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Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (1110)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): We will resume our public hearing. We are continuing our study of Mr. Choquette's motion, which I will read immediately:

That the committee invite witnesses in order to assess Madeleine Meilleur's ability to perform the duties of Commissioner of Official Languages before it reports to the House on her appointment.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Chair, if memory serves, did I not table the other motion first?

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

An hon. member: What motion?

Mr. François Choquette: The one about the language tests.

The Chair: Had we not made a decision on that?

Mr. François Choquette: No, we had not. We interrupted the debate and postponed it.

The Chair: Okay. If the motion on language skills was tabled first, we are going to debate that one first.

Mr. François Choquette: Yes, and it seems to me that that would be easier in any case.

The Chair: That is not a problem.

The Chair: We will go back to the other one. This is Mr. Choquette's other motion:

That the committee ask Madeleine Meilleur for her language skills qualifications as required by the Language Skills Act.

I expect that some of you followed the debates in the Senate last night. The reply to that motion was discussed.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

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

I am rereading the testimony provided by Ms. Meilleur yesterday. A senator—I'm trying to find the passage—raised this same concern. As you know, as a committee, it is our responsibility to provide or refuse a certificate of nomination to the person who is being suggested, Ms. Meilleur, in this case.

The Chair: May I correct you; it's a recommendation.

Mr. François Choquette: Yes, that's it, a certificate recommending the nomination, as you said, Mr. Chair.

In this regard, it is our duty to examine her CV, her skills and also her ability to perform the duties of this post, this role. The new act requires that officers of Parliament be bilingual. Hence the position of Commissioner of Official Languages must be filled by a bilingual person. We were informed that the other candidates underwent a language test. That language test was even a prerequisite to continuing with the process. Since that requirement was made of the other candidates, we simply want to ensure that the same rules were applied to Ms. Meilleur, that she went through the same process as all of the others, and that things were done normally. We are only asking her for proof. A senator asked her about this yesterday, and she replied that she had indeed taken an official language test, and had passed it. Consequently we are simply asking her to produce that certificate, since she mentioned that she had passed the test. It would be normal, I think, to add that to her CV, because this is part of our examination of her skills.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Ms. Boucher has the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I was present during Ms. Meilleur's entire appearance at the Senate yesterday, and in light of what we heard, it seems to be a very, very good question.

Yesterday, Ms. Meilleur told the Senate that she had received the highest possible ranking on the test. How did she know that? Who spoke to her about it, and why did she find that out, whereas the others did not find out about their results? I would like the committee to inquire about her language skills, as required by the Language Skills Act. During her appearance before the Upper Chamber, Ms. Meilleur was unable to answer any of the questions asked by senators about the anglophone minority in Quebec. She was not even able to name the anglophone organizations of Montreal.

So we must be informed about everything concerning this nomination. The more we look into this, the more we see that the process was borderline; that is what I would call it. It would be good for the committee, beyond any partisanship—and I say this honestly—to find out what happened. Yesterday at the Senate there was no partisanship—we know how the Senate works—and even some former Liberals, such as Serge Joyal, did not understand this nomination. In light of that, I would like the committee to study the matter, as we have always done before; we need to set aside partisanship and get to the bottom of things to see what lies there.

• (1115)

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

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For the same reasons I listed last week regarding another of Mr. Choquette's motions, I think we are trying to use the back door to do something we cannot do by going through the front door. However, Mr. Choquette agreed with me that we should not be involved in the process.

The process includes a language test. I personally did not follow the debates that took place yesterday because I was in committee. Ms. Boucher just informed us that Ms. Meilleur stated that she did very well on the language test. Nothing tells me that the other 71 candidates were not told the same thing.

Trying to get into that is getting involved in the nomination process. A committee has already examined Ms. Meilleur's candidacy, as well as that of the 71 other candidates. A committee already administered language tests to all of the candidates. We are now asking the Standing Committee on Official Languages to get involved in the process once again.

Subsection 49(1) of the Official Languages Act is clear:

The Governor in Council shall, by commission under the Great Seal, appoint a Commissioner of Official Languages for Canada after consultation with the leader of every recognized party in the Senate and House of Commons and approval of the appointment by resolution of the Senate and House of Commons.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: That was not done.

Mr. René Arseneault: According to Ms. Boucher, this was not done; that is her contention. That said, it is up to the Senate and the House of Commons to decide on the nomination. It is not up to our committee to go and see if the candidates obtained the requisite diplomas before they began their career, or if they successfully passed the language test, since that was already done in the course of the process.

What I mean is that there is already a process in place. There were people who examined the 72 candidacies. They did a selection. There were language tests. How could the Standing Committee of Official Languages have the mandate to re-examine the candidate's language skills qualifications, when this was already done in the same process that led to Ms. Meilleur's nomination?

For those reasons, I think we cannot go through the back door to do what we cannot do through the front door. We can't interfere in the process. I will oppose this motion for those same reasons.

The Chair: Ms. Boucher, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: First, we don't want to know if she passed her English tests in high school. We want to know why she benefited from preferential treatment. She found out that she had passed the language test. Who told her? We don't know.

Mr. René Arseneault: That is not the topic of the motion.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: No, it isn't. In fact, the motion is very moderate as compared to what we heard yesterday.

Mr. René Arseneault: I spoke about the motion, personally.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I agree, but the motion refers to our duty as the Standing Committee on Official Languages to find out who this person is who will represent us. We are the Standing Committee on Official Languages; we are the ones who are most often required to

work with the person who will be appointed Commissioner of Official Languages, and with all of the other organizations. These files will always find their way to the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

There is no reason for partisanship to prevent us from finding out who told her that she had passed her language test, and why.

Even if I speak English a little, and even if I passed the language test, I can guarantee you that I could not be Commissioner of Official Languages, first, because I donated money to my party, and second because I helped my party. I would not want to occupy that position either, for those reasons.

We are not trying to find the reasons behind this nomination here. What we are trying to find out is entirely relevant, since we are the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

If such a motion were tabled at the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, I think that it would be out of order, but this is the Standing Committee on Official Languages. If we cannot examine the language skills of the commissioner who will represent us, we have a big problem.

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

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

I'd like to go back to Mr. Arseneault's comment. If you read the motion, you can see that it is very simple, and does not talk about the process:

That the committee ask Madeleine Meilleur for her language skills qualifications as required by the Language Skills Act.

Let's read Standing Order 111(2), from chapter 13 of the Standing Orders. It is the same paragraph our chair read to us several times to explain the role of the Committee on Official Languages. It says:

(2) The committee, if it should call an appointee or nominee to appear pursuant to section (1) of this Standing Order, can examine the qualifications and competence of the appointee or nominee to perform the duties of the post to which he or she has been appointed or nominated.

The Standing Order does not refer to the process, but it does refer to our role. The Standing Committee on Official Languages has the duty to examine the qualifications and competence of the nominee.

Further, in Standing Order 111(4), the candidate's curriculum vitae is also mentioned. I can read it to you:

(4) the office of the minister who recommended the appointment shall provide the curriculum vitae of such an appointee or nominee to the committee upon written application from the clerk of the committee.

As you can see, it does not talk about the process, but about our role as a committee. I don't know if, or when, and I don't know how it will be done, but I think it would be preferable that we not grant a certificate of nomination. In my opinion we should abstain. It would be the best thing to do.

If we must provide a notice of motion ratifying the nomination, we must get to that point by using all of our skills and using all the time we have. Considering all of the controversy around Ms. Meilleur's nomination, and since complaints were tabled with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages with regard to this file, and given also that groups from official language minority communities will also be taking legal action, we have to use all of the resources we have, that is to say our abilities and our time.

We may discuss this again when we get to the next motion, but in my opinion this motion is completely in line with the responsibilities of our committee. Now that there is this new law that was enacted in 2013—the Language Skills Act, which requires that officers of Parliament be bilingual—the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada must be bilingual. How did the government in power, the Liberal government, decide to assess that? By administering language tests, which it is fully entitled to do.

We know that other candidates were given language tests because they told us, and they probably told you as well. The “E” rating means an exemption. It is a rating indicating that one is bilingual and that one does not have to take any additional second language courses. That mark is required for the process to continue. Consequently, it is certain that Ms. Meilleur got the “E” mark, since she went to the end of the process.

Just like we asked for her curriculum vitae, we must also ask for her language skills test results. It's really a routine question. “Can you send us your CV?” “Yes, of course!” “Can you send us proof of your language skills qualifications?” “Yes, of course!”

That is all we are asking for. It's a new way of doing things, because that act did not exist before 2013. The government put in place a system which is entirely legitimate, and requires that candidates obtain an “E” in order to be able to be Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada.

I don't know if that answers Mr. Arseneault's questions. Does the motion refer to the process? The answer is no. It refers to qualifications and requirements. We aren't involved in the process, but we are asking for required qualifications. Validating Ms. Meilleur's skills is the duty of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

I have no other names on my list. If there are no other speakers, we are going to vote on Mr. Choquette's motion.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I ask for a recorded division.

(Motion negated; nays 5, yays 4.)

• (1125)

The Chair: The next motion is also from Mr. Choquette. I will read it again:

That the committee invite witnesses in order to assess Madeleine Meilleur's ability to perform the duties of Commissioner of Official Languages before it reports to the House on her appointment.

We were going to hear from Mr. Choquette.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: He is over there.

The Chair: He isn't far.

In the meantime, does someone else want to speak?

Mrs. Boucher, you have the floor.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Thank you.

I agree entirely with the motion to invite witnesses. That is exactly what we need to do. There are more and more dissenting opinions being heard, and we should hear what those people have to say, as well as those who agree with the nomination. Let's be very clear: we have to consider both sides of the coin. That is what our committee has always done. We can invite people who agree with Ms. Meilleur's nomination, and those who do not.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Chair, with your permission, first I would like to go back briefly to the defeated motion.

What we have just done does not help the committee, because it is our duty to examine the competencies and curriculum vitae of Ms. Meilleur. It is our duty. It is mentioned in Standing Orders 111 (2) and 111(4) of chapter XIII of the Standing Orders. It is our duty as a committee.

By doing this, all we have done is add to the polemic and raise more questions. What does she have to hide? Did she not undergo the test? Did she not succeed? Was she given preferential treatment? This is what we have been talking about from the beginning. When will this controversy come to an end? It is not dying down, because people are trying to hide things all the time.

It is really disappointing that the motion was rejected. We were simply asking for something that should be a routine matter. We were asking for the curriculum vitae and the language skills qualifications, as for all of the other candidates.

That said, the motion we are going to debate now is the following:

That the committee invite witnesses in order to assess Madeleine Meilleur's ability to perform the duties of Commissioner of Official Languages before it reports to the House on her appointment.

We are now in the fifth week of controversy since this proposed nomination was announced by the Liberal government. Every day, or almost, we discover new information or we hear worrisome things from various interveners.

We don't want to discuss the process, because that is not our role here at the committee. Nevertheless, I think we could have looked at it: it is our right since the committee is free to study whatever it likes.

Be that as it may, I'll come back to chapter XIII of the Standing Orders. As you can see, the motion uses the same words as Standing Order 111(2): “[...] examine the qualifications and competence of the appointee or nominee[...].”

It is almost verbatim, except for the language skills qualifications, which we cannot evaluate. But I don't know why we cannot at least have a look at them.

I'll continue: “[...] to perform the duties of the post[...].” That is exactly what the motions says, i.e. “to assess Madeleine Meilleur's ability to perform the duties of Commissioner of Official Languages”.

The reason I asked for that is very simple. Currently there are serious doubts about her ability to perform the duties of Commissioner of Official Languages. I spoke about it, and we discussed it together. What can Madeleine Meilleur do for her good friends in the Prime Minister's office if there is a complaint against the Prime Minister's Office or the Privy Council Office?

I myself filed two complaints against the Prime Minister and the Privy Council Office. The first complaint was received and analyzed, and the Privy Council Office was found guilty of not having complied with the Official Languages Act by holding consultations in English only in Ontario, and in French in Quebec. That had been mentioned by the Commissioner of Official Languages.

• (1130)

How could this be handled? Could she recuse herself and say in certain cases that she cannot conduct such or such a study? She could recuse herself, but will she have to do this frequently, all the time? That is the concern we have, and that is why I suggest that we invite witnesses.

I did not mention any names, because the last time, we had a list. Of course when we have a list, there are always people who will agree to invite this person, but not that person. Some will say that this person will reveal secrets, and that he or she should not be invited, and so on. Currently there is no list. We can decide together and in a consistent way to invite three, six or eight witnesses—the exact number does not matter—to find out what the necessary abilities are to occupy this position.

We could meet with people such as the former Commissioners of Official Languages, for instance Graham Fraser. We could invite the current commissioners of New Brunswick and Ontario. If they are in a conflict of interest, we could invite the deputy commissioners, for instance the deputy commissioners of Ontario and New Brunswick, so that they may outline what is needed to play this role, and what the required abilities are to occupy this position.

I thought there would be a vote last night at the end of Ms. Meilleur's appearance, but there was not. There is something going on that we don't know about.

• (1135)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: At the Senate.

Mr. François Choquette: Yes, at the Senate, and here as well.

When Ms. Meilleur appeared at the Senate yesterday, Senator Smith put the following question to her:

If you applied for a position as an officer of Parliament and learned that other candidates had met with political contacts from various departments, and that the candidate who was chosen before the recruitment firm the government had hired submitted its final recommendations, would you consider that the process had been equitable?

Ms. Meilleur then answered:

Senator, thank you for your question. As I mentioned, it is possible that that point may raise concerns, but I want to say once again that I knew the persons in question. I met with them to say that I wanted to continue to serve my country.

And so, she knows a lot of people in the Prime Minister's inner circle and in the Liberal Party, which, in my opinion, may have an impact on her ability to discharge her mandate. If that is not the case, I think we should at the very least examine this issue.

I am repeating myself, but if we don't take the time to study the process that was followed carefully, what will we do later? How are we going to be able to issue this famous certificate of nomination? How will we do that, and when will we do so? Will we do so when a complaint is filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages? Will we do so when an application for review is submitted to the Federal Court? How are we going to do all that?

I am wondering about this, and I don't get any answer from my government colleagues. In this regard, if we are not going to provide the certificate of nomination immediately, or if the Liberals decide not to provide one at all—I think that is what is going to happen, and that that is the best solution—what are we going to do in the meantime? Are we going to analyze this nomination or not? If we don't want to provide the certificate of nomination, let's say so immediately. We can continue to work on our reports. I would like to know what we are going to do next. That is why I tabled this motion. If we want to issue a certificate of nomination, I think we have to go forward and support the motion. If we all agree to drop the topic, and that we do not have enough information to provide the certificate of nomination, we will simply not provide one. Tell us and we can move on to something else.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor.

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

First I want to say that I am in favour of Mr. Choquette's motion. What we are going through is extremely deplorable. It is all based on extreme partisanship.

To summarize what is going on, let us say that our committee is supposed to defend and represent official languages in the context of minority communities. All of this controversy affecting the committee currently will inevitably leave marks. I believe this situation is totally unprecedented.

The House of Commons and the Senate must approve Ms. Meilleur's nomination, but if that is not unanimous as it always was in the past, the situation will be difficult for all of the committees that will follow in the course of the next seven years.

I want to denounce this situation in the strongest possible terms, because our role is to defend and work to improve the quality of French language services in official language minority communities, and English services in Quebec. For a month and a half, we have been reading all kinds of things about this situation. In addition, some groups—and I am referring here to groups we represent, incidentally—have told us that this situation makes no sense and that the process has to be started over, and an appropriate person found.

I am almost tempted to suggest to Ms. Meilleur that she apply again and go through a second selection process, one that would be totally devoid of partisanship. But clearly, Ms. Meilleur would still be associated with the Liberal Party. Unfortunately, she made donations in the past, particularly to the Prime Minister's campaign. As I said last week, if the roles were reversed, you would no longer have any shirts or ties on.

That said, we have to do our work, and I thank Mr. Choquette for having raised matters related to the Standing Orders. We have work to do and we must do it. Unfortunately, the Liberal members of the committee have just voted against the motion. Simply refusing to ask Ms. Meilleur to provide her linguistic qualifications shows an attitude I would describe as cavalier.

You don't realize what is going to happen. Inevitably, this is going to blow up in your faces. This is what happens when you spit into the wind. Sincerely, I think that is what you are doing. To avoid using overly familiar language, I would say that you are literally derailing the Standing Committee on Official Languages, and that is extremely unfortunate. Moreover, I think it will be derailed not only for one or two weeks, but for several years.

If I am not mistaken, the new provisions were introduced by the NDP in 2013, and were ratified by the Liberals. I was not a member of Parliament at that time, but I know that the House of Commons unanimously approved these new measures. It is incumbent upon the committee to ensure that the skills of the person who will assume the position of Commissioner of Official Languages are satisfactory. The committee has however defeated the motion that we ask that person to provide her language skills qualifications.

One or the other is true: either partisanship is gaining ground here, or Ms. Meilleur simply did not undergo those tests. It would have been interesting to hear the comments of other candidates who took the tests in question.

In conclusion, I will say that I am extremely disappointed with what is happening. I sincerely think that this situation is not to your credit at all, dear members of the committee. Several of you are new today, but be that as it may, I don't think this will be an asset to your resumes.

• (1140)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Especially since you represent linguistic minorities, and I don't.

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, Mr. Arseneault has the floor.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to be given the same privilege as my colleague Mr. Choquette and go back to the first motion, the one that was defeated. He went back to that motion and then spoke about the second motion.

However, before discussing those matters, I would like to say that the Standing Committee on Official Languages, which I have had the honour to be a part of since last year, is a very good committee. I consider that it is the best committee. The people who are a part of it are people of good will and good faith.

I understand that the imminent nomination may displease some people and please others, but I must go refer the Official Languages

Act, which tells us how the Commissioner of Official Languages is to be appointed, and how long the mandate is to last. At the risk of repeating myself, this is in section 49 of the Official Languages Act.

As for Mr. Choquette's motion, I understand what he is going through. However, the famous Language Skills Act does say that the appointee "at the time of his or her appointment", must be able to speak and understand both official languages. The appointee must meet those criteria. This was already taken into account by the selection committee. A process was followed which led to this imminent nomination.

This may not be deliberate on the part of Mr. Choquette and Mr. Généreux, but in my opinion, people are trying to go through the back door. Last week, Mr. Choquette told us that we had no business attacking the process and that interfering in it was not a part of our mandate.

The Language Skills Act applies to high level appointments. I will list the positions the act applies to: the Auditor General of Canada; the Chief Electoral Officer; the Commissioner of Official Languages for Canada; the Privacy Commissioner; the Information Commissioner; the Senate Ethics Officer; the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner; the Commissioner of Lobbying; the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, and the President of the Public Service Commission.

In reference to this prior condition regarding language skills, section 2 reads as follows:

The person appointed to any of the following offices must at the time of his or her appointment be able to speak and understand clearly both official languages:

That is what the Language Skills Act says. I am basing my comments on the act, and I remember that Mrs. Boucher said that all candidates had passed the language skills test. The skills assessment has thus been done.

This motion interferes in the process and tries to do better than what is already in place. The process was followed by the selection committee, and we have nothing to say about that. That is not the role of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I am repeating myself, and I understand the frustration of certain members and certain citizens. I also understand the satisfaction or lack of satisfaction people may feel regarding this nomination.

Once again, I think you are trying to use the back door to do what you cannot do through the front door. You want to attack the process, the selection committee or the steps involved in the selection. The selection committee assessed — I will repeat it — 72 candidates before it finally made a choice.

Those were my thoughts about the first motion. I wanted to benefit from the same privilege as my colleague Mr. Choquette, that is to say to go back to the first motion, which was defeated.

The purpose of the second motion is again to interfere in the process, since its goal is to invite witnesses to assess Ms. Meilleur's abilities. Did we invite witnesses to assess the abilities of the Auditor General? To my knowledge that was not done. Did we invite witnesses to assess the abilities of the previous Official Languages Commissioners? To my knowledge that was never done. Once again, this would be interfering in the selection process that led to Ms. Meilleur's nomination. For the same reasons as for the first motion, I object to this one.

Mr. Généreux, I understand what you are saying, and I understand what Mr. Choquette and Mrs. Boucher are saying. However, you are trying to use the back door because you could not get through the front door. You want to interfere in the selection process; that is what you want to do.

I did not listen to the Senate debate last evening because I had to be at a committee meeting, but Mrs. Boucher, you were there. Someone who was present during Ms. Meilleur's appearance at the Senate said that everyone without exception—as was the case here as well—recognized that Ms. Meilleur has the necessary qualifications, and that that was not the issue. However, the concerns centre around the process or the way in which the nomination was made. Of course that is only hearsay, and you must take it with a grain of salt. I am simply repeating something that someone who was present during Ms. Meilleur's appearance before the Senate said to me.

• (1145)

The real question is the following: Does Ms. Meilleur have the skills to do this work? Does her appearance before the committee, as well as her curriculum vitae, allow us to believe that she will be able to do this work?

Personally, I am convinced that our committee should not interfere in the process. I am not saying that we do not have a role to play as members of Parliament, since ultimately it is the House of Commons and the Senate that will make the decision. In light of that, we can make our voices heard and express our satisfaction or dissatisfaction with regard to this nomination. However, the Standing Committee on Official Languages as such does not have this role people are trying to give it, to allow it to interfere in the selection process. If that were our role, we would have been in the front row from the beginning of the selection process.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. Samson, you have the floor.

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

I agree entirely with my colleague Mr. Arseneault. We discussed this at our last meeting.

First, it would be important to point out that this is the first time in our history, from what I understand, that a commissioner was selected through an open and transparent process. That never happened before. In the past, leaders of the government appointed the person.

Personally, I find it remarkable that anyone who thought they met the criteria could apply for the position. I think that if I had not been a member of Parliament, I might have applied myself, because I

think I meet the criteria. In fact, self-assessment is the very first step. The person must determine if he or she meets the criteria. Once he has done this self-assessment, if he feels that he has all of the necessary skills, he may decide to apply. He does not wait to be called; he simply applies, because he wants to apply for this position, and because according to his own assessment, he has all of the necessary competencies and meets the criteria.

And so, 72 people applied. That in itself is quite impressive. There may have been 200 or 500 people who felt they could do this work, but actually applying is another matter. You have to commit to the position for a seven-year term, which requires that you move to Ottawa, I imagine. This has to fit into the person's career plan.

I am not here to reassess the work that was done by the selection committee, or even before that. In fact, even before the 72 candidacies made it to the selection committee, the process was not tainted by any political influence, since a professional and independent company was hired to analyze the 72 candidacies. Once again, that is very impressive. The selection committee then examined all of these files and selected 12 people who, following the analysis of the dossiers and other elements, clearly met the criteria at a very high level. Afterwards, according to what I understand, 10 people were chosen by the selection committee to undergo a psychometric assessment, as well as a reference check.

No one mentions this, but the selection committee was for the most part made up of public servants.

• (1150)

Mr. François Choquette: There you go: they were deputy ministers.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Officials are supposed to be non-partisan. They are responsible for ensuring the quality of those assessments. They have to check the references. To me, it is crystal clear. This was the first time that the process was open, clear, and run by qualified people.

Let me come back to the motion. In my opinion, determining which witnesses will appear in committee to assess a person's skills is not a great idea. So we have a witness coming from somewhere and assessing skills. How will they do it?

Mr. François Choquette: By ability.

Mr. Darrell Samson: In terms of ability, a firm had the files of the candidates. A selection committee decided. There were also psychometric assessments and references. All this was done in advance. It's not up to us to do that.

In my opinion, the motion is asking this committee to do something that has already been done. Let me continue. We are talking about skills and how they are assessed. I have not yet heard anybody in this country say that Ms. Meilleur did not have the skills.

Mr. François Choquette: The abilities.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Or the abilities. I have not heard anyone say that.

The leader of the opposition party clearly said that she was competent. The leader of the NDP clearly said that she was competent. The critics also said that she was competent. And we were going to evaluate her ability and her skills!

Our work was done. Ms. Meilleur came to meet with us. She was questioned. Our responsibility is to ensure that she has the skills we want. Everyone is in agreement. Our work is done. I think we have to move on to the next step. We make our recommendation that she is competent and we move on. We are not here to do assessments, nor do we have the ability to do so. We will not ask Peter to do something that Paul cannot do. That is not how it works. We can bring all sorts of strategies to the table, but our role is simple and clear.

I'm in favour of a process that allows all Canadians to apply to become an officer of Parliament. The process includes an analysis of the candidates carried out by an independent group. You cannot ask for better. The process was followed. For these reasons, I cannot support the motion. We do not have the ability to conduct those assessments.

Thank you.

•(1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

We are going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes. However, when we return, Mrs. Boucher, Mr. Choquette, Mr. Généreux, Mr. Arseneault and Mr. Nater respectively will have the floor as per their request.

We will suspend for a few minutes.

•(1155)

(Pause)

•(1200)

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Mr. Chair, I will repeat what I said, and what everyone has been saying, from the outset. We have had a committee that considers itself non-partisan all along. Today, I would recall that, contrary to what Mr. Samson stated before the cameras, Ms. Meilleur may have had a fine résumé, but the other candidates may also have had fine résumés. Ms. Meilleur's problem is that she is 100% Liberal. This is one of the first times that an appointment has not been unanimous in Parliament or in the Senate. We must stop hiding behind grand principles, because this is really what the problem is here.

It goes even further. Ms. Meilleur says one thing to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, and another to the Senate. I think that is unacceptable. She misled the Standing Committee on Official Languages and the Senate on the same issue. On May 18, when Mr. Mulcair asked her whether she had talked to Graham Fraser, she said that he had told her to apply. And where did he meet her? In the street. Yesterday, in the Senate, she said that she had a telephone conversation with Mr. Fraser, and that she had gone to a restaurant with him. So we have two completely different versions of the story.

Every time a senator asked her about the anglophone community in Quebec, she was not able to answer. She knows nothing about the reality of this community, and she does not even know its name. Does that sound smart to you? We are talking about the Commissioner of Official Languages. She even ended up saying that she would be the commissioner of the francophonie. Listen, as much as we want to be nice and not get into it, it does not make sense, and we're not the ones saying it. She was the one who said it,

to this committee and to the Senate. She did not say the same thing in both places. If that's what transparency means to you, we'll have to talk about it because I do not agree.

This is about the appointment of a senior official of Parliament, who should not have any political stripe. Just because someone was in politics in the past does not mean that they cannot aspire to become a commissioner some day. That does not preclude anything.

However, last June, she resigned from her position as a minister in Ontario, saying that she had to take time for her family because her husband was very ill. Two months later, in August, she met everyone in the Liberal Party, and now she wants to become the Commissioner of Official Languages. This is not a part-time position! If her husband was very ill, his condition could not have improved in a month. Read the "blues" of her appearance before both Houses, and you might realize that what we are saying is true. What we want to know—

•(1205)

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the bells are ringing, calling us to a vote in the House. I need the unanimous consent of the committee so that we can continue the meeting for a few minutes.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yes, a few minutes. No problem.

The Chair: Does everybody agree? Very well.

Mrs. Boucher, you can continue.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: You have to realize what's going on. It is unfortunate for everyone and it is unfortunate for you, because you are caught up in this process and we are attacking you.

However, this is affecting all the members of the committee. All members have to go through that at some point. We are getting appointments shoved down our throats, because we are not in favour of them. If at least people say the same thing in the same places and to the same people, that's fine, but she appeared before both Houses and she said two completely different things. The minister told us in the House that Ms. Meilleur had never spoken to Mr. Butts and Ms. Telford. Yesterday, she said verbatim to the Senate that she had called them and they told her about the process. I want to be nice and stop asking questions, but the further we go, the more reasons you give us to ask them.

The members of the committee must work well together. What are we going to do when the commissioner eventually appears and we ask her questions? We are the opposition and she will surely be on your side. We will say so from the outset. She will speak and we will say that the Liberal Party has supported her. That's definitely what we will say because that is what it looks like. In politics, perception is very important. Today even more than ever.

You rejected all the motions that Mr. Choquette has tabled, and yet they were rather tame. You rejected them all. How can we work together and not bear in mind that you have been partisan? We'll no longer ever be able to trust this woman who is going to come to see us because she will not be speaking on behalf of the organizations. She does not even know the organizations in Quebec, she does not even know who they are.

Canada has two official languages, and we keep talking about them here. They are French and English. We talk a lot about the francophone community outside Quebec, but there are also anglophones in Quebec. She does not know who they are and she does not know their reality. Members who have lived in Ontario could say a lot more about Ms. Meilleur. You keep telling us that she is competent. She is competent, but in relation to whom? Do we know who the others were? Do you know their names? There is, of course, Mr. Doucet, who wrote a beautiful letter that appeared today in the *Acadie Nouvelle*, and who is absolutely right. Did you wonder who the others were? Did they have the required skills?

Don't tell me that this man is stupid, I would not believe you. There were others. Actually, Ms. Joly gave me another name. I'm sure he's competent. I will not provide the name because that information is not public and I have too much respect for the process to disclose it.

You have been playing this game because the government started it, but you are holding us hostage. The Standing Committee on Official Languages could get to the bottom of this, but we will have to work with her. You have just slipped one by us, because we can never have confidence in this committee again.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

Mr. Choquette, the floor is yours.

Mr. François Choquette: Do we have time? Will there be a vote, after all?

The Chair: No, there will be no vote. It was a quorum call and it is done.

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

I think we have to ask why we—all the members of the opposition and myself—are asking to study her ability further. I would like to distinguish between ability and skills to clarify what Mr. Samson said.

A person may have all the skills, but they may not have the ability to do their job because they are too close to the people they have to judge. She will not have had time to take enough distance to judge people afterwards. The position of Commissioner of Official Languages is an oversight and watchdog position. You may even have to sue the government if it does not comply with the Official Languages Act.

In that sense, I think sometimes we might not have a good grasp on the committee's role. So it's important to remember what the committee's role is.

Section 88 of the Official Languages Act, which Mr. Arseneault will consult, I am sure—

Mr. René Arseneault: If you ask me to.

• (1215)

Mr. François Choquette: Yes, I'm asking you to.

In section 88 of the Official Languages Act, if my information is correct, it says:

The administration of this Act, any regulations and directives made under this Act and the reports of the Commissioner, the President of the Treasury Board and the

Minister of Canadian Heritage made under this Act shall be reviewed on a permanent basis by such committee of the Senate, of the House of Commons or of both Houses of Parliament as may be designated or established for that purpose.

I would like to follow up on what my colleague Mr. Arseneault said. Earlier, he mentioned the Official Languages Act. The act specifically states that this committee must ensure compliance with the Official Languages Act. In terms of the process, it is not accurate to say that this is not part of our mandate, because it is.

Having said that, my motion was moved and, unfortunately, rejected. I hope it's just because of the list of suggested witnesses, not because of the basis of the motion, but it does not matter. The motion that is now on the table addresses Ms. Meilleur's ability to perform the duties. Does the candidate have the ability to do the job? I think we have to look at that before we issue the certificate of nomination. We must determine whether or not we approve the appointment.

It is important to bear in mind everything that is happening right now. The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada (FCFA) and the Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN) requested a meeting with the Prime Minister of Canada. That's serious! Groups are pointing out that there are so many problems, questions, divisions within not only political parties and Parliament, but also communities—which the candidate will have to represent and defend—that they have to meet with not only the Minister of Canadian Heritage Ms. Joly, but the Prime Minister. Is the Standing Committee on Official Languages, which is supposed to defend and represent those communities, going to tell them that the Prime Minister is not available, that he will not meet with them, but that the committee will still be issuing the certificate of nomination, without caring about what they have to say? Is that what we're going to do? I hope not.

You said loud and clear that you are going to vote against my motion, so my question is: what is the next step? When will we issue this certificate of nomination and in what context? In a context where the two largest associations of official language minority communities in the country are denied a meeting with the Prime Minister? That is not on.

Can we, as members of the committee, decide to issue the certificate of nomination when the two largest associations of official language minority communities are asking to meet with the Prime Minister? The Prime Minister may not be available right away. That's normal, but he will have to make himself available to meet with them. That's for sure. We will have to wait for that before we make our decision.

It is all well and good for the opposition to move motions, to want to work and to study the situation. I understand that the members of the committee representing the government do not want to do that, but what do they want? I would like to know because I don't get it.

Just recently, yesterday, in fact, we heard that the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, or SANB, was taking the matter to court. This was reported in an article in the *Acadie Nouvelle* newspaper, Acadians' most read newspaper. Of course, people in Ottawa read it as well.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yes, we get all the newspapers.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: It's very popular.

• (1220)

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Samson, I hope that you read the *Acadie Nouvelle* from time to time.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I read it, but do you read it?

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Samson, I can tell you that I read it.

In addition, if you have read it recently, you would have seen quite a fine article on the bilingualism of Supreme Court judges, urging you to vote in favour of the legislation on the bilingualism of judges.

Mr. François Choquette: Let me quote from the article. It is important and it provides us with some context.

The article states:

In the next few days, the SANB will be making an application for judicial review to the Federal Court in the matter of Madeleine Meilleur's nomination as Commissioner of Official Languages.

The Court will therefore have to consider the validity of Madeleine Meilleur's appointment process.

Let me reiterate what I said at the outset. First of all, the two largest associations of official language minority communities are asking to meet with the Prime Minister because there are divisions and questions about Madeleine Meilleur's nomination.

Furthermore, complaints were filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. We will soon know whether one of them is admissible. In all likelihood, it should be, because it refers directly to subsection 49(1) of the Official Languages Act. There is ample evidence of non-compliance with that subsection and a breach of the act.

Official language minority groups will be filing an application for judicial review with respect to this same subsection 49(1). What will the committee do in the meantime? Do we decide not to talk about it until everything is settled? Are we going to wait to issue a certificate of nomination? Are we going to decide to move forward, to look into this, as the motion asks, to understand whether she has the ability or not?

Regardless of what we are going to do, I'd like to hear what the Liberal government has to say because we have been discussing this for the last two or three meetings. This is extremely important. We are talking about the Commissioner of Official Languages, who will be appointed for seven years, not two days. This role is extremely important; she is the watchdog of official languages.

I hear you want to reject this motion and you do not want to try to find out what her ability is. What are the Liberals on this committee planning to do? I do not know and I do not understand where we are headed.

Let me reiterate, because it is important, the two largest associations want to meet with the Prime Minister, a complaint has been filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, and there is an application for judicial review.

What are we going to do now?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Following up on what Mr. Choquette said, I was going to include all the associations in Canada. There are large and small ones. Tomorrow morning, we could ask all the associations representing minority francophones and anglophones in Canada what their opinion is about this nomination and the process.

Earlier, Mr. Samson mentioned that no one in Canada had said that Ms. Meilleur did not have the required qualifications. I agree with him. I must agree with you. In fact, Ms. Meilleur has had an exceptional career. That's not the issue.

The opposition parties are not the ones telling you this now. We are not playing politics by sending you little motions to try to get you into trouble. Mr. Arseneault, you should not be laughing at that, because that's really not it.

Mr. Samson, contrary to what you are saying, all of the communities themselves are telling you that the process was not open and transparent. In addition, you said that, if you had not been elected as an MP, you could have had the skills to apply for this position.

You are doing a self-assessment, you say you have the skills to apply for this position, but you are telling us that you do not have the skills to assess this person's ability? I think you are barking up the wrong tree.

Actually, the communities are talking to you today. They will probably be taking you to court because this makes no sense.

Once again, what we are experiencing is unprecedented. We must appoint the watchdog who must hold the government—

• (1225)

Mr. René Arseneault: —responsible.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: —responsible. Clearly, this person is a very close friend of the government. Under the circumstances, this sentence alone can destroy the whole process, and even Ms. Meilleur's reputation. It's inevitable. She cannot be in that role, under the current circumstances, after all the issues that have been raised.

Once again, we are not playing politics. The communities themselves are telling you that this is unacceptable. If the communities were to say that they supported the government's choice, that there was no problem because Ms. Meilleur is the ideal candidate, that would be one thing. However, that is not what I'm seeing from reading a few articles.

Mr. Arseneault, you who stand up for Acadia and the Acadians come hell or high water, I do not understand that Mr...

What's his name?

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: It is Michel Doucet.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Do not try to tell me that Mr. Doucet is not competent, or potentially competent, to do the job. Is it because he's a man and Ms. Meilleur is a woman? Do we want more women? Yesterday, someone said that the idea was to have more women in the public service. Anyway, I think that was said yesterday in the Senate.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: When we asked questions, yes.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: That said, I repeat, the committee is not able to do its job. We have the opportunity to ask candidates to give us the results of language tests and their résumés, among other things, but you have just voted against that motion. This does not allow the committee to do its job. We will be accountable to all the communities. You Liberals are going to be especially accountable to them later on.

Mr. Choquette said it well. Once the Prime Minister refuses to meet with the presidents of the associations of official language minority communities in Canada, whether they are francophone or anglophone, we will have a serious problem, and so will you. We are not asking to meet with the Prime Minister. The communities themselves are asking in order to have their voices heard on what has just happened.

We say that we want to appoint someone neutral. Do you know what the word “neutral” means? If the Conservatives were in power and a Conservative who had made a donation to the Conservative Party were appointed as commissioner, I think the House of Commons would shut down altogether. I think we would come to blows. I can be a true Quebecer when I want to. I can tell you one thing: if you want expressions, I can give you as many as you want. However, honestly, we are in deep doo-doo. That's exactly what it is, and you are in it much deeper than we are.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bernard Généreux: You have to understand that what Canadians are saying right now about the nomination flies in the face of the needs of the communities. The communities are telling you that what happened and what is happening now is not right, not because Ms. Meilleur does not have the skills, but because she is a Liberal. It's as simple as that. That's the reality.

Don't tell me that there are no non-partisan people in Canada. Other people have been appointed before her.

That's all I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Arseneault, go ahead.

Mr. René Arseneault: To prevent the committee from going around in circles, I will not repeat everything that was said. We are telling it like it is, and it is important to hear these remarks, especially from our colleagues in the opposition. While it may be difficult, I think it's a good discussion.

In response to Mrs. Boucher, I would say that the committee has been reliable to date and has provided good services to Canadians. In my view, it is doing its job, and I hope it will continue to do so, notwithstanding the commissioner's imminent appointment.

That being said, I have consulted section 88 of the Official Languages Act. In my humble interpretation, there is nothing in this section that indicates, in any way, directly or indirectly, that we can interfere in the appointment process. What you just said is important. As you said, the Senate, one of the two entities that will be deciding on this appointment, heard from Ms. Meilleur yesterday.

If we take everything you have said for granted, if we go by it 100%, we know better what the act says about appointing a commissioner. We are in a better legal position to do that. That's what I'm hearing. The Senate did its job yesterday. When we sit on the Standing Committee on Official Languages, we have two hats: one as members elected by our communities, and another as members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Mrs. Boucher referred to an article in the *Acadie Nouvelle*. I read it this morning. It was written by Michel Doucet, whom I consider extremely competent. It is indeed a model of language and constitutional competency. In an article where he once again uses a very polite tone, Mr. Doucet criticizes the process.

• (1230)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: No.

The Chair: We will let Mr. Arseneault continue.

Mr. René Arseneault: Ultimately, he talks about the New Brunswick method for appointing a commissioner of official languages. So it is a criticism of the process. I am always hearing people talk about the process.

To use Mr. Généreux's words, it's not that the opposition wants to “stir up trouble” in the committee. I understand that, but in my opinion—and I'm not speaking on behalf of other committee members—it is not the role of the Standing Committee on Official Languages to interfere in the appointment process.

Mr. Choquette, who appoints the commissioner, under subsection 49(1) of the Official Languages Act?

The Chair: I don't want any dialogue.

Mr. René Arseneault: I have read and know by heart subsections 49(1), 49(2), 49(3) and 49(4). Once again, as a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I must oppose any interference by the selection committee during the process that led to the impending appointment of the commissioner of official languages.

I want to once again mention section 88 of the Official Languages Act and Mr. Doucet's article that criticizes the process. If the SANB undertook an injunction process or a similar process, it would constitute legal recourse. The government in power will have to deal with the consequences of that process and the court decision. In a judicial process, we cannot do anything right away. The government in power will have to deal with those consequences, be they positive or negative.

I will wrap up by saying the following:

Deliberately shirking or ignoring nuances in the pursuit of truth often leads us down a bad path.

We are forgetting something Ms. Meilleur said to us—that the first person who approached her about the position was Graham Fraser.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: That's not true!

The Chair: Just a moment, Mrs. Boucher. I think that your name is on my list and that you will have a chance to comment later.

Mr. René Arseneault: Ms. Meilleur told us in her testimony that her dearest wish was to become a senator, but that she ran into Graham Fraser, who told her—this is what she answered to one of Mr. Mulcair's questions—that the position was vacant, but that he also wanted to solicit other candidates. She alluded to the fact that Mr. Fraser was very neutral. Mr. Mulcair added that Mr. Fraser was not the type of person to play petty politics or seek out party members.

If Mr. Fraser, the outgoing Commissioner of Official Languages, thought that Ms. Meilleur, despite her past and the fact that she was actively involved in politics in Ontario, was a potential candidate, as a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I will refrain from commenting on Ms. Meilleur's qualifications and abilities.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. Nater, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Chair, I wasn't going to speak to this motion, but I have to respond to the comments made by Mr. Samson about the process. He implied that it was an open process, a fair process, because there was an external body that participated in it, because there was a committee of deputy ministers, of public servants, who participated in the process.

Where was Parliament in the process? No one around this table is a member of the government, not one. The Liberals may be members of the governing party, but they are not members of the government. They are members of Parliament who may be sitting as members of the governing party. They are not members of the government. They are not members of the executive branch.

The position of official languages commissioner is that of an officer of Parliament, an officer of both Houses of our Parliament. To hear that there is an external body reviewing candidates and that there are deputy ministers reviewing candidates is not acceptable if Parliament is not involved in the process. These are the same deputy ministers who would be subject to investigations and interrogations by the official languages commissioner, and they are the ones who are determining which name will go forward? It's not acceptable.

Parliament makes this decision. Parliament or a representative of Parliament was never involved in the process for the selection of the short list or the final nominee. In fact, the potential candidate was informed that she would be going forward before the leaders of the official opposition and the third party were even consulted.

Parliament was not at the table as this process was unfolding, and I would say that it's unacceptable for us to go forward with this nomination when the fact is that the very entity to which we are appointing wasn't involved in the process. This isn't even to go on to the conversation, which I think is well-founded, about her independence from the current government. This is talking about the process. Parliament was entirely shut out of the appointment process for an officer of Parliament. This is not a deputy minister. This isn't someone being appointed to implement the will of the government. This is an entity that is mandated to review, examine, and investigate the executive branch of government. Serge Joyal, a

long-time Liberal, raised his concerns. If a long-time Liberal cannot find trust in this position, how do we expect Canadians to have trust in this position? How do we expect official languages communities to have respect and trust in this position?

Unfortunately, this has been botched from day one. Had Madeleine Meilleur, when she was a provincial legislator, been in the position we are being placed in today, I don't think she would have gone ahead with this appointment. If she were to review the process that is now unfolding and the concerns that are being raised, I think she would do well to reconsider her eagerness to serve in this position.

I think there are legitimate concerns that have been raised by key stakeholder groups, by members of Parliament from the opposition, and by members of the Senate from the governing party who self-declare as "Senate Liberals". I think we would do very well to take a second look at this process and to hear witnesses, as this motion states.

I want to end on a final point, as I don't want to take up too much time. In every case where an official languages commissioner has been appointed, it has been done with the consent of each recognized party in the House of Commons. Even in 1999, with five recognized parties, including the Bloc Québécois, they did so with the unanimous consent of every recognized party. This would be breaking that mould.

There is an abundance of people.... We know that 72 people applied for the position. We know that 10 people made it to the short list. We don't know who is on that short list. We are accepting the word of one person, the minister, that they found the best candidate. We have no way to verify that because we were not part of the process. Parliament was not involved.

That's why I will be voting in favour of this motion. I think we need to take a long, hard look at the appointment of Madam Meilleur.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, John.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Choquette, the floor is yours.

Mr. François Choquette: I'm disappointed because I have not gotten a response from my Liberal colleagues. What are we going to do about the FCFA and the QCGN, which are requesting a meeting with the Prime Minister? Does this mean the committee will make a decision without allowing those two groups to meet with the Prime Minister? I didn't get an answer on that. That's disappointing.

I understand that the current government thinks nothing of appointing someone and being subject to a complaint lodged with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and to legal recourse concerning the process.

Moreover, I have not heard what your plan is. When do you want to issue this certificate of nomination? Is it today? When? We don't know. I don't know either.

On May 30, the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta wrote a letter, which says the following:

Subject: Appointment of the next Commissioner of Official Languages

The Board of Directors of the ACFA, the organization that represents Alberta's francophone community, held a meeting. During that meeting, we discussed at length the appointment of the next Commissioner of Official Languages, an appointment on which much has been written over the past few weeks.

Further on, the association explains subsections 49(1) and 56(1) of the Official Languages Act, which respectively cover the appointment and the mission of the Commissioner of Official Languages—in other words, their qualifications—and the letter concludes with the following:

For those reasons, we are sure that the federal government must immediately play a major leadership role in this important file and do what is necessary to guarantee the credibility, neutrality and integrity of the next Commissioner of Official Languages.

Two recommendations are made:

Therefore, the ACFA is asking the federal government to repeat the process for appointing the Commissioner of Official Languages, including the membership of the selection committee.

The ACFA is also reiterating the request of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada for a meeting to be held as soon as possible, between you and the FCAF, to discuss this issue.

That letter is addressed to the Prime Minister of Canada.

I just want to remind my Liberal colleagues what kind of a situation official language communities are in. We talked earlier about the SANB and we are now talking about the ACFA. Those associations bring up the division within the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne. Many groups are asking for the process to be repeated, and that is why the FCFA and the QCGN are requesting a meeting with the Prime Minister.

So here is my question for the Liberals, the people from across the table who are the government spokespersons. What is your plan? According to what you said, you will reject this motion, whose goal is to better understand Madeleine Meilleur's capabilities for the job. What will happen after that? Do you know? What is your plan?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

Mrs. Boucher, go ahead.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Mr. Choquette, Mr. Généreux, Mr. Nater, thank you for highlighting our concerns, but also those of the organizations we support. Since I am a Quebecker, we don't have any francophones in minority situations in the province. Our minority is anglophone.

I was shocked yesterday evening, in the Senate. I was sitting next to Mr. Nater, and I asked him at some point whether I was not hearing properly or whether, every time a senator asked Ms. Meilleur what she would do for anglophone minorities, she would actually only talk about the francophonie.

Toward the end, when she said she would be commissioner of the francophonie, I must admit that it disturbed me. In fact, there is no committee on the francophonie; there is only the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Until further notice, there are two official languages: French and English.

In light of what we are learning day after day, it is clear that this is a partisanship issue. This is a truly partisan appointment; and don't try to suggest otherwise. The problem is not that her name is Madeleine Meilleur, but rather that she is highly partisan.

During the latest election, she walked around with Mr. Trudeau practically every time he was in Ontario. She donated a total of \$5,500 to the Liberal Party. She was still an Ontario minister less than a year ago. She should take a little step back. That is actually what most of the senators told her yesterday. They asked her why she did not take some time to distance herself a bit from politics.

For example, Mr. Fraser was not associated with any political party, and that was his strength. He could find fault with us any time. We were on that side of the table, where you now sit, and when we made a mistake, he did not hold back and he let us know. That was to his credit.

Frankly, even if Ms. Meilleur had the nicest résumé in the world or she had all the necessary qualifications, she would not pass muster because she is affiliated with the Liberal Party, which forms the government. In addition, the commissioner's role is that of a watchdog.

All the opposition parties, like organizations, know that no one will believe what she says. She should begin today by doing her homework, including preparing for appearances before a committee. Her statements change from one committee to another, and that misleads us. I think it is becoming problematic.

I know that you will unfortunately vote in favour of Mr. Choquette's motion. It would have been possible to create some distance between partisanship and Ms. Meilleur's appointment. As I said earlier, we could have invited both those who are in favour of her appointment and others who are opposed to it, gotten to the bottom of things and maintained our independence. As Ms. Joly pointed out, our committee is independent.

However, I would say that, based on what I am seeing today, this is anything but the truth.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

We have 10 minutes left before the hour is up, and I would like to have a discussion among us. That is why I propose that we end what we are doing next Thursday. I would like us to go in camera for the remaining 10 minutes.

Do you agree?

Mr. François Choquette: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Yes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: So we will continue the meeting in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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