move on the Senate amendments after one of the longest studies in the Senate in recent memory.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It is the longest study. There was a lot of filibustering by the Conservative Party. That's why.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You're saying there are 20-some amendments the Senate put forward and you are rejecting all of them.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, I never said that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Are you saying the article is wrong?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: No, no. There will be a lot of amendments approved, I guess. We don't know which ones yet, but some will be approved. However, if an amendment has a negative impact on the bill or goes against the intention of the bill, we cannot accept it. Also, the intention of the House...two-thirds of the House voted in favour of that version of the bill that went to the Senate.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I thought we were talking about indigenous languages here. We've kind of gone off course and have gone on to a different bill. I know the heritage committee is looking at this bill and it's in the Senate, and I'm wondering what its relevance to indigenous languages is.

• (1715)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'm sure, as it's my time, I can ask whatever questions I want, but also it is about indigenous languages, when we have APTN saying that their voices are not going to be heard and are going to be affected by this. That's the relevance.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale is right. There is a wide latitude in the questions that are asked, and there is an indirect link to indigenous languages with respect to Bill C-11, so I'll allow it, although there's only about 15 seconds left.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Back to APTN, they are concerned that their voices and their product are not going to get out to the ears and eyes of people who want to watch and listen to it. What guarantees can you give this committee that this will not be the case?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: It's the intention and objective of the bill to give more room for indigenous voices, so we'll make sure they are more discoverable and we'll make sure they are better financed. However, we have to move on. The Bloc support it. The NDP support it. The Liberals support it. You guys filibuster it. Now it's time to move on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

We'll now go to Mr. Weiler for five minutes.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to thank our minister for joining the committee today on the really important study we're doing right now.

A couple of questions came up today related to some of the indigenous languages that are most at risk, because we know indigenous languages across the country very much have different statuses. Throughout this study, we've heard about the urgency of acting right now, because many of these communities have few remaining language speakers. They're doing the best they can to capture this knowledge but, in many cases, it's a race against time.

Minister, I was hoping you could speak to how the government is working with those communities—I have one in my riding as well—where the future of the language is very much threatened right now. How are we able to address the pace of implementation, so that we are able not only to save the languages, but to strengthen and revitalize them for future generations as well?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Of course, I said at the beginning that such an important bill cannot be realized overnight. However, the fact there was so much work done in the process and the fact there was so much discussion and collaboration....

I remember meeting with my friends—the Métis, the Inuit and the first nations—here and in other cities. I went to Iqaluit. We had meetings in New York while we were there at the United Nations. Again, we didn't always agree on everything, which is normal, but we agreed that we had to put in a robust bill and we had to be able to start very quickly.

The second the bill was adopted—again, it received royal assent in June and was put in place in August—we started increasing the level of funding. More importantly, though, we put in place structures such that we would work with our indigenous counterparts and colleagues, because we didn't want PCH to be there saying, “Okay, send us projects. We'll be the ones analyzing them and you guys will have nothing to do”. It's quite the opposite.

We have different groups that work with us and will vet the projects. They're groups that know their own reality and know the people who presented the project. Through that, I think we're in a good spot. We can always do better, but I think we're in a good spot, where we can keep increasing the funding of the projects. I said it's been about \$840 million since the implementation of the act, with \$118 million ongoing. There are community projects and on-the-ground projects that make a difference in the daily lives of people and the objectives we all have.

I don't see how this bill could be politicized or partisan. It is about—this is very important—revitalizing, permeating and promoting indigenous languages.

As I said before...I gave my example of how important it was for my father and my family to keep our Spanish. I'm so proud to have kept my Spanish. I can talk to my daughter in Spanish. I can go back to Argentina and speak to my mother, who's there, my uncles and others in my language.

That is equally important for all of us. I'll always be there to defend it, and not only because it's the right thing to do. For me, it's so personal that we do the right thing.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you, Minister.

As a follow-up to that, it seems there are a number of different things we need to do. We need to make sure that with the languages

that are there, we're able to help and encourage uptake. There is an urgency in that we're seeing languages at risk of being lost forever. Some parts of the language in many parts of the country are already lost.

I wonder if you could speak a bit more to that particular aspect of making sure that we are recording and saving those languages, so that down the road we're able to do the important work of revitalizing them.

• (1720)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Absolutely.

There is recording, there is the writing of stories and there is the drafting of books and dictionaries. It's everything we can...but it's all based on the needs identified by their communities. It's never by us.

Who am I to say this is what this community needs or what the Inuit people need? No. Whatever we do, we will do it in collaboration.

Sometimes it takes a bit more time, but it's the right way to do it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you very much.

How does the Department of Canadian Heritage contribute to the revitalization of indigenous languages among the younger generations and how does it attract indigenous youth to their language, heritage and culture?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's an excellent question.

It mostly comes through young people themselves. I sensed that they were very enthusiastic about learning the language and being able to say that they can speak with their grandparents in the language of their ancestors.

They have to be provided with the essential tools, like software that enables them to directly translate tweets into one or other of the indigenous languages, as well as immersion activities for younger children, which are more appropriate for them than just pedagogical materials.

Access is needed to equipment to record songs or shoot videos in indigenous languages. Those are the kinds of things that will attract youth. There is a lot of talent, and some will become the major producers and musicians of tomorrow. In fact, we have one in the room with us today.

Those are some of the things we can do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiler.

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you mentioned, Minister, collaboration is clearly important.

Needless to say, I know that the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages is independent. The commissioner told us that he was currently carrying out several studies on indigenous languages to obtain an overview of the current situation. You mentioned that there were more than 70.

Has the department also looked into it? Does it have a handle on this?

Has there been collaboration to avoid duplication of existing data? Have there been discussions on this between the commissioner's office and the department?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you for the question.

I don't think our research is as exhaustive as what the commissioner's office is doing, because that's its role and it's part of its mandate.

I recall that work on the bill began in 2016. When I became the Minister of Canadian Heritage, work had been progressing for some time, and I continued with it.

In the course of our discussions, tours and meetings, we obtained information about the status of the situation. However, the research was done more instinctively than quantitatively. I'm not sure that everyone had much information at the time. That's also when we became aware of the fact that for some indigenous languages, there were perhaps only three living speakers, and they were over 85 years old. We asked ourselves what ought to be done in situations like that.

We were compiling this information somewhat instinctively, but not scientifically. It will be up to the commissioner's office to do this work exhaustively.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I would imagine that without data it's hard to know what the real needs are on the ground and in the communities. If it's impossible to have an exact idea of what's happening, it must be difficult to evaluate requests from the field.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's why we work with the communities, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm aware of that. I also mentioned the collaboration required and the possibility of disseminating the data, because there may well be statistics that the department could produce on this. Even though that's the role of the commissioner's office, it's not up to them to do all the work. Their mandate covers only a portion of the bill. All of the purposes set out in section 5 indicate that some of the responsibility also rests with the Department of Canadian Heritage.

In terms of the appointment of the commissioner and directors, can you tell us which communities and organizations you consulted, since that aspect is also mentioned in the act? Did they comment on the department's recommendations?

Could you send this information to the committee?

Thank you.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I just wanted to briefly point out that when we make decisions—and you are correct in saying that we don't have all the information—we work with our Inuit, Métis and first nations partners throughout the project approval process. We

do not unilaterally approve projects submitted to the department. We work with representative groups.

• (1725)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: It would be centralized, then.

I'd like to clarify that. For example, it would involve the Ralliement national des Métis, Inuit Tapiriit...

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: There are many groups, but I don't know exactly how many. There is one per group.

What was your second question?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I was asking about the appointment of the commissioner and directors, and about comments that had been made.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We had the offer with respect to the appointment of the commissioner and the directors translated into several languages, but I can't remember how many.

[English]

We went broad when we were looking for the commissioner and the directors, and we also translated the offer into nine languages. We went to different communities in their own languages to see if there were interested people.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

Ms. Idlout, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you.

We who are indigenous have rights, but I think our rights are lesser than those of the French and English when it comes to our languages.

You have been a minister for quite a while now. What would you recommend for changes for the indigenous languages and indigenous rights to make them equal with English and French rights?

[Translation]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We can certainly do better in terms of service delivery. The rights associated with indigenous languages are mentioned in section 35 of the Constitution. They are not defined because it's not up to us to define them. That's for you to do, but we are going to work with you to get it done.

Some of the rights of indigenous peoples are clearly related to the indigenous languages. One way of changing things, specifically with respect to the Inuit, would be to offer more services. That, moreover, was one of the requests made by Ms. Aluki Kotierk, with whom I have worked extensively. We have not always agreed, but I have an enormous amount of respect for her because she knows her file and defends it with a great deal of courage. Our discussions were frequently about services.

We are currently trying to assess service delivery requests more accurately. A committee of assistant deputy ministers was struck to establish the government's capacity to provide these services and how to offer more of them.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Under section 35, it appears that indigenous people do not have a lot of rights. We have rights in Nunavut under the Inuit Language Protection Act. We have official languages that include Inuktitut, but not enough people who work for Service Canada or for CanNor speak Inuktitut. Many Inuit, 85% of Inuit in Nunavut, speak Inuktitut only and expect to be served in their language, but federal government employees do not speak Inuktitut when providing the services. Even under that section, it doesn't seem to be making any difference at all to have that right.

Our rights are not being adhered to. With section 35, if you are going to implement it.... How can we change that so that Inuit can be equally served in their indigenous language by your federal employees?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: The situation is not static. You're right to say that what we're providing is inadequate. If we were to say right now that we weren't going to do any more, then I'd agree with you that it's not enough.

As I was saying before, a committee of assistant deputy ministers was created to review what the government is currently doing in terms of services, and what we are capable of doing. The challenge is not related to our willingness to provide services in Inuktitut, but rather that there are currently too few people who have the ability to perform these duties.

It's important to establish the needs with respect to the most important services, our ability to provide these services, and how to strike a balance between them. We need to determine what has to be done in order to have more people within our structures who can provide services in your language.

• (1730)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We'll complete round two, but given the time, there will be three minutes for a Conservative intervention and three minutes for a Liberal intervention.

We will start with Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I got through most of my questions before, but I have one other that I'd like to get to.

I was doing some digging on your website this afternoon, and under the indigenous languages and cultures program, there's a second component. We talked about the indigenous languages component, but there's also the northern aboriginal broadcasting component of that program. In the riding I come from in northern

Saskatchewan, that's a pretty big deal. The radio stations in many of these northern communities are a huge mechanism for them to communicate. In the context of indigenous languages, I think they're also a mechanism for maintaining and enhancing.

I'd be curious to get a bit of information and your perspective on the importance of those, and possibly on how some of those small community radio stations that are frustrated with their ability to exist.... The cost of existing in that context is really, really high. I'm wondering if you might have any advice for them on how to better access the system and on how we could support them—that perspective, if that makes sense.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: That's a great question.

My answer is fundamental. On what the role is, it is fundamental. The problem, Mr. Vidal, that we've seen in the last 15 years is that those small communities—but also big ones—are disappearing. Why? Because the ad revenue is going to two big players, honestly. Google and Facebook are getting 80% of all the advertising, which has had the impact of closing 460 media outlets: small and big radio stations and small and big papers, both local and city. The solution we put in place is a \$50-million program to help local media outlets. There is also the \$6-million program for tax credits on *la main d'oeuvre*—I don't know how to say that—

A voice: Workforce.

The Chair: It's manpower.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Yes, manpower in the newsrooms.

Also, there's another bill coming, you'll be happy to know, Mr. Vidal: Bill C-18. That's coming. That will ask the big techs that are receiving \$8 billion out of \$10 billion to contribute to those small newsrooms.

Mr. Gary Vidal: When you talk about those numbers, though, in fairness, Minister, I don't think those little indigenous language radio stations in small remote communities were generating a whole bunch of ad revenue. They're just trying to survive, probably on grants, and probably, honestly, on fundraising in their own communities.

When you talk about those big numbers, I'm guessing you're using much larger numbers relative to the nationals, but not specifically to this northern aboriginal broadcasting component, these small, northern, indigenous language community radio stations and stuff. I think you're talking about a bigger picture, and I would rather you focus just on these.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: This includes everyone specifically in Bill C-18, because to be excluded, let's say, from the bill and not touched by the bill, the tech giants will need to have deals with a huge bunch of media across the country, including small local radio media, which will have the power to negotiate collectively. They won't be negotiating alone. They will be negotiating with other groups, and it will give more balance in terms of discussion. This will allow them, as has been the case in Australia, for example, to get more money for that.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Chair, I'm probably out of time.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Vidal. Thank you.

We'll conclude with Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question for the minister is in regard to a presentation I heard from the AFN. It was their presentation about languages. They talked about 82 different indigenous language groups across the country. They expect only three languages to survive if we keep doing things the way we're doing them now.

There's been a lot of activity in the last while on indigenous languages, and it's really exciting to see. We've heard a lot of presentations over the last number of meetings we've had. Our witnesses all claim that investment in their language has to be on par with the French and the English.

For the English language, you can go to a nice facility with trained staff, and for French it's the same, but it's not the same when it comes to indigenous languages. In fact, I have an indigenous language speaker and instructor who walks around in the shop with all his material in a shopping cart and parks it in the janitor's room at night. There's no comparison.

My question is, in the government's vision, can we expect investment in the indigenous languages to be on par with investment in the French and English?

• (1735)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: What I want is the investment to increase, which it already did.

Now, if we say to compare it to English and French, I'm not sure what we're talking about in terms of comparisons, because the plan for official languages is around \$500 million, I think—the whole plan. In this case, we're close to \$1 billion for indigenous languages. It depends on what we compare.

What I want—I don't want to get into too much detail on official languages, as my friend who is the minister there can answer—but what I want is more money.... On that thing of saving three of them—no way. There's no way. Since the start, we've invested in I'd say about a thousand projects. That touches 77 languages.

That's 77, and if we can go higher, we'll go higher, but I think the key for us, regardless, is to transfer the decision to indigenous groups—to first nations, to Métis, to Inuit—where they will sit down and make decisions based on their own needs and what's most urgent: what's more strategic to preserve the language, what's more strategic for the youth, and what's more strategic in the long term.

It's their decision, not ours, and, to be honest, the negotiations are going extremely well and we hope to get deals this year, which would pretty much take all the roles away from PCH and give them to them, because that's how it should be.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

We'll have to call it a day there.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Minister, and I would also like to thank you colleague Mr. Pelletier, for having come to answer our questions with respect to our study of indigenous languages, a subject of considerable importance. We are very grateful.

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday at 4:30 p.m.

[*English*]

We will be undertaking committee business next Wednesday.

Thank you very much.

I call this meeting adjourned.

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