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Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), we are continuing our study on the state of Canada's francophonie.

This morning, we are pleased to have with us, from the Government of Ontario, Marie-Lison Fougère, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, and Associate Deputy Minister for Francophone Affairs, and George Zegarac, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Welcome, Ms. Fougère and Mr. Zegarac. You are joined by Mr. McPherson, who is not here to testify but to assist you. I just wanted to let the committee members know about that.

As you already know, witnesses appearing before our committee enjoy parliamentary privilege and are therefore protected.

We are continuing our study on the state of official languages in the country and we have to report to the House of Commons. Before completing the study, with a specific emphasis on the language crisis in Ontario, as we describe it here, we wanted to have this dialogue with you. We want it to be as cordial as possible in order to find out how we can improve the report that we have to table in the House of Commons shortly.

We have two hours together, during which time we will be able to discuss the subject. The comments and questions are intended to move forward the whole area of language issues all over Canada.

As is our practice here, you will each have 10 minutes to give a presentation and then we will move to a question and answer period with the members of the committee.

Let us start with you, Mr. Zegarac.

[*English*]

Mr. George Zegarac (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Government of Ontario): Thank you very much.

I thank the chair and the members for the opportunity to make my opening remarks.

My name is George Zegarac. I was appointed the deputy minister of training, colleges and universities on June 29, 2018. Before I provide some context to the issue, I'd like to share a bit of my

background with regard to my experience in the Ontario public service, where I've worked for over 32 years.

Over the last 10 years, in addition to my current portfolio, I've served as the deputy minister for these ministries: infrastructure; education; children and youth services; and agriculture, food and rural affairs. In my lengthy public service career, I've served all the political parties and have overseen files of vital importance to Ontarians, including programs and services that directly benefit Ontario's francophone community.

I will share with you a bit about my current ministry, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The ministry is responsible for Ontario's post-secondary education and employment and training systems. The ministry provides operating and capital funding to publicly assisted colleges and universities, establishes provincial objectives for the use of those public funds and designs frameworks for achieving these objectives.

The ministry also ensures that high-quality post-secondary education is accessible to all qualified candidates through tuition regulation, student assistance, targeted funding and accountability mechanisms. In particular, the French-language services division within the ministry ensures high-quality post-secondary education for Ontario's francophone students.

In the area of workforce development, the ministry develops policy directions for adult education and labour market training. The ministry also manages and funds provincial employment training programs and services, including adult literacy and basic skills, and undertakes labour market research and planning.

I've been privileged to work on the entire continuum of education from day care through to post-secondary education. In the Ministry of Education, initially as the assistant deputy minister and then as the deputy minister, I supported the creation of an independent Télévision française de l'Ontario, or TFO. This included developing a collaborative and mutually respectful relationship with TFO over a period of several years.

During my time at the Ministry of Education, and together with the community, we have overseen the creation of a number of French-language schools across the province and have worked with staff to tailor programs and services to francophone students. This includes various programs such as specialist high skills majors and dual credit recognition, for example. These programs have changed the experience of students in schools across the province and have helped them with their transition to post-secondary education or to the labour market. I was also the deputy minister at a time when French as a second language programs expanded substantially to meet the needs of students and parents who were increasingly interested in French-language instruction.

Through base funding investments and collaboration with the francophone community, Ontario now has almost 500 French-language schools and close to 110,000 francophone students. French immersion has grown to more than 200,000 students, and French-language funding has grown to \$1 billion. These funding investments continue to support and serve the francophone community today.

In my current role as deputy minister of training, colleges and universities, we are guided by Ontario's 620,000 francophones, with over 200,000 francophones living in central and southwestern Ontario. The Ontario government continues to work with the francophone community to make it easier for French-speaking Ontarians to access high-quality post-secondary education. More than 22,000 students attend post-secondary institutions, with close to 17,000 attending university and more than 5,500 attending two French-language colleges, La Cité and Collège Boréal.

This history of collaboration has resulted in 10 post-secondary institutions that provide over 300 French-language or bilingual programs in Ontario colleges and universities, including the University of Ottawa, Laurentian University, Collège Boréal, La Cité, York University's Collège universitaire Glendon, and L'Université de Hearst and its four associated affiliates.

Examples of Ontario's rich and diverse French-language post-secondary programs include bachelor's degrees in nursing, civil law and criminal law, nutritional science, social work, environmental studies, business administration, economics, mathematics and international studies, to name just a few.

•(1110)

In addition, Ontario post-secondary institutions also offer diplomas in domains such as digital and information technology, public relations, civil engineering, electrical engineering, architecture, forestry, mining and agriculture.

The government also committed recently to investing in post-secondary francophone education in Ontario by providing \$15 million to Collège Boréal for its Toronto campus. The ministry continues to support models of post-secondary education that meet the needs of francophone students and the francophone community, as well as Ontario's business community in the evolving job market.

I'd like to now provide an overview of the actions the Ontario government has taken over the years to advance the French-language university in Ontario. In April of 2011, the ministry established an expert panel to provide advice on the most efficient models to build

French-language post-secondary capacity in the central and south-west regions. One of the expert panel's recommendations was for government to support the establishment of post-secondary institutions designated under the French Language Services Act.

In 2014, the ministry proceeded to develop and implement an action plan to address the expert panel's and the commissioner's recommendations. The government plan included establishing an advisory committee on French-language post-secondary education; issuing a request for proposals to expand French-language university and college programming; and providing support to Glendon College—part of York University—to explore enhanced governance for and by francophones at York University, located in Toronto's north end.

The French-language advisory committee was established in February of 2014. In March of 2016, a report by the advisory committee on French-language post-secondary education in central-southwest Ontario recommended the creation of a university governed by and for francophones. In response to this, a planning board was created in June of 2016, comprising a chair and six board members. A student interest and market demand study was commissioned, and in May of 2017, the ministry received the study, by R.A. Malatest and Associates Ltd., which supported the creation of a French-language university.

The planning board's report was finalized in July of 2017. The planning board recommended that a French-language university begin classes in September 2020. The *Université de l'Ontario français Act, 2017*, came into force on April 9, 2018. The first board of governors of the *Université de l'Ontario français* was also appointed on April 9, 2018, via a minister's regulation.

On November 15, 2018, the government announced in the "2018 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review" that, due to fiscal concerns, funding for the *Université de l'Ontario français* would not proceed at this time. The government has also indicated that the French-language university could be reconsidered once the fiscal position of the province has improved. The board of governors is able to access private and public funding from other entities while the project is on pause.

At this time, the *Université de l'Ontario français Act, 2017*, remains in force; the board of governors remains in place, as specified in the regulation; and the interim president's appointment continues. The government has no plans at this time to revoke or amend legislation under the *Université de l'Ontario français Act, 2017*. The government has indicated it is committed to high-quality French-language post-secondary education, with many French-language programs available at universities and colleges in Ontario to provide francophones with the educational opportunities they need to succeed.

The government has indicated that it will continue to support post-secondary French-language colleges and bilingual universities that are efficient and cost-effective and also benefit francophone students.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the opening remarks. With the chair's permission, I will pass the floor to my colleague.

•(1115)

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

[*Translation*]

We now move to Ms. Fougère's presentation.

Ms. Fougère, the floor is yours

Marie-Lison Fougère (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Francophone Affairs, Accessibility, Francophone Affairs and Seniors Affairs, Government of Ontario): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, distinguished members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I am grateful for this invitation and opportunity to talk to you about the mandate of the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, and about how French-language services are organized in the Ontario public service.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Marie-Lison Fougère and I am the Deputy Minister for Seniors and Accessibility and, since June 2018, Associate Deputy Minister for Francophone Affairs.

Allow me to give a very brief overview of my career.

First, I must mention that French is my mother tongue. I grew up in a unilingual francophone environment in the Rimouski region in eastern Quebec. As those of you who know the Rimouski region can well imagine—although the situation has evolved a lot since that time—I had to learn English as a second language.

I have more than 25 years' experience in the Ontario public service. I have had the opportunity to support various governments and to work very closely with them.

My experience comes in the form of a number of management and senior management positions in various ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and, of course, the Ministry of Francophone Affairs.

Like my colleague, I have worked very closely with a range of areas, including education at elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels, and labour market training in both English and French.

A number of the areas I have been called upon to handle during my professional career are horizontal in scope. The field of francophone affairs, including French-language services, is one of those areas.

In its legislation, Ontario recognizes the obligation to provide services in French to the province's francophone community. The right to services in French was enshrined in the French Language Services Act, which was passed in 1986 and came into effect in November 1989. The act was intended to cover many areas, as it still does, and to provide a legal basis for French in the province. By virtue of the act, Francophones in the province are provided with government services in French in designated regions of Ontario.

The French Language Services Act recognizes and emphasizes that the French language is a historic and honoured language in Ontario and that the Constitution of Canada recognizes it as an official language. It also emphasizes that, in Ontario, the French

language is recognized as an official language in the courts and in education, and that the Legislature recognizes the contribution of the cultural heritage of the French-speaking population and wishes to preserve it for future generations.

The French Language Services Act is the main legislative instrument governing the provision of French-language services in the province. As such, I would like to very briefly describe the major features of the mandate of the Ministry of Francophone Affairs in the public service of Ontario.

The Ministry of Francophone Affairs oversees the implementation of the French Language Services Act. Very importantly, it works in very close partnership with ministries and agencies so that services in French are provided to the public, particularly in the designated regions of the province. We make recommendations for designating new regions and new agencies. As an example, I should mention Markham, the most recent designated region, where French-language services began to be implemented last summer, in 2018.

We also lead the planning and implementation of French-language services, once a region has been newly designated. Once again, we work very closely with the ministries on the ground to provide services. We collaborate with government ministries and agencies to ensure that the needs and interests of the Franco-Ontarian community are accommodated. In addition, we represent the Government of Ontario in francophone matters.

•(1120)

I would also like to highlight the fact that the ministry supports the provincial advisory committee on francophone affairs. The committee is responsible for providing the Ministry of Francophone Affairs with advice on a range of matters and issues affecting the Francophonie in Ontario. I would also like to point out that Ms. Fortier was a member of the committee a few years ago.

Currently, Ontario has 26 designated regions under the French Language Services Act. This represents about 80% of the Francophones living in Ontario. The province also has more than 200 designated organizations, grouped into various sectors of activity.

However, it is extremely important to emphasize that providing services in French, or, more specifically, the responsibility to provide services in French, is in the hands of the ministries. As a result, the staff of the Ministry of Francophone Affairs works in close collaboration with a team of French-language services coordinators, who work in the ministries.

To make the horizontal management of matters and issues easier, these coordinators are situated in five groups of ministries.

First, we have the health group, which includes the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

Then, the justice group includes the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services.

The third group, education and community services, includes the Ministry of Children, Social and Community Services, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

The fourth group deals with the economy and with central organizations. It is made up of the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, and the Ministry of Labour.

Last but not least is the group for lands and resources. It includes the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines.

I have taken a few minutes to introduce all those groups to you, because it shows the complexity and scope of the tasks before us and the issues in which we are involved.

The French-language services coordinators play an extremely important role because they are responsible for the planning, development and implementation of services in French. They also ensure that their ministries consider the needs and interests of the Franco-Ontarian population. They therefore work in concert with ourselves in the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, to enhance access to services on the ground.

I would like to emphasize that the Ministry of Francophone Affairs works in constant and very close collaboration with various ministries, including the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

In conclusion, as you know, the Franco-Ontarian community has many faces and is constantly evolving. It is dynamic and creative thanks to a strong drive to come together, and a network of organizations with activities in a variety of fields, such as health, justice, education, economics and communications, to name but a few.

The Ministry of Francophone Affairs intends to continue working in collaboration with all its partners in order to support the vitality of the Franco-Ontarian community.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to answer your questions to the best of my ability.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation, Ms. Fougère.

We will start with a period for questions of six minutes each. I have to advise you that the time includes the answer.

Mr. Clarke, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, colleagues. Ms. Fougère, Mr. Zegarac, Mr. McPherson, welcome to Ottawa.

Greetings also to everyone listening to us.

I would like to tell you that inviting you to appear is not the most joyous occasion for us. I understand that this is a difficult moment for you, but our goal is absolutely not to make you uncomfortable or to back you into a corner. Our committee has a responsibility to Parliament to ensure that the language rights of official language communities all over the country are guaranteed and protected. That is the context in which we invited you and I thank you for joining us this morning.

I would like to talk to you about Part VII of the Official Languages Act, which deals with positive measures.

As you said, Ms. Fougère, language matters in Canada are evolving very quickly. Communities are establishing themselves everywhere. There are said to be 700 francophone schools in the country. New high schools continue to appear, as is the case in Whitehorse, where construction work began this week, I believe.

Language matters are evolving very quickly at federal level too. In 2005, under the Paul Martin government, Conservatives and Liberals voted almost unanimously in favour of including positive measures in Part VII of the act. That created a new paradigm for official languages in Canada, because those measures complicate the division of powers between the federal government and the provincial and territorial governments. As Conservatives, honouring areas of jurisdiction is fundamental. As the future government in a few months, we must be responsible and participate in the work of this committee that is designed to protect the constitutional primacy of the country's two official languages.

However, the positive measures in Part VII of the act could allow the federal level to grant funds on an exceptional basis. That has never really been done before, except a few weeks ago when Ms. Joly unlocked \$2 million to establish the Université de l'Ontario français project. That is a start.

However, the idea of granting \$40 million to fund the first four years of that same university's existence is not a good one, because we still do not know the real costs.

Mr. Zegarac, your professional career is exceptional. You have been working in your ministry for 35 years, if I understand correctly, or at least on behalf of the official languages and the Francophonie in Ontario. Can you give us all the figures for the new Université de l'Ontario français in Toronto this morning? Aside from the \$80 million in start-up costs, what will be the operational costs for the next eight years, especially if we go from 300 registered students to 3,000? We need to know what those total costs will be, because we cannot embark on a financial adventure in the name of the positive measures in Part VII of the act if we do not know what they are.

• (1130)

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: The status, as I mentioned, is due to the fiscal condition the provincial government is in. A number of projects have been postponed, not just the French university. We postponed the establishment of three campuses in other locations—in Markham, Brampton and Milton—due to the fiscal condition.

I can't answer when the government will have the fiscal capacity to move forward on this, but I believe the president of the French university testified here in early December that planning dollars were identified. I think he shared with you that the interim board had estimated \$84 million over seven years for that university. We allocated—

Mr. Alupa Clarke: This \$84 million concerns what exactly? Are there other expenses?

Mr. George Zegarac: The final design was never approved. That's why we're continuing to have discussions and why I continued to meet with the board over that period of time.

In the first year we put aside \$8 million. In the beginning, it's planning phase: looking at finding facilities, doing research, looking at what the demands would be, starting to negotiate the lease cost to find a facility. For that planning activity, \$8 million was allocated for this year. Only \$2 million was expended, partly due to circumstances. We had an election in there, and we had to get final approvals after we saw what the fiscal situation was, after two independent reviews.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Sorry to interrupt you—with all respect, of course.

Does the \$84 million concern any other expenses: building, electricity, registration? I just need to know. This is really important.

Mr. George Zegarac: I'll go through it. It basically had allocations for leasing costs because the intent was to lease a building, not to purchase a building, so it would cover a 10-year lease, for example. The president of the university is probably in the best position to answer because it was their planning. We were reviewing that—

Mr. Alupa Clarke: We have to evaluate the cost because you will, at the final point, be injecting the funds.

Mr. George Zegarac: Absolutely.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Have you evaluated all the costs—all through—of if, for example, we decide to do a positive measure and to give half of the \$80 million for the next four years? Could you tell me now, “Mr. Clarke, it's not enough because that does not include, for example, operational costs?” That's what I need to know. The government needs to know.

Mr. George Zegarac: Our government needs to know, as well, and that's why we work with them around those planning figures. The big variable, quite frankly, is how many students would enrol. We won't know what the student enrolment is until we get further down in that planning process because we don't know how many new students will come. Will it actually take students away from other universities?

There are a number of assumptions that are made, and that's why we work with the board. We constantly meet with the board to go through those assumptions and to get a better idea. They were at the point where they were looking to lease, so we got a better idea of the leasing costs, but each year we would have better information. It's not something that I can answer for the committee today.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: There's an unknown.

Mr. George Zegarac: There's definitely an unknown.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

The floor now goes to Jean Rioux.

Mr. Jean Rioux (Saint-Jean, Lib.): I would like to thank the witnesses for being here.

We all know that bilingualism is at the foundation of our Canadian identity. When we see that the rights of certain groups are being eroded, it's worrisome. Our committee's mandate is to be informed, which is why we asked you to appear.

I got into politics for one main reason. I'm from the riding of Saint-Jean, where Royal Military College Saint-Jean is located. Classes began again with the start of the 2018 school year. Personally, I think this new school year was important, because it was necessary not only to guarantee francophones access to a college, but also to ensure bilingualism across the country. This college offers courses in both languages and allows anyone to benefit from university courses in French and English.

We learned from the last census that Ontario is currently home to 740,000 francophones—people who speak French. That is the largest francophone minority outside Quebec. That's nothing to sneeze at, 740,000 people.

How many people, young people, immigrants and others do you estimate are enrolled in French-language elementary and secondary schools and in immersion courses? Mr. Zegarac, you started giving figures earlier. Do you have the answer to that question?

• (1135)

[*English*]

Mr. George Zegarac: What I can share with you is that we have 110,000 francophone students and 200,000 students are in immersion. As I mentioned, we have 22,000 students who currently are engaged, as best we know, in the post-secondary activities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rioux: To go back to Ontario's French-language university, have you assessed the impact that this institution could have on the economy?

[*English*]

Mr. George Zegarac: There were studies done by the planning committee that were submitted with government and, as I said, even for the ministry, but the study was more about whether there would be enough demand for those services. As I said, the Malatest study indicated that they believed that there would be enough demand for that university to go forward.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rioux: So the economic benefit hasn't been studied. Could an evaluation be done that could help to relaunch the project?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I think the government continues—and our minister has stated she will continue—to work with Minister Mulroney to look at the opportunity to support the francophone communities, as well as the francophone students. There were some studies done in terms of the locations, but I believe, not necessarily detailed economic impact studies.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Rioux: When I think about economic benefits, I think about the number of professors who will be hired, the expenses they will incur, including rental costs, and so on. For example, in Saint-Jean, the return of university training to the Royal Military College had a significant impact on the region. So I think it would be worthwhile to look at that as well.

In particular, I liked hearing you say earlier that we must ensure accessibility to post-secondary education. Is Ontario's French-language university not part of this element? That's why I'm also happy to know that the legislation that creates this university is upheld.

How will the \$1.9 million that Minister Joly has just granted to the university's board of directors be used to move the file forward?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I can address a couple of the questions and then, with the Chair's permission, go back to the previous question. There was work done on identifying assumptions around the number of professors that might be hired. Also, we knew that the investment would be in the central or southwest area in Toronto. We know the impacts, but Toronto is a big community.

I'll go back to your question. Maybe I can just speak to the \$1.9-million offer. That is for the innovation hub. I believe it was Minister Joly's commitment. That is a complementary part of the university, but it was not part of the approved plan for us. We approved them to proceed to find funding for that from other sources. It is not something I'll comment on. I think the board is free to continue in the discussions with partners to support that innovation hub. That was the commitment.

We did look at accessibility. The reason Toronto is the preferred location by the planning board and by the board itself—and the government supported looking at locations in Toronto—is that it's the fastest growing area of the francophone community. I don't think anybody debates the issue of the demand in that area.

The challenge is that you have to have funding to sustain a university. There's no sense for us to proceed if we're not going to have the funding to actually complete this project. That is really the premise of the decision to postpone. As I said, it's not cancelled. It's postponed. When the fiscal reality allows the government to engage us again to consider the options going forward, we're happy to do that.

• (1140)

[Translation]

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

We'll now move on to Mr. Choquette.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here.

My first question is for Mr. Zegarac. How many meetings have been held between your department and Ms. Joly's regarding the future of Ontario's French-language university?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We've had no meetings between us and Minister Joly's ministry.

We've had meetings on other issues. The ministry, through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, have had an outstanding issue of funding that has been frozen under the protocol, and funding for second languages that has been in place for 10 years. We've been having discussions on that, but I have not received anything directly, nor have my staff, around any proposals to support the university.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: I'm really surprised to hear you say that. Didn't anyone in Ms. Joly's department contact you for an official meeting?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I think there might have been discussions in the media, but I have no documentation requesting a meeting, nor do I have any detailed proposal.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Zegarac, did you and your department ask to meet with the people from Ms. Joly's department?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I have not, and I think there are opportunities for discussion if we get something to respond to. We have not received anything.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: You saw in the media the federal funding offer, which covers four years. The offer was clear and has been mentioned several times. Did your ministry analyze it?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We haven't analyzed the offer because we have no details. Nothing has been submitted to us. If we get something submitted, I believe my staff and I would be happy to analyze it.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Ms. Fougère, did the Government of Ontario or your ministry consult the group representing the Franco-Ontarian community before coming to the decision not to fund Ontario's French-language university and to transfer the Office of the French Language Services Commissioner to the Office of the Ombudsman?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Thank you for the question. As for the first point you raised, the fact is that the Ministry of Francophone Affairs isn't responsible for university funding. I think my colleague has provided you with some details.

As far as the commissioner is concerned, the Ministry of Francophone Affairs was informed of the decision to transfer the position of commissioner to the Office of the Ombudsman, but the ministry and I were not involved in discussions surrounding that decision.

• (1145)

Mr. François Choquette: I'm sorry, but wasn't it the Ministry of Francophone Affairs that made the decision to transfer the French Language Services Commissioner position to the Office of the Ombudsman?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: If I may, I would like to clarify a few points. The positions of commissioner or independent officer do not fall under the jurisdiction of the ministries. They do not essentially report to the government, but to the Legislative Assembly. With respect to independent officers—and in particular the position of French Language Services Commissioner—the Ministry of Francophone Affairs has no decision-making authority, since this is the responsibility of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr. François Choquette: Okay.

Mr. Zegarac, we are going to receive the deputy ministers that work with Ms. Joly. What message would you like me to give them?
[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: The only thing I would say is that if there are proposals that they would like us to consider, they should submit them. We'd be happy to look at any proposals, not only from her but from the communities. We'll take a look at them.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: If I understand correctly, if a request was made for an official meeting between the department and the ministry to take place, you would be willing to sit down with their representatives and discuss a solution to funding Ontario's French-language university. Do I have that right?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We're happy to take any direction. That's a political discussion that occurs between two ministers. I can't speak for either minister.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Of course.

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: If we're directed and there's something to speak to, we'd be happy to address that issue when it arises.

[Translation]

Mr. François Choquette: Great.

Ms. Fougère, you said that the position of commissioner reports to the Legislative Assembly. I would like to know whether, to your knowledge, your ministry consulted anyone before transferring this position to the Office of the Ombudsman. If not, I would like to know how much money the transfer is going to save you.

Since my time is up, I will ask you to forward to the committee the findings of your study showing how much money you'll save by transferring the position of French Language Services Commissioner to the Office of the Ombudsman.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I just need to reiterate what I said earlier.

The Ministry of Francophone Affairs is not responsible for the transfer at all; it does not come under its authority. Also, the funding of independent officer positions comes under the Ontario Legislative Assembly's Commission of Internal Economy. Again, ministries are not involved in these discussions or decisions. That's all I can say at this point.

I would also like to point out that the position of commissioner has indeed been transferred to the Office of the Ombudsman. In fact, several decisions have been made regarding several independent officer positions. The commissioner's position remains that of an independent officer, and all the powers that were conferred on the current French Language Services Commissioner are transferred and may be exercised within the scope of the commissioner's duties.

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

Mr. François Choquette: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I asked the witness if we could get a specific document. Could you follow up on that request?

The Chair: What I understand from the deputy minister's response is that this is more a matter for the Ontario Legislative Assembly's Commission of Internal Economy. In this case, our request should be addressed to the commission. Have I understood your comments correctly, Ms. Fougère?

• (1150)

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Yes, that's right. I have no access at all to that kind of information. The request really should be addressed to the Commission of Internal Economy.

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

We'll now hear from Mr. Samson, from Nova Scotia.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I, too, would like to thank the witnesses for being here today to answer our questions.

As you know, the federal government has a responsibility toward minority francophones and anglophones across Canada. We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act. There is no doubt that improvements to this legislation is needed, which the government has clearly recognized. I'm sorry for saying this, but the kind of decision the Ontario government has made has shown the weakness of the act.

I always question leadership because, in my opinion, it's a matter of leadership. Leaders must make decisions for their people, but to do that, they need to know their people.

Mr. Zegarac, I'm going to ask you some questions about certain answers you have given us, and I would appreciate it if you could be brief.

[English]

You said that numbers of projects were postponed because of the fiscal situation. Did anybody think that maybe when you make cuts, leadership is about making cuts, where cuts are able to be made, that don't disadvantage one group?

[Translation]

It has been clearly shown that budget cuts made at the expense of a francophone minority do much more harm than cuts in other areas because it takes several years to catch up. That's the difference.

In the Montfort Hospital case, the Ontario Court of Appeal judge recognized the importance of francophone institutions for Ontario's francophone minority in terms of language, culture and education. In other words, if we lose these institutions, it might be forever. It will take a very long time for the damage to be repaired.

There is another very important aspect. Quebec protects its institutions, and in a minority situation, institutions protect minorities. You can't make these cuts under the sole pretext that you are cutting funding by only 10%. Do you agree that cuts can cause more harm to one group than another?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I will assume that the question is that—

Mr. Darrell Samson: My question is simple. Can cuts across the board have a greater effect on one group than another, yes or no?

Mr. George Zegarac: That was not a yes or no. There's an impact, obviously, that the government considers, and these are tough decisions. They are not made lightly. They consider the impacts going forward.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you—

Mr. George Zegarac: Part of the decision is to look at what the impacts are across the board. These are projects that have not progressed. Therefore, the decision was not to proceed with the projects you didn't have funding for.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you. We have only six minutes.

I like the fact that you're saying that you have to look at the impacts across the board. Let's hold that thought for a second.

[Translation]

Deputy Minister Fougère, I want to congratulate you, first of all: you're Acadian like me, so Acadia continues to prevail. That's very important.

Deputy Minister Fougère, if I were the minister responsible for the Francophonie, and the Prime Minister or cabinet instructed me to make budget cuts in services to Francophones, I would like to believe that I would have the opportunity to present arguments on behalf of the Francophonie. I would tell them to wait a moment and ask them if they realize that this poses multiple problems.

My question is this: Did the minister meet with you to inform you of the instructions she had received and to ask you whether you had any ideas for arguments to put forward to defend the cause?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: First of all, yes, I must say that I'm pleased to be part of the broader Acadian community.

Listen, I know nothing about the political instructions that may or may not have been given by the Premier to my minister. Those conversations are confidential, and we don't have access to them.

I can say, because it has been reiterated publicly on several occasions, that Ms. Mulroney is very committed to the Francophonie. She has already outlined some priorities, including the need to

take a closer look at the French Language Services Act to modernize it after so many years. She has also called for a simplification of the designation process, so that services could be made more accessible and the task of organizations that provide services could be made easier—

• (1155)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you for your response, Ms. Fougère. However, if I may, I'll continue with my questions.

We talked about the minister to determine whether she had gathered information to advocate for the francophonie in order to present the information to cabinet.

Now, we'll set this aside and look at your role. Your role as deputy minister is extremely important. If the minister doesn't ask you the questions, your role is to provide essential facts that show what will happen on the ground. Simply put, you must ask the minister whether she realizes that the cuts that she was told about concerning minorities may have other implications. Have you advised the minister to approach the federal government to obtain a little more money? In other words, even if it's 50-50 over four years, the federal government may pay 90% the first year, then 80% the second year, which will help you address the fiscal issue. You can then take over.

As deputy minister, have you given the minister possible solutions so that she can do her job? Your role is to make the minister look good. Have you given her arguments to advocate for the francophonie so that she can then bring these arguments to the premier in order to strongly advocate for the francophonie? Of course, the premier shows weak leadership when it comes to this issue, since he hasn't analyzed the impact on certain groups.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, I'll treat your contribution as comments. We must move on to the next speaker. The deputy minister may have the opportunity to provide a response as part of another question.

I'll give the floor to Ms. Lambropoulos.

[English]

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here with us today. My questions will be about the Université de l'Ontario français.

Mr. Zegarac, you mentioned earlier that 110 students attend French primary or secondary school. Is that right?

Mr. George Zegarac: That's 110,000.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Sorry, that's what I meant to say—110,000.

As well, there are about 200,000 students in immersion programs across the province. Is that number bigger or smaller than it was five years ago, let's say?

Mr. George Zegarac: I'd have to go back to look at the trend, but during my period there, it continued to grow. There was a huge demand for, in particular, French immersion. We continued to have demand on the French side of the school boards. Those were the investments we were making for new schools, and the investments in new places.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

Since there's a growing number of students, would I also be right to assume that the French population in Ontario is growing?

Mr. George Zegarac: It has grown, and in the statistics that I have, on the francophone side, yes, I believe the numbers have continued to grow.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Do you find it fair that these students would not have access to higher education in French? I understand that you mentioned there are programs offered at different universities, and there's a French university up north, but you are saying that the need is coming from southwestern Ontario. Do you not feel that maybe these students wouldn't have access to the quality of French universities that they should have access to?

Mr. George Zegarac: I would say that the government has continued to invest. The government provided \$31 million back in 2013-14 and put money in particular around expanded programming in the central-southwest area. That included Glendon College, to introduce new programming, and Collège Boréal. There were e-learning courses, online courses that were expanded, and we continue to invest.

As I said, there is \$79 million that we continue to put into programming. Our job is to continue to work with the 10 institutions to continue to improve programming in the area. We have that dialogue with those institutions on an ongoing basis as to how to prioritize their investments to address the local demands.

• (1200)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: You also mentioned that it was a financial decision not to go forward with the university, yet you failed to give us the actual numbers and what the cost of the university will be in the long term. It seems it was prematurely stopped before they could even plan out the way it would look financially. I don't know if it's really based on what you were able to commit, but there was a decision as to whether or not it was a priority. That's what we're getting here, I think.

Mr. George Zegarac: Can I comment on that?

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Sorry, that wasn't the question, so I'm going to continue. I'm from an anglophone community in Quebec, so I am from a minority community.

McGill University, which you might know of or have heard of, is one of the biggest and best universities in Canada, and English students as well as French students are able to go to that university for their education. It's a staple and it's what strengthens the English community in Quebec. The Government of Canada believes in both official languages, believes in promoting them, believes in making minority communities in all provinces stronger, and unfortunately this decision has taken away from that. Can you comment?

Mr. George Zegarac: I would comment that the government has stated its commitment to enhancing and working with French

communities to address post-secondary demands in terms of services, but it has to have a sustainable fiscal solution. You can't spend money that you don't have. Our minister has spoken to the fact that she would continue to work with Minister Mulroney to look at the needs in those communities and continue to look at using the dollars that we currently have, and when the fiscal situation improves, they would reconsider and move forward on timing.

To your question on the planning dollars and not knowing, that's why we have a planning committee. They are working on it, but as I said they don't know how many students they would undertake. They have projections, and we would continue to work with the board over that period of time. I think the government is committed to continuing to serve the francophone community and committed to its having funding. It has requested enhanced funding from the federal government that has been frozen for 10 years. Provincial and territorial governments are short \$58 million now. We're continuing to have all of these dialogues to see what we can do to enhance the services for our francophone communities.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: This was a commitment that was made under the previous government. Is that correct?

Mr. George Zegarac: It was a commitment under the previous government, but it didn't have sustainable funding because of our fiscal situation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[*English*]

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I'm okay. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lambropoulos.

I'll now give the floor to Ms. Boucher.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. I want to welcome both of you. I'm very happy that you're here today. I'm actually not entirely happy, because we may be putting you in a somewhat special situation. However, the members on our side and all the committee members really want to understand what happened in Ontario.

My name is Sylvie Boucher, and I'm the member for Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix. Unfortunately, the whole saga surrounding the Université de l'Ontario français has created a language crisis, not only in Ontario, but across the country.

Did you warn your ministers about the repercussions of the announcements resulting from this type of decision? Did you help them understand the sensitivity of the French language issue? Although we aren't a minority in Quebec and this issue is more directly related to my friend on the other side, it affects all francophones, wherever they live in Canada. Were you aware that the issue could lead to a crisis of this nature?

Did you contact the interim president or the UOF's board of governors prior to the public announcement of the project's cancellation? Did anyone in the office call the board or the minister? Did you contact the departments or the board of governors?

When the issue concerns language, in any part of the country, it's a little dangerous.

My question is for the two witnesses.

• (1205)

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I want to make one point before I give the floor to my colleague. To some extent, it will help me answer Mr. Samson's question.

A public servant's responsibility is really to serve the government in power and to do so with integrity. In this regard, as a public servant, when I'm asked for my point of view, I paint a complete picture and explain the pros and cons. In the case of francophone affairs, all decisions are made based on their impact and the community's perception. I do so with integrity and transparency. I take into account what this may mean, based on my responsibilities, and I share it.

Ultimately, as all elected officials know, decisions are made by the government through the cabinet. I think that we need to keep this in mind.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I understand.

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I would just add that this decision was communicated through the fall economic statement. Like the budgetary decisions, those decisions are not shared in advance. As soon as we became aware, through the fall economic statement, of the communication on the decision, we immediately contacted the chair and shared the government's decision. We had meetings subsequent to that with her and the president of the university.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: In other words, you never assessed what this could mean for francophones. You made an economic statement. The French language is very fragile everywhere, and the same is true for the English language in Quebec. Therefore, no assessment was conducted.

The francophonie issue is very emotional. As a member of the opposition, I went to the Franco-Ontarian protest with my friends and I made a speech.

I want you to know that I'm fully aware that we, the politicians, are responsible for the final signature.

Given what we've experienced so far, I hope that, when the ministers or departments make decisions, they'll be more sensitive to

the language issue. It's a very emotional issue. We never want to lose certain acquired rights again.

If I were to provide some political advice or if I were also a minister, like Mr. Samson, I would ask my deputy ministers to show the same sensitivity as I do and to keep me informed of what's happening. This degenerated a bit, and unfortunately, we paid the price.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boucher. You've just appointed Mr. Samson minister.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I appoint him minister of Status of Women.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Samson: Let the Prime Minister know.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boucher.

I'll now give the floor to Ms. Fortier.

Mrs. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I care deeply about this issue, and so do my constituents. This is an important issue not only for Ontario's francophone population, but also for the entire population of Ontario.

We often talk about the Université de l'Ontario français, but I want to remind everyone that the university isn't only for francophones in Ontario, but for all francophones. There are even francophiles around the world who want to participate in this university project.

I want us to see this university as an important opportunity for Ontario to make a positive investment in post-secondary education. The value added can benefit everyone, not only in Ontario, but across the country. We're very concerned about this issue, which is why we're currently studying it.

Mr. Zegarac, you talked about the possibility of discussions between the federal and provincial governments, and I want to go back to that. Do you have a mandate to work and negotiate with the federal government as part of bilateral agreements on education and French-language education?

• (1210)

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We've actually expressed our concerns through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, collectively, around frozen funding for over a decade.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Do you have the mandate to negotiate with and present projects to the federal government? Do you have the authority to do so?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: As my colleague has said, we have the opportunity to implement the direction of the government. If the government wants to pursue that discussion, we would bring that request back. I'm hearing that from a number of people—

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: So you have the authority to present a project to the federal government that comes from your minister.

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: The situation right now, as the government has said, is that they've paused it. There's no discussion under way until they have a solution to their economic situation. Having conversations, without having a solution and understanding the final decisions the government is making on a number of files in the future, puts us in a difficult position to have a dialogue, but we can raise that and bring it back, if there's a submission.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Maybe I misunderstood. I thought that I heard you say that you hadn't received an invitation to hold this discussion. Perhaps you didn't ask the federal government the question.

I just want to remind the committee members that the Honourable Caroline Mulroney received a letter from Minister Joly, on January 13, 2019, informing her that Minister Joly was ready to have a conversation about the university project. Minister Joly also invited the Ontario government to submit a project to the federal government. The invitation to hold a discussion was issued.

We must focus on the fact that both governments can work together on this project, but also on other post-secondary education projects in French Ontario. The government is open to this.

My next question concerns the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario.

Ms. Fougère, I may have misunderstood your comments, but I thought that the Ontario Ministry of Francophone Affairs was responsible for the French Language Services Act, which governs the Office of the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario.

I also thought that the deputy ombudsman position created did not necessarily correspond to the commissioner position. This would constitute a deputy ombudsman position under the banner of the ombudsman, and not a transfer of the commissioner's position.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: The commissioner's authorities are based on the French Language Services Act. The commissioner's role is to monitor the application of the act. However, the commissioner's position—this was also the case in the old system—isn't under the aegis of the Ontario Ministry of Francophone Affairs.

As in the case of the auditor general or ombudsman, the commissioner is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. As such, the position falls under the Legislative Assembly. I know that this can be confusing. At the legislative level, the commissioner obtains a mandate from the French Language Services Act. However, as a senior public servant, the commissioner reports to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

Regarding the transfer of the commissioner position, the final version of Bill 57 of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, which amended certain statutes, clearly states that the French Language

Services Commissioner remains a commissioner position, but under the auspices of the Office of the Ombudsman. As a result, the commissioner's related authorities remain the same.

• (1215)

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Will the commissioner alone make decisions on budgets and priorities, or will the ombudsman have this role?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I can't speak for the ombudsman. This will be done within the ombudsman's budget, which falls directly under the Legislative Assembly's Board of Internal Economy. I imagine that there will also be discussions within the Office of the Ombudsman.

It should also be noted that the ombudsman publicly stated that he was very enthusiastic about working closely with the French Language Services Commissioner to support the services.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: The commissioner position has been eliminated and the new position of deputy ombudsman has been created. Is that correct?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: The position of French Language Services Commissioner as it stood, meaning the position of officer who reported directly to the Legislative Assembly, has been eliminated. The commissioner position has been transferred to the Office of the Ombudsman. However, the French Language Services Commissioner position remains independent. The French Language Services Commissioner will be incorporated into the Office of the Ombudsman, along with, to my knowledge, the team that supports the commissioner.

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

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes, but we'll be back soon.

• (1215)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1230)

The Chair: We will resume our meeting.

Mr. Clarke, you have the floor.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the break, it was much appreciated.

[English]

Mr. Zegarac, you mentioned a word that was extremely interesting in your introduction and in speaking about your past history and experience in the matter. You said the word "continuum" in education. Could you share with us what analysis there is? What is your understanding concerning the continuum for francophones in education throughout Ontario, and also for the particular area of Toronto? How is it, the continuum?

Mr. George Zegarac: I think it's always been a priority to try to address that continuum. As I said, we have an assistant deputy minister who is in charge of francophone affairs and on the child care. We also had supports looking at making sure we had the continuum of services from the early years into education and post-secondary. We always looked at being more creative, I would say, in trying to find solutions for the francophone community. When we were doing dual credits in high-skills majors, we wanted to see what we had in terms of services in French as well.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: You said you were looking for solutions. What can you do collectively to help the francophones in Toronto? Maybe it's already the fact. What are the measures you can do to help them to have a continuum to university, while the project goes forward when the fiscal situation becomes more healthy in Ontario? What are you going to do? What's your insight into that?

Mr. George Zegarac: As I mentioned, we have funding currently and we have discussions under way with the eight universities and affiliates and the two colleges to look at what we can do. The University of Ottawa is looking to expand its services. It had a relationship and delivers some programs with Glendon College.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Which francophone university is the closest to the GTA right now?

Mr. George Zegarac: Right now the Glendon campus, a part of York University, would be, and Collège Boréal, obviously.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: That's interesting.

Finally, sir, each year annually for the francophone programs for the official language minority groups, the federal government either through the action plan or through Canadian Heritage sends money to each province on a gratis basis. Some information was quite concerning. We learned that in Ontario it's around \$2 to \$3 per head, compared with other provinces where it's between \$8 and \$12. I've heard also that it depends on what the province puts forward, and then federal government tries to add the same amount. I would like to hear from both of you on that.

Do you think it would be necessary to increase this flow of money from the federal government on the per capita basis?

• (1235)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I believe you are referring to the Canada-Ontario Agreement on French-Language Services, which is different from the Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Nevertheless, there is a link where vitality is concerned.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I don't want to minimize its importance. I'm simply saying it is another agreement.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: We understand each other.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: At the provincial level, the agreement falls under the minister, Ms. Mulroney, and the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, of course.

It has been pointed out a few times that for more than a decade, Ontario has been receiving \$1.4 million per year from the envelope for French services, which is part of the plan for official languages. Ontario receives \$1.4 million in federal funding annually. The last agreement—

Mr. Alupa Clarke: —which is being negotiated at this time—

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: No, it is coming to an end. Ontario has thus invested the equivalent of \$13 million over the past five years, in addition to everything it already invests in services through the—

Mr. Alupa Clarke: I understand the specifics.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: For its part, the federal government provided \$7 million over five years, or \$1.4 million dollars annually.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: I don't understand. I thought that under the agreement, if the province invested \$1 million, the federal government had to invest the same amount. But that is not what happened.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: In agreements in general, there is a principle according to which if the federal government commits to investing a certain amount, the province must invest an equivalent amount. It's called matching funds.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: You are telling us that your ministry went beyond that.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: If I may, in the context of the Agreement on French-Language Services, Ontario invested twice as much as the federal government.

I know that part VII of the Official Languages Act refers to measures to ensure the vitality of minority communities. It is extremely important to recognize the vital need to support French-language services. Quite often, in the various communities, especially in remote locations, it is not easy to access services. I know that the federal government has the same type of responsibility in its own areas of jurisdiction. French-language services are very important.

I'd like to add that the federal government, through Canadian Heritage, was asked to take a closer look at the scope of investments in French-language services. That request was also made by the ministers responsible for French-language services in the different provinces.

Let's go back a bit. The 2018 Ministerial Conference on the Canadian Francophonie communiqué, which was recent, stated that the provincial ministers responsible for French services or the francophonie found it regrettable that the federal government had not increased its contribution under the Agreement on French-Language Services. I'm referring to that agreement alone. That request was not made by Ontario.

In light of the large population and extremely complex and diverse geography of Ontario, the government invests large sums through its various departments to support French-language services. I worked on this file for several years and I always believed—and said so on many occasions—that French-language services play an essential role in the vitality of communities.

There are a lot of things that contribute to the vitality of francophone minorities, notably institutions and organizations, but access to services in French is extremely important. It is important here, and I imagine that it is very important elsewhere as well.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor for three minutes.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to submit a notice of motion on what is happening at this time. There is, of course, the situation in Ontario, but there seems to be a general decline in the defence of official languages throughout the country. We may need to create a forum to re-establish the leadership of Canadian bilingualism. There are also difficulties in Saskatchewan. There is the issue of francophone schools in British Columbia. About New Brunswick, not much needs to be said. Everything that is happening in that province at this time is worrisome.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Are you talking about the Jeux de la Francophonie?

Mr. François Choquette: Yes. As for Quebec, the abolition of school boards is raising concerns.

So, for all of these reasons, I wish to submit the following notice of motion:

That the committee invite, as soon as possible, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada (FCFA), the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN), the Commissioner of Official Languages, and the Minister of Tourism, Official Languages and La Francophonie to attend a two-hour meeting to discuss a federal-provincial-territorial summit on official languages as part of the 50th anniversary of the *Official Languages Act*.

May I now continue with my questions?

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Your notice of motion has been received.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fougère, you spoke earlier of the famous letter Ms. Joly sent to Ms. Mulroney. What was Ms. Mulroney's answer to that letter?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: In fact, I don't think I referred to that letter. Someone else mentioned it.

At this stage, the file is ongoing. The objective of the letter was simply to inform the minister of the fact that the federal government, through Ms. Joly, had decided to allocate \$1.9 million to the needs of the Carrefour francophone du savoir et de l'innovation.

Mr. François Choquette: Did the letter not request a meeting between Ms. Joly and Ms. Mulroney?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: No, not to my knowledge.

Mr. François Choquette: Fine.

Have there been any meetings between Ms. Mulroney and Ms. Joly since this difficult situation began to unfold?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: I will not be able to comment on that matter. I believe there may have been a call at some point but I'm not aware of the details and this is not the type of...

Mr. François Choquette: So, there was no official meeting, with an agenda?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Not to my knowledge.

Mr. François Choquette: Fine.

Given the current situation, would you suggest to Ms. Mulroney that she hold an official meeting?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: It is not up to me to suggest anything to Ms. Mulroney. That decision is up to her. All I can say today is that Ms. Mulroney was very favourable to the federal injection of

\$2 million. She stated publicly that it was a good starting point, but she also reminded people, as I said earlier, that there is a large gap between the need for French-language services and the federal investments in that regard. It would thus be advisable that the federal government examine the matter, recognize the importance of our francophone community, and seriously consider increasing its envelope for French services in Ontario, without doing this to the detriment of the other provinces.

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

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

The Chair: Let me make a brief comment. The committee will soon be studying the modernization of the Official Languages Act. We would like to take advantage of your presence here this morning to ask for your suggestions on some specific points we will be studying, such as positive measures. Is an administrative tribunal the right path to follow in that case? We would be very pleased to hear your comments with regard to this modernization.

We will continue our question period with Mr. Clarke, for three minutes.

• (1245)

Mr. Alupa Clarke: I have a somewhat difficult question, which I expect you will not be able to answer, but I'll try it anyway. After all, we're like a family here, we all support the francophonie, and these matters are important to all of us.

In your relationship with the Government of Ontario, have you ever encountered any ill intent at any point during all of this affair?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I'll speak to fact that I haven't felt that they have. As I said, I've been around for 33 years in the provincial government. Governments have had to make tough decisions. I think all governments struggle with making sure that they're sensitive, and these are difficult decisions to make, but I've certainly had no indication that there's any bad intent.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Based on my experience and all of the discussions that took place, I'd like to assure you beyond any doubt that I never felt any hostility toward the francophonie; quite the opposite, in fact.

Mr. Alupa Clarke: That's very good, thank you. It's good news.

I want to ask you one last thing, to conclude.

Based on what we understood from the public comments made by the Premier of Ontario, the premier would like to go forward with the Université once his finances are sound—according to his perspective, as I have no idea what the situation is in Ontario.

Have you been told to continue the work?

You said you meet with the board of directors of the university. If I were in your shoes, and if I were present at those meetings, I would tell people that there is no need to panic, that work should continue, that it's in the works and that things will go forward when it is possible. To be able to move forward in four or five years, you have to continue to work on various elements now, such as finding students to register or finding land to build the university.

While preserving confidentiality, can you tell us whether things are moving forward at this time?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: As I stated in my answers earlier and in my opening statements, the legislation is still in place. The board and the president are still in place. We'll continue to have discussions. We're having discussions now in terms of the pause. The real focus now is working with the other institutions that have funding to make sure we utilize that funding in the best interests of our francophone communities and the francophone students.

[Translation]

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

Ms. Fortier has the floor for three minutes.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fougère, before my colleague asked his questions, you said you would like to see an increase in your funding.

Did you submit an official request to the Department of Canadian Heritage or to the Department of Tourism, Official Languages and La Francophonie to discuss a possible increase?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: A letter was sent on behalf of the Minister of Finance, Mr. Fedeli, and Ms. Mulroney, to the attention of Mr. Morneau, the Minister of Finance, and Ms. Joly. The letter indicated quite clearly that Ontario is not receiving its fair share and that it would be important to rectify that situation.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Did this concern French-language services?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Yes, it did.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Very well.

So, you could make a similar request for a project such as the Université de l'Ontario français. You could address a request directly to the federal government.

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: As I mentioned earlier, we have funding with the federal government around the protocol for minority-language education and second languages, which helps support francophone educational services. That's been frozen for 10 years. Through the Council of Ministers of Education, because this is an issue across Canada, not just in Ontario, we have submitted that request.

• (1250)

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: So you asked for a meeting with the federal government.

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We've asked for a positive decision on the funding request.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Fine.

I'd like to clarify something. Federal government ministers receive a letter of mandate that lists their priorities, in addition to the normal expectations of their post.

Did your ministers receive a letter specifying the priorities of their mandate, which would allow you to help them respect those priorities?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: The ministers have priorities that are discussed with the premier. As Marie-Lison pointed out, we support implementing any priorities that they might identify.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Is that letter public?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: I didn't say it was a letter. I said there were priorities. I don't think the government has publicly stated, although they have stated in many releases, some of their priorities.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Would it be possible to submit to our committee the priorities your ministers have received within their mandate, more specifically those related to services in French or post-secondary education in French?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: We can go back. The budget deliberations are still under way right now. When we have final decisions on our final budgets, we'll be in a better position to go back and share that—

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: I am not talking about the budget.

The committee would really like to know whether a mandate letter was sent to your ministers, or whether priorities were clearly defined in terms of their portfolio. If so, we would like to look at those letters.

The Chair: I would like to clarify something in this respect. It is a practice of the Canadian government for the Prime Minister's cabinet to send a mandate letter to each minister when they take office. The letter indicates what the minister must focus on. Those letters are public. So anyone can know what direction ministers should follow. I don't know whether the same is done in Ontario.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: The previous government would produce mandate letters, which were public. We cannot communicate anything at this time. As my colleague said, priorities are stated, but it is not necessarily in—

The Chair: It is not in a mandate letter.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: As public servants, we cannot provide that information.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Fortier.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Choquette, you have the floor for three minutes.

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fougère, something worries me and I think the entire committee shares my concern. The French Language Services Commissioner will remain in office until the end of March, I think.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: It's actually until the end of April.

Mr. François Choquette: Many people are still concerned. We don't understand how the commissioner can maintain his independence when the legislation clearly states that he will be an employee of the ombudsman and will follow his directives.

Earlier, you really stressed the fact that the commissioner currently reports to the Ontario Legislative Assembly and not to another ombudsman or another commissioner. He reports directly to the legislative assembly. That is why you have told me several times that you are unable to answer the question I was putting to you.

But according to the new piece of legislation, he no longer reports directly to the legislative assembly. He reports to the ombudsman and is becoming his employee. That is why, when Mr. Boileau appeared before the committee, he strongly argued that this made no sense. Like me, you probably heard him. He feels it is false to say that he is maintaining his independence.

How can you say that he retains his independence? In this situation, it is now being ignored that he reports to the legislative assembly, as the parliamentary budget officer and commissioners, here at the federal level. His independence is disappearing.

•(1255)

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: The French Language Services Commissioner will fulfill his duties and responsibilities through the ombudsman's office, but we are still talking about an independent status. The ombudsman, along with the appointed commissioner, will have the same obligations to investigate complaints about services in French and produce independent reports on the state of French services. In addition, he will have to report to the legislative assembly.

The mandate, which has now been transferred, provides for the possibility of a separate report on services in French to be included in the ombudsman's report and then submitted to the legislative assembly. The commissioner's role and status in terms of his mandate will remain independent in the sense that they are exercised through an officer of the assembly who is also independent. The value of independence is maintained. It is true that the commissioner will not report directly to the legislative assembly.

Mr. François Choquette: Allow me to add something, Mr. Chair. It will be very brief.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. François Choquette: In closing, I would just like to thank the witnesses for coming to meet with us and for participating in the discussion.

I know that this is not easy for you. Our main objective is to enable you to talk to the federal government in order to find solutions.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. Samson, go ahead.

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

I also thank our witnesses.

I want to begin by thanking you, Ms. Fougère, for your honesty. You said that, in the aftermath of this situation, you provided the minister with its complete overview. As far as I understand, you have conducted analyses and specified what difficulties were associated with the cuts affecting the minority, but that was ignored. Be that as it may, you have done your job and I commend you for it.

Mr. Zegarac, you talked about finances. When the minister tells you that your department's budget must be cut by 3%, do you carry out a summary analysis or a more in-depth analysis? Do you just reduce all expenditures by 3%, finish the job in five minutes and go for a coffee or do you conduct a full analysis, which takes into account the pros, the cons, the difficulties, situations on the ground, and so on?

How do you proceed?

[English]

Mr. George Zegarac: For those items that are directed to us for conversation, we always try to support the minister with good analysis.

Mr. Darrell Samson: If the minister asked you to cut 3% in your department, are you cutting across the board automatically, or are you analyzing the situation?

Mr. George Zegarac: No, and we didn't cut across the board automatically. We looked at areas that had not been expanded and that's why the government postponed some of this.

Mr. Darrell Samson: My question wasn't about that. It was about when you get in that situation personally, how you deal with it.

The next point is this. When we negotiate and we see that one party is leaning hard to help, it seems to me if you're a good negotiator you're going to take advantage of that situation. If the premier of the province, Mr. Ford, sees them leaning, he'd say, "Okay, look, you pay 75% now and I'll pay 75% in three years because I don't have the money". I didn't see that.

I guess I'm going to conclude by saying this. All of you answered the question, and I appreciate that, and said, in your personal opinions there was no *mauvaise intention*. I'll grant that I believe that fully.

•(1300)

[Translation]

I think that is poor leadership.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Rioux, go ahead for two minutes.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It has been said that the commissioner will now report to the ombudsman, whose role is to receive complaints. However, the commissioner's role was not limited to that. He promoted francophonie in Ontario.

Do you agree that this aspect of his role will be lost to the detriment of Ontario's francophone minority?

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: No, that will not necessarily be the case. The current commissioner, whose mandate derives from the French Language Services Act, decided to exercise a fairly broad mandate in terms of his responsibilities. He does a lot of promotion work.

I repeat that the existing powers will remain and be enforced through the ombudsman and the French Language Services Commissioner. Of course, I cannot say what exact form that will take. I would nevertheless say that, for the time being, the mandate remains unchanged. It all depends on how the mandate is interpreted and how those in charge decide to exercise it.

Mr. Jean Rioux: In other words, the francophone community has reason for concern.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: No, that is not what I just said. I said the exact opposite. I just talked about the possibility of promotion based on the preamble to the French Language Services Act. It will be up to the commissioner to decide how to exercise his mandate. That possibility remains, but it will be realized through the ombudsman's office.

I want to clarify that the ombudsman is a very important agent of the Legislative Assembly who takes his mandate very seriously. He has previously said publicly that he was very enthusiastic about taking on that additional mandate related to services in French. He will have the support of a commissioner who will focus on services in French. Let's see what happens.

Mr. Jean Rioux: Thank you, Ms. Fougère.

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

Finally, I want to thank the witnesses, on behalf of all of my colleagues, for this exchange I feel will really help us draft the report we will submit to the House of Commons.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank those joining me at the table. Lucie Lecomte and Christine Holke, our clerk, are doing amazing work.

I think this meeting has been very worthwhile.

Mr. George Zegarac: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Marie-Lison Fougère: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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