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Mr. Steven Blaney

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● (0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Hello and welcome to this 11th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Without further ado, I would like to welcome a new member to our committee, Mr. Brent St. Denis.

[English]

Mr. St. Denis, we wish you well on our committee as you replace Madame Folco. Welcome to the committee.

We have a special guest this morning.

[Translation]

We are very pleased to have with us this morning the Commissioner for Official Languages, who came before the committee last November to present his most recent report on the Action Plan for Official Languages. He is with us again this morning because that is the subject of our considerations. We are discussing bilingualism within the federal public service more specifically.

I would now like to turn over the floor to Mr. Graham Fraser, Commissioner for Official Languages, as well as to the three officials who are accompanying him today: Ms. Dominique Lemieux, Director General, Compliance Assurance Branch; Ms. Scott, Director General, Policy and Communications Branch; and Ms. Tremblay, Director, Legal Affairs Branch.

Mr. Fraser, welcome to the committee. You are always welcome. You have the floor. Thank you for this flexibility you have shown in coming to meet with us this morning.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I should start by apologizing, as I have a cold. If I have to stop from time to time or if I'm not as quick as I would ordinarily be, I apologize.

[English]

Thank you for this opportunity to share my assessment of the action plan for official languages, which ends in March 2008. As Commissioner of Official Languages, I will also offer my suggestions for the new phase of the action plan.

The 2003 plan had three main goals: to advance linguistic duality in Canada, to improve the government's delivery of services in our

two official languages, and to foster the development of official language minority communities.

The 2006 census data reveal a decrease in the demographic weight of francophones in Canada, in percentage terms, even though their numbers are holding steady. They also show that Quebec's English-speaking community has increased, despite its many challenges. There may be an increase in bilingualism throughout the Canadian population, but there is also a noticeable hesitancy among youth to learn a second official language.

[Translation]

In recent Statistics Canada examination of the vitality of French-speaking communities outside Quebec demonstrated different attitudes and behaviours regarding the use of language in health care, child care, post-secondary education and government services, among other areas. The data clearly show a desire among francophones to be part of communities that are dynamic both economically and socially.

The study results confirm the relevance of the areas targeted by the first action plan: education, health, immigration, community development and government services.

Progress is most obvious in the health sector. The initiatives implemented focused on training health professionals in the language of the minority, as well as recruitment and networking. I know that the exemplary cooperation between Health Canada and community organizations was a determining factor in the success of action plan initiatives.

There was also considerable progress in immigration. Action plan investments targeted the recruitment, reception and retention of French-speaking immigrant. Allocated funds led to various initiatives such as the strategic plan launched in September 2006 and a system for integrating new Canadians into the Franco-Manitoban community. The federal government's work undoubtedly facilitated the review already underway in French-speaking communities on the role of immigration and strategies to foster the integration of new Canadians.

I was happy to hear the government reiterate its support, in the Speech from the Throne on October 17, 2007, for linguistic duality in Canada as well as for the action plan for official languages.

I applauded the appointment of Bernard Lord as a special advisor and I look forward to reading his report following the consultations he has held, as requested by the government. Although they differ, I see our two roles as complimentary; his as an advisor to the Prime Minister and mine as an officer of Parliament. But what is important is not Mr. Lord's recommendations but the government's actions. I will be pleased to share with you my assessment of this initiative.

The 2003 action plan will have demonstrated how a concerted effort among several departments according to well-defined objectives can bring positive and concrete results. It also confirms the government's commitment to linguistic duality.

That said, there is room to improve the current plan, particularly in light of an important element identified by the Statistics Canada study: a global and strategic approach involving several key actors is required to foster the vitality of French-speaking communities and to strengthen linguistic duality.

I believe the new action plan should focus on four elements: the promotion of linguistic duality, official language education, community development, and public service renewal.

● (0910)

[English]

Given the increased diversity of the Canadian population, the new action plan should place much more emphasis on opportunities for Canadians to benefit from linguistic duality, regardless of their country of birth or ethnic origin. Given our evolving demographics, we need to look more closely at the relationship between our official languages and multiculturalism policies as we forge a shared Canadian identity.

There are many activities that could accomplish this. For example, we could encourage more youth and teacher exchanges at the secondary and post-secondary levels to foster second-language learning and understanding of each other's cultures. We could promote Canada's bilingual image abroad, and we could communicate our linguistic duality to immigrants.

The government must maintain its goal of doubling the number of young bilingual Canadians by 2013 and reinforce its efforts with the provinces and territories to do so.

To accomplish this, we need to increase awareness among Canadians, particularly parents, about the importance of learning a second language and of asking for stronger French programs in schools. Also, universities need to contribute by training bilingual graduates and providing options for students who are graduating from immersion programs. Young bilingual graduates need to see that there are real and numerous career opportunities that require their second official language.

In addition to these efforts, we need to continue investing in minority community school systems to make education in the minority language more accessible and adapted to their situation.

[Translation]

To continue supporting community development, all aspects of the current action plan must be renewed and new elements added: for example, arts and culture, early childhood development (especially

daycare and pre-school), and post-secondary education for minority communities.

The outcome of the Sommet des communautés francophones et acadiennes, held in June 2007, should also be considered. Participants of that summit found that community growth, better infrastructure, French services and activities, and full respect for linguistic rights and true equality were among the areas requiring priority action.

Mr. Lord has already indicated he would take the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Official Languages into account.

We must continue researching the status of official languages, as these only observations and recommendations can contribute to the vitality of official language minority communities. In the next action plan, the government should include a component promoting research on community development and the learning of two official languages, among other areas.

[English]

Finally, bilingualism must be a pillar of the public service to ensure it remains competitive and a major contributor to Canadian society and Canada's productivity. Bilingualism must be recognized as a key characteristic of leadership in the public service and a crucial element of renewal. The public service must recruit more bilingual employees and promote itself as an employer of choice for young Canadians across the country. Achieving this goal requires cooperation with the post-secondary sector, and it requires that we provide Canadians with fair and equitable access to quality second-language training at all levels of the education system.

Any initiative affecting education, as well as other aspects of a renewed action plan, should encourage the provinces to play a greater role in achieving the goals of the action plan and in coordinating and implementing activities, though the Conférence ministérielle sur la francophonie canadienne, for example.

The health sector is a good example of how much can be accomplished when the provinces are actively involved. At their last annual meeting, francophone affairs ministers indicated they would be willing partners in community development.

While it's important that the federal government respect provincial jurisdictions, it should also encourage governments to offer key services to the official language minority in their provinces. Provincial governments should become major partners in implementing all aspects of a new action plan.

[Translation]

In launching a new phase of the action plan and benefiting from the momentum created by the 2003 plan, the government now has a golden opportunity to demonstrate the strength of its commitment to linguistic duality and official languages.

I would be pleased to answer your questions.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Commissioner, for your excellent synthesis and recommendations.

Without further ado, we'll start the first round of questioning, which will be five minutes each, as usual. We'll start with the Honourable Mauril Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you Commissioner, I'm glad...

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Perhaps I'm mistaken, but isn't it seven minutes for the first round and five minutes thereafter?

The Chair: That's right, seven minutes. If I said something else, it must have been a slip of the tongue.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: A slippery tongue is dangerous, Mr. Chairman.

Commissioner, I listened attentively to your remarks on what people are starting to call phase I of the Official Languages Action Plan, which is in fact the new chapter of the action plan. I share your analysis and the observations you have made. Things are uneven and haven't been as successful in some instances as we would have hoped. On the other hand, there are examples of things working better than we had hoped, for example in health care. This really is a result of the collaborative tone set right at the outset by the department and the institutions concerned, especially the National Workplace Health Consortium, and the provinces.

And I'm very pleased to note that you've made the same recommendation or the same remark concerning the public service, and that is that there should be more cooperation between Canada's public service and post-secondary institutions. I myself share that view.

Is the commissioner or the AUCC or the Public Service Commission in a position to recommend any initiatives that may be of benefit? Have you gotten wind of any such recommendations? Are there any initiatives that are currently under discussion or about which you have any information?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, we have already begun to discuss the matter and we have begun a joint study with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. First, we must draw up a directory of programs, courses and opportunities offered by universities to enable students who maintain the knowledge of French they have acquired upon leaving high school. We note that there is a problem with the wide gap between students who have followed immersion courses and those who have not. The figures from Statistics Canada also confirm that there is such a problem.

After finishing high school, the students who have reached a certain level of bilingualism lose it gradually at university, if the university does not emphasize bilingualism. That study has already begun. I hope that we will have more consistency and that universities will offer opportunities. I also hope that the federal government, which, let us not forget, is the biggest employer in Canada, will send a clear message that fluency in both official languages is very important as a factor to consider when hiring public servants who hope to rise in the ranks of the public service.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Regarding this topic, I can tell you that a study was made last year at the university of Ottawa. It was a joint study made by Mr. Pierre de Blois, who is a member of the board of governors, and Ms. Fauteux, I believe—we should verify this—from the Education Department. Actually, it was recommended that the University of Ottawa should increase the number of bilingual graduate students and even that bilingualism should be a compulsory requirement for obtaining a degree. I dare to hope that the university will take those measures. This is an important element.

Secondly, they created an immersion program at the post-secondary level. To my knowledge, they received many more applications than they expected. There is a cost to pay in both cases. In your opinion, would it be appropriate for the Canadian government, through transfers to provinces or perhaps even through direct transfers, to support those institutions which would help the federal government to ensure that its public service obeys its own rules?

● (0920)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that this is a very interesting possibility. Let me point out two initiatives, one at the post-secondary level and the other at the secondary level. At the post-secondary level, as you mentioned the University of Ottawa directly encourages students who have followed immersion courses in high school to follow French courses at the university. There is a mentoring program to allay the fears of some students who might feel that they won't be able to follow the subject matter. The mentoring program is a way to help the students.

Regarding the secondary and primary levels, I would like to point out the role played by the Edmonton Public Schools school board. It is really ahead of the other school boards in Canada. It offers quality programs. One of the results of this program is that the vast majority of the students studying at the Saint-Jean Campus, the francophone campus of the University of Alberta, have followed an immersion program that enabled them to acquire the skills for doing their post-secondary studies in French, as well as the confidence that they will succeed.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you.

I will quickly change subjects, because we only have seven minutes. Perhaps I will have an opportunity to come back to that. Mr. Commissioner, I would like to invite you to be much more vigilant and much more severe with regard to the Canadian public service and the government agencies, and specifically the Department of National Defence. They had an ombudsman, but he just got a promotion. I congratulate him, but this leaves a gaping whole. We are wondering whether he will have a successor.

Then there is the RCMP. I know that one of my colleagues raised this issue this week. The situation at the RCMP is totally intolerable. Moreover, because the Court Challenges Program was abolished, an association of Franco-Saskatchewanians has to leave an individual to his own devices. I hope that the commissioner's office will seriously consider using its resources to intervene in this case and in other cases concerning the Canadian public service and agencies such as the RCMP and the Department of National Defence.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger. If you wish, we could go back to Mr. Fraser following your comments. We will now move to our second speaker, Richard Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, Mr. Fraser, Mr. Lemieux, Ms. Scott and Ms. Tremblay.

In speaking about renewing the Action Plan for the Official Languages, the Minister, Ms. Verner, mentioned at one point that existing services would at least be maintained. We will see; we hope this will be true. We are also hoping there will be some improvements.

Generally speaking, Commissioner, we are all working for the common good: namely, allowing people whose mother tongue is French, for example, to still be able to speak it at the end of their lives and to live their whole lives being able to develop in that language and that culture. And this applies to their families and offspring as well. The same goes for people whose mother tongue is English. We all agree on that.

Nevertheless, there are some situations and some expenditures with respect to the public service that give rise to some questions. Let me give you an example. This is a quote from an article that appeared in *Le Devoir* on January 28, just recently. I will read it to you:

In her report, Ms. Fraser made particular mention of the case of someone in the commissioner's office who met the language requirements of her position, but who was nonetheless sent to France to take training in French for one month, in July 2006. Ruth McEwen, the Executive Director of Corporate Services, paid for her stay herself and her plane ticket to Bordeaux, but taxpayers picked up the tab for her tuition (\$757.61), and for her return flight (\$2,358.63).

I know you are not responsible for that, but how could the action plan be focused—I know it has a number of components—to avoid a recurrence of situations of this type?

Before turning the floor over to you, I would also mention the case of a francophone in Aylmer who wanted to improve his English at the end of his career. He was not allowed to do this because his skills were considered good enough. So you see the type of inconsistencies that occur. I would like to hear your comments.

• (0925)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I would not want to go into details about a case that I learned of by reading the same article as you. However, I would like to make a general comment about something of concern to me. I think there is a problem we must deal with. I'm sure there are some people in the public service who can communicate in the second official language, but who do not pass their test. There are others who do pass the test, but who cannot communicate in the other language. I do not know whether it is the workplace

environment that causes people who've had language training not to use their second language, or whether there is a difference between the two groups, because of the nature of the test. I do know that the Public Service Commission has just changed the test public servants have to take to determine their language skills.

Another thing I've noticed is that there have been very few studies done on linguistic duality as regards the management of the public service, and that is something that we are starting to look at. Exactly how does it work? What are the best practices in a context where there is genuine respect for the two official languages?

One point I try to emphasize when I talk to public servants is that linguistic duality must be seen as a value, and not as a burden. People have to understand that proficiency in the official languages in the public service is an essential part of leadership.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Commissioner, you mentioned this in your report, where you stated that—I do not remember exactly what year it was, I could verify this—892 persons were hired in an imperative staffing context, and were unable to function in both official languages. This is a serious problem that deserves close attention. You also emphasized that.

What would you say if the federal public service required that people be bilingual before being hired? I would like to hear you on this matter.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Certainly, this would be of enormous help to further the respect of both official languages, but, we must, at the same time, realize that not all Canadians have access to good training. If bilingualism were required for all positions in the public service, a great many public servants in Quebec would not be hired, just as there would be many public servants in the west who could never get into the public service. There is always a certain tension between the spirit of the law on the one hand and the letter of the law on the other hand. We must also contend with the reality of this land.

I have often said that there are four reasons why a public servant should be bilingual. It enables him to serve the public, to manage people who have the right to work in their own language, to serve a minister—even if this is not in the legislation, the minister should be able to receive information in the language of his choice—and finally, a factor which is perhaps more important but more difficult to define, to have an understanding of this country. Nevertheless, not all members of the public service meet these obligations.

• (0930)

The Chair: Very well. Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You are welcome.

Mr. Godin, go ahead.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Commissioner, I welcome you and your team.

If we go by what you just said, we should conclude that all deputy ministers should be bilingual. Perhaps we could make some progress then. This would give the government some leadership.

You just mentioned certain targeted sectors, such as health. You say that real progress has been made in the field of health, with positive results.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The Standing Committee on Official Languages travelled across the land and verified things on the ground. We did what we wanted to do, we went out into the field to see what was happening, and whether it was positive.

I do not know if you have received any information about Tuesday's committee meeting regarding the action plan, and the aspect of training and learning in a minority language. We are short of money. If you do not have it, I can give you a copy so that you can follow. Do you have it?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, I think that I have it. I must say that I didn't really have time to get familiar with all the numbers.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We'll check this together.

In the Dion action plan, that the Liberals are bragging about, it says:

In addition to these two funds, the Minister of Canadian Heritage will renew the framework agreement and federal-provincial-territorial agreements under the official languages and education program at current funding levels.

When it talks about "current funding levels" the plan would provide a surplus, if I understand correctly.

This is referred to in our report of May 2007 on page 165. It says that with regard to minority language education, that is the funding from kindergarten to grade 2 in francophone schools outside Quebec, progress has been continuous, but it cannot be attributed to investments under the action plan. It says that indeed, these significant investments were offset by a reduction that was almost equivalent to investments in the regular program.

According to the information we received from the Library of Parliament, in 2002-2003, the regular program received an investment of \$144,819 million. In reality, in 2003-2004, only \$122 million was spent. So the regular program was cut by about \$20 million and the government only spent \$9 million under the action plan.

Since it was saying that it would invest in the action plan to improve minority language education, there was a shortfall. I could continue, but I don't want to waste too much time, we only have seven minutes. Every year under the Liberal reign, there was supposed to be \$144 million invested under the current program, in addition to the action plan. In 2004-2005, only \$116 million were invested. With regard to the action plan, it was supposed to be \$43 million and that's the amount that was invested.

These amounts continue to decline, but let's examine the figures for 2006-2007. The actual investment forecast was \$144 million, but it was reduced to \$99 million. However, the investment under the action plan was supposed to be \$44 million and was raised to \$67 million. If you do the math, in a real plan, the government should have spend \$724 million but it only spent \$544 million. In addition, in the action plan which provided for spending \$209 million, \$256 million was spent. It's all very well to say that \$50 million extra was put in the action plan. The Conservatives can

brag about having put \$50 million more in the action plan but in reality, every year, there was a net loss of \$132 million.

In your opinion, Commissioner, how did the action plan work with a shortfall of \$132 million earmarked for education for our young people in order to ensure that they don't lose their language, for instance in St-John New Brunswick or in Hearst, Ontario or in Prince George, B.C.? The government says it has an action plan that should work, and that it has invested the necessary funds. In fact, \$132 million were stolen from the action plan, a theft committed by both governments, because the figures speak for themselves.

I'd like to hear your views on this.

● (0935)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I would think that it's up to the minister to respond in detail about the figures provided by her department.

I can see as you do that there is a gap between what was planned and what was actually spent.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The minister should provide that information, I agree with you. The issue regarding the lack of money is one for the minister and not the Official Languages Commissioner.

However, the government has boasted about its plan of action, and you yourself have said that it worked and that we should continue to invest in it. But where? There is not enough money in the action plan. There's talk of improving education at the post-secondary, secondary and primary levels, and also in day care. But wouldn't the \$132 million in the action plan have helped in that regard?

Mr. Graham Fraser: In my view, what you have pointed out underscores two things. For obvious and historical reasons, education is a provincial matter, and when the federal government becomes involved in an area of provincial jurisdiction, it's always more complicated and requires more work.

I have already raised the issue of transparency and accountability. It is often difficult in the context of a federal-provincial agreement to ensure that the federal funding is spent where it should be, namely in the classroom. So, as with you, we hope that the money earmarked for education is indeed spent in that area.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We are not talking about expenditures, but of investment, namely the \$132 million which the federal government has not invested. The money did not leave Ottawa to end up in Montreal. We certainly hope that the money did not end up in sponsorships. But it did not get to New Brunswick, to Hearst, to Ontario, or to Vancouver. It's not that the provinces did not want the money. I have never heard of a province refusing money. It's just that the money was not sent out. Would you agree with me on that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. You may continue later. Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

We will now move to the government side with the Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Pierre Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your presentation this morning. I appreciated what you said. With regard to the action plan, you talked about successes and challenges. You also proposed recommendations for the future. That was well done. Thank you very much to you and your team. Thank you also for what you said about Mr. Lord.

[English]

He definitely is well qualified for the task he has undertaken. From everything I've heard, he's been very well received by the people and by the leaders of our official language communities.

I particularly like the comment you made that you find your roles complementary. I agree, I think they are complementary.

[Translation]

I would like to know whether, in your opinion, the feedback you received from Mr. Lord with regard to official language minority communities is the same as the feedback he got during this process.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I can't make that comparison for now. I met with Mr. Lord last week, and our conversation was very constructive. It will come as no surprise to you that I basically told him the same thing I told you this morning, which is that there were strengths and weaknesses. In many cases, his conclusions were the same. I know that shortly after Mr. Lord was appointed, some people who wanted to be heard expressed their concerns on the subject. I think that in the end he managed to meet with those people or at least to contact them.

One thing struck me, and it is the fact that he understands that every community is unique. He learned a lot from the community in New Brunswick, and this experience is very valuable and will help him to better hear what people have to say across the country. He also understands what is at stake in the area of languages given Canada's diversity. I got the impression that he understood very well how important it was to strengthen certain things. However, I cannot compare what I heard to what he heard.

In a certain way, I can only wait to see what the government will do. The fact that the government turned to someone with as much experience as Mr. Lord is important, but what will ultimately matter are the results of this process.

• (0940)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It's true that concrete gestures are very important. The first major step we took was to include in the Speech from the Throne our commitment to the action plan, and the second step was to hold consultations which were not general, but specifically focused on the plan of action. Indeed, a great many consultations are being held between the government and the communities. But what counts is to translate words into action, and I think we are doing that.

You are right to say that Mr. Lord really listened to our communities. He remarked that some issues were common to certain communities, but that from province to province, each community was different. It is important to highlight and acknowledge these differences.

In your presentation, you talked about the four things you would like to see in the next action plan, as well as other things like

[English]

arts and culture, early childhood development, and post-secondary education.

[Translation]

You highlighted the important criteria. In my view, we must also establish our priorities. Success is achieved when you focus on a few issues at a time. It's not a matter of ignoring the other issues, but you just need to focus more on a few. I would like to know whether you can prioritize your recommendations.

Mr. Graham Fraser: You have to make a distinction. Some of the successes in this area can be explained by the systems which were created, such as the 17 health care networks. The communities said they feared that if there was a gap between March 31 and the new plan, it would mark the end of these networks. I believe it is very important that the programs that work be maintained. In an exchange I had with Minister Tony Clement, I was pleased to hear him say that agreements had been signed to maintain the networks.

I would like to point out two things. What was done in Manitoba in the area of immigration is, in my view, a model of best practices. This model could be imitated or strengthened in other parts of the country. When I was in Manitoba, I was struck by the degree of cooperation between the parties involved. You could say that it brought together the three levels of government, but there was also, in a way, a fourth level, namely the communities which were directly involved in the process which brought together the province, the municipal institutions and the federal government. In my view, this is a good model.

• (0945)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser. You can tell us more when you respond to the next question. I will now begin our second round.

Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Fraser, thank you for being here with your team.

You seem generally satisfied with the implementation of the action plan and the way it is unfolding. Is there any part of the plan which you feel is not necessary, or at the very least which you would do differently?

Mr. Graham Fraser: For me, it's not at all a matter of abandoning the objectives. However, there is one problem. In fact, it seems as if the goal of having half of all high school graduates be bilingual by 2013 is not working out. If you look at the census figures, you'll realize that we have lost ground. In my opinion, it is more important to develop a strategy to encourage high school students to take second language courses. This can happen either at work or in post-secondary institutions. Students have to understand that this is important. Having a goal without a strategy is not good enough.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: If you take a step back, I would like to know whether you think there have been changes in government since Bill S-3 was adopted. Have communities or people expressed their concerns to you that things might not really be changing?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We are still in a transition period with regard to the application of the amendment. I don't like saying "S-3" because we are in a new session and there is a new Bill S-3. However, the act was amended just over two years ago and federal institutions are still trying to understand their new obligations. There are fairly interesting examples of initiatives which have been taken on the ground to improve collaboration and measures have been taken to help minority language communities.

Before concluding, I would like to point out that the amendment has been interpreted very narrowly, which is understandable in part because the scope of the amended act will be tested in court for the first time. So institutions naturally want to find out what the scope of their obligations are before acting.

● (0950)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I would like to come back to the action plan. You mentioned that it had to be improved, and we all agree with you. You talked about certain things which could be done, including in the areas of arts and culture, and so on. We have probably all received a letter from the Association de la presse francophone saying that the first plan totally ignored the communications sector. Of course you are aware of the growing importance of communications in the world today. Further, the media play a central role in the vitality of official language minority communities. It is therefore logical and imperative to include communications in the next plan.

What do you think of this?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Arts and culture are important for minority communities, because they create a francophone space or, in the case of small anglophone communities, an anglophone space.

I can hardly imagine how one can live in a linguistic space without having access to means of communication. Without going into often complicated details on how newspapers are funded and freedom of the press, there is no doubt that the vitality of a minority community depends on that community being able to function in its own language.

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

We will now go back to the government with the Hon. Michael Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Commissioner.

Today, I would like to ask a few questions about second language education, because that is the most important part of the official languages policy. Other parts deal with the protection of rights, but in my opinion, the most important thing is second language education.

[English]

In your report, you said that public support for bilingualism remains high in Canada, which is encouraging, but that support for French language instruction has waned in some parts of the country.

At the last meeting, we had officials here from Canadian Heritage who told us that enrolment for French immersion has slightly increased in the country. So can you explain the apparent contradiction between those two points and maybe explain what actually is the case?

We were told at the last meeting that there are approximately 2.4 million students in Canadian schools, and out of that number, there are approximately 300,000 students in French immersion. The officials told us that number has slightly increased, particularly in Ontario, in recent years. Yet you say that French language instruction has waned in some parts of the country, so maybe you could explain that.

Mr. Graham Fraser: If you look at the breakdown of the numbers—and I think some of those officials went through those numbers—there are some provinces where there has been a slight slippage. What has been very impressive is the increase in British Columbia, and particularly Alberta, which is being driven by quality. I've been very impressed by what's been done in Edmonton, and I think the results show that if a planned, strategic approach to delivering quality education is adopted, parents and students follow.

I keep thinking about the fact that in the 1980s there were studies done that showed that if the increase continued at the same rate, by the year 2000 there would be one million students in immersion. Sometime in the 1990s, around the time of budget cuts, there was a plateau at about 300,000, and we've remained at about 300,000. Some provinces drop a bit, some provinces increase a bit, but certainly in terms of the potential that was seen for continuing growth and commitment, it remains fairly flat.

● (0955)

Hon. Michael Chong: In the 2003 action plan, there was a commitment made to increase the number of bilingual students in the 15 to 19 age category from approximately 24% to 50%.

I have two questions. First of all, what is the definition of bilingual? Is it those students who are just in French immersion, or those students in the normal streams who receive French language instruction? It seems to me that the only way to become bilingual is to be in French immersion.

Secondly, where are we on those numbers right now as we are halfway through the action plan?

Mr. Graham Fraser: There are two things I would say to that.

One is—and this is one of the challenges you always have in terms of statistical analysis of language mastery—that it tends to be self-identification. So the numbers that have always provided the basis for the analysis have been the degree to which people at that age self-identify as bilingual. Every now and then, there are tests that show that people either aren't as bilingual as they think they are, or are more bilingual than they say they are. It's a challenge in knowing exactly what we're talking about.

On one comment you made, challenging the idea that immersion is the only way to be bilingual, I didn't go to immersion. I'm a product of core French, as are many of my equally bilingual colleagues.

The Chair: You were sure a talented student in those courses.

We will now move on with Monsieur Gravel.

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Fraser. I have not been a member of this committee for a long time, but this is the second time you appear before the committee. I would like to thank you and your team for being here.

I'll begin with a comment. I was surprised to hear Mr. Lemieux praise Mr. Lord and his work, because the report has not even come out yet and the consultations are taking place behind closed doors. Perhaps some people have access to information which others don't.

In your presentation, you said this:

To continue supporting community development, all aspects of the current action plan must be renewed and new elements added.

You then mention arts and culture, early childhood development, day care and preschool.

Why do you think day care and preschool are so important?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Experience has shown, together with some studies, that in minority language communities, access to preschool was a determining factor with regard to the school which the children would then attend. But there is today a gap between the number of young people who have the right to attend a minority language school and the real number of students who actually go to such a school.

The Government of Ontario created a certain number of French early childhood education centres in minority communities outside Quebec, such as Windsor. We noticed that almost all the children who attended a French preschool then went on to attend a French school. However, it is clear that if a child who is just learning to speak French attends an English kindergarten or pre-kindergarten, chances are that child will go to an English school. I think it is very important for parents, and more particularly exogamous families, to be able to send their children to these early childhood centres.

● (1000)

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I would like to talk about another subject, namely the incident involving Mr. Jean Léger, who was unable to receive service in French from Air Canada, and as a result missed his flight.

How do you intend to deal with that situation?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I do not want to comment on the details of the incident. I think that Air Canada's service to its passengers is a very important matter, as well as the responsibilities of the Halifax International Airport.

We are currently looking into the Halifax incident. We are studying it in detail and we are looking into the airport's responsibility. I met with the president of Air Canada last week. We talked about the right of Air Canada's passengers to be served in their own language, and of the importance of that right. Further, we had a more in-depth discussion with Air Canada to find ways of improving the situation.

In part because of what happened, we added Air Canada to the list of 37 institutions which are covered by our performance bulletins. In our annual report, we will for the first time cover Air Canada and analyze what it does in terms of service and what happens in the workplace.

The Chair: That's quite interesting. Thank you, Mr. Commissioner.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I do not want to dwell on figures. Mr. Lemieux said that money was not the only important thing, that concrete action also mattered. The government boasted that it injected an additional \$50 million into the action plan, but it certainly did not boast about cutting \$50 million from the regular plan. The two things cancel each other out, and there still is a shortfall of \$132 million.

Let's talk about the battles which were won thanks to the Court Challenges Program. Francophones on Prince Edward Island and in New Brunswick won the right to have French schools. That's why some young people were able to learn French and reconnect with their mother tongue.

Mr. Chong himself said that education is important. At every meeting, he wants to talk about education. But the fact remains that the regular plan is \$132 million short. That's a lot of money, and it affects bilingualism and minorities in Canada.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I believe that the government must respect every single commitment it made under the action plan. This includes improving on commitments already made and making sure that the money is all spent.

Mr. Yvon Godin: As for Mr. Lord, you seem to be paying him a lot of attention. You said that he got good results in New Brunswick. But I can tell you that your counterpart, Mr. Michel Carrier, who was the Official Languages Commissioner in New Brunswick at the time Mr. Lord was Premier, and whom you know well, said this week in the papers:

The position of Commissioner of Official Languages in New Brunswick has existed since 2003. Michel Carrier noted that in his four years as commissioner, he always received the same complaints. That's why he feels that departments and other government institutions must do more than simply react to non-compliance with the act.

Mr. Commissioner, there is no reason to boast about what was achieved in New Brunswick when Bernard Lord was Premier. He was not able to properly look after bilingualism in that province, so it doesn't look too good for Canada as a whole. The situation is clear: we have the data and the studies. I don't know if you looked at all the information. Further, New Brunswick's francophone minorities have shrunk by 2%. These are Statistics Canada's figures.

● (1005)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, with all due respect for Mr. Lord and the member of Parliament, I insist on repeating that I am focused on what the government is achieving. Even though we are on good terms, the final product is really all that matters.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Commissioner, you talk about the final product, but is it not a fact that there is a shortfall of \$132 million which should have gone to the communities?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Those figures—

Mr. Yvon Godin: —talk.

The Chair: Yes, but I've just received them, as have you. They were made public this week, and we still haven't conducted an in-depth analysis of them. Whatever the case may be, it's very important that the government spend the money it promised to spend.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, will the Office of the Commissioner analyze why the communities did not receive \$132 million?

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I'm just asking for a yes or a no.

The Chair: Don't worry, you still have a minute left. You'll have time to get your answer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: There you go: I've worked myself up.

Will the commissioner try to find out why the missing \$132 million were not spent on regular training and education programs as intended? A strategy was developed, and this strategy should yield results. The strategy came up \$132 million short, which means that institutions did not receive any money, nor did people who could have taken language or literacy classes. The list is long.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, in our office, the word "investigation" has a very specific meaning. We are talking about figures which were made public the day before yesterday by the department. I will look at them, as will the member. It goes without saying that analyzing government results is part of our mandate. These figures are included in those results, and they have just been made public. We will therefore take these figures into account when we analyze the government's performance in this area.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For our third round, we will begin with the official opposition.

Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the commissioner and his accompanying staff.

Commissioner, you said earlier that you discussed the recent French-language service shortcomings, including those that occurred in Halifax, with the CEO of Air Canada. It's all well and good for the company to express a willingness to make progress, but as you mentioned on several occasions, it takes concrete action for things to actually get done.

I don't know whether I've already told you this, but I myself had a problem, albeit minor, which was quite unfortunate and insulting for francophone communities. And it's not the first time I've seen this kind of thing. In the last two weeks, in an Air Canada plane, I have seen a notice in French on the cockpit door which translated reads "Do Not Smoke The Toilet". And don't worry, the English version was correct. I didn't have my camera, which was a pity. But, upon reflection, I may have been arrested had I taken a photo.

It's awful. A company which says it wants to make an effort is asking us to not smoke the toilet. Air Canada needs to ensure that the translations are acceptable. Now, don't worry, I have no desire whatsoever to smoke the toilet. I know what the sign means, but the problem is that these people are supposed to offer bilingual services. I'm sure someone from Air Canada is listening today. And if not, when you have an opportunity to speak to the CEO, tell him to make good on his good intentions by taking the kind of concrete action, albeit small, which will curb the frustration felt by francophones when it comes to services in French.

Having said that, on page 2 of your document, you said the following:

I was pleased to hear the government reiterate its support for linguistic duality in Canada in the Speech from the Throne on October 17, 2007 [...]

Once again, it's concrete action which is important. The Conservative government says many things, but we have seen recently how things have backfired. The government is reiterating its support for linguistic duality but at the same time has relieved National Defence, among others, of its obligation to staff certain positions with bilingual individuals. In other words, candidates no longer have to be bilingual in order to obtain these positions, which has the effect of eroding away linguistic duality. Isn't that behaviour contradictory?

I'd like to hear what you have to say on the matter.

•(1010)

Mr. Graham Fraser: As far as the Speech from the Throne is concerned, I've always said that it was a menu and not a meal. So we'll wait and see what is served up to us. I have a similar philosophy when it comes to the commission the government established. The results are what's important. Now in terms of the Canadian Forces, let me come back in part to what your colleague said.

I was very concerned when I heard about what Mr. Yves Côté discovered concerning the training received by French-speaking soldiers. I said very clearly to the people on the National Defence Joint Management Committee that Mr. Côté was perhaps on his way out, but that I was not going anywhere. We are now conducting audits on training. I have toured a number of military bases. We're keeping a very close eye on the Canadian Forces' transformation system, what people call the transition from a universal to a functional system. Only 44% or 47% of positions designated bilingual were filled by people able to communicate in both official languages. Clearly, it was a failure. The decision to change their approach was an admission of failure. What we now need to assess are the results of their new approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser. As you are aware the committee also considered the Borden case, among other cases.

We now go to the Bloc Québécois with Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I hope that Ms. Lemieux will accept my sincere apologies. Ms. Lemieux, earlier, I gave you the wrong title. I hope that you will forgive me.

Those of you who do not know what I am talking about should read the "blues".

Now that that is out of the way, Commissioner, you spoke about education in the language of the minority. There is what we call FL1, French as a first language, and FL2, French as second language. Under the action plan, the goal is to increase enrolment in minority official language community schools so that, by 2013, 80% of eligible children are enrolled. I do hope that we achieve 100%.

In the late 1990s, when I left Saskatchewan where I taught at the École canadienne-française de Saskatoon, there was a 10% enrolment rate even though Saskatoon is the most populous city in the province. We had our work cut out for us and there were hurdles. I am going to speak to you frankly and I am going to tell you what those hurdles were. We met with Canadian Parents for French and told them that it is all well and good to have immersion students, but that rights holders, in other words those young people whose mother tongue was French, should be in our schools. They agreed, but they said that these students were role models for their own children. So that kind of discussion went on. It was a problem. It was quite clearly a case of recruitment.

What is more, these school divisions or school boards did not want to lose these children because at the time the provincial budget allocated \$5,400 per child. In addition to that, the Department of Education did not want to promote our schools, which accounted for one of the seven categories of schools of the Fransaskois School Board of Saskatchewan.

The purpose of the action plan is to meet the community's needs, that much we agree on. Can you shed some light on the matter and tell us how to successfully reach this goal of 80%? Can you answer that question and can you tell us what is currently happening? Earlier you referred to Edmonton. I assume that the Edmonton School Board had shown willingness to move forward on this.

I would like to speak to that issue.

•(1015)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I acknowledge—and it concerns me a lot—that the enrolment rate among rights holders is very low. I think the census study showed that there is an average enrolment rate of about 50% across Canada. It is all the more worrying because rights holders only have this right for one single generation. It is not an ongoing right, it disappears.

It is my deeply-held belief that we need to acknowledge the importance of excellence in our minority schools. Parents will not sacrifice the education of their children just for the sake of principle. If we give them an education where there are fewer programs, fewer services, less equipment, fewer sports, and if their young 14-year-old boy wants to play soccer and there is no soccer team at the French-language school and yet there is one at the English-language school, their choice will be quite difficult. My belief is that francophone schools are destined to provide excellence in education, and I have already told them that. They don't have any other choice.

Now, the departments of Education also share an obligation and that is to recognize that these schools cost more. Ontario has acknowledged this. The Government of Ontario acknowledged this difference after having calculated the per-student cost of minority

francophone schools. There is now more money for students in minority schools than there is for students in majority schools. And no one is complaining about this. There has been an acknowledgement of this difference.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

We'll now move on to the Conservative Party, with Mr. Lemieux.

•(1020)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To begin with, I'd like to set the record straight on a few matters, especially in relation to what Mr. Godin said. I don't know what he was huffing and puffing about, but it was quite a challenge following his argument.

As far as the action plan is concerned, I should point out that the Liberal government announced a \$751 million plan. In March 2008, \$810 million will have been spent. In other words, our government increased spending under this plan. Other initiatives have been added. For example, we announced a \$30 million envelope specifically for minority official language communities, and the communities were grateful for this. There is a \$1 billion agreement between the federal government and the provinces for education, and to promote both languages. There's also \$30 million which went to Canadian Heritage for official language francophone festivals.

So, Mr. Godin, you need to be more rigorous in speaking about this issue. We need to set the record straight as far as what Mr. Godin said earlier.

On the matter of education, I was involved in a number of meetings with stakeholders from the education community, especially representatives from immersion programs targeting anglophones who want to learn French and programs for francophones wishing to improve their own language skills.

We're interested in primary and secondary education, and that's why I mentioned our \$1 billion agreement, in cooperation with the provinces and territories. But post-secondary education is also really important, especially after grade 12. What is really available to them in their own mother tongue? We've undertaken a number of initiatives in this regard also.

As parliamentary secretary, I went to Timmins to announce the allocation of a federal fund for Boréal College, Mr. Godin.

I'd like to hear your opinion about the post-secondary network and resources available across Canada.

Mr. Graham Fraser: You're referring to minority community post-secondary institutions.

Well, my position as commissioner has given me the opportunity to discover and observe the energy and vitality of these institutions which, often with limited resources, do extraordinary things. You referred to the Boréal College. I visited the Sudbury campus of the Boréal College. The Boréal College comprises several campuses. There is the University of Hearst, and the Cité collégiale here, in Ottawa.

There is now a network of institutions working together across Canada, which share best practices and often establish agreements and relationships with anglophone institutions in order to provide programs and classes. I'm referring to the Saint-Jean campus, which is the francophone campus of the University of Alberta. There's also the Bureau des affaires francophones et francophiles at Simon Fraser University. There's the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg. There are networks of post-secondary programs across Ontario, francophone colleges, and also, of course, the University of Ottawa and Laurentian University. There are anglophone universities in Quebec, which are, generally speaking, in a slightly different situation. And there is the Université Sainte-Anne in the Maritimes.

All these institutions do a good job.

• (1025)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Parliamentary Secretary. Unfortunately, your time has run out.

We'll now move on to Mr. Godin. You have five minutes, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try and speak more softly: it seems to disturb Mr. Lemieux otherwise. His hearing is too good and it hurts his ears. So I won't speak as loudly.

Let us use Mr. Lemieux's figures. Let's suppose for a moment that I accept them at face value. He said that the government has spent \$810 million. However, \$933 million was earmarked. Now even if we were to accept the figures put forward by Mr. Lemieux, there is a shortfall of \$123 million. I'd be more inclined to believe the figures provided by our research analysts, but Mr. Lemieux then goes on with that piece on festivals. We'd have to check the extent to which their budgets were cut before they got the \$30 million he referred to. Last year, the festivals didn't get any money, and they had to fight at the House of Commons. There is nothing to boast about.

For my part, I'm talking about teaching in the language of the minority. That is where the cutbacks were made, and that is where there was projected spending of \$933 million. Action plan and regular program expenditures totalled \$933 million, and yet the government spent \$810 million. Now I'm not talking about festivals, that's something else. I'm talking about educating our young schoolchildren.

Mr. Fraser, you were clear when you spoke about the institutions. You referred to the Boréal College. I went to Sudbury, and I met the principals. Mr. Lemieux came with us, I think, when we went there. I think that he was part of the official languages committee at the time. He was able to observe the positive impact the college has on Sudbury and the surrounding areas, and how it's benefited Hearst, Kapuskasing, Timmins, and all of the northern Ontario region. All this was achieved because of these institutions.

Let me use your words. You said that francophones might be wondering whether or not to send their child to a school where he or she can't play sports, where there may be no library, laboratories, and where there aren't enough classes, etc. The reason why the action plan worked from a health care standpoint is that there was enough money set aside. The reason why it hasn't worked in the area of education is perhaps due to a lack of money, in fact a shortfall of \$132 million.

I'd like to hear your reaction to this.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We will be taking a close look at the figures that were released this week. That will be part of the performance analysis we carry out in relation to the government. I will take into account the member's misgivings and his analysis of the figures. However, I hesitate to make a spontaneous analysis of such fresh figures. Indeed, as you say in English: "The devil is in the details". So we'll take a close look at this devil and determine what all this means.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do I have a minute left? Good.

We're going to meet with a number of public servants. Has a study been carried out on public servants' lack of training? I know that there has already been a big focus placed on training. Now what we're starting to hear is that once you reach a certain age, they no longer want to send you off for language training, etc. Has the commissioner's office undertaken a study on this matter?

Mr. Graham Fraser: No, we haven't conducted any such study. However, it is an issue which concerns me. As I said earlier this morning, intuitively, I think that there is a gap between actually being able to communicate and just passing tests.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We need to start telling the universities that the labour market is indeed for doctors, and lawyers, but also for public servants. The curricula should be geared to ensuring people are able to manage in both languages. And I think that it is a failing on the part of these institutions when they don't seriously believe that language is an integral part of learning a profession.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is precisely the message that I am sending directly to the universities. It is even more important now, because the public service is recruiting to renew itself. This is a very important time to send out the message, and I do so every time the opportunity arises. When I travel across the country, I make sure to meet with university representatives in order to pass this message on to them. I have already met with the committee of deputy ministers that is considering the issue of public service renewal.

• (1030)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

We will now proceed with our fourth and last round of questions. This gives the members who have not yet spoken an opportunity to participate in the exchange. I will also advise members that if they are willing to share their time, they should indicate that to me before speaking.

Monsieur St. Denis.

[Translation]

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.): I will be sharing my time with Mr. Mauril Bélanger.

First of all, thank you for your words of welcome, Mr. Chairman. I represent a large riding in northern Ontario that includes the Highway 11 corridor, which runs through cities like Hearst, Kapuskasing, and Smooth Rock Falls. It is a very hospitable, welcoming and innovative region.

I would like to raise a problem as my friend, Mr. Godin, did.

[English]

During the last redistribution, we faced a situation in northern Ontario where communities of interest, when it came to French minority language speakers, became an important problem. I know that Monsieur Godin faced that in New Brunswick. The process of the redistribution did not really permit very effectively the francophone leaders an opportunity to make sure their communities were protected.

I know this committee has engaged itself in the issue of the boundaries of ridings vis-à-vis francophone communities, and I believe your predecessor as well was engaged in that. I am just wondering if you could make a comment on the measures that you see...and thank you for being here, by the way, with your team. Just quickly, so that my friend Mauril has time as well, I'm wondering what measures, more proactive possibly, can be taken in the future to prevent.... We won't find a perfect solution, because there will always be winners and losers, sadly, but are there better ways to approach the next redistribution that will arrive on our doorsteps in the next few years?

Mr. Graham Fraser: The member raises a very interesting question, Mr. Chairman.

We've done some work on it in the past. It will be a subject that, as the next distribution approaches, we will be looking at very carefully.

I would ask Catherine Scott to add something.

Ms. Catherine Scott (Director General, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): You probably know that our office did publish a study looking at the whole redistribution process. We set out a series of recommendations for the Chief Electoral Officer on how the process should be undertaken in the next round. We will be doing a follow-up on those recommendations to see how they have been taken into consideration.

[Translation]

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I want to thank my colleague for sharing his time with me.

Commissioner, I would like to make two suggestions, if you want to take note of them. They are important issues for official language communities, and the first deals with early childhood and day cares.

As you will recall, the Conservative government, even before swearing in its cabinet, had stated that it would cancel the day care agreements signed with the provinces. These agreements contained linguistic clauses and, for the most part, communities were happy with them. My suggestion is as follows: since the \$250 million set aside by the Government of Canada to encourage the private sector to create day care spaces has not produced results, you could perhaps suggest that the government consider giving this sum of money to the official language communities to set up day cares. We are well aware that the work starts in the early years. We would perhaps be more successful if this sum of money were transferred to the provinces so that it could be used by the official language communities. That is my suggestion. A word to the wise!

Here's my second suggestion. It has become increasingly important—as you yourself pointed out—to examine the issue of immigration. When Ms. Caplan was minister, the caucus of francophones outside Quebec had convinced her to include an amendment in a bill—and the Commissioner of Official Languages of the day supported us—which stipulated that immigration programs must respect the current make-up of Canada, in other words, a ratio of 75% to 25% anglophones and francophones, which is not currently the case. In immigration, it is more like 90% anglophones and 10% francophones. It would perhaps be helpful, Mr. Commissioner, to undertake an in-depth study of past practices and of those that are not used. For example, I know there is a good budget for training newcomers to Canada in English as a second language, but very little for French as a second language. If we really want to have a long-term impact, we must take action. If nothing is done, the phenomenon will intensify in Canada and we will end up with francophones in Quebec primarily, and fewer and fewer anglophones, and the opposite in the rest of the country. This concentration will lead to an untenable situation. So Mr. Commissioner, I believe that it would be helpful to examine the broader issue of immigration.

Thank you very much for your indulgence.

• (1035)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger. Unfortunately, your time is up, but I think that the commissioner has made note of your very constructive comments.

We will now go to the government side. Mr. Petit, you have five minutes.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Good morning, Mr. Fraser. I am happy to see you again.

I have retained certain aspects of the action plan, because it did not always exist. The official languages acts have not always been applied.

I am going to use the expression "francophones outside Quebec". Censuses by Statistics Canada show that since 1960, the number of francophones who are not necessarily bilingual has gone from 800,000 to 1 million. There are more than 100 schools, 21 colleges and universities, 21 community radio stations, 2 daily newspapers, and 30 weekly papers. In addition, Radio-Canada and the satellites currently broadcast cultural and information-based programs that did not exist in the past.

There seems to be a difference between minority communities in the west and those in the east. That is why we need your help. My children are studying at Collège Saint-Jean, in Alberta. In some fields, the quality of French used in teaching is even superior to what it is in Quebec. Collège Saint-Jean has become a faculty, since it now has a dean. We get the impression that in Alberta, at least in that case, there is a willingness to establish French in all areas, and this is without an official languages act. In Edmonton, you can easily study in French in almost all fields. And no one has had to hold a gun to anyone's head. I am talking about this particular case, because I am linked to the Collège Saint-Jean, which could be called one of the components of the University of Alberta.

I don't see that kind of willingness in the east. The central provinces seem to be lagging behind, and that bothers me. You have visited several groups, and you have been with us for some time now. What are the specific characteristics of the communities in the west and in the east, the anglophone ones in comparison with the francophone ones? How can the government modify its practices to meet their needs? There are places where you almost have to hold a gun to someone's head to get things to change, whereas in other places, it works.

I do not want to get into a power struggle. I am trying to promote the francophone cause, but there are also anglophone communities in Quebec. For example, there are small anglophone minorities in the Gaspé Peninsula that do not have any access to services in their language. There is a disconnect.

Could you elaborate on this question?

• (1040)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I would like to highlight two aspects in response to the member's question.

What struck me in the case of Edmonton is that they conducted in-depth analysis of what would be needed to provide training in French, not only in elementary and secondary school, but from kindergarten right through the 16th year. The analysis included the post-secondary period. They established 14 criteria including support from the school board and school principal, the hiring of a competent staff and support for that staff, and support from the community. It was not difficult, but the criteria were rigorous and logical, and they were applied. Often, in other provinces—and I do not necessarily want to make an east-west distinction—in other school boards, the same level of rigour was not used.

Another factor that cannot be neglected is the significant economic growth in Alberta. Some provinces are dealing with negative growth, but there is growth in Alberta. When I mentioned Edmonton as an example in other provinces, they often told me that Alberta had the necessary resources to take such steps. However, even provinces with fewer resources than Alberta must be rigorous.

The Chair: Thank you, I will try to be a bit more rigorous as regards time, Mr. Commissioner.

Mr. Nadeau, are you ready for your final comment?

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Petit, perhaps you should take a better look at the history of these communities before saying that that situations occur more often in some places than in others. I think some people will be somewhat disappointed with your remarks. I will leave you to think about that.

Commissioner, I want to go back over some topics that have already been raised, without however doing so in detail. As Mr. Bélanger said, something must be done in the case of Justin Bell, involving the RCMP. It is also a matter of respecting the Contraventions Act. There was the Mercure case, in Saskatchewan; and now we are talking about the Bell case. At some point, it gets a bit ridiculous.

As I said at our last meeting, people are going to start wondering what point there is to learning French, when they cannot be served in

French and they are even ridiculed. You are very familiar with the subject.

The case of Mr. Léger involving Air Canada is an example. I commend Mr. Léger for his courage, because people don't always have time to kick up a fuss to be served in their language. When I wanted to register at Elections Canada in 1995 in Saskatchewan, I had to go to the office three times in order to be served in my language. I wanted to register at Elections Canada in French. That is all I will say about it; it even made the newspapers.

It is a good idea to focus your attention on the base in Borden, but you should also consider the Department of National Defence. The representatives of the department are not bad guys, but the official languages file is not doing so well, especially as far as French is concerned.

You said that Canadian Heritage was looking after the policy and that it was to examine what is happening both in other departments and its own. There is a lack of objectivity—you used that word as well—because the same department is responsible for coordinating, managing and evaluating. That is a rather extraordinary situation.

We know that the Conservatives say they are able to make everything snow white thanks to the Federal Accountability Act proposed by Mr. Baird. Are there any aspects to examine in that regard? I would like you to elaborate on the topic of governance. You also raised the issue.

• (1045)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I did indeed raise that question in the last annual report, and I expressed exactly the same concerns about a potential conflict of interest and the danger of a directive coming from an office next door having less influence than a directive from above. In Ottawa, a message from the Privy Council has more influence than a message coming horizontally from another department.

We are taking care of that issue. We have commissioned a study on governance from Professor Donald Savoie. In addition, they have already made recommendations in the annual report on that.

I am going to ask Ms. Scott to say a bit more about this study Mr. Savoie is currently working on.

Ms. Catherine Scott: Just before Christmas, we asked Mr. Savoie to undertake the study. He has already conducted a series of interviews and he is in the process of writing his report, which we expect to receive within a few weeks. We have asked him to look at the repercussions of transferring the Official Languages Secretariat from the Privy Council Office to the Department of Canadian Heritage. We have also asked him to make recommendations on how to strengthen horizontal governance in general in the federal government. We planned to talk about this report in our next annual report.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: We have one last speaker, this morning. Mr. Godin, are you still ready to take the floor?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Since I believe that it is important for us to give you our impressions, Commissioner, I would like to go back to the incident involving Mr. Léger and Air Canada. There was also the case of Mr. Thibodeau, who had asked for a can of 7UP, but couldn't make himself understood. He was arrested by the police and the case went to court. Air Canada fought and was prepared to go all the way to the Supreme Court. That is incredible!

In the case of Mr. Léger, Air Canada supported the decisions of its employees in Halifax and felt it was a good thing to have him miss his flight. However, the video shows that Mr. Léger was very calm. That doesn't encourage people to fight for their rights. It sends a dangerous message. If Mr. Léger, who is the director general of the Acadian Federation of Nova Scotia, was unable to take his plane and a decision was made to make an example of him, imagine how much trouble the ordinary citizen would have!

I raise my hat to Mr. Thibodeau. I raise my hat to Ms. Marie-Claire Paulin who had a bone to pick with the RCMP in New Brunswick. She fought the case in court, and a settlement was finally reached. She had to fight the RCMP to obtain bilingual service in a bilingual province. Imagine that! Canada is bilingual, New Brunswick is a bilingual province, and people still have to fight. That is why we cannot send Mr. Lord too many compliments. He was premier at the time.

The problem is Air Canada's attitude. We can not only blame the employees, but also their supervisors who make the schedules and must ensure that the necessary personnel is on duty to provide the desired service. Air Canada could have blamed its own supervisors and told them that they had forgotten to include bilingual people on those shifts. Air Canada could have apologized to Mr. Léger. I don't know if they can hear me, but I still expect Air Canada to apologize to Mr. Léger and to the population of Canada for the way that francophone minorities have been treated in Halifax.

I don't want to leave out the Moncton airport. Personally, I generally do not go through that airport. One evening, I arrived at the airport and I demanded to be served in French. The woman was forced to bring back someone whose shift was over. She arrived at the counter and she served me in a sweatsuit. She wasn't even wearing her uniform. That shows they were short-staffed.

As commissioner, you have your work cut out for you, especially with institutions that, like Air Canada, continue to fight the system.

Earlier on, Mr. D'Amours talked about the lavatories. Don't smoke the toilet. That is comical. Air Canada could improve little things

like that or like the shifts for employees, and it stubbornly refuses to do so. What's more, when an incident occurs, Air Canada takes its employees' side and violates the Official Languages Act.

I wanted to share my feelings and thoughts in this regard with you.

● (1050)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, my answer will also cover some aspects of the questions put by Mr. Nadeau, who mentioned some rather sad cases involving the RCMP. I think there is some common ground in the remarks by both members.

I will say two things. First of all, the aspect that is missing in both of these incidents is the important value underlying all involvement by the Office of the Commissioner and which is at the basis of the act itself. I am talking about respect. When institutions do not show respect to Canadians citizens, incidents occur.

Secondly, I have already noted that certain institutions are caught up in a series of incidents. Complaints are received, investigations are conducted, and reports are produced. Then more complaints are received, more investigations are conducted, and more reports are produced.

We are trying to develop a third way of dealing with institutions with the systemic problems. We are looking at developing the ombudsman role. In addition to dealing with complaints, in addition to notices, we will sit down with the institutions that we can clearly see have a problem. We will try and see how we can establish a new dialogue in order to change their behaviour.

We are currently holding discussions with Air Canada. I have spoken with the Canadian Forces and I have met the new Commissioner of the RCMP.

We are very much aware of the incidents raised by the members of Parliament, and these are very important matters. This is something to follow up on in the annual report.

The Chair: All right.

Commissioner, that is a very constructive way of wrapping up the discussion between a committee and you and your organization. All there is left for me to do is to thank you for your sustained attention and that of your colleagues. I thank you again for your four-pronged analysis, it was very interesting. I also thank the members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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