



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Official Languages

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 102

Monday, May 27, 2024

Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



Standing Committee on Official Languages

Monday, May 27, 2024

• (1550)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 102 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, April 29, 2024, the committee is commencing consideration of the Annual Report 2023-24 of the Commissioner of Official Languages, submitted to the committee on Tuesday, May 7, 2024.

Before we begin, I ask all participants to review the card on the table before them. It provides instructions on how to avoid causing acoustic incidents in order to protect our interpreters' ears.

Today we have the Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Thériège, who is accompanied by Mr. Leduc, assistant commissioner, who is responsible for strategic orientation and external relations branch; and Mr. Wolfe, assistant commissioner, who is responsible for the compliance and enforcement branch.

This is your first appearance before our committee. Welcome.

We are starting the committee a bit late as a result of the voting.

Commissioner, I believe you have to leave us around 5:45 p.m. Is that correct?

Mr. Raymond Thériège (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): I have to appear before the Senate at six o'clock.

The Chair: A vote is also scheduled. So—

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): The senators can wait.

The Chair: That's it: The senators can wait. That's obviously a joke.

We will begin.

Commissioner, you have prepared an interesting report. Under the new version of the Official Languages Act, your annual reports are now required to provide certain details.

You have five minutes for your remarks. I'm usually very strict with speaking time, but I'll be more flexible with you. Then I'll be very strict during the period of questions from members because we have a lot of questions for you.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Raymond Thériège: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the committee, hello.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge that the lands on which we are gathered are part of the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people, an indigenous people of the Ottawa Valley.

I'm pleased to be with you today to present my 2023–2024 annual report.

Since the modernization of the Official Languages Act last June, my team has been laying the foundations for exercising my new powers. We're now ready for action according to the timeline I unveiled when I tabled my annual report.

We therefore plan to start gradually phasing in the use of these new tools with the funding we've been granted in the 2024 budget.

[English]

It's hard to say, at this point, whether this amount will be enough, though, because we don't yet have all the details on the new Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act or on my new power to impose administrative monetary penalties. We'll know more once they come into force, after an order in council is issued by the Governor in Council and regulations are adopted.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Pardon me for interrupting the Commissioner's testimony, but the interpretation isn't working.

The Chair: All right.

It appears that the problem is now solved.

I apologize, Commissioner. You may continue.

[English]

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That said, let me be clear: My team and I are fully prepared to ensure greater respect for the public's language rights. As you probably noticed in my annual report, the 847 admissible complaints filed with my office in 2023-24 are a bit of a contrast to the very high volumes of complaints we've become accustomed to in recent years. Is this a trend that will continue over time? Unfortunately, I don't have a crystal ball to help me answer these questions with any certainty. Only time will tell.

• (1555)

[Translation]

One thing is certain, though: This decrease doesn't mean that we need to take our foot off the gas. Au contraire! We need to keep up the momentum and build on the progress we've made to effect concrete, lasting changes in order to secure the future of both of our official languages across the country. I'm counting on all federal institutions to step up their efforts to meet their language obligations, including the new ones in the modernized act.

Despite the fact that regulations have yet to be made, federal institutions still have new obligations that they're required to meet right now, including those under part VII of the act, which deals with advancing the equality of status and use of English and French.

[English]

In my annual report, I recommend that by May 31, 2025, all deputy ministers and deputy heads in the federal public service incorporate into their strategic plan a plan for ensuring full implementation of part VII of the act that draws from the road map I recently published to support federal institutions.

Among the changes introduced in the modernized act is the requirement to review the act every 10 years to ensure it remains in step with Canadian society as it evolves. However, in order for this to happen, indicators need to be developed as quickly as possible to monitor the application of the act, track any changes in the issues at stake and propose solutions in a timely fashion.

[Translation]

In my annual report, I therefore recommend that by June 2026, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, with the support of the President of the Treasury Board, develop and publish indicators for reviewing the provisions and operation of the act in preparation for the 10-year review in 2033.

As you'll have noticed, this year I'm reporting on a period of change and transition in the world of official languages.

Although we still have a lot of work to do to ensure better respect for the language rights of the public and of federal public servants, I think that it's achievable.

[English]

We need to ensure that the act is fully implemented and we need to make concrete, lasting changes to improve the state of our official languages, both in the federal public service and in Canadian society as a whole.

Thank you for your attention. I'm now ready to answer your questions, which you're welcome to ask in the official language of your choice.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

In the first round of questions, each of the parties will have six minutes. We will begin with the Conservatives.

St  phanie Kusie, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

It's always a pleasure to see you, Commissioner. The purpose of this committee is to preserve the French language. I think that's very important for us and for the witnesses here before the committee, which is why my first question is a bit sensitive.

Would you please give me your opinion of the way one member of this committee, Mr. Drouin, treated a witness who was here solely to defend the French language and Quebec?

Do you think Mr. Drouin acted acceptably with that witness in this committee?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I don't really feel it's the Commissioner's role to express an opinion on the conduct of a committee member, although it's important to work in a respectful manner.

Both witnesses were researchers who were presenting their evidence, their tables. It's up to committee members to interpret them. One table alone doesn't represent an entire reality; it's just one piece of the puzzle. So I think it's important, when you receive that information, to absorb it and incorporate it in your thinking so you can form a clearer understanding of the situation.

As I said earlier, one table doesn't paint the entire picture. Many factors and variables have an impact on the use, usage and status of a language.

• (1600)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

So you think it's really important to respect all witnesses.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think we should always work with one another in a respectful manner. I'm going to limit my remarks to the fact that this is how I want to work and how I think you want to work.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Do you think that a person who was unable to respect a witness who was here to defend the French language in Quebec and Canada deserves to sit on this committee?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think that's a question for the committee, not the Commissioner.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Then, given the purpose of this committee, which is to promote the French language, I imagine you agree that it's really important for us to work respectfully together for both the language and the individuals who are here to defend it.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Of course.

With regard to the committee's role, we're here to discuss the French language, but also both official languages. We're here to discuss both official language minority communities.

You hear from many witnesses who have a range of opinions and expertise on the matter. As I said a moment ago, it's up to committee members to absorb that information and draw the necessary conclusions.

The language issue is clearly important to us. As I said earlier, I personally want to work in a spirit of respect and collaboration.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

I can't imagine saying the words that member directed at someone who was here for the same purpose as I am, and as all the members of this committee are, which is to promote the French language.

Commissioner, I'm going to continue with a question regarding your report.

In it, you discuss the shared responsibilities between Treasury Board and the Department of Canadian Heritage. This is important to me because I'm the shadow minister for Treasury Board.

You said it was important once again to clarify the roles of the two ministers. What do you think causes the confusion over this sharing of powers?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: When we discuss the governance of the act, by which I mean its application or implementation, the important thing is to clarify who is concerned with which part of the act.

Generally speaking, the President of the Treasury Board handles the governance of the act. In part VII, we're talking about a collaboration with the Department of Canadian Heritage. Consequently, what's actually important to consider is what the word "share" means, to determine who does what.

For example, the Department of Canadian Heritage has extensive experience with the official language minority communities, having worked with those communities for many years—

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Treasury Board has expertise in developing directives. It's therefore important to draft those directives in concrete terms so the duties of each department are clear.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

The next questions will be asked by Darrell Samson from the Liberal Party of Canada.

Go ahead for six minutes, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Many thanks to the Commissioner and his team for being here with us today.

We had some good times together during consideration of Bill C-13, and we thank you for your contribution.

It's interesting that you discuss evaluation many times in your report. As a former educator, I'm really interested in that because evaluation lets you know whether you're on the right track so you can make the necessary adjustments to meet the demand.

So you've made a two-part recommendation. What do you think we should do to develop responses quickly? What tools would be necessary?

• (1605)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Thank you very much.

Actually, when we talk about a periodic review of the act in 2033, people think that's way into the future. However, it's already 2024, and the act was assented to in 2023. We've already lost a year.

It's important to measure the impact of the act on the communities first and then on the federal government. We also need to determine which elements of the act are working and which aren't.

We may not have the necessary expertise in my office to determine types of indicators, but I will nevertheless cite a few examples. We can have data on various elements, such as demographics, rights holders, the various community elements, compliance and the parts of the act that we most often use.

It's extremely important to compile that data so that, in 2032—and I don't know who'll be sitting around the table then—the members of this committee can consult a bank of data gathered over a 10-year period for them to consider.

I say that because one thing is clear: The communities will change. Major changes will take place in Canadian society over the next decade. We must therefore ensure that the act can always meet society's needs. That's why we made that recommendation. We want the Department of Canadian Heritage to look into this matter as soon as possible.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

I agree with you. The last time, we waited 36 years before reviewing the act. Progress has been made, and we can point to certain elements, but it would probably have been preferable to make adjustments as we went along. However, you need to conduct an in-depth analysis first so you can make adjustments.

You said that 10 years just fly by, and you've already been Commissioner for nearly seven years. You now have new powers that you haven't yet had a chance to use, powers that I hope you'll use soon. As you know, time passes very quickly.

Would you please tell us briefly about those new powers? Have you worked with the three categories: compliance, orders and penalties? If so, how is that going?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We announced a deployment plan during the press conference for the release of the annual report and have restructured my office in the past nine months to reflect these new powers. We've brought in expertise but are still waiting for the resources we need to move forward. We'll also be launching a new investigation process this coming July.

This new investigation process should be viewed as a highway. When someone files a complaint now, we rule it admissible, conduct an investigation and prepare a report. In future, when someone files a complaint, this new highway will let us make use of a variety of on-ramps and exits. We'll be able to go to mediation, which will be introduced in July. We'll also be able to enter into compliance agreements, which will also be established in July or August. Later on, we'll be able to issue orders depending on the situation. We propose to implement that in the fall. To carry out these processes, we need to develop internal tools, provide training and develop expertise. We'll have to take it seriously because we'll be dealing with new powers.

Our organization has become quite legalistic, by which I mean that people can challenge our decisions much more frequently than in the past, but our new compliance mechanisms are far more robust than our former recommendation powers. However, there are some powers that we can't implement, either because we have no regulations or because the act hasn't yet been passed.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you for those details.

That will lead to far more transparency, which will let us know what's going on in government, what's working and what isn't.

However, I noticed that this year's report doesn't include a list of offenders, which would provide some transparency. I really like transparency.

So you decided not to publish the list. Can you name the two worst offenders? It would be interesting to know who they are.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: There are a lot of them.

Although there were fewer complaints this year, the percentage was the same. There were a lot of complaints from the travelling public. So I'm talking about Air Canada. Complaints were also filed against the Canada Border Security Agency, Employment and Social Development Canada, Global Affairs Canada, and I forget the fifth one.

• (1610)

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'll stop you there because—

The Chair: You have five seconds left, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: All right. Let's take Air Canada, for example. What power do you think will let you lean on it harder?

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Samson, but you'll have to wait for the answer.

The next questions will be asked by the second vice-chair, Mr. Beaulieu, from the Bloc Qu  b  cois.

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

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'  le, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses as well for being here. It's always a pleasure to see you.

We've discussed at length the funding of post-secondary institutions and so on. Do you think that fair funding for francophone post-secondary institutions outside Quebec is an important factor in enhancing the francophone minorities' linguistic vitality?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's actually mentioned in the act because part VII refers to the education continuum, and post-secondary education is an important part of that continuum. Having lived in Moncton and Saint-Boniface, I know from experience that the role post-secondary institutions play in the development of communities is important. They need to be funded in a manner commensurate with their needs.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's essentially what Fr  d  ric Lacroix and Nicolas Bourdon said.

If that's important for francophone communities outside Quebec, don't you think it's important for Quebec francophones to have adequately funded institutions too?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think all post-secondary educational institutions should be properly funded. Are you referring to public or partially public institutions? That depends on the funding that governments provide.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: For example, do you think it's offensive to say that attendance at an anglophone university or CEGEP in Montreal increases the likelihood of working in English and thus has an anglicizing effect?

Why do people like Mr. Drouin consider an observation like that offensive?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I said earlier in my answer to the first question, presenting certain information, data and tables may help explain a trend, but is that the only factor? I don't think so.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We don't either.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I didn't attend that meeting, I don't know what was said.

What's important is to realize that it's extremely important, especially for minority francophones, to have access to an education system in their language, from early childhood to the post-secondary level, in order to offset the effects of the very anglophone community in which they live.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: All right.

For example, in a recent report, the Office québécois de la langue française stated that there had been a decline in the use of French, particularly among young people in Gatineau and Montreal. Minister Jean-François Roberge said that one of the factors contributing to the phenomenon was the overfunding of anglophone universities and the thousands of unilingual English-speaking young people who come and work in Montreal, for example. That apparently has an anglicizing effect on workplaces in the city of Montreal.

Would you like to comment on that subject?

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: Certainly—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I know that...

In any case, I'll let you speak.

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: I read the report of the Office québécois de la langue française on the situation in Montreal and Gatineau. Can that situation be explained as a result of a single factor? No, especially when it comes to young people.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Oh!

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: Young people live in a completely different, almost virtual world. Their eyes are constantly glued to their telephones and they're subject to many influences.

What role does post-secondary education play in this phenomenon? As I said earlier, we have to determine what variable, among all those that are involved, we can address.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see.

In that same report, the Office also stated that it had found that the federal government, in many instances, is the hardest place for Quebecers to work in French.

Would you like to comment on that?

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: It's an interesting question, to which I don't really have an answer.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's the prevailing situation in Quebec. You can imagine what happens outside Quebec. It must be very hard to work in French. You more or less agreed when you said that language requirements should be raised.

• (1615)

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: Those requirements should absolutely be raised. The number of complaints regarding language of work didn't decline this past year. In fact, we saw an increase in those kinds of complaints. The language-of-work issue is always a problem in the federal government.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In the wake of the incident involving Mr. Drouin, the Liberals insisted that they were the first to acknowledge the decline of French in Quebec and that they wanted to protect French in that province.

Do you know whether the Official Languages Act provides any new measures to protect French in Quebec?

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: Currently—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm not specifically referring to federally regulated businesses, but, under part VII of the Official Languages Act—

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: In part VII of the Official Languages Act, the government has committed to protecting and promoting French across the country, including outside Canada. However, I haven't seen any specific programs designed to meet that obligation.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you. We'll come back to that.

The Chair: We now come to the final six-minute round of questions, and Ms. Ashton, from the New Democratic Party, has the floor.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Good afternoon. I hope you can hear me.

The Chair: Loud and clear, Ms. Ashton.

Go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Thanks as well to the Commissioner, who is with us today.

My first question concerns part VII of the Official Languages Act. Part VII must apply to all federal institutions, and that involves the responsibilities of the Minister of Canadian Heritage under the act.

It is clear from your report that the government must take part VII of the act seriously. In that report, however, you state the following:

... full compliance with language rights and obligations is still a long way off in many respects. The complaints my office has received over the years and the investigations it has conducted attest to the fact that a number of federal institutions do not take their language obligations seriously.

What specific and strict measures do you recommend that the government finally take to remedy the non-compliance with language rights in federal institutions?

Mr. Raymond Thérberge: I will speak specifically to part VII, to which you refer and which very much concerns official language minority communities. We discuss this at length in our report.

Last week, I met all the deputy ministers in government to discuss the importance of part VII of the act and its implementation. Among other things, part VII states that the government has a duty to provide positive measures to support development of the communities, to consult those communities and to avoid introducing programs that may have a negative impact on the communities. What's important now is to make effective regulations for the implementation of part VII.

In the meantime, we have developed a road map specifically to assist the federal institutions in more effectively meeting their obligations under part VII of the act. The road map can help them make appropriate decisions to take positive measures to support the communities. We previously observed that the vast majority of federal institutions didn't understand their obligations under part VII. They felt that those obligations didn't concern them since they weren't working with official language minority communities.

In a way, however, everything we do has an impact on those communities. It is therefore extremely important that federal institutions be made aware of their obligations. That's why I met with all the deputy ministers. We have established a road map, which is now available. We also ask them to include a plan to implement part VII of the act in their strategic plans. It's this part that will have the most significant impact on the development of our communities.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I see. Thank you very much.

I'd like to go back to the point that you addressed in your report and that concerns the work that the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage is currently doing. In your report, you discuss how important court challenges are in guaranteeing language rights. We're currently discussing Bill C-316 in the Heritage committee, on which I also sit.

Would you please tell us how court challenges have helped to secure the rights of Canada's francophones? Would you recommend that we pass this bill as soon as possible?

• (1620)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The case law that has been established over the past 30 years has provided considerable support for the development of the communities. I'm thinking here of section 23 of the charter. Without the Supreme Court's judgment in the Mahe affair, we wouldn't have the school systems that we now have. The same is true of the Beaulac decision, without which we wouldn't have the interpretation that we now enjoy. In many cases, those actions were funded by the court challenges program, at least in part.

Obviously, we very often rely on the courts to decide issues that, for one reason or another, can't be decided by other authorities. In many instances, the courts are extremely important allies for minority communities. That's not the case of the majority. The ability to clarify rights and obligations makes progress possible. When the charter, and its section 23, came into force in 1982, there were no francophone schools in Canada, except in Quebec, obviously. Now there are nearly 150,000 students in a school system that is managed by and for francophones outside Quebec. That's extraordinary progress indeed.

In my province of Manitoba, a reference was made to the Supreme Court in 1985 to determine what Manitoban statutes had to be translated. Once again, it was the Supreme Court that decided the matter. As a result, we in Manitoba now have a right to justice in French. The court challenges program is extremely important for minorities because, in many instances, it's individuals who appear before the courts. I doubt they would get very far without its resources. The court challenges program has always played an extremely important role in the evolution and interpretation of language rights in Canada.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll ask my question in the next round. I hope there is one.

Thank you very much, Commissioner.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. There will definitely be a second round of questions.

Mr. Dalton, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you for being with us, Commissioner. Thanks as well to you and your office for your efforts in defending official language minority communities.

According to your report, the federal government is experiencing declining commitment and a lack of will regarding official languages. Would you please tell us more about that flagging commitment?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Here's an example regarding language of work.

There's a significant connection between language of work and language of service. If the federal government is unable to work in both official languages, how can it provide service and communicate in both official languages?

Some years ago, we published a report on the impact of emergencies on official languages. I think it's quite a revealing example. Our study focused on a period of 10 years or so.

The response I always get is that it's an emergency. That's true, but we've been calling for it for 10 years. There's an expression that I particularly like: "emergency preparedness". You have to be prepared for emergencies. If an incident occurs and we aren't prepared, can we be prepared 10 years later? I think so, but we have to build that capacity within government. This is an example of declining commitment. We're very familiar with the situation, but we don't take the necessary corrective measures.

In a way, it's like what's happening with language of work. All too often, when presentations are made to staff as a whole, a slide is put up in English and French, but then everything's done in English. That's one example.

There has to be a renewal. I talked about commitment earlier; this has to start with senior management. Ministers, for example, also have to play a leadership role.

We have a new act, but it doesn't solve all the problems. We need the support of stakeholders to restore the official languages to their rightful place in the federal government.

• (1625)

Mr. Marc Dalton: You also say in your report that the Official Languages Act will definitely have to be reviewed sooner than anticipated. Would a mandatory review every 5 years, as the Conservatives propose, rather than every 10 years help adjust the Official Languages Act more effectively to trends on the ground?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's an interesting question.

We have to let a certain amount of time pass if we want to know what effect an act is having. A year has already gone by. I think it takes more than five or six years to measure that effect; it may take 10. We have to determine the impact on society. You don't make changes with a snap of your fingers. The federal government doesn't move that fast either. I think it's important to be realistic if we want to be able to measure that impact. It takes time, but what's important is to ensure that, during that time, the necessary tools are in place so we can gather the information we need for analysis.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Do you think this trend toward disengaging increases the need for bilingual senior officials in the federal institutions?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I've often said, this starts with leadership that is committed to official languages. It also starts at the highest levels. Under the new act, if new deputy ministers are appointed but aren't bilingual, they must become bilingual. As we've previously said, official languages will truly find their place within the federal government when anglophone senior officials work in French.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Who do you think is responsible for ensuring that federal institutions take positive measures in accordance with part VII of the act?

The Chair: Mr. Dalton, I agree that's an excellent question, but your time is up.

Perhaps you can answer it later, Commissioner.

For the moment, I give Ms. Koutrakis the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the commissioner and his colleagues for being here today.

I chose to speak English today because I come from the beautiful province of Quebec. I guess I'm considered a member of the anglophone community of Quebec. My parents immigrated from Greece in 1957, and I came into the world a few years afterwards. When it was my turn to be registered in school, my mother—bless her soul—had the good foresight to say she wanted her daughter to go to a French school, because she wanted me to be able to compete and be educated with everybody else, realizing that in Quebec, francophones are the majority.

When she tried to register me in school at the time, we were not allowed. It was because I wasn't francophone and I wasn't Catholic. In those days, the school boards were based both on linguistics and religion. I was reading your annual report for 2023-24 while looking back at my own experience, and right now I feel that at times my Achilles' heel is my inability to speak French the way I would like to speak French. I feel comfortable in French, I work in French and I love the language. However, I learned it by working at McDonald's as a student; I learned it by working with my father and helping in his business later on; and, more importantly, I learned it when I was doing *dict  es* with my children when I chose to send them to French schools.

The only way I could have been educated in French at the time was if my parents had had the means to send me to a private school, which they did not.

In your report, you say, "My office will continue to reach out to Canadians—particularly those in official language minority communities—to inform them of their rights, but we'll scale back our activities in schools."

Given that schools are an integral and central part of official language minority communities and that it is mainly in schools that young people learn a second official language, why would you scale back your activities in schools? I would hate to see young people today in a position where they cannot learn both official languages. Why did you scale back?

• (1630)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I'm going to clarify that statement.

First, it has to do with our new mandate in the area of promotion. We have to promote compliance now. It has nothing to do with whether or not we support French-language schools, FSL schools or immersion schools. That's not the point. This has to do with the new legislation, which requires us to report on different.... Our mandate for promotion is different. We have to promote compliance with federal institutions in communities.

We do a lot of work in the area of first- and second-language education. We've done a lot of studies in that area. We will continue to do research. We follow all of the various situations in all the provinces, whether it's French as a first language, French as a second language, English as a first language in Quebec, etc. We monitor all the situations. This has to do with our mandate in the new act to promote compliance.

We used to go into the schools not to promote but to explain the Official Languages Act. However, we have developed partnerships with new organizations like CPF to do that for us, and they have a much better network than we do for dealing with schools.

The work will still be done, but it will be done by another organization in terms of promoting official languages, minority language education and that kind of thing. This is still part of what we do.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Is your commission tracking how well the partnerships you've set up together are doing in that regard? Is someone tracking them to make sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing?

Also, do you feel that you have enough resources right now? Do you have the help you need from the federal government to make sure you achieve your goal?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The short answer is no.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: How could we do better?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We were provided new resources in the budget with respect to those parts of the legislation that have already been enacted, but moving forward, we'll talk about monetary administrative penalties and the new use of French in businesses act. That's not part of the mix.

My colleague here is very much into promotion. He always tells me he doesn't have any money, so if you listen to him, I think you'll hear that we need more money.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Ms. Koutrakis.

[English]

Thanks.

These are very interesting questions.

[Translation]

We will now go to a two-and-a-half-minute round, starting with the committee's second vice-chair.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Were the 847 complaints that you received essentially related to a lack of service in French?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Yes, the situation hasn't changed.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's almost always the reason for these complaints.

You say that many federal institutions don't take their language obligations seriously. Would you please give us some examples? I guess it's Air Canada and the RCMP, isn't it?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Let's say that the top offenders in that department every year are often federal institutions that have a lot of contact with the public. For example, we don't get a lot of complaints from the public concerning the Department of Finance, but—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It seems that a lot of complaints concern the Canada Border Services Agency.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Yes, there are actually a lot.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: How do you explain the fact that the situation doesn't change? It seems to me the government should have some influence over the public service. If there was a political will, it could issue instructions and change the situation.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It's very often a matter of resources, of needs.

Take, for example, the Canada Border Services Agency, which has 1,200 service points across the country. Its resource needs are extraordinary. It's always a challenge to improve bilingualism proficiency in all organizations.

In concrete terms, we need to ensure that federal institutions have the resources to provide language training, for example, so that every employee has an opportunity to take a good training program and become bilingual.

• (1635)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Where positions are supposed to require knowledge of French, should we keep hiring people who have no knowledge of French but who commit to learning the language? Shouldn't we require that they know and can demonstrate that they know it before they even get the position?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: In principle, when a position is classified bilingual, the candidate must meet requirements, but non-imperative staffing is always a possibility, and we get a lot of complaints on that score.

Since our recommendation is always based on the job description, we always request that the position be filled by a bilingual candidate.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to discuss immigration.

You stated in the road map for federal institutions' obligations that you presented that a francophone immigration policy "must therefore be supported by in-depth analyses and include targets that, if achieved, will enhance the vitality of French linguistic minority communities".

At the same time, many university representatives who have appeared before this committee have told us that a francophone immigration policy wasn't compatible with the ceiling that the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, or IRCC, has announced for international students. Francophone universities are requesting a specific exemption from that policy.

How can we help francophone universities that claim francophone immigration will suffer as a result of IRCC's decision?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think we should take a holistic approach to our immigration policy because there are many aspects to it. There are economic immigration, temporary workers, refugees and, of course, international students.

In minority francophone post-secondary education, foreign students very often represent additional funding for post-secondary educational institutions. Without foreign students, there would be a major shortfall in funding for those institutions.

There is also a significant connection between foreign students and the way they subsequently integrate within the community. Consequently, this has to be viewed as a kind of trajectory: someone arrives as a student, then becomes a citizen and so on.

Earlier Mr. Beaulieu asked a question about funding for post-secondary educational institutions. For 20 years now, francophone post-secondary educational institutions have been underfunded, and federal institutions have been told they can top up their funding by accepting more international students. If that funding is suddenly cut—it's been done and it was a draconian decision—it has an immediate impact on funding for those institutions.

When it comes to francophone immigration policy, I think we have to consider all the various possible pathways that can contribute to francophone immigration, including foreign students.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Mr. Godin, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, Commissioner. It's always a pleasure to see you and inspiring to hear you. One could say you represent this institution, and you are a true leader.

Earlier you said that success requires committed leadership. What do you think of the attitude of a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages who treats witnesses the way Mr. Drouin did on May 6?

What is your definition of “committed leadership”?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: In the federal public service, we have the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector. It refers to diversity, reconciliation, official languages and certain key values. Consequently, exercising leadership in the federal public service means complying with that code. It's also important not to favour certain parts of the code. It's a whole, and you can't simply tick the boxes for official languages, diversity and so on. First, it's a thought process; these are the values that we convey through our comments and remarks as public service leaders.

Second, we are committed to the extent that what happens in our institution is important to us, just as we are concerned about how it affects Canadians.

• (1640)

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Commissioner.

If my understanding is correct, on May 6, our colleague on the Standing Committee on Official Languages wasn't very inclusive or willing to consider all the information that was available and expressed by the witnesses.

Is my understanding correct?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: I'm referring to the public service, and I don't think your colleague is part of it.

Mr. Joël Godin: However, you're talking about ethics and values, and I think they apply to us as well as members of Parliament, but that's fine.

Commissioner, I'd like to get another piece of information from you. You are granted new powers under Bill C-13. You said that you didn't have a crystal ball, that we unfortunately had lost a year

and that you didn't even know when the government would issue its order to provide you with the necessary tools.

You also mentioned federally regulated businesses. That's another order that will apply to those businesses in Quebec, once it has been made and approved two years after the fact.

Don't you think it's taking a lot of time?

Doesn't this government's attitude reveal a lack of will?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: We realize that it's taking its time developing regulations. The situation is urgent, in my view. It should be proceeding as quickly as possible. Last year, they were talking about a three-year timeline. Now they're talking about an 18-month timeline. When will it be done? We need tools in order to do our job. We have some tools now, but not the ones we need to exercise our new powers, in particular to impose administrative monetary penalties on federally regulated businesses.

Consequently, despite all its good intentions, the clock is ticking. 2025 is fast approaching and we don't want to miss—

Mr. Joël Godin: We don't want to miss the boat. We need to act now. We all agree that French is in an exponentially accelerating decline.

You said in response to a question that you had prepared a road map for federal institutions. Is that your role or that of the Office of the President of the Treasury Board or the Department of Canadian Heritage? There's some confusion.

I believe you have all the good will in the world, Commissioner, but it isn't your role. I think it's the role of the Office of the President of the Treasury Board. There unfortunately seem to be some confusing grey areas between the two departments.

Do you think that's normal?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: I believe this road map was developed because something was missing. The idea was to provide federal institutions with guidance as soon as possible while awaiting the part VII regulations. I think our role is to be proactive. When I work with federal institutions, I often say that it's like being a supply teacher. That's not why we're there, but all too often we have to take action in the meantime. I can't just wait without doing something.

Mr. Joël Godin: I agree with you, Commissioner. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Godin. You've gone well past your speaking time.

Mr. Serré, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being here today. Thank you also for the work you do on an everyday basis.

You said earlier that all the regulations would likely be adopted within 18 months.

I'd like you to explain to the committee members and to Canadians what additional powers you now have since the adoption of Bill C-13.

Some of your new powers, such as monetary penalties, have not yet come into force, but others have. Can you tell us about that?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: As I mentioned earlier when I was speaking about the new investigative process, which I compared to a highway, I now have the power to publish an investigation summary following its conclusion.

I have the power to sign compliance agreements with federal institutions. In practice, a compliance agreement is a contract. I also have the power to issue orders to require the fulfilment of compliance agreements or recommendations.

There are also now more grounds available to me to refuse to investigate certain complaints, such as those deemed to be trivial.

I can also use alternative dispute resolution methods. We opted for mediation, which we will begin using over the next few months.

So those are new tools now available to me. I believe they are helpful, because they provide the commissioner's office with more teeth than before. However, the more rapidly additional tools can make their way into my tool box, the better it will be. Enormous challenges remain in certain areas, such as those faced by the travelling public in the transportation sector. And monetary penalties will be applicable to that sector.

Within four to six months, most of the new powers granted to me will be in force, but there are limitations.

• (1645)

Mr. Marc Serr  : Thank you very much.

You also spoke earlier about a shortcoming with respect to indicators for official language minority communities in terms of assessing the effectiveness and implementation of the act in 10 years.

Do you have any recommendations for the committee about the indicators required to ensure that we have useful data within 10 years?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I think it has to be based on part VII of the Official Languages Act.

Part VII identifies important factors. One such factor is the education continuum. We know that the quality of an educational system is a contributing factor to linguistic vitality. It's also affected by immigration policy, which has a demographic and linguistic impact. Then there's the matter of the number of eligible children.

So some important factors are mentioned in part VII, and they should be the basis for reviewing the impact of part VII on official language minority communities. This would determine whether the positive measures introduced have had an impact on the development of these communities, as required under the act.

Mr. Marc Serr  : You said that it was preferable for the periodic review of the act's provisions and application to be every 10 years, and that a five-year period would not be long enough.

You also said you had recommended that indicators should be developed to ensure that the periodic review is done properly. Based on your own experience or on what you've heard from researchers, what should these indicators be?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: These indicators include the state of the early childhood to post-secondary education system, the demographic evolution of communities, the impact of immigration on these communities, the impact of federal institutions on the communities, the place of culture in the communities, and the extent to which support is provided for the cultural industry in our communities.

It would be easy for us to set up a group of researchers who could quickly put together a whole list of indicators. The important thing is to develop lists that include key indicators—not hundreds of indicators. Part VII of the act lists a number of indicators.

Mr. Marc Serr  : In response to a question from Ms. Ashton, you mentioned the importance of the court challenges program, which Bill C-316 would maintain. Based on the challenges that were raised throughout Ontario, it became clear that this program was important in education, just as the Montfort Hospital case demonstrated that it was important in health, and also in justice, as shown in Manitoba.

The Conservatives previously cut this program twice. And recently, the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage welcomed a witness who had been Mr. Harper's chief of staff, who once again recommended cutting this program.

What impact would cancelling this program for a third time have on our official language minority communities?

• (1650)

The Chair: We've gone well beyond the allotted time. That's why, in the next round of questions, I'm going to give the Bloc Qu  b  cois and the NDP an additional 30 seconds each.

Thank you for the question. The Commissioner will be able to answer it later as we continue the discussion.

We're beginning another round of five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, you deserve a lot of credit for having taken the initiative to provide a road map. However, I believe it's now up to Treasury Board to do its work and require that each of the institutions that makes use of this road map to achieve results. I think we've reached the point at which the government needs to be forced to take the steps required to achieve the desired results.

How do we sort things out now? In your recommendation 1, you tell the Minister of Canadian Heritage, with the support of the President of the Treasury Board, to develop and publish indicators by 2026.

So there are two heads, in addition to the Minister of Official Languages, because the Minister of Canadian Heritage is supposedly not linked to the Official Languages Act. She delegated her powers. You then recommend to the latter, who has delegated her powers to the Minister of Official Languages, to work together with the President of the Treasury Board.

Doesn't that look a bit like the tower of Babel?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I don't know whether it looks like the tower of Babel, but there are always different parties involved in governance.

The new Official Languages Act assigns Treasury Board a much larger role than it had in the past. What's different pertains to part VII of the act because, as I said earlier, of the Canadian Heritage and Official Languages departments' experience with the communities.

When I say "in collaboration", the implication is that someone is responsible.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Who might that be?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: My view is that it's Treasury Board.

In the new Official Languages Act, much is made about the importance of the Treasury Board's governance and role. It's a central agency, whereas the Department of Canadian Heritage is not. This department still has a role to play then, because of its relationships and experience with communities. However, clear directives are required, and these, I believe, must come from Treasury Board.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: I fully share your opinion on that. The Department of Canadian Heritage can contribute to the exercise, of course, but a conductor is needed to orchestrate the entire act, and it should be Treasury Board. Because the Liberals did not agree with the amendment introduced to this effect, power has once again been divided. It was their decision.

I'm going to ask you a question that I've asked you before.

When discussing the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Department of Canadian Heritage, should the Minister of Canadian Heritage appear before the Official Languages Committee?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It depends on the subject being discussed.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Do you think the Standing Committee on Official Languages might deal with matters of some interest to the Minister of Canadian Heritage?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I believe that the committee is free to invite—

Mr. Jo  l Godin: I'm not talking about what the committee can do, Commissioner.

My question is: Should the Minister of Canadian Heritage appear before the committee to answer questions about official languages and the Official Languages Act?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: Some portions of the act affect the minister's mandate, including CBC/Radio-Canada.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: That's the way I see it too, Commissioner, but I don't think the minister understands it.

Earlier, Commissioner, you said that a review of the Official Languages Act every five years was too soon. You thought that a review every 10 years would be ideal.

What I was saying when we were trying to convince members to agree to our amendment about the five-year review...

Everyone knows that it's difficult for an ocean liner to change direction. If we say that the review is to be held every five years, then it will probably happen after seven or eight years, and if we say there will be a review every 10 years, it will end up being after 12 or 13 years. On the one hand, you're saying that the decline in French requires urgent action, but then you're saying that five years is too soon.

Could you provide some clarification?

• (1655)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: An interim report could certainly be considered, in which the current state of affairs could be described along with the information required to continue with the work.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Commissioner.

Mr. Iacono, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the commissioner for coming.

Commissioner, in your 2023–2024 annual report, you say that "TBS is working on a new version of the accountability and reporting framework".

Can you tell us more about your recommendations with respect to this framework and how they would help to improve accountability, particularly the accountability of federal institutions with respect to official languages?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We were indeed consulted, as were many others, on the accountability framework. We don't think that this framework is restrictive enough. I believe federal institutions are still being given too much latitude in determining how they are going to implement the act. I think that we still need to do more to make the framework more restrictive.

I get the impression that the Treasury Board Secretariat often wants to give federal institutions latitude so that they can interpret how best to proceed in their own fashion with implementation. However, we think that the Treasury Board's mandate or role is much more prescriptive, and that it needs to clearly state what has to be done.

I believe that the minister is supposed to be returning to the committee to table an accountability framework.

Mr. Pierre Leduc (Assistant Commissioner, Strategic Orientation and External Relations Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Yes, it's supposed to be published soon.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That will provide us with the definitive version.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: You said that it should be more restrictive. Could you give us some examples?

You've said that there are shortcomings and that we're not doing enough. How can we improve things? The best way to explain what you've just said would be to give us a few examples of what hasn't been done and how we can do things differently.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: I'll return to part VII. More information is needed on positive measures, such as how to choose and implement them. The communities also need to be consulted when developing these positive measures.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Mr. Th  berge, you're saying that the communities need to be consulted. Can you give us an example of what's being done now and how it could be done better?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: A concrete mechanism is required. For example, the act refers to the disposal of property. When property becomes available, it's extremely important to consult the communities in order to determine whether it would be useful to them. Communities are often looking for land to build schools. In cities like Vancouver and Toronto, the cost of land is exorbitant. So before disposing of anything, the communities should be consulted.

In many instances, this was not done.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: You said that you had been consulted; so you had an opportunity to make recommendations on this.

Were your recommendations implemented? Can you tell us more about that?

Do you think this consultation accomplished anything?

• (1700)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We were consulted, but it didn't necessarily lead to the desired outcomes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Can you give us some examples, Commissioner?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: We'll send you our response in writing.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

The next questions will be from the Bloc Qu  b  cois and the NDP. I'll give you three minutes each, because I inadvertently allowed more time to two of your colleagues.

Go ahead Mr. Beaulieu, for three minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'd like to talk about the new act that will apply to federally regulated companies in Quebec.

To your knowledge, are there any businesses that will be exempt from the application of the Charter of the French Language?

If you receive complaints about federally regulated companies that are not subject to the Charter of the French Language, do you have ways of taking action?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: For now, we honestly don't know how it would work. There is no decree or regulation, and several aspects are not defined, such as what constitutes a region with a strong francophone presence. We don't know what our relationship with the Office qu  b  cois de la langue fran  aise or the labour relations organization would look like, for example. There's a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty at the moment.

So we're waiting. We know that work is being done on the regulation and that it's moving more quickly than before, but there are so many unknowns. It's therefore hard—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Is there work in progress? Do you have a schedule?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It's not our schedule, but rather the government's schedule.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see. So you don't know.

On another topic, the commissaire    la langue fran  aise du Qu  bec prepared a report which said that the number of people who did not speak French in Quebec had increased by approximately 50% since 2011, mainly because of temporary immigration. It reported that between 2016 and 2023, the numbers had increased from 86,000 to 528,000 temporary immigrants. It estimated the cost of teaching them French at \$11 billion or \$12 billion.

As immigration is a federal area of jurisdiction, should funding be allocated to Quebec or should the federal government provide French language training to them?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's certainly the sort of initiative that could be negotiated between the Quebec government and the Canadian government. However, it's important not to forget that we're talking about all foreign temporary workers in Canada, including Quebec. Companies need workers.

Nevertheless, it's clear that more foresight is needed with respect to the impact of these decisions on our communities. I was saying earlier that a holistic immigration policy was required. There are so many factors involved in immigration that it's difficult to anticipate their impact on communities.

Immigration has become a hot topic just about everywhere. It's therefore important to find a way to discuss what constitutes a proper francophone immigration policy for Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, please go ahead for three minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, in a Radio-Canada story about your report, you said: "federal institutions' respect for language rights does not meet the expectations laid out in my previous annual reports".

What needs to be done to make the government actually listen to your recommendations and comply with language rights? How often does the government actually follow your recommendations?

• (1705)

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: That's a very interesting question.

Very often, even if recommendations are implemented.... Under the previous language regime, it didn't change the behaviour of federal institutions. Every year the complaints and recommendations were the same. The recommendations were implemented, but then the same thing happened over and over. The new powers will perhaps provide you with the tools needed for better compliance. I'm optimistic that these new powers will enable you to obtain enhanced compliance from the federal institutions. All of which is to say that we have a new regime and that the people involved should be given a chance. We'll see what happens.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I have a more general question now.

We are about to begin a study on the education continuum in French, and we also hope to carry out a study on French immersion. The shortage of workers in French as a first language and French immersion education is also of concern to many of us. The federal government's role is another major question mark. As we know, education is a provincial jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the worker shortage, the lack of teachers and the absence of support staff for these teachers are having an impact on the number of young people who can be educated in French.

Given these labour shortages, does the federal government have a role to play?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: The federal government has always had a role to play in supporting francophone education in minority communities and in teaching French as a second language.

In 2019, we published a study on the shortage of immersion teachers. The study made a number of recommendations that were implemented.

The problem is that these efforts were inadequate. It's not by adding an additional education cohort here and there that the current gap will be closed. Other ways of closing the gap have to be found. Much more innovative approaches are needed to find new teachers or people who can work in education in support of teachers.

It's a societal issue. Teachers are in demand just about everywhere, whether in official language minority or majority communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner. You'll be able to add further details as we continue.

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

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

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

Welcome, Mr. Th  berge. I always enjoy seeing you here.

In your report, table 3 is about the changing pattern in the number of admissible complaints received over the past 10 years. It shows that there has been a substantial improvement, if I can describe it that way, with respect to the processing of complaints, at

least if the 2023–2024 and 2021–2022 years are compared. It's much better now. Compared to the previous year, the number of complaints decreased by almost half. From 2021–2022 and 2023–2024, the number of admissible complaints dropped to about only one fifth as many as before. Of course in 2021–2022, there was the pandemic.

You included the number of admissible complaints in various sectors, including public services and language of work. In the previous reports, I believe it was more about things like the number of complaints about Air Canada. I've been here for nine and a half years, and you've been the commissioner for seven years. There have been many discussions since then. Air Canada representatives frequently came before the committee to testify, including Mr. Rovinescu, a former Air Canada president.

Do you think there has been an improvement in services in French at Air Canada? Are you still trying to identify or sort out the number of Air Canada complaints?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: There were fewer complaints about Air Canada. There were only 136 compared to the previous 300, if memory serves me correctly. There was a decrease in the number of complaints in the whole travelling public sector, but the proportions are similar. It remains a significant number.

You're asking whether there has been an improvement. To answer you, I have to ask myself whether this particular year was an anomaly or the beginning of a new trend.

As I said earlier, I don't have a crystal ball to tell me what the future holds. So before saying that there's been an improvement, I'm going to wait another year or two to see if it's a new trend. I don't know whether you remember Bernard Derome. He always used to say, "if the current trend continues".

I'm not convinced that the trend will continue. We shall see.

• (1710)

Mr. Bernard G  n  reux: For a company like Air Canada, it might require several years to determine whether there has really been an improvement, or a new trend, in the number of complaints. Air Canada was the main culprit for many years. We made recommendations to deal with this, as you did. The company has not come here to testify for a while now, and we haven't studied this particular issue for a while. However, I think it had promised to introduce mechanisms, particularly in terms of training.

You will also no doubt recall, Mr. Chair, that we were invited to visit its training centre here in Ottawa.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: I'd like to point out that we can't see the people on the screen.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Which people?

Mr. Joël Godin: We can't see you or any of the others. I just noticed. The cameras are not showing—

The Chair: I hadn't noticed.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You can look at me if you want.

Mr. Joël Godin: I just noticed it.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You may be looking for stardom, but I'm not.

I'll get back to my question, Commissioner. I hope that—

The Chair: I've stopped the clock, Mr. Généreux. Do I need to do anything about this point of order, Madam Clerk?

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I'm going to take advantage of the fact that the clock has stopped to continue to speak.

The Chair: Keep your comments to yourself for now. You've got three minutes and 23 seconds. We can certainly see you on ParlVU. Your makeup was fortunately done very well, because we can see you clearly.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I am very happy to learn that people find me attractive.

Mr. Joël Godin: That's not what the chair said.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes, that's what he said. Ha, ha!

Commissioner, in the same vein, I'd like to ask you whether you send letters of congratulations to companies that are making genuine efforts to improve and that have been criticized on several occasions in the past. If the trend continues, as you say, and as Bernard Derome has said for many years on election nights, can we acknowledge the efforts made over the years by companies such as Air Canada?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: I think we could examine that issue at a later date.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I encourage you to think about it, because it would incentivize companies, as well as government departments and agencies.

If the trend continues and the number of complaints continues to fall, it means that people are making an effort, so it should be acknowledged. Part of your role should be encouraging people to continue to make the necessary efforts to reduce the number of complaints. Everyone wants to see a reduction in the number of complaints, which would indicate an improvement in French-language services, particularly at the federal level.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you for coming, Commissioner.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Samson will be asking the final questions.

I've just been informed that two cameras are working at all times: The one in the meeting room and the ParlVU camera. Priority is given to the ParlVU camera to film speakers, meaning the people asking and answering the questions. Those listening to us on Par-

lVU saw Mr. Généreux in all his glory asking questions and the Commissioner answering them.

We're almost finished with you, Commissioner, because we know that you have somewhere else to be.

Now, we move to Mr. Samson, who is last but not least, from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Samson, you have five minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you again, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Généreux, thank you for giving me your 15 seconds. I'm grateful.

Commissioner, I have some important questions for you. The first concerns the proposed amendment to section 16, regarding the bilingualism of Supreme Court judges. Do you think this amendment is important? If so, why?

My subsequent questions will depend on your answer.

• (1715)

Mr. Raymond Thériault: It's essential for Supreme Court judges to be able to function, meaning to express themselves and hear the case before them, in both official languages without the assistance of an interpreter.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Why?

Mr. Raymond Thériault: The Supreme Court is an institution that affects all Canadians. It makes extremely important decisions, and it's essential for Canadians appearing before the court to be able to be heard and understood in their official language.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

I'm not surprised by that answer. I agree with you, as do all Liberals. However, the Conservatives don't agree.

What do you think of a party that wants to take power and govern Canada, but is opposed to the appointment of bilingual judges?

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I've stopped the clock, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, my colleague knows full well that we must stick to the subject, which is the report by the Commissioner of Official Languages. I'd like him to get back to the main subject.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, as you know, I've given members a great deal of latitude in their questions, starting with those from the Conservative Party. We didn't talk about the Commissioner's report initially, but I didn't intervene, and I find this question just as relevant, even more so. So, I'll let Mr. Samson continue.

Mr. Samson, I'll restart the clock. You have 1 minute and 29 seconds remaining.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for reminding members that the initial questions didn't refer to the report at all. I was going to say that.

Commissioner, getting back to what I was saying, what do you think of an opposition party that wants to govern this country and thinks that having a bilingual Supreme Court isn't important?

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: What matters is the principle of bilingualism at the Supreme Court of Canada. As I said earlier, in my opinion, it's a fundamental right to be heard and understood by all Supreme Court judges.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

Earlier, you said that senior management had to show strong leadership. About a month ago, a Conservative Party MP once again asked a minister in committee to answer her questions in English. It did a lot of damage.

What do you think about that kind of approach to the official languages?

If we at this committee don't do what needs to be done to further bilingualism and if others work against that goal, the situation won't improve. That's not leadership, in my opinion.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: It's important for all parliamentarians to be able to use the official language of their choice. I think we should stick to that. It applies to everyone. It's a pillar of our parliamentary system.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Commissioner, if I understand correctly, you intervened in a case in the Northwest Territories and made some extremely important arguments to influence the judge. You said that every student enrolled in a francophone school promotes the French language and culture, in principle, and the judge agreed with you. He said that they played a significant role within the community.

Could you comment on that? That's an extremely interesting argument, in my opinion.

Mr. Raymond Th  berge: When it comes to culture and language, many people have a role to play. For francophone minority communities, the education system has always been the prime vehicle for transmitting their language and culture. Everyone who enrolls in a French-language school plays a role, and we mustn't forget the fact that, for 12 years, parents are also involved in the community.

When I was a child, there weren't any francophone schools. The world has completely changed. Now those schools exist to counter-balance the mainstream institutions and environment. So, when a young person enrolls in a francophone school, they develop an identity and a connection.

• (1720)

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's a very good argument that makes a lot of sense. I really like it.

I'll conclude by saying that adding real property to Bill C-13—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Darrell Samson: —was something that existed previously, however it was never applied. Let's hope that the measures being proposed will contribute to its success.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: It wasn't a question.

Thank you, Commissioner. I also want to thank your two assistants, Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Leduc, as well as your entire team, at your office, who aren't here.

On behalf of the committee, I want to take a minute and tell you how grateful we are that you came.

Congratulations on your report, but, above all, for the way you answered questions so that everyone could understand. We're talking about a piece of legislation, it's in the legal field, but your answers were very easy to understand, as if you were a teacher. Thank you very much. We've enjoyed having you here.

We'll give you time to leave to prepare for your next meeting, which I believe is in a few minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: On a point of order.

The Chair: We're listening, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I want to thank the opposition members for recognizing the importance of having the Commissioner of Official Languages come to talk about these important issues.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's not a point of order. I'm in the middle of thanking the commissioner.

Thank you, Commissioner. We know that you need to be at the Senate in 30 minutes. We wish you and your colleagues good luck.

Mr. Wolfe, Mr. Leduc, Commissioner, once again, thank you very much.

We're going to pick up where we left off, as I said at our last meeting. We had suspended the meeting to resume debate on Mr. Beaulieu's motion, and on Mr. Samson's amendment.

Before we do that, I just need to—

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Will the meeting be suspended or adjourned?

The Chair: I will in any case be adjourning the meeting shortly, but the same conditions will apply.

Mr. Jo  l Godin: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, but you said "suspend", it's not suspended, it's adjourned. You adjourned the last meeting.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Godin. My intention was to suspend the debate but I had adjourned it.

Another committee is scheduled to meet after ours, and we don't have much time. I meet on Monday mornings with our team here. I need the committee to give me answers to two specific matters, Mr. Beaulieu's study on post-secondary institutions and the study on the education continuum.

As for the study on post-secondary institutions, I must inform you that Minister Boissonnault has declined the committee's invitation to reappear as a witness. Perhaps we might consider inviting the officials to come back. If not, we need to instruct our analyst to draft the report.

I'm still talking just about the post-secondary study. Let's focus on that for the moment. If you want to think about it and come back to it later, we can do that.

In short, first, the minister declined the invitation to return. Second, should we invite the officials back? That's how we thought we would conclude this study. If we invite them back, we need to find a date; if we don't want to invite them back and we're happy with the witnesses we've heard from so far, we need to give instructions to our analyst.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I suggest that we think about it and revisit this issue at our next meeting on Thursday.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Did the minister give any explanation or does he just not want to come back as a matter of principle?

The Chair: I'll repeat the answer I received: he has declined the invitation. That's all I was told.

Mr. Serré, go ahead.

Mr. Marc Serré: Our next meeting is Thursday. What are we doing on Thursday? Do we want officials to come talk about post-secondary institutions?

The Chair: I'd like—

Mr. Marc Serré: I just want to clarify what's happening on Thursday.

The Chair: The committee will need to make a decision. Perhaps we can start with that on Thursday, to resolve the issue.

Answer this simple question: Will we invite officials back to complete our study or can we conclude our study with the witnesses who've already appeared, and give instructions to our analyst?

Before we make a decision on that, however, we need to consider the second issue, which is the education continuum, because it's related. Mr. Godin, you'll be interested in this.

After a long discussion with the committee's masterminds, meaning the analyst and the clerk, to save time, the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, our subcommittee, needs to meet to better coordinate the witness list. Remember, we had sent a list of witnesses to the subcommittee. The subcommittee may want to sit down with the analyst and the clerk to determine how we can coordinate our witnesses and put our invitations in chronological order, and determine who we've forgotten and who we mustn't forget, so as to write the best report possible.

If the subcommittee does that, it could report back to the committee, which could accept or refuse its recommendations.

Do we agree to meet to do that?

Mr. Godin, we're all ears.

• (1725)

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, is Ms. Ashton on the subcommittee?

The Chair: Yes. There's the chair, the deputy chairs and Ms. Ashton.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I agree with your proposal, Mr. Chair. It works. I think it's a good way to proceed.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: Mr. Chair, are you saying that we're missing some witnesses, subjects, provincial representatives?

The Chair: We're talking about the education continuum, so we're talking about just one province. We know which jurisdiction it falls under, so a single province has been invited to appear.

Each committee member has invited witnesses from their respective region. We don't know how we're going to fit all the pieces together. I gave a basic example.

Perhaps the subcommittee should discuss some other matters so as to maximize our chances of getting the best witnesses possible, who are the most in sync and best placed to respond to questions about the education continuum, so we can produce the best possible report. This also has to be done within the framework of our study on funding for post-secondary institutions. We'll fit it all together at the end.

Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I need to raise an important question.

I haven't looked at the witness list recently, but did we invite representatives from StatsCan? I'm asking because we asked them to send us information on the short-form census. We should invite them to testify before the committee.

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Samson, because we had not invited them.

Mr. Darrell Samson: There you go.

The Chair: This is the infamous short-form census that we managed to get done. Imagine if we hadn't invited them, even though we're waiting for information.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: No other witnesses have been proposed either.

The Chair: Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I agree to hold a discussion to determine which witnesses could give us a general overview of the situation.

I know that we strongly recommended inviting local witnesses so they could speak about the daily reality in our schools.

However, I think it would be important for the committee to invite national experts.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Given her experience, could our analyst, the oracle on your right, do a pre-screening now to tell us which witnesses are missing so that we can perhaps fill in the gaps?

The Chair: We can discuss it in subcommittee, since the work has already begun.

I would also like to tell you that, because of available resources, a subcommittee always takes the time slot of a regular committee meeting.

Hold on a second. I'm going to consult the oracle on my left.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Here's what we could do: The subcommittee could meet during the first half-hour. I suggest that the meeting be held Thursday morning, and that the subcommittee meet for half an hour. We should have enough time, because once we produce a report, get it translated and so on, we will have it in our hands as quickly as possible. This is still the study on the education continuum.

Would that be okay?

Mr. Serré, you have the floor.

Mr. Marc Serré: Last week, we were supposed to review the report on the economic development of official language minority communities. We're still on version two of the report.

Is that planned for the second hour on Thursday?

The Chair: We have to make a decision and plan accordingly.

Had it not been for these two items, which I had to bring to the committee's attention, we would have resumed where we left off when we adjourned on Thursday and continued the debate on Mr. Beaulieu's motion as amended by Mr. Samson. I already had the list of the first four speakers.

If all goes according to plan, that's what we'll do Thursday.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Can you give us the list of speakers again?

The Chair: On the list are Darrell Samson, Mario Beaulieu, Angelo Iacono and Marc Serré. We can add other names afterwards. That's where we were when we adjourned. It was as if we had suspended the meeting, but the meeting was actually adjourned.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Basically, we would meet in subcommittee for half an hour and then come back to the debate for the rest of the meeting.

• (1730)

The Chair: That is what the clerk has just told me.

We could meet as a subcommittee for half an hour to discuss the witness list. Then we could continue the debate on the motion as if nothing had happened.

Would that be okay?

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Joël Godin: From what I understand, the subcommittee must provide a bilingual report. We need to set aside time to have it translated. In the meantime, the committee can continue to debate Mr. Samson's amendment. Then, at the other committee meeting, the subcommittee's report will be presented to the committee.

Is half an hour enough?

The Chair: The analyst tells me that it is.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm fine with that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: To make it easier, the subcommittee will meet in the same room. It will be the two vice-chairs, Ms. Ashton and Mr. Serré, and myself. As chair, I am neutral. Then the other members will join us half an hour later. Instead of starting at 8:15, the meeting will start at 8:45.

Then we will resume the debate where we adjourned it last week. However, before we do that, we will have to decide what we are going to do about the post-secondary study. Do we want to complete it and give instructions to the analyst for the report? Do we want to invite officials to give evidence? I urge you to think about that. We will take the first five minutes of Thursday's committee meeting to decide.

If we want to invite officials, we will do so and set a date. They are much more flexible than other witnesses.

Mr. Gagné, go ahead.

Mr. Bernard Gagné: Does our analyst think it would be appropriate to bring in the officials? If she finds it relevant, let's invite the officials.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I made a suggestion. Let's give ourselves time to deliberate. Let's come back Thursday morning to work on the study and the witness list. Then let's go back to the debate that was adjourned at the last meeting.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Ashton, it will be early for you. You will have to join the meeting before 8:15 a.m., because we'll have only 30 minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'm always online before 8:15. It's the committee that's not always online at 8:15.

The Chair: I don't always see that, but you may be right.

That said, committee members, the notice of meeting will reflect exactly what we have just discussed.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>