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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1100)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 43 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, May 30, 2022, the committee is resuming consideration of C-13, An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, to enact the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and to make related amendments to other Acts.

Before we go any further, just a reminder to the members that, if they wish to draft amendments, they should contact Isabelle D'Souza, the new legislative advisor, who is replacing Alexandra Schorah. I will provide members with her contact information a little later.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for the witnesses and members.

Pursuant to our routine motion, I wish to inform the committee that all witnesses completed the required login tests prior to the meeting.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses, that is...

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: Mr. Chair, before we start the meeting, I should inform people that we will have to suspend for a few minutes because there's a vote.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, that's what I was going to do after introducing the witnesses.

Before the bells start ringing, I wanted to request the committee's consent to suspend the meeting five minutes before the vote so we can vote electronically.

Do I have unanimous consent for us to vote using the application and to suspend for five minutes before the vote?

I see no one around the table objects to that.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Mr. Chair, I don't know what's happening in Acadie, but it seems to me you're going fast.

What you're asking—

The Chair: We would have been in trouble if the bells had started ringing before we started the meeting.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm ready to cooperate, but I'd like the minister to be with us for one hour.

The Chair: Colleagues, you'd find out all kinds of good things if you'd let me finish what I have to say.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, you requested the committee's unanimous consent; I'm simply answering your question.

But I have some questions before I give my consent.

I'm willing to listen to you. Let's hear your speech, and then we'll talk.

The Chair: Okay.

I should also note that we will have until 1:30 p.m. to make up for lost time. In other words, if we lose 5 or 10 minutes as a result of the vote, we'll be able to make up that time, but we can't go beyond 1:30 p.m.

I hope that answers all your questions.

That being said, do I have the committee's unanimous consent to suspend the meeting five minutes before the vote?

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Yes.

The Chair: Does that suit everyone?

I think so. That's great.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I'd like to give my consent.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Dear friends, I will be with you in person at the meeting on Thursday.

I would like to welcome the first minister that we'll be hearing, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Sean Fraser.

• (1105)

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thanks for the promotion, Mr. Chair.

Some voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I said "the first minister that we'll be hearing", not the "prime minister".

Hon. Sean Fraser: I love that interpretation.

The Chair: The minister is accompanied by Ms. Fox, Deputy Minister, and by Ms. Scott, Assistant Deputy Minister.

Mr. Fraser, you are used to testifying before the committee. As you know, you have five minutes for your opening statement, then we will go to questions from the members.

You have five minutes, Mr. Fraser.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the members of the committee for inviting me to appear here today.

Before I begin, I want to mark the anniversary of the tragic incident that took place at the École polytechnique de Montréal. I want to tell everyone who is concerned about violence against women that we will not forget that incident, which unfortunately has now become part of Canada's history.

I would also like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

First, I would like to thank Minister Petitpas Taylor for introducing Bill C-13, the Commissioner of Official Languages, Raymond Thériault, and his team for their work regarding the vitality of francophone minority communities, and the member for Orleans, Marie-France Lalonde, who is my parliamentary secretary and an ardent advocate of our two official languages.

Although I'm not a francophone, as a proud Canadian, I believe in the importance of promoting French across Canada. I acknowledge the positive impact that the French language continues to have on our country.

Immigration is essential to all our communities. The growth of the labour force in recent years is almost entirely attributable to immigration. Furthermore, today's immigration will help us meet our demographic challenges.

This past August, Statistics Canada reported that the demographic weight of francophone minority communities was declining across the country, which explains why the immigration-related measures contained in Bill C-13 are so important.

Our present francophone immigration strategy was launched in 2019, and its purpose is to support the vitality of francophone minority communities. To do that, we have set a target of 4.4% of francophone immigrant admissions outside Quebec by the end of next year. We have also adopted additional measures to support the integration and retention of francophone newcomers.

I'm delighted to announce that, from January 1 to August 31 of this year, Canada admitted more francophone newcomers outside Quebec than in any other year since we began compiling statistics. We have actually doubled the number of admissions since the same period last year.

The number of francophone immigrant admissions to Canada outside Quebec has just now exceeded 4%.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, has made significant investments in the francophone immigration strategy. To leverage those efforts, I expect to announce a new francophone immigrant admissions target, which will guide our efforts after 2023. I intend to set a new target of more than the current 4.4% in order to offset the demographic decline of francophone and Acadian communities. However, we need to adopt a long-term vision in order to have an impact. To that end, the adoption of a francophone immigration policy will ensure that the government is committed to future francophone immigration.

We have made changes to assist newcomers in adjusting to their new lives once they arrive in Canada. For example, we have implemented the francophone immigration pathway and launched the welcoming francophone communities initiative so that newcomers feel welcome and integrate into their communities.

To attract more francophone and bilingual newcomers to Canada, we are expanding and targeting our francophone immigration promotion activities. This past August, for example, we opened a new office in Yaounde, Cameroon, which will enable us to increase our promotional activities in western and central Africa.

Immigration will play an essential role in Canada's economic future. We have also understood the need to raise immigration thresholds in future and to increase assistance to support the vitality of francophone minority communities.

I am pleased to support the various recommendations that have been made to modernize the Official Languages Act, which will improve our immigration system and enable all our communities to enjoy the benefits of immigration.

In closing, I want to thank my colleagues from all parties for their support of my efforts to learn French, particularly Mr. Godin, whom I regularly see in the corridors of Parliament, as well as my Liberal colleagues. I am very happy to be learning a second language. When I began my political career, I was incapable of carrying on a conversation in French. However, I have made progress with the help of my colleagues, who have encouraged me. I still make a lot of mistakes, and I'm not perfectly bilingual, but I will have learned another language by the time I finish my political career. That's a real positive for me.

● (1110)

Thanks to all my colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

We will begin the first round of questions with the first vice-chair of our committee.

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

[English]

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

Minister, I'm very happy to listen to you speak French. I'm in a similar situation. I work very hard to learn English, but now I'll switch to French.

[*Translation*]

Mr. "first minister to come and see us", I know that the burden of respecting both official languages doesn't rest on your shoulders alone. Nevertheless, how many times is your department mentioned in Bill C-13? The Minister and Department of Citizenship and Immigration are mentioned four times.

Immigration is important. Many organizations, including the Fédération des communautés francophone et acadienne, the FCFA, and the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, have clearly shown that francophone immigration, among other things, is failing. Many years ago, you introduced mechanisms to remedy that. My intention isn't to criticize past actions, but we must have a vision for the future, as you said in your presentation.

This bill states that the policy that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration adopts must include objectives, targets and indicators.

Minister, with all due respect, we know perfectly well that indicators alone will lead us to a dead end. We don't need to know that. Targets are important, but we have to do more. We're setting objectives and targets, but there's no obligation to achieve a result. How will this bill, once passed, provide you and us with more tools to do our job?

I may have to cut you off because my time is limited. I must obey the instructions of our chair, whom I very much respect.

Hon. Sean Fraser: First of all, the number of times the department is mentioned in the bill won't make much of a difference.

The bill requires the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to establish objectives, targets and indicators. To that end, we've had discussions within my department for the purpose of introducing ambitious strategies. Under the bill, this isn't merely an option: our department would be required to adopt measures to increase the number of francophone newcomers in order to protect the demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec.

We want to protect the francophone culture and identity of communities large and small. To do that, we have to introduce immigration strategies, but that won't be possible without francophone newcomers. My department can't continue to take in larger numbers of newcomers in general. Under Bill C-13, all future ministers will now have to adopt the same approach to welcoming many francophone newcomers.

Mr. Joël Godin: All the official language minority communities say we have some catching up to do to meet the targets. You said in your presentation that you had doubled the number of admissions. When you go from one to two, you double the original number, but that doesn't mean you meet objectives.

These are fine words, but how can you reassure the organizations that want to improve francophone immigration results?

The bill would grant you no power. It contains nothing that would provide you with additional tools. It's status quo and all for show. As I said, we're talking about objectives, targets and indicators.

The FCFA suggested that we meet a restorative target of 20%. Then we'll have to stabilize the number of francophone immigrants in order to maintain the demographic weight of francophones outside Quebec at a good level. That will even have to apply to Quebec.

• (1115)

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, the legislation starts the conversation every minister is going to need to have, but it also demands accountability and provides transparency, so the public can see the results of the measures we put in place.

[*Translation*]

It's essential that we increase the number of newcomers to protect and restore the demographic weight of francophones in Canada outside Quebec. However, we can't significantly increase that number overnight because there are no pending applications at IRCC. It's essential that we improve promotion and recruitment and support organizations and institutions.

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me for interrupting, Minister, but time is passing.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Joël Godin: The Commissioner of Official Languages and the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, the FCFA, which represents many organizations, say that Bill C-13 should focus more on restoring the demographic weight of francophones. We need to offset the declines of the past.

Do you agree with those two organizations, which claim that this bill wouldn't help to meet the established targets or provide you with the tools you need to do so?

The Chair: That's an excellent question, colleague, but your six minutes are up.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for agreeing to appear before the committee on such short notice, since we had to spend so much time negotiating and adopting the motion.

I want to congratulate you, Minister. On March 28, I said I'd be happy if you could meet the objectives that had been set, particularly since you and I have a shared Scottish heritage. In my case, it's the name of my riding, whereas you have a Scottish surname, like many of your fellow citizens.

You mentioned your parliamentary secretary, who's a Franco-Ontarian, and I know that Franco-Ontarians work in your office, even though they come from the north—I have to back my riding here. I bet they're lawyers sensitive to the importance of achieving francophone immigration objectives.

It seems to me you said you had exceeded the 4% target, didn't you?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, the francophone immigration rate is now greater than 4%. I'm convinced we'll meet the 4.4% target next year and the rate will continue increasing the following year.

Mr. Francis Drouin: First of all, I want to congratulate you. This is the first time in 20 years that this has happened. I therefore withdraw the remarks I made on March 28. Thank you very much.

You also mentioned that we had opened an office in Yaounde to process these applications and to do promotional work in francophone Africa. I think that's important, since that's where the young people are. We also read this week that the acceptance rate for study visa applications had risen 14% in one year. All that has happened before Bill C-13 is even passed.

What steps have you taken within your department to ensure that the necessary work is done to meet objectives and that francophones have access to our post-secondary institutions?

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's very important because international students, in particular, make an enormous economic and social contribution to our communities. When I saw the acceptance rate for students from western Africa, I thought that was a great opportunity for Canada to increase it. That rate has risen from 27% to 41%. However, we can't say "mission accomplished" yet because it's essential that we increase the acceptance rate for students from other regions of Africa. We also have the student direct stream, which can be accessed by students from Senegal and Morocco, and other countries.

We're still improving recruitment and promotion and taking measures to welcome more international students because it's a good thing for both them and Canada as well.

• (1120)

Mr. Francis Drouin: There's no doubting that progress has been made, and it has happened in a single year. I congratulate you on that.

Now let's discuss Bill C-13. You would obviously have obligations under section 41.1.

What do you think will change within your department if the bill is passed as is?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is important because we're developing an ambitious strategy under which we will welcome larger numbers of francophone newcomers. The obligations under Bill C-13 wouldn't be just for me or for now; every future minister would be required to continue developing a strategy on targets, public indicators and departmental obligations over the coming century. If every discussion is an opportunity to consider the demographic weight of francophones, ministers will obviously have to continue ensuring that the number of francophones in Canada outside Quebec increases. That's essential if we want to protect the francophone community.

Without Bill C-13, it would be easy for ministers to say that this is the problem, to have few discussions and to take other measures concerning other immigration issues. Under these statutory obligations, it would be impossible for ministers to forget their duties. It's important to move this bill forward now in order to protect the future of the culture and identity of francophones in Canada.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Francis Drouin: You have a good understanding of the francophone communities outside Quebec. It's important that future ministers and departments protect francophones' rights.

I won't ask you any more questions because I have 20 seconds left.

Thank you very much for being an ally of the francophone communities outside Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin

Before we go to the next speaker, I would like to say that we're maintaining a good pace. We have 25 minutes and 40 seconds until the vote, and Madam Clerk will warn us five minutes before it's time to vote. So you needn't worry. We can suspend the meeting while we vote using the application.

Minister, my colleague Mr. Beaulieu, our second vice-chair, will be asking you the next questions.

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

The Acting Chair (Mr. Mario Beaulieu): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you said that French was declining outside Quebec. Are you aware that it's also declining significantly in Quebec too?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, I've paid attention to the discussion on this issue. When I saw the statistics and considered the areas of jurisdiction, I understood that immigration outside Quebec was mainly an issue for me. Under an agreement that we reached with Quebec, the provincial government has the authority to select people with language skills—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Mario Beaulieu): Pardon me, I'm going to interrupt you.

Yes, we're seeing a significant decline in French in Quebec. Do you acknowledge that francophone immigration is important to Quebec?

One of the main factors that made it possible to improve the situation somewhat was the Couture-Cullen Accord. Other agreements followed enabling Quebec to select immigrants who had knowledge of French.

Do you agree that immigration is also important for Quebec?

That doesn't appear in Bill C-13, but we're going to try to get it included.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think immigration is very important for every community in Canada, both in Quebec and elsewhere. We entered into the Canada-Quebec Accord for that reason. Quebec is empowered to select every newcomer who immigrates for economic reasons and to select levels in all immigrant classes. That's very important, both in and outside Quebec.

• (1125)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Mario Beaulieu): That's correct. The federal government makes considerable use of temporary immigration to Quebec to circumvent the Canada-Quebec Accord. We're seeing that more and more people are being accepted and granted temporary student or temporary worker status, for example, but no language criterion is applied. We're told that 45% of these people only speak English.

Do you agree that we should also find a way to establish linguistic criteria in granting temporary student and temporary worker permits.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Quebec has the authority to grant Quebec acceptance certificates, or CAQs, and to determine who will receive them. There's a federal process and the provincial process, and the Quebec government is now empowered to authorize people to study and work in Quebec.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: According to CBC/Radio-Canada, there appears to have been a minor improvement regarding francophone African students. I'm told that the government has admitted that there's racism at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. I believe that's true.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Among other things, Quebec grants acceptance certificates, but many of them are denied. For example, Quebec universities and the provincial government accept foreign students, but the federal government rejects many of them.

Are you planning any mechanisms to address that situation?

Furthermore, in many instances, Quebec doesn't know whom it has accepted, as a result of which it's hard to locate those people—

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There were a few aspects to your question.

I don't think an increase in less than one year, from 27% to 41%, is insignificant. I think it's serious and measurable progress. We need to go further, certainly, but I don't think dismissing it as a slight improvement is appropriate or accurate.

Second, I don't think the suggestion that anyone has ignored racism within the department is a fair criticism. I will acknowledge that there has been discrimination within the department. In fact, because we wanted to make sure we were looking inward after the murder of George Floyd in the United States, we decided to conduct the Pollara survey proactively, to identify the problems we had. They were bigger than I anticipated they would be, frankly, and we developed an anti-racism strategy internal to our department to deal with that.

When it comes to the rejection or approval of students who are coming to Canada, each case is still going to be decided on its merits. I think we need to do more to increase the acceptance rate.

We have seen some progress so far. We need to continue to work towards developing a pathway to permanent residency, as was indicated in my mandate letter, in order to make sure.... There are students who are currently being refused on the basis that they're not likely to return home, when we want them to stay as permanent residents. That's an obstacle we can and must overcome. However, it will take some serious policy work, because it represents a funda-

mental change in the way we process temporary resident applications in Canada. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it; it just means we need to take the time to do it right.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I congratulate you for acknowledging that there has been a racism or discrimination problem. You can't solve a problem if you don't admit it exists.

The Chair: You have less than 10 seconds left, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In that case, I'll continue in the next round.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the minister for being here.

To restore and maintain their demographic weight, francophone and Acadian communities are asking that, in 2024, you adopt a restorative target of 12% per year. That target would gradually rise to 20% per year by 2036.

Can you confirm that your department will set targets of that size starting in 2024?

• (1130)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I set goals for the future, I think I need to demonstrate that I can achieve the goals we've developed with the communities that exist today. We worked, before my tenure in this position, with FCFA

[Translation]

and other stakeholders to establish the targets.

I think it's essential that we achieve our goals before setting bigger ones, especially if we want to gain the community's trust. It isn't good to have no plan to achieve a goal. A plan is essential if we want to develop a new strategy and a new target with the francophone community's involvement.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay.

It should be noted that these figures don't come from us, but rather from the FCFA and the francophone communities. We hope you'll show some confidence in the initial steps that are taken and that you'll acknowledge that much more has to be done in the next few years.

My second question concerns the programs.

Your department will need new and ambitious resources to meet the target requested by the francophone and Acadian communities. The status quo is no longer an option. More specifically, the communities want you to adopt a francophone immigration program that's separate from other existing programs and that's tailor-made to accommodate the needs and situation of the Canadian francophonie.

Will your department once again develop separate programs for francophones?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I've considered the possibility of establishing a separate new program for francophones, but I've also considered the option of using that new tool, the express entry system, to select people with French language skills.

I think there are two ways to achieve the same objective. I won't make any decisions today because I need to understand all the available possibilities for increasing the number of francophone newcomers. If I see that the new flexibility of the express entry system can accelerate Canada's capacity to welcome more francophones to Canada, then I'll use that tool.

For the moment, my perception of the path forward is incomplete. There may be other paths that my office and my department could explore, which would help increase the number of opportunities for welcoming more francophones. If that's the case, I will select that tool.

I have to complete that exercise first so I can then determine the best strategy that I should adopt before making a decision.

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right. I understand.

We agree with you: there clearly is a demand for a special program.

We have to use the tools that are already at our disposal, but if we want to achieve a much more ambitious objective, which is necessary in order to protect French, there clearly has to be a special program for the francophonie to reflect the situation on the ground in the communities.

This week we learned that IRCC had begun efforts to reduce the study permit refusal rate for African students.

What specific measures will your department take to ensure that francophone African students are admitted in the same proportions as students from other regions of the world?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We intend to take steps to increase the number of francophone students.

As I mentioned, the approval rate has increased from 27% in 2021 to 41% today. We will also be opening an office in Cameroon to provide services in the western and central regions of Africa.

We're still conducting promotional activities and recruitment campaigns. We're still communicating with applicants to inform them that settlement services are provided in their communities and in Canada.

There's no magic bullet, but I think it's essential that we continue increasing the approval rate and the number of francophone newcomers in the foreign student program, as well as the number of

francophones in general. It's essential that francophones and individuals who speak French be able to continue living in French in Canada.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. You kept exactly to your six minutes.

We have time for another speaker before we suspend in order to vote.

Mr. Généreux, you are the next speaker.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today, Minister.

I had a chance to speak to your parliamentary secretary, Marie-France Lalonde, at the Sommet de la Francophonie in Djerba a week and a half ago.

She was accompanied by a group of individuals representing francophone organizations from across Canada, including Yukon, Ontario and New Brunswick, which was well represented. Those people wanted us to pass Bill C-13 as soon as possible. They were clearly concerned about the bill now before us compared to what already exists.

What do you think is the fundamental difference regarding immigration between Bill C-13 and the act that has been around for 50 years?

What is the fundamental difference in this bill that will facilitate your work in future?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Generally speaking, the bill would require ministers to continue increasing francophones' demographic weight. Various characteristics of the bill acknowledge the significance of the contribution of francophone immigration in the act for the first time, in addition to recognizing that immigration is a factor that specifically contributes to maintaining and increasing demographic weight. My duty as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship is to adopt a francophone immigration policy to support the vitality of the community by means of objectives, targets and indicators. It's very important that we be accountable to Canadians.

It's up to the minister and the department to publish the data. That isn't an obligation under the act.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Pardon me, minister, I completely understand that it isn't an obligation, but the fact nevertheless remains that the bill contains a provision on immigration. In actual fact though, the new bill doesn't necessarily provide tools that would provide you with more resources. At any event, that's my understanding. You may see the matter differently.

When we went to Djerba, I noticed that young people in Tunisia, in North Africa in particular, and Reunion Island, want to come to Canada. These are francophone countries. The young people I spoke to face extraordinary obstacles. There's also a very significant financial aspect, and we are somewhat self-contradictory in the way we invite these people to come to Canada.

There's no reference to relations, promotion and so on in this bill, which concerns the French language, but the fact nevertheless remains that there's an intrinsic and direct link between Canada's expectations and what one can actually do. There's a major discrepancy between the two.

What I'm trying to say is a bit vague, but many young people would like to come to Canada. Unfortunately, the obstacles to doing that are enormous.

I'm pleased to see that we've now reached the 4% threshold. I congratulate you on that. The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, or FCFA, is aiming for 20%. Do you think that's potentially a realistic target?

• (1140)

Hon. Sean Fraser: It isn't possible right now because we haven't accumulated that many applications. We couldn't get to 20% this year even if I processed all the applications in IRCC's backlog.

Going forward, it's essential that we invest in promotion and recruitment in order to show interested individuals that the idea of coming to and staying in Canada is an option.

[English]

and eventually to maybe even become a permanent resident, but without letting so many more young people know.... You may have met a lot of them, but not every person in French-speaking countries is thinking about leaving their country of origin, let alone coming to Canada.

Mr. Chair, are you—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister; the five minutes are up.

How much time do we have left before the vote, Madam Clerk? Is it three minutes?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Michelle Legault): It's approximately eight minutes.

The Chair: Then we will continue with you, Ms. Kayabaga. We will interrupt you if necessary. We will keep track of the time and you may continue after the vote.

You have three minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Minister. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

A number of witnesses recently came to discuss the fact that they are settled in Canada. They are francophones. French is their mother tongue. They want to stay here. One of the tests they have to take

to be granted permanent residence in Canada is a language proficiency test.

Why should we continue asking francophones to take a language proficiency test?

Hon. Sean Fraser: That doesn't just concern francophone immigrants. We do the same thing now with anglophone immigrants who have graduated from a Canadian English-language institution.

I'm open to the committee's suggestions for improving the ability of anglophone and francophone immigrants to settle in Canada and be granted permanent residence. We should conduct a study on the relevance of these tests.

I don't think this will be an issue that comes up with regard to Bill C-13. If the committee makes a recommendation on this, that will be an opportunity for me to introduce some effective strategies.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: This committee has previously been told that linguistic expectations of francophone immigrants should be lowered. They've been educated in Canada and have the same language level as Canadian francophones, in some instances even higher levels. Some Canadian francophones can't pass those tests.

Minister, I'd like to congratulate you on the decline in the refusal rates relative to last year's rates. My colleague spoke to you about the challenges that North African students must overcome in order to come to Canada. However, the figures that you gave are quite high.

Would you please tell us about the announcement that was recently made about the change in the refusal rate for francophone students from Africa?

The Chair: Ms. Kayabaga and Minister, I must interrupt you.

Keep that question in mind, Minister.

We will suspend in order to go and vote, and we will then resume as soon as possible.

• (1140)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: We will resume.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have a little more than two and a half minutes left. Perhaps you could take 10 seconds to remind Minister Fraser of the context of your question.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, earlier I discussed the refusal rates that my colleague had mentioned in connection with the applications of African students.

First of all, I would like to congratulate you on the progress that has been made on this bill.

Would you please discuss the rise in the percentage of applications from North African students that have been accepted? And what about the 4.4% target that the department has set? Do you think it can meet it?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for your question.

Before answer it, I'd like to thank you for the questions you've asked at previous meetings of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration concerning international students and for the time you've devoted to that. I've made some changes, and I thank you for supporting those efforts.

The rate at which applications from North African students are accepted has risen from 27% to 41%. That's good news, and we must continue our efforts to increase the acceptance rate for North African students as well as students from central Africa, western Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. We're still taking measures to that end and building relations with the home countries. We send them information on our programs, which fosters ties between those countries and Canada's institutions.

It's essential that we continue making efforts to raise the 4.4% target. It's hard to get this year's figure because the final result will depend on the decisions that families make whether to travel to Canada. Whatever the case may be, we have the capacity to process the applications and to meet that target, but it's difficult for the department to determine whether a family will arrive in December or January.

We have a target for 2023. I'm convinced that our government can welcome 4.4% francophone immigrants in 2023. We are very close to that percentage this year.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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

• (1210)

Mr. Joël Godin: On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'd like to clarify how much time we will be allowed before the end of this first hour. We were suspended for 22 minutes, and I'd like to organize my questions accordingly. Will that time be added to the second hour?

The Chair: We normally get through two complete rounds of questions in one hour; that's all.

We could add 22 minutes, but I don't know what arrangements Ms. Fortier has made. We can start the next round of questions, but I'll have to cut us off somewhere because we won't have time to... Let me do the calculation.

Mr. Joël Godin: You said we had until 1:30 p.m.

We can divide the question time between the Conservatives and the Liberals. There will be 15 minutes left after the two and a half minutes for the Bloc Québécois and the NDP. After that, there'll be five minutes each for the Liberals and the Conservatives, and then we'll come back with the Conservatives and Liberals.

I just want to clarify the situation.

The Chair: We had agreed that we would extend time. We can have another round of questions from the Conservatives and Liberals and then another round. Then we will have to adjourn the meeting.

Mr. Joël Godin: Will each of us have a five-minute round?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: All right.

The Chair: I gave Mr. Beaulieu the floor before Mr. Godin's point of order.

I'll restart the clock.

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

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

Minister, earlier you said that francophone immigration was important everywhere.

Were specific measures recently taken to increase francophone immigration to Quebec?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, definitely.

We've made a considerable effort to increase the number of francophone newcomers outside Quebec.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Minister, I'm referring to francophone immigration to Quebec.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Pardon me, but the interpreter said the opposite.

I think it's essential that we cooperate with the provincial government. As you very well know, the decision to establish immigration thresholds is up to the Quebec government. My job is to process cases.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We were told that procedures that the federal government had put in place were undermining francophone immigration to Quebec. For example, employers outside Quebec enjoy a very simplified process for hiring francophone temporary foreign workers, but that process isn't available to Quebec employers, which increases the pool of francophone temporary foreign workers eligible for the permanent selection program outside Quebec.

We've heard that some people who are already settled here under temporary permits will be moving to other provinces so they can acquire permanent residence sooner.

Are you prepared to make that mechanism available to Quebec employers to facilitate permanent residence in Quebec?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The committee has to understand certain important factors.

We intend to offer former Minister Boulet's Quebec international mobility program plus in order to simplify the process for temporary workers.

However, there's a process that's specific to Quebec, but it was the Quebec government that decided that.

As for the number of newcomers who have acquired permanent resident status in Canada, it's very important to understand that the level of permanent residence in Quebec is determined by the Quebec government.

I understand the people who want to settle in other provinces. They can do that given the mobility right in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

My question concerns the services that new immigrants need.

Do you intend to offer francization courses to newcomers, even if they've decided to take English-language courses?

Will newcomers be able to learn both languages, regardless of where they live in Canada, but especially if they live in communities with a strong francophone presence?

• (1215)

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's a good question.

The federal government doesn't provide that service directly, but it supports institutions that offer those services in the communities. We've increased the number of organizations in the francophone communities from 50 in 2018 to 80 today.

It's actually hard to determine which organizations can provide French-language training in rural anglophone communities. If that service exists, it's a good idea for the organizations to be able to provide services. However, that's not possible in every community.

We're going to open a new office in Dieppe, New Brunswick, which will help promote innovation in francophone immigration to Canada. It's a good thing for New Brunswick, but also for the country as a whole.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I would add that this demand is coming from the communities. We know that the Department of Immigration doesn't provide the services, but it does invest in them, and we must definitely invest in them. We can't invite people to come here thinking they're going to stay if they don't have access to the services they need on the ground.

Do you intend to enhance integration programs, including French literacy programs?

Do you intend to work in partnership with the communities and community organizations that provide French-language training across Canada?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton. That's a good question, but your time is up.

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

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your testimony, Minister.

I'm a member from British Columbia, like Mr. Vis, who is with us virtually.

I can tell you that we rely on francophone immigration in the west and across Canada, not just in Quebec. There's a lot of interest in it. You can see it particularly in our schools, where French immersion programs are very popular. So francophone immigration is essential.

You said that francophone immigration had increased to 4%. Do you have any statistics on how many of those immigrants have settled in the west, in Alberta or British Columbia, for example?

Do you have the data, or do you just have the overall percentage?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have them to hand, but it would be easy to send them to the committee.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay, thank you.

Last year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we heard testimony on the lack of services for newcomers. The federal government was missing in action. Consequently, in our region, the Fédération des francophones de la Colombie-Britannique and the provincial government, among others, took over, together with our riding offices, to bridge that major gap.

The department now has way more officials to process applications, and there are fewer applications than there were before the pandemic, but waiting times are increasingly long, which is very hard for people trying to immigrate.

Could you tell us a little about what you're doing to expedite the process? I know that many people want to know this because they're still expressing their frustration at our offices. I'd mainly like you to tell us about immigrants from francophone countries.

• (1220)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

The pandemic caused a lot of problems. When we shut down the borders, we continued accepting applications, and applications were backlogged more than normal. We were also responding to the situations in Afghanistan and Ukraine. The number of applications also rose because Canada is a very popular destination.

We're making investments to expedite application processing.

[English]

In the fall economic statement last year, there was \$85 million. We're now in the process of hiring 1,250. We've almost completed that hiring blitz, and we've seen the productivity go up. We relaxed a whole suite of policies, from an administrative point of view, and have embraced technology to speed it up.

Having a lack of limits in the TR to PR program for francophone newcomers creates an opportunity for those who are already here to stay. We continue to work with different countries with large francophone populations, in order to try to spread information about this.

I'm trying to go as fast as I can, because I sense I'm almost out of time. We're going to continue to make what investments we can to process more cases.

[*Translation*]

Next spring, we'll be able to select candidates in the express entry system who have the necessary language skills and who intend to travel to a particular region or the regions that have major labour shortages. We'll have that new flexibility to increase the number of francophone newcomers starting in the spring of 2023.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

You mentioned productivity, and that's very important because the bureaucracy is as slow as molasses.

If I have a few seconds left—

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

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay.

In that case, I wish you all a Merry Christmas.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The last five-minute round will be divided in two, between Mr. Drouin and Ms. Kayabaga.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We've discussed the targets. We've talked about taking in more francophones. To do that, we obviously have to have the local infrastructure with which to receive them.

There's a francophone community in my riding, a small welcoming town called Hawkesbury. I know the Cité collégiale campus was established there, and the minister responsible for that is here today.

The Cité collégiale's mandate is to train and prepare francophone immigrants who are in Africa. I also know that, when we came to power, francophones were welcomed in English at Pearson airport, but that has changed.

With regard to all that, Minister, how important do you think it is to welcome francophone immigrants to Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's very important.

But there's a problem. This isn't the topic of the day's discussion, but it's an essential factor in providing services in French. In francophone immigration, it isn't enough just to reach a certain number. It's essential that we enable people who have chosen to live in French to do so.

It's important to welcome francophones in French, but it's also important to provide services in both official languages in day care centres, high schools and stores.

I come from a very small rural community. During my first election campaign, my community lost a school and mental health care services. Imagine the consequences if the francophone community lost those same services. The community wouldn't exist in French. Families would lose the opportunity to live in the language of their choice. That's not acceptable in Canada.

It's important to promote an inclusive culture so we can promote and protect the French language, but also to protect Canada's culture and its two official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

There's not much time left, Mr. Drouin. We will go to Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I'll ask these questions in English to save time, as I have only two minutes. I'll also ask two questions in one.

I'm wondering if you think it would be beneficial for us to boost the number of French-speaking PRs if we were able to bring more francophone workers into the country.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

I'm also wondering if we can do something to leverage the express entry program, which we amended in 2017.

Lastly, how can we use the tools at our disposal to tell the francophone world that Canada wants to make this a priority?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll reciprocate and answer in English, because I talk really fast in English too.

The answer to your first question is, yes, let's increase the number of permanent residents who are francophone. We need to do that not just because it's the right thing; the economic opportunity for Canada to be a destination of choice for people who want to live in French and work in French would blow you away. When I meet with organizations in western Canada—I was in Alberta a number of months ago with a network promoting francophone immigration—the opportunity to attract skilled workers to communities where they can live in the language of their choice is extraordinary. We need to embrace it for economic as well as moral reasons.

On express entry, new flexibilities that will come into effect this spring will allow us to choose workers through the federal economic streams for the first time based on the sector they work in, the region in which they plan to live and their linguistic competencies. We will have the ability to do a targeted draw based on a person's linguistic competencies, including whether they can speak French or whether they are francophone. This will create a flexible opportunity for me in the short term to further increase the number of francophone newcomers who obtain permanent residency. We plan to look at the best ways to do that in collaboration with communities across the country.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

Before the chair cuts me off, Minister, I want to make sure I correct myself.

[*Translation*]

I talked about reducing the number of tests that francophones are required to take.

What I meant was that we should update that so they're on the same level as Canadian francophones. The tests that people currently take are at such a level that even Canadians couldn't pass them.

I absolutely wanted to make that correction before my time is up in the chair cuts me off.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I understand. I have already had the opportunity to discuss with my deputy minister the need to review some of the language testing requirements to facilitate the entry into Canada of more francophones.

I appreciate your clarification.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I daresay that everything that comes from the Atlantic is invaluable and clear. I want to thank you for your poise and for expressing yourself in French.

Thanks as well to Mr. Vis, who is on screen, to Mr. Dalton, to Ms. Ashton, who speaks very good French too, and to Mr. Drouin, who masters the French language as well.

The effort that you make is an example for others to follow, and it's reassuring.

That being said, we will briefly suspend to allow the next panel of witnesses—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, before you suspend, I'd like to tell you that the quality of your French is excellent too.

Some voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you,

We will suspend briefly, and then we will hear from the team of the President of the Treasury Board, Ms. Fortier.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: We will resume.

We are in the second hour of the meeting.

We have the pleasure of welcoming the Hon. Mona Fortier, President of the Treasury Board. She is accompanied by Sonia LeBris, Acting Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, and Carsten Quell, Executive Director. Welcome to the committee.

Ms. Fortier, I think this is the first time that we have had you here in your capacity as President of the Treasury Board, although you have previously been with us around this table as a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Everyone knows the routine. You will have five minutes for your presentation, after which we will go to rounds of questions. I am very strict on time.

Ms. Fortier, the floor is yours.

Hon. Mona Fortier (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I feel very honoured to be here today.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking to you from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I have defended and promoted the official languages and linguistic duality all my life. As a proud Franco-Ontarian who has worked in this field for the past 35 years, I am very honoured to be here with you today to advance the first major modernization of the Official Languages Act in more than 30 years.

As you know, English and French, together with the Indigenous languages and cultures, are central to Canada's history and identity. They contribute to our diversity, our inclusivity, our social cohesiveness and our resilience.

According to the results of a recent poll released by the Commissioner of Official Languages, the population of Canada is very much in favour of the act's objectives, and 87% of Canadians across the country support it.

[*English*]

The current Official Languages Act dates back to 1988, and it really needs to be updated to reflect changing realities. Bill C-13 modernizes the act, proposing major improvements that would help address challenges facing the French language in Canada and official language minority communities.

Notably, it will help clarify and strengthen the part of the act that supports the vitality of minority communities, including the English-speaking communities of Quebec, and it would provide more robust tools for the Commissioner of Official Languages to address shortcomings. Importantly, it also clarifies and strengthens requirements for institutions to take positive measures to promote official languages.

As this committee knows, Mr. Chair, the Treasury Board Secretariat shares a responsibility for the implementation and the administration of the Official Languages Act with other federal institutions. Under the current act, the Treasury Board is responsible for the general direction and coordination of policies and programs relating to communications with and services to the public in part IV, the language of work in federal institutions in part V, and the participation of English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians in the federal public service in part VI. The Treasury Board Secretariat establishes and interprets official language policies, directives and regulations, and monitors federal institutions' compliance with them.

[*Translation*]

Under Bill C-13, the Treasury Board would play a more significant central agency role. This is in response to a major request that stakeholders and parliamentarians made during the consultations.

The Treasury Board Secretariat would play a greater role in better supporting and monitoring federal institutions' compliance with their linguistic obligations.

Bill C-13 would also require the Treasury Board to provide directives and establish policies for the federal institutions. This would include, for the first time, responsibility for monitoring the manner in which the federal institutions take and implement positive measures to improve the vitality of the minority communities. As a central agency, the Treasury Board is ideally suited to holding institutions accountable, a fact that will reinforce the positive measures taken within government.

The implementation of our new responsibilities would result in the creation of an official language policy centre integrating parts IV, V, VI and VII of the act. The Treasury Board would report on compliance in its annual official languages report.

Our legal measures are supported by administrative measures such as a new second-language training framework for the public service and the new Official Languages Regulations, under which we anticipate that approximately 700 currently unilingual offices will become bilingual in the next few years.

• (1235)

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, for the past half century, the Official Languages Act not only provided Canadians with fundamental language rights, but also shaped our identity. Quasi-constitutional, it is a law of fundamental importance to the social fabric of the country.

Bill C-13 modernizes and strengthens Canada's official languages legislation. Simply put, official languages need to be an all-of-government effort.

I want to thank the committee for its contribution to the modernization of Canada's official languages.

[*Translation*]

My colleagues, Carsten Quell and Sonia LeBris, whom you have already introduced and who are with me today, can also answer your questions.

Thank you very much for allowing me to be part of this historic moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the first round of questions. Each of you will have six minutes. The first vice-chair of our committee, Joël Godin, will start us off.

Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Fortier. It seems strange to be questioning you since we used to sit together on this committee.

Here's my first question. Ms. Fortier, as you know, since we have a time limit, I may interrupt you, but not out of a lack of respect.

First, I would like to know whether you've read the white paper.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Was it written to improve the situation of both official languages, but especially French, here in Canada?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Chair, here's what Minister Joly's white paper says about the Treasury Board:

The Treasury Board already has considerable powers concerning Parts IV, V and VI of the Act, but the use of these powers has declined over time, contributing to a weakening of oversight.

With this in mind, the Government intends to proceed with a series of reforms to strengthen coordination and accountability for official languages.

Legislative proposals

Strengthen and expand the Treasury Board's powers, notably the power to monitor compliance with Part VII of the Act as appropriate, by providing the Treasury Board Secretariat with the necessary resources so that it assumes the role of a central body responsible for ensuring the compliance of federal institutions and by examining cases where permissive provisions would be made mandatory.

Assign the strategic role of horizontal coordination to a single minister in order to ensure effective governance and implementation.

Create the authority to enact policies, directives and other policy instruments to clarify guidelines on positive measures taken by federal institutions under Part VII, and as proposed in section 3.3 of this document.

Madam Chair, can you tell us why this wording doesn't appear in Bill C-13 right now?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First, thank you for your question.

As we know, we have been studying this bill for quite some time. We have met with a number of stakeholders and examined ways within the government of putting this modernization of the Official Languages into concrete action.

Mr. Joël Godin: Minister, I apologize for interrupting you, but I want to know why...

Hon. Mona Fortier: I will explain.

Mr. Joël Godin: Yes, but I would not want you to give us a long spiel.

Hon. Mona Fortier: No, no, but I am just about...

Mr. Joël Godin: Yes, it's important, but it's also important that I get answers to my questions.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am just about to answer your question.

Mr. Joël Godin: Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Mona Fortier: What it is important to understand is that Treasury Board's role is internal to the government while, as we know, the role of the Department of Canadian Heritage is external. By dividing that role, Treasury Board will be able to focus on ensuring compliance.

Mr. Joël Godin: Minister, I apologize for interrupting you. Forget...

Mr. Chair, may I be allowed to interrupt her?

Mr. Francis Drouin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Could we not have answers and questions, without interruption? I'm having trouble following.

The Chair: I have stopped the clock, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Minister, I am going to change questions, because you do not seem to want to answer my question.

Mr. Chair, you can restart the clock.

Minister, Senator Pierre De Bané, a big Liberal, had warned the then Minister of Canadian Heritage that he would be unable to implement the Official Languages Act effectively; he foresaw that "all that provision will do is cause you frustration."

We have known for close to 35 years that Mr. De Bané was right. Bill C-13 exacerbates the problem by expanding the role of the Minister of Canadian Heritage of promoting and encouraging coordination in the implementation of the entire act.

When the government claims to govern based on evidence, why is it working so hard to extend an implementation model, one that has been shown to be ineffective for over three decades, to the entire act?

• (1240)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Under the approach we want to adopt, the role of Treasury Board would be as a central body that monitors, evaluates and ensures compliance with Parts IV, V, VI and VII of the Official Languages Act.

We will leave it up to the Department of Canadian Heritage offices to continue to apply their expertise from an external perspective, given their knowledge of the field. This will enable Treasury Board to actually verify compliance on the part of institutions within government.

That is the role being proposed for Treasury Board in Bill C-13, so it can assume more responsibilities than before and will be able to devote its efforts to monitoring and evaluating and to ensuring

compliance with the various measures and programs that will be implemented.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Minister.

What is there in Bill C-13 that gives you the power to take on obligations of result in each government department?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm not sure I understand your question.

I want to clarify that Treasury Board is going to be able to establish an official languages policy centre so that it can evaluate and monitor the various federal institutions and ensure that the work they do for Canadians is in compliance.

Mr. Joël Godin: In fact, Minister, my question was very simple.

As President of the Treasury Board, do you have the necessary tools for taking on an obligation of result for the various departments?

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are going to create those tools.

Mr. Joël Godin: There is nothing about that in the act. You do not have that power.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are going to have that power in the actual new act. We are going to assign the responsibilities to Treasury Board. Then, when we pass this bill, which I hope will be very soon, we will be able to make the necessary regulations so we can perform our role. As I said earlier, we are going to report annually on Treasury Board's efforts.

Mr. Joël Godin: We will take all the time it takes before passing this bill.

Those are the results I want, Minister.

I want to thank you for your collaboration during this examination. I don't want to be disrespectful, but time constraints are an annoyance.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Indeed, it's not the chair who is annoying, it's the time constraints.

Mr. Iacono will ask the next questions.

You have the floor for six minutes, Mr. Iacono.

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

I entirely agree that you are not annoying, but you play a very active role.

Hello, Minister.

As you can see, the whole team gets along very well.

We are happy to have you and your senior officials here.

What administrative measures is Treasury Board taking to strengthen the official languages?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for your question.

Again, I am very happy to answer all questions. I know your committee is working very hard to move this bill forward. We are all on the same wavelength in that regard.

To answer your question, I will say first that respect for official languages is not just a duty and a priority for our government; it is also essential for providing our services and carrying out our programs effectively. We are determined to provide federal services in accordance with our official languages obligations.

To achieve our objectives, we have followed the administrative measures set out in the White Paper, "English and French: Towards a substantive equality of official languages in Canada."

One of the things we are developing is a new second language training framework for the public service that will meet the needs of all learners, including the particular needs of Indigenous people and persons with disabilities.

We are also ensuring that positions in the public service are defined as bilingual where that is necessary. You know that it is done at an appropriate level of bilingualism and, as I said earlier, it is essential in order to create and maintain a work environment that encourages the use of the official languages in the public service. We are going to continue to protect and promote both official languages.

• (1245)

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

Will Treasury Board be hiring new employees in order to perform the mandate assigned to it by Bill C-13?

Hon. Mona Fortier: That is a very good question.

We are hiring 23 full-time equivalent positions, and that will represent an annual investment of \$4.3 million.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Yes.

Is bilingualism in the public service improving?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I believe it is, because we are committed to having a federal public service that continues to progress when it comes to official languages. The number of bilingual positions is constantly growing, from one year to the next.

According to a survey of federal public servants published in 2020, nine out of ten employees feel free to communicate with their immediate supervisor in the official language of their choice.

However, bilingual capacity deserves to be strengthened even further. That is why we are paying special attention to language training for our public servants.

I don't know whether you know this, Mr. Iacono, but over 40 per cent of federal jobs in the entire government require French and English.

I wanted to provide you with those figures.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you. That is good news.

Minister, who is in charge of promoting a culture of bilingualism in the public service?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Treasury Board has the Policy on Official Languages.

I don't know whether you have heard about official languages champions before. That policy requires that each of the more than 200 federal institutions appoint an official languages champion to support the deputy head in developing an integrated vision for the official languages program. The champions in the government enable us to create a culture of bilingualism and to know how it is working in terms of developing and promoting the official languages. On a daily basis, the champions contribute to federal institutions' compliance with the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: As you said earlier, 40 per cent of federal positions require that employees speak French and English.

How many public servants are bilingual?

Hon. Mona Fortier: As I mentioned, 44 per cent of public servants are bilingual. That figure refers to the number of bilingual public servants in the entire government.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Is that a percentage that you want to maintain or increase?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Because I am an eternal optimist, I want to increase that percentage. We are putting training opportunities in place and we are providing opportunities to recruit people who can do their work in both official languages. It is on the upswing, and obviously that number has to be increased.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

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

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Take the opportunity to wish us a merry Christmas.

The Chair: The second vice-chair of the committee will ask the next questions.

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

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

Thank you for being here, Minister.

First, I would like to ask you a question about Statistics Canada. I believe the President of the Treasury Board has an important role to play for that agency.

Hon. Mona Fortier: That is true, since Statistics Canada is an entity that we work with to make sure we have the evidence we need for doing our work.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Does the data that Statistics Canada wants to publish have to be approved by Treasury Board?

Hon. Mona Fortier: The role of Treasury Board is to promote open government. Statistics Canada therefore publishes data about open government. We do not approve the data, we just publish it.

• (1250)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The president of Statistics Canada has told us that he could not publish data on rights holders because he had not received authorization from the president of the Treasury Board.

Hon. Mona Fortier: In fact, it is actually that we could not get a complete count of rights holders. If there is one thing that the present government has put in place, it is the possibility of getting a count of all census holders. Statistics Canada therefore now has the ability to do that through the census. In the last census, in 2021, all rights holders were counted.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You have a responsibility in relation to the language of work and communication in the government. Is that correct?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Yes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: A few months ago, the CBC reported that 68 per cent of federal employees in Quebec were required to know English, while only 13 per cent of federal employees outside Quebec were required to know French.

Why does such a high proportion of positions require knowledge of English in Quebec?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for telling us about that study.

In the government, there are designated regions in which there are designated positions that require knowledge of both official languages.

On your question, I will add to what was said by Ms. Petitpas Taylor in the House. I am saying this to anyone who wants to hear it: the use of French is in decline everywhere in Canada and we are proposing measures to ensure that French is promoted.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: What is difficult is that in Quebec, the language of work is French. An effort is being made to make French the common language. This is vital to ensure the future of French in Quebec, and federal institutions really are a hindrance to that effort.

Mr. Barrière, the vice-president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada in Quebec, has even said that there is systemic discrimination in the federal public service in Quebec that assumes that communications will be in English first, when French should be the language of work. What can you do about this?

There is a request by the Quebec government to amend Bill C-13. The amendment calls for recognition that French is the predominant language—I would have said "common language"—in the federal public service in Quebec.

Do you think that is something that could be considered?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First, I want to make sure that federal services are offered in both official languages everywhere in Canada.

As you know, in Bill C-13, we are going to ask private enterprises under federal jurisdiction to offer these two...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Fair enough, but you are essentially reiterating the principle of institutional bilingualism, which is contrary to the Charter of the French Language.

Under the Charter of the French Language, Quebec is the only francophone state in North America. The only way to succeed is to integrate newcomers, and we know that 90 per cent of language transfers in Quebec have to be toward French in order to maintain our demographic weight.

By using the criterion of first official language spoken, for example, the federal government is already taking the position that 33 per cent of immigrants should receive services in English, and that is in direct conflict with our objective. The effect is to make francophones a minority.

We are going to propose these amendments to Bill C-13.

If it is passed, do you think it would be possible for you to make efforts to achieve this?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I know we are obviously always going to want to ensure that services are offered in both official languages from one end of Canada to the other.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You don't want French to be predominant.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I would say that French is one of the official languages of Canada, so I am talking about French and English.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In Quebec, however, French has to be predominant. It has to be the language of work, the common language. That doesn't mean that people...

Hon. Mona Fortier: Obviously, the language of work is going to be respected, in French, but we are also going to allow people to work in one of the two official languages: French or English.

We are well aware that there has been a decrease and a decline in French, not just in Canada as a whole, but we are well aware that in Quebec...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Knowing and acting accordingly are two different things.

Based on what you are saying, you are not prepared at all to respect the fact that French is the only official and common language of Quebec. That seems clear.

• (1255)

Hon. Mona Fortier: In conclusion, the language of service will take precedence over the language of work.

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

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu and Ms. Fortier.

We will now move on to the last round of six-minute questions.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

Minister, I would like to start with a short comment.

Your answer to my colleague Mr. Godin was that you wanted to have a power to implement whole-of-government strategies on Parts IV, V, VI and VII of the act. At present, we are including only one part of Part VII.

I would like to point out that I believe you are right. I believe we have to correct Bill C-13 to include all of Part VII.

With that said, I would now like to ask you a question.

You are very familiar with Canadian francophonie. A few years ago, you were the vice-president of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, the FCFA, and before that you were the president of the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, or FJCF.

So you must be aware of the importance of language provisions to francophone and Acadian communities. You know that are often unable to access the services they are entitled to from provinces and territories, even when those services are funded with federal money.

Do you support their request for enforceable language provisions in federal-provincial-territorial agreements?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for reminding me that I was a member of the FCFA and the FJCF, Ms. Ashton. We can see that we were talking about the same things 20 years and even 30 years ago.

On the question of the provisions in federal-provincial-territorial agreements, Bill C-13 will obviously strengthen the obligations provided in Part VII of the act regarding positive measures, as you mentioned, to ensure the development of official language minority communities.

Treasury Board will therefore have a role in monitoring how institutions abide by their obligations in connection with that position when it comes to positive measures, but also in connection with our provincial and territorial counterparts. On the question of monitoring, evaluating and ensuring compliance, we are going to evaluate adherence to language provisions in federal-provincial-territorial agreements.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I want to point out that this request has been made in clear terms by the francophone and acadienne communities of Canada.

In addition, the communities are asking that Treasury Board be responsible for the preparation and general coordination of the federal principles and programs for applying the entire act and that it not have the power to delegate.

What is your position on that request?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

Yes, I have heard the organizations express that concern.

To date, with the powers we have, we have never used that measure. We do not anticipate doing so, but yes, I have heard that concern. There may be a solution we can propose. As President of the Treasury Board, I do not intend to make use of that measure.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Fair enough.

For many years, a number of federal institutions have ignored their official languages obligations without suffering any consequences.

In addition to Bill C-13, do you intend to review the evaluation framework for senior managers in the public service so that all senior officials have to report to you on the efforts they have made to propose the positive measures that are needed in order to support the vitality of official language minority communities?

Hon. Mona Fortier: If I understand correctly, your question has two parts.

On the first part, concerning the accountability framework, a new framework will apply under Bill C-13, which I hope will be passed, so the answer is yes.

Could you repeat the second part of your question so I can be sure I am answering it properly?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Will senior officials have to report to you on the efforts they have made to propose the positive measures that are needed in order to support the vitality of official language minority communities?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I think we are on the same wavelength. We want to ensure the vitality of the language communities from one end of the country to the other for people who live in minority communities, in French or English.

• (1300)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Since I only have a minute left, I don't think I have time to get an answer to another question.

However, I would again like to point out the requests made by the francophone and Acadian communities. They say it is necessary for Treasury Board to take a much larger role as a central agency. We also have to be sure that Bill C-13 provides tools such as language clauses to genuinely support the communities where we see a very concerning decline in French.

We hope to be able to work to make sure that Bill C-13 is improved in this regard.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

To follow up on your comment, the role of Treasury Board will be strengthened. The additional powers will enable it precisely to respond to that question, which has been raised for a very long time by official language minority communities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

[English]

The next two questions will be of five minutes each, starting with Mr. Vis.

Mr. Vis, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

I've been looking very closely at part 2 of this bill with respect to federally regulated workplaces. Subclause 6(1) is of major importance. It says:

In relation to communications with or services provided to consumers in Quebec or in relation to workplaces in Quebec, Quebec's Charter of the French language applies instead of this Act to a federally regulated private business if the federally regulated private business chooses to be subject to Quebec's Charter of the French language.

Subclause 6(2) goes on to say:

A federally regulated private business must, in accordance with the regulations, give notice of the day on which it will become or cease to be subject to Quebec's Charter of the French language.

This is very problematic for me, because, one, the Minister of Justice outlined his opposition to Quebec's Charter of the French Language with respect to minority rights and the use of the notwithstanding clause. In this legislation, the Government of Canada is potentially subjecting Canadian workers to a law the justice minister has criticized.

Do you have any comments on this process and how the government will ensure charter rights are protected? Say, for example, that a business decides to be subject to a law the Prime Minister and Minister of Justice have criticized for its use of the notwithstanding clause and the potential charter challenges related to individual rights with respect to language.

Thank you.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Vis. Thank you for your statement and question.

I know you will be receiving Minister Petitpas Taylor on Thursday. She'll probably go into more of a deep dive on that.

All Canadians deserve to be served in the official language of their choice by federally regulated sectors. We also expect that businesses in these sectors take the official languages obligation seriously, by demonstrating leadership and setting examples. The commissioner—

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm going to interrupt you. I have a very short period of time.

Hon. Mona Fortier: You can, if you want to.

Mr. Brad Vis: With all due respect, on the notice paragraph, it specifically says that the business, not the individual, must provide notice. In this context, a business is determining the use of language—which happens, but you guys are encoding this in law—to which its employees will be subject.

That's why it's problematic. You have your justice minister making challenges about the notwithstanding clause and its use and in respect to language protection, but then you're allowing a business owner to make a charter decision for his or her employees.

Hon. Mona Fortier: As I said earlier, we will be bringing federally regulated sectors in to follow Bill C-13 to make sure Canadians can be served in the official language of their choice. I believe you—

• (1305)

Mr. Brad Vis: But the law, Madam, states that it's the choice of the business as to whether it follows the federal law or the provincial law.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Well, with Bill C-13, we will be enforcing the fact that federally regulated sectors will have the ability to offer those services in both official languages.

I know you'll be able to dive in more on this issue with Minister Petitpas Taylor on Thursday. I would let her bring forward the analysis that has been done for that provision.

Mr. Brad Vis: In good faith, Minister, I'd ask you to review those sections of the law. What you just said almost contradicts the powers of the Official Languages Act. With regard to the amendments under clause 54 of Bill C-13 moving forward for federally regulated workplaces, what you just said almost contradicts it. It says very clearly that it's up to the federally regulated private business to determine whether work is done in French or English.

For the record, I have no problem with the steps the Quebec government has taken. I'm addressing this only in the context of our Prime Minister, who has said it's problematic how the Province of Quebec has used the notwithstanding clause. Secondly, the justice minister, who comes from Quebec, has also stood in strong opposition to this law.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

I'm sorry, but we have passed your time.

Madame Lattanzio, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for being with us this afternoon.

Minister, I'm going to address some of the questions I have for you in French. The first one maybe carries a bit through the question that was asked of you by my colleague on the opposite side.

[*Translation*]

Why could Treasury Board not handle coordination as the central agency, instead of the Department of Canadian Heritage?

I would like to hear more from you on that subject.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for your question.

As I said earlier, Treasury Board's role will be that of central agency for ensuring compliance and for evaluating and monitoring the various federal institutions.

Treasury Board is in a good position to play a greater role internally, while the Department of Canadian Heritage will be better able to play a role externally, since it has expertise in the field.

As I said earlier, Treasury Board will be able to enforce and establish standards and monitoring elements across the government. The Department of Canadian Heritage will focus its efforts on programs and its commitment to stakeholders.

I will give you an example.

The office of the Department of Canadian Heritage, throughout Canada, gives it expertise in the field, while Treasury Board is only present in Ottawa. As you know, it would not be effective for a body like Treasury Board to be responsible for program implementation and also be in charge of compliance by federal institutions. To clarify, the Department of Canadian Heritage could not handle compliance by federal institutions. Treasury Board will be responsible for that.

You may have already heard from people like Linda Cardinal and Michel Bastarache, who also agree that Treasury Board Secretariat should not have sole responsibility for the Official Languages Act, although its role must be strengthened.

As well, as we said, we are making an essential change, and Treasury Board will have the job of holding federal departments accountable for using positive measures to promote the official languages.

In addition, as I think we have clearly shown, Treasury Board is the best central agency to handle that responsibility.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Minister.

I am going to continue in the same vein, the delegation of powers.

Some people have criticized the delegation of powers to deputy heads at Treasury Board. Bill C-13 limits the power of general delegation to a specific delegation to institutions.

How has this delegation of powers been used in the past?

• (1310)

Hon. Mona Fortier: As I said earlier in reply to a question from Ms. Ashton, we have never used that delegation of powers. So there is no experience in that regard.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Right.

Is the government going to adopt a tool that would allow for an official languages lens to be applied to the policies, programs, initiatives and services put in place by federal institutions, modeled on the gender-based analysis plus, or GBA Plus?

Hon. Mona Fortier: It is a tool that we take into consideration. As well, we referred to it in the well-known White Paper entitled "English and French: Towards a substantive equality of official languages in Canada." The government affirms its intention to strengthen the analysis of the impact of initiatives developed by departments regarding official languages and official language minority communities.

That initiative will be administrative, not legislative, which means that it is not currently reflected in Bill C-13. However, it will be applied administratively when the bill is passed, which I hope will be done soon.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Minister.

I come from Quebec, where I represent an anglophone minority community.

How does the government go about improving services in official language minority communities?

The Chair: That is a good question, Ms. Lattanzio, but your speaking time is up.

The next questions will be asked by Mario Beaulieu.

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

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

I am going to continue along the same line as Ms. Lattanzio.

Since the Official Languages Act came into force, what are referred to as "positive" measures in Quebec operate almost entirely to strengthen the anglophone community.

Will Bill C-13 change anything about that?

Hon. Mona Fortier: We have to continue supporting official language minority communities and anglophone communities, and that is what we are going to do through Bill C-13.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So there will be nothing for French.

Hon. Mona Fortier: There is always something for French. We have said from the outset that we are well aware that there has been a decline in French. However, in Canada and Quebec, we obviously have to respect official language minority communities...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We don't have a lot of time.

Quebec has asked that it be recognized that of the two official languages, only one is in a minority situation and is threatened: French. You are telling us that this request is denied in Bill C-13 and that you believe English is the minority language in Quebec. So all federal support measures will be devoted to English.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We recognize that there has been a decline in French in Quebec and in Canada...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: No, that's not it. You recognize that there has been a decline in French, but you continue to support English alone. That doesn't work.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We also recognize that we have to support federal programs and offer services to Canadians and Quebecers in both official languages.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: How can you say that you recognize there has been a decline in French and you want to support French, but you are going to continue devoting 100 per cent of your assistance to English in Quebec?

Hon. Mona Fortier: If I am not mistaken, very recently, regarding immigration—Mr. Fraser may have answered...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm talking about positive measures that involve your department.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I believe immigration is also a positive measure. We have to agree on that. Immigration is a positive measure...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You are not able to go elsewhere...

Hon. Mona Fortier: I can explain that we are going to respect...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: What I mean is that your answers show that you do not agree to any of the requests by the Quebec government and there will be no help coming from you regarding positive measures for French.

Hon. Mona Fortier: There are positive measures everywhere in Canada, through our programs, precisely to make sure...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I am talking about Quebec.

Hon. Mona Fortier: In the public service, for example, we have a training framework, and we are going to continue...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In the public service, specifically, 68 per cent of positions require English...

Hon. Mona Fortier: There is training in English and in French.

The Chair: Just a moment, please. There is a lot of noise.

There are ten seconds left.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: To conclude, I would point out that in Quebec, 67 per cent of positions in the public service require English, for about nine per cent anglophones. That makes no sense. The Official Languages Act of Canada is probably the main factor in the anglicizing of Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton and Mr. Boulerice, it's your turn. Which of you two would like to speak?

Ms. Ashton seems to be busy.

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

Ms. Niki Ashton: I was going to say I'm back.

The Chair: Right. Go ahead, Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: No, Mr. Chair, I am going to let my colleague have the floor. It's not the ideal time for me, as you can see.

• (1315)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Your boy is certainly growing up fast!

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Boulerice. I will reset the clock to zero.

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

Thanks to the President of the Treasury Board for being here.

In recent months, we have heard about a number of problems in the federal public service regarding respect for French, when meetings are held solely in English and communications also take place solely in English.

First, do you acknowledge the problems that have been experienced by federal public service employees in the last two years or in recent months?

Most importantly, what corrective measures are you taking to avoid this happening again in the future?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First, the situation always needs to be improved. That is one of my guiding principles. I have the privilege of being the President of the Treasury Board and of holding almost 80 per cent of my meetings in French, so I am setting an example. However, I will not hide the fact that we have work to do. We can improve the situation and encourage public servants to work in both official languages, and we have done that.

Earlier, I talked about the Policy on Official Languages, which means that we have 200 official languages champions in 200 federal institutions. That provides us with a better idea of what we can do to improve respect for official languages in the public service.

Obviously, I am going to work with the unions and with employees throughout the government to promote the use of French and English.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I'm happy to learn that you are setting an example personally, but what we often hear is that people are uncomfortable and will switch to English if there is a majority or even a minority of unilingual English speakers at the table. Sometimes, there is no interpretation, or it is not widely used. It is as if there is a cultural unease.

Speaking institutionally, do you have clear directives for protecting francophones?

Hon. Mona Fortier: First, in my opinion, the situation you refer to is language insecurity, and we see it across the federal government and everywhere in Canada. That is why we are putting various measures in place to encourage public servants to work in both official languages.

Very recently, as I mentioned, I met with the official languages champions. We reiterated that various measures need to be instituted, and we are going to continue doing it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

You have four seconds left. You have time to wish everyone merry Christmas if you want.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I want especially to wish everyone a happy 2023.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have used 18 of the 22 minutes. That doesn't give us enough time to continue the round of two five-minute questions. Unless someone really wants to split hairs, I would stop here.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I would like to say something.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: As you know, we have expressed our fervent desire to have the ministers testify for two hours. In my opinion, we could ask for unanimous consent for the representatives of the Liberal and Conservative parties to have four minutes each so that the President of the Treasury Board could finish her testimony.

The Chair: Because we had agreed to 22 minutes, I would allow each of the parties two minutes. I am already late for a meeting of another committee.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but I am still going to ask for unanimous consent, if possible. I can also chair the committee, if you want.

The Chair: Do we have unanimous consent?

Mr. Francis Drouin: You have our consent.

Mr. Joël Godin: So that's good.

Is that for four minutes?

The Chair: That's right.

Go ahead.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you again, Minister.

The Chair: Excuse me.

I have Mr. Dalton's name on my document.

Mr. Joël Godin: The clerk had the information. She may not have sent it to you. If you were on site, it would be easier. You are participating remotely and we are respecting that.

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

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I simply wanted to verify something with you.

Do you support the idea that we propose amendments to make it so that Bill C-13 gives the president of the Treasury Board more powers?

I would like you to give me a quick answer, please.

Hon. Mona Fortier: The committee is obviously working very hard.

Personally, I can say that at Treasury Board we think we have found the right balance, precisely for playing a better role.

Mr. Joël Godin: Would you support the idea?

• (1320)

Hon. Mona Fortier: I am going to support the idea of passing Bill C-13.

Mr. Joël Godin: Would you support an amendment that gave you more powers?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I think I already have enough powers. If you think I should have more, I will leave it to you to do that. I really think we have found the right balance.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Minister.

Until last May, Treasury Board had a directive that provided that when a federal institution disposed of surplus real property, it had to consider the interests of the communities, including official language minority communities, and of the other levels of govern-

ment. It also had to prepare a balanced disposal strategy for real property, supported by an exhaustive evaluation of the interests of the federal government and other stakeholders, including the interests of official language minority communities.

That directive was repealed and replaced by the Directive on the Management of Real Property, which provides only that federal institutions must inform official language minority communities of the intent to dispose of real property.

Minister, this means that the rights of francophone and Acadian communities have been significantly weakened by the government.

Are you going to correct this and support an amendment to Bill C-13 that will guarantee that federal institutions are actually required to take the interests of francophone and Acadian communities into account when they dispose of surplus real property?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you for telling me about that.

I heard about this change only quite recently. The official language minority communities were consulted. Nonetheless, I asked the department to take another look at this change, which was made in the wake of other changes made following the election. We are currently taking another look at that directive.

Thank you for pointing that out.

Other members have also pointed it out.

Mr. Joël Godin: What you're telling me, Madam Treasury Board President, is that people in your department made adjustments or changes without consulting you.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I wasn't the President of the Treasury Board at the time, so I couldn't have been consulted.

Mr. Joël Godin: Weren't you Treasury Board President last May?

Hon. Mona Fortier: The changes were made last May, but the decision was made before that.

Mr. Joël Godin: I think the directive was in effect until last May.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I was told that the decisions were made before the election.

Mr. Joël Godin: You understand what this demonstrates, Ms. Fortier.

Hon. Mona Fortier: What's important, Mr. Godin—and you pointed this out—is that the official language minority communities, as well as indigenous communities, are consulted. The same is true for the provinces and territories when it comes to real property requests. I think we need to revisit and review this.

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Treasury Board President, this means that you would be open to amending Bill C-13 to enshrine it in the act, so that we can't play—

Hon. Mona Fortier: It's a regulation that—

Mr. Joël Godin: I think it can be enshrined in the act. As you know, regulations can be changed.

Hon. Mona Fortier: For real property—

Mr. Joël Godin: Actually, real property—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'll let you check that, but I think it's a directive rather than a piece of legislation.

Mr. Joël Godin: You know, Madam Treasury Board President—

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'll let the Treasury Board do its work.

Mr. Joël Godin: In closing, I will simply say this: regulations can be changed, but it's more complicated to amend an act.

We're here to ensure that French is protected. I think it's very much to our advantage to enshrine this in the act we have every advantage in enshrining that in the act.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I understand very well—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Drouin. You have four minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the President of the Treasury Board for being with us.

Normally, I would take this opportunity to talk about the Franco-Ontarian community, but I don't need to do that because you understand very well—

Hon. Mona Fortier: Go ahead! You have four minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Some stakeholders, including the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne and several lawyers, mentioned the difference between Bill C-13, the former bill—

Hon. Mona Fortier: It was Bill C-32.

Mr. Francis Drouin: —and the role of the Treasury Board.

Both bills talk about the Treasury Board's responsibility under parts IV, V and VI of the act. The latter may intervene, but has not done so often. Subsection 46(4) created by Bill C-13 clearly states that the Treasury Board “shall”, in carrying out its responsibilities, establish policies.

I can still hear Mr. Samson emphasizing the word “shall” in his accent.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We all do!

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Francis Drouin: I would like you to tell us about the difference between the words “may” and “shall”, as well as the role that the Treasury Board will now play in implementing these parts.

Hon. Mona Fortier: There was a time when its role was discretionary, but it is becoming mandatory, which is exactly the approach proposed in Bill C-13.

I really want to acknowledge the work done not only by all the stakeholders, such as the FCFA, but also by all parliamentarians—Senator Cormier comes to mind—who have studied this from all angles to determine how this modernization could be done. The federal government has matured to ensure that the role of the Treasury Board is mandatory and not only discretionary.

• (1325)

Mr. Francis Drouin: You also talked about the role of the Treasury Board within the machinery of government. It's not really an external role with stakeholders. That explains why we wonder why the Treasury Board wouldn't be responsible for implementing, as it is in the French, “les” positive measures. That's another difference in Bill C-13: the word “des” was replaced by “les”.

Why did you agree that the Department of Canadian Heritage should continue to be the main player in implementing the positive measures under part VII, for example?

Hon. Mona Fortier: The departments will implement the positive measures, but we have to recognize that the Department of Canadian Heritage is an expert in this area, so we'll let them continue with that part of the work.

It would be difficult for the Treasury Board to do both. That's why we want to ensure that we have the compliance, monitoring and evaluation powers. That's what the Treasury Board would begin with the new Official Languages Act.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Does that mean that you're going to shirk your responsibilities and say that the Department of Canadian Heritage isn't doing a good job?

Hon. Mona Fortier: No, we're going to put in place what's necessary to ensure that both the Treasury Board and the commissioner have more teeth, as Minister Petitpas Taylor often says. After studying it thoroughly for over 30 years, we're at the point where the Official Languages Act needs to be modernized. We've come a long way, and the Treasury Board is ready to begin its work and assume its new role.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Drouin.

Before adjourning the meeting, I'd like to remind members that the next meeting will take place on Thursday, December 8. If all goes well, I should be chairing it in person. We'll continue with the study of Bill C-13 at the next meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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