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Chair

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez

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• (0910)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.)): Good morning and welcome. I am pleased to see you again.

It is a pleasure for me to welcome minister Mauril Bélanger this morning, as committee members requested. As you know, Mr. Bélanger is the Deputy Government Leader in the House of Commons, the Minister responsible for Official Languages, the Minister responsible for Democratic Reform and the Associate Minister of National Defence. So he is a very busy minister.

Good morning, Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Minister responsible for Official Languages): Good morning.

The Chair: Thank you for being here.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you for inviting me.

The Chair: As agreed, Mr. Bélanger will speak for about 10 minutes. Then we will give the floor to committee members. As we decided earlier, on the first round, speakers will have seven minutes each. On subsequent rounds, they will have five minutes.

Without further delay, I will turn the floor over to you, Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to this meeting of your committee. I am pleased to be here and to tell you about how I see my role and responsibilities as the Minister responsible for Official Languages.

I am going to be reading a text. I have no copies for distribution. I was told that I have ten minutes, so I may shorten my remarks to keep within the time limit.

With me today is Ms. Marie Fortier, who is the Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs at the Privy Council Office and the person responsible for the Official Languages Secretariat at the Privy Council Office.

Last July, the Prime Minister asked me to assume certain responsibilities, and I am pleased to do so. I undertake to do this job with the same passion that I put into my work as a member of Parliament and as chair of this committee, the Standing Committee on Official Languages, for a while.

My convictions have not changed. I was proud and I remain proud to be part of the francophone community of Canada. And I'm not forgetting about our partners in the anglophone communities of Quebec, who experience a unique and diverse situation. For

example, the situation is different in Montreal than it is elsewhere in the regions. So I am very well aware of their situation as well.

First of all, I would like to remind you of the Canadian government's ongoing commitment to linguistic duality. The Speech from the Throne of October 5, which was approved unanimously by all members of Parliament in the House of Commons, repeats that the government is striving to enforce the Action Plan for Official Languages and that it will continue to promote the vitality of official language minority communities.

With respect to my mandate, the responsibilities of the Minister responsible for Official Languages are described in the accountability and coordination framework of the Action Plan for Official Languages, a copy of which I have here. I would therefore invite committee members who have not seen this document to take a look at it, because my first priority as the Minister responsible for Official Languages is to implement this plan.

The minister plays a coordinating role that enables the government to adopt a comprehensive approach to official languages. The minister is supported by a group of ministers, some of whom have a mandate under the Official Languages Act—the Ministers of Heritage and Justice, the presidents of Privy Council and Treasury Board—and others of whom have a role to play in the implementation of the Action Plan. So in addition to the ministers I have already mentioned, the list includes the Ministers of Citizenship and Immigration, Industry, Human Resources and Skills Development, Social Development and Health.

Together with his colleagues, the Minister responsible for Official Languages facilitates communication between the government and the communities, between the government and the Commissioner of Official Languages and between the government and the parliamentary committees with respect to their priorities. I appeared before the Senate committee last evening.

The minister also ensures that official languages matters are drawn to the government's attention, for example when new initiatives are introduced to Cabinet. You all know that the Government of Canada is currently designing and discussing the establishment of a day care system with the provincial governments. Clearly, the issue of linguistic duality is part of these discussions, negotiations and this planning process.

The minister states the government position on current issues involving the official languages. He brings together his colleagues and consults with the representatives of the communities and other stakeholders, as well as the government, at least once a year—and you know what I am talking about, since a number of you have participated in these consultations in the past—regarding the implementation of the Action Plan at the half-way point, as was planned. These consultations will be held next fall and at the end of the five-year period, namely in 2008.

The minister is also responsible for supporting his colleagues with responsibilities in the area of official languages, for coordinating replies to reports from the Official Languages Commissioner and the Senate and House committees, and for coordinating the implementation of the Action Plan, including research work and evaluation.

This Action Plan, which was released on March 12, 2003, seeks to give a new impetus to linguistic duality in Canada. It provides for the spending of over \$750 million over five years in four priority areas: education, community development, the public service and the language industries.

I can also assure you that the implementation of the Action Plan will be at the heart of my activities as the Minister responsible for Official Languages. However, the plan cannot succeed if we do not involve as many stakeholders as possible, namely the various levels of government: the Government of Canada, of course, but also the provincial and territorial governments, and in some cases, even the municipal governments. We must involve institutions working in education, health, justice, immigration, and so on, and particularly the official languages communities, namely the francophone communities, wherever they are located in all the provinces and the three territories, as well as the anglophone community in Quebec.

So I am working very closely with all these partners to implement the Canadian government's ambitious project involving the official languages.

• (0915)

Slightly a year and a half after the plan was announced, solid foundations have been laid in each of the departments responsible for the various components. Work is well under way and will increase in intensity over the coming months.

I would also like to highlight the success of our health and early childhood initiatives, two areas that are important in terms of community development.

There is also an accountability and coordination framework. Under this framework, official language minority communities will be consulted at least once a year on the implementation of the action plan for official languages. In order to follow up on this commitment, the Official Languages Directorate of the Privy Council Office, led by Ms. Fortier, developed a round of consultations which provides for two annual meetings with official language communities: one in the spring, with senior officials from departments involved in the implementation of the action plan, and another in the fall, with the ministers of the same institutions. Four consultations have already taken place, two with senior officials, in May 2003 and in March 2004, and two with the ministers, in

October 2003 and, of course, in October 2004, when all members of the committee were invited to attend.

The second set of consultations took place here, in the Central Block, last October 27. Thirteen ministers and 50 community representatives took part: 28 francophones and 23 anglophones, to be specific. Official language opposition critics, Mr. Lauzon, Mr. André and Mr. Godin, were also involved, as well as the chairman of the committee, and Mr. Godbout and Mr. Simard.

These consultations are a major event much appreciated by communities. On the one hand, they give community representatives an opportunity to express their views on the implementation of the Action Plan. On the other hand, they allow federal ministers to sound out communities on current issues in the field of official languages.

Most participants were satisfied with these 2004 departmental consultations, given the fact that a considerable number of ministers were in attendance.

I'll admit the format has to be rethought. At least, that's my opinion and that of other participants. For the next round of consultations, we will seek out a more flexible format allowing for a bit more participation.

I would like to briefly touch on discussions which took place with the communities on the development of a horizontal results based management accountability framework. Privy Council Office is currently working to develop this horizontal results based management accountability framework. It's very important because it will become the instrument necessary to ensure that all departments having specific responsibilities under the Action Plan are implementing them.

Consulting with communities. Several representatives from the communities, provinces, territories and federal institutions have actually taken part in these workshops. Quite recently, I had the opportunity to meet people who took part in both community groups, francophone and anglophone, to prepare this accountability framework. As I said, the framework will be an essential tool in reporting to Canadians. It will set out who does what and how. It will serve as a foundation for the midway report on the Action Plan which should be made public in the fall of 2005.

I don't know how much time I have left, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you. I will dispense with the long list of accomplishments in each department and agency responsible for implementing the Action Plan. We could always come back to it during question period, if need be.

I now come to my conclusion. The government has implemented the plan it announced on March 12, 2003. Its commitment to language duality is unequivocal. The Speech from the Throne of October 5 reiterates that the government will continue to implement the Action Plan and to promote the vitality of linguistic minority communities.

As Minister responsible for Official Languages, I feel privileged to have been mandated to coordinate the various departments' contribution to this important exercise. There is no doubt in my mind that we are on the right track.

• (0920)

[English]

This is a complex environment fraught with some controversy at times. Nevertheless, the intent of the government is clear, that the matter of linguistic duality is a fundamental tenet of what we are in Canada, and we will make sure the Constitution of Canada is respected.

Canada has two official languages, English and French, that are equal, and all federal institutions have a responsibility, according to the Official Languages Act—which is my other priority—to make sure it is respected. The Official Languages Act is a quasi-constitutional law that is rather important in terms of where this country is going and how it develops from here on in.

Thank you for your attention, Mr. Chair.

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

We'll start with Mr. Poilievre, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank the minister for coming to see us today.

[English]

I read with some concern in the *Ottawa Citizen* a report from the Public Service Commission that came out in mid-April, which indicated that there has been a dramatic decline in the number of anglophones meeting the oral testing requirements for bilingual jobs and that only 38.7% of anglophones are passing the French testing requirements.

I'm wondering first whether the minister considers a 38.7% success rate to be the sign of an effective policy.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I haven't read that report, Mr. Chairman, so I wouldn't mind having a copy of it, if Mr. Poilievre has it.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Sure, we can get that to you.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Upon receiving it, I'll look into it and then comment.

But Madame Fortier may have some.... I know the deputy ministers responsible for the different elements of the official languages action plan have met recently, and that may be one of the items that was discussed.

Can you help on this, Madame?

Mrs. Marie Fortier (Deputy Minister, Intergovernmental Affairs, Privy Council Office): What I know about that report is that it referred to staffing actions over a specific period. It wasn't a cumulative total, so one has to put it in context. But we don't have the detailed data here, I'm afraid.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: The data that came out in the report indicated there's been a 15-percentage-point drop in the number of anglophones passing the public service language proficiency tests. It was of great concern to Katherine Trim, who's a spokesman for the commission. She said that clearly there's a problem here within the testing system. At the time she indicated it was her goal to ascertain

exactly what the problem was: was the problem the stringency of the tests, the lack of resources in preparing people for those tests, or some other environmental characteristic that was causing people to fail? But she did acknowledge there was a tremendous problem.

I wonder if either of you recognize that there is such a problem. Perhaps you could indicate what you think is at the root of such a problem.

Mrs. Marie Fortier: I can tell you there's a lot of concern about this issue. It's also been the object of fairly consistent reporting on CBC in the last few months.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

Mrs. Marie Fortier: There is a study under way, jointly led by the president of the Public Service Commission and the president of the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency, to review all aspects of testing, training, alternatives, supports that need to be given to employees who are undergoing language training. There are concerns that have been raised that need to be reviewed, and a reality base established, in order to determine what the real problems are and what action needs to be taken to correct them. There have been statements about diagnostic testing for employees who are tested, to determine how much time they will need to meet the language requirements of their job. There have also been concerns expressed about training.

At a meeting of deputy ministers on official languages, which I chaired last Wednesday, November 10, we had a progress report on the work the two agencies are conducting. Obviously it's not finished, but they're determined to put forward strong recommendations. At the same time they're finding that some of these concerns are—not general; they may be individual—not necessarily applicable to all participants in the language testing and training program. We were quite encouraged that progress is being made and that there's an enormous amount of interest and participation on the part of people in the ADM and DM groups, who all want to see resolution of these concerns.

• (0925)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'd like to add three things rather quickly, Mr. Chairman.

In the official languages action plan there is a \$38-million envelope for rebuilding capacity within the public service, because there's a recognition, a realization, an acceptance that there had been a reduction in the dollar amount available for training. That's being corrected through the action plan. That's the first thing.

The second is that the overall intent is to make sure there's a pool of young Canadians accessible for recruitment into the public service who are bilingual. That, by and large, is working because today's young generation, between 15 and 24, is the most bilingual we have. The immersion programs throughout the country are accepting more and more people—anglophones or allophones—wanting to learn French. In that sense, the longer view seems to be working.

Finally—this is not to dismiss the concerns that may exist—I might suggest that the person responsible for the agency should perhaps be invited to appear before you. That person would have the freshest stats. As a matter of fact, my understanding is that very shortly the Treasury Board will table its 2003-2004 report, which will give us the most recent assessment. Once it is tabled, either the President of the Treasury Board or myself would be delighted to come back to answer specific questions on that aspect.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you, Minister.

Both of you did a superb job of addressing the training issue and the long-term goal of making a more bilingual Canada.

The third issue mentioned by the Public Service Commission in its report was that the testing requirements might in fact be too stringent and more stringent than necessary. What are your views on that?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm not a pedagogue, so I can't determine whether the testing is too stringent. But I think another question might be as valid: are there sufficient hours of training allowed to meet the requirements? I know there's a discussion and that there have been decisions to increase the number of hours of linguistic education and training available so that people can meet the requirements.

The requirements are ABC—or CBA, in reverse order. Most people are not expected to have the CCC understanding, but CBC, for instance—and I'm not trying to make any puns here about the public broadcaster. I suspect the hours of training might be the solution to this, rather than lower standards.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Okay—

The Chair: No, Mr. Poilievre, that's all the time we have.

Monsieur André.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Good morning, Mr. Bélanger.

I am very happy to see you today. We were to meet at various other times to discuss the issue of Official Languages, but we never had the chance to do it. This is therefore a first.

I am the Bloc Québécois' spokesperson for official languages. Since my coming to Parliament, I have attended some meetings including the one you mentioned which was held last week. I was also present when Ms. Adam, the Official Languages Commissioner, tabled her report. I also had to intervene last week after CBC in Winnipeg asked me some questions about French-speaking minorities outside Quebec.

You said that you met several francophone communities in the last few months to discuss official languages. In your opinion, are they satisfied so far with the implementation of the Action Plan?

• (0930)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I wouldn't say that they are satisfied. They are waiting. There are concerns because, let's face it, in some cases things move rather slowly. There have been delays in education. That is nobody's fault, there was a transition period, followed by an election campaign, etc. We are awaiting the outcome of the negotiations with the provinces on the lion's share of the

Action Plan, namely the \$380 million for the funds targeted for education of those who are eligible or those who are learning a second official language. This has been acknowledged. However, they would like it to be done post haste without further delay.

In fact, my colleague, the Minister of Canadian Heritage is committed to negotiating and settling all of these agreements—there are three series—before the end of the fiscal year, so that the money can begin to flow and be available as of next year, or even this year, if possible. The communities are expecting this, and rightly so.

In other areas, the communities are delighted. Take health, for example. The Action Plan has been completely implemented. Things are working very well. In all of the communities, people are enrolled in courses that will lead to professional credentials in various health related fields. I was told about the new program at the Saint-Jean Faculty when I travelled to Edmonton. There are 16 spots available in nursing. They have received four times the number of applications that they had been expecting. So things are working quite well in health care.

With respect to early childhood, a grant was given to the *Association nationale des parents francophones*, and that group is getting ready for the future day care programs, and so on.

In immigration, there may have been some misunderstanding as to the amounts that the communities would receive. The envelop is rather slim: \$9 million over five years. The money was supposed to go to the department so that it could be in a position to ensure that the immigration process would not take place completely in English outside Quebec or completely in French within that province, in keeping with Canada's demographic distribution.

When the Action Plan was made public, Mr. André, it was quite well received, and the public perception is still favourable. We might say that the jury is still out when it comes to deciding whether or not the implementation was a success.

Mr. Guy André: The implementation was delayed, that is correct, as you say, because of the election, etc. The official language commissioner was not sure how much of the Action Plan budget was spent on follow-up because it was short of quantifiable objectives. There were broad guidelines within the Action Plan, but it appeared difficult to assess the actions and determine the short and medium term objectives.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Actually, when I spoke to you—

Mr. Guy André: I have another question.

Last week, the francophone communities outside Quebec contacted me regarding the PALO program. Are you aware of this program?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Guy André: It is a program to promote community action within francophone communities. Their current budget is around \$24 million. As you know, there are about one million francophones living outside Quebec at this time, and the \$24 million budget represents about \$24 per francophone outside Quebec to support community, cultural, and social activities for a number of groups. The directors of this program will be requesting approximately \$42 million from Official Languages. They sent me a file containing their rationale for the funding that they need to continue their activities. My office is looking at that now. I am hoping to meet with you and Ms. Frulla to discuss this soon.

I would like to hear what you have to say about this.

● (0935)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: With respect to the first part of your question, accountability, I spoke earlier of a horizontal management framework and results-based accountability. That tool will allow us to determine our objectives and measure the results. This has been done with the communities in order to properly assess the results and see if we have met our objectives. The framework will come into play for the first time next fall, when the Minister responsible for Official Languages, whether myself or someone else, will table the Action Plan mid-term report. The accountability framework will be very, very detailed. I had an opportunity to see what is in the works: it is exactly what the communities want to have.

Therefore, on that score, I am confident that we will be able to gauge our results. We will know which departments have not met their objectives, and we will then be able to take the necessary steps to correct the situation.

In answer to your second question, the Canada-Community agreements, I confirm that the budget is indeed \$24 million, but that includes the anglophone communities in Quebec. What the communities are saying is that the budget hasn't changed for a number of years. They want an increase. I would suggest that you meet with Ms. Frulla, the Heritage minister, because I don't have the money.

All of the Action Plan budgets are in the relevant departments. I would love to make a commitment, but I am in no position to say that I can increase that amount when I have no authority to do so.

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, I have to interrupt you to tell you that Ms. Frulla will appear before us the day after tomorrow.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, Minister, and congratulations on your appointment. I believe this is the first time that you appear as a witness before this committee that you chaired for a number of years.

You are the Minister responsible for Official Languages. That is a lovely title, and a weighty responsibility. You gained a great deal of experience in the Montfort Hospital file. Did the federal government, through official languages or Heritage Canada, have anything to do with helping to keep Montfort Hospital open?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would first like to thank you for your kind words.

Was the government involved by giving money directly to the hospital? No, because we would be prohibited from doing that. We must respect jurisdictions. The Constitution is very clear on that. The government did not transfer money directly to Montfort Hospital. However, I can tell you most assuredly that the government did lend a hand.

For example, in January 1999, I announced, on behalf of the Government of Canada, that there would be a new \$10 million envelope available over five years to train health professionals at the University of Ottawa and Montfort Hospital, in particular. Then, there was a national consortium on health training and \$75 million. That had a major impact on the entire debate, to begin with.

Then, the Liberal government, along with the Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party, demonstrated their political will to ensure that the only French-language hospital in Ontario would continue to operate, and would not become an outpatient facility.

● (0940)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, in providing money for training, the federal government was indirectly involved.

The provincial government decided to close four Francophone hospitals in northeastern New-Brunswick. The reason they gave was that there was a lack of doctors, specialists, nurses, etc. The federal government could therefore possibly reach an agreement with the province to assist in keeping hospitals open in minority regions such as this one. Four hospitals is a lot.

In the Acadian Peninsula, believe it or not, it does not just take snow for roads to be closed. The wind from the Gaspésie just has to blow a little stronger for the roads to close on the Baie-des-Chaleurs side. If maternity wards are closed in the Acadian peninsula, then people have to go to Bathurst. I already asked a question about this in the House. I wonder what will happen to the pregnant women, about to give birth, travelling in a car. Someone is going to have to do something they have never had to do in their entire life.

I come back to my question. I think you answered it but I want to be sure. The federal government can reach agreements and encourage a provincial government to find an envelope that they can use to keep these hospitals open, as was done for the Montfort hospital. I myself was involved in the Montfort fight; I went to talk to people.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Godin, there is no doubt that under federal-provincial agreements, the government of Canada can indirectly provide assistance. We can also indirectly assist in training. If one of the reasons for closing an institution is the lack of staff able to provide services in French, then obviously what we are doing will help. Over the next few years, the \$75 million package—\$63 million on the Francophone side and \$12 million on the Anglophone side—will provide training for more than 2,500 new health professionals: doctors, nurses, etc. If the closing was due to a lack of staff, then we can provide part of the solution.

In the agreement signed in September by the Government of Canada and all provinces and territories...

Mr. Yvon Godin: Seven hundred and fifty million dollars.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Part of that agreement deals specifically with training for official language communities. The Action Plan ends in 2008. There are some questions as to what will happen afterwards, but the agreement that was signed refers specifically to necessary and continued training. This agreement is for a period of 10 years. I would therefore expect the funding for training to be provided for at least 10 years.

I would like to add one last point to my answer, Mr. Chairman. When the Health Ministers recently met, at the end of September or October, for the first time Health Services in official language minority communities was on the agenda. Minister Dosanjh called on his colleagues to think about this issue, which is supposed to be discussed again at their next meeting, to see how the Government of Canada can assist provinces in ensuring that their minority language communities have equal access to health services. So the will to help is there. There is no doubt about that, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The Official Languages Commissioner says that the Dion plan is a year and a half behind. Do you agree with that statement?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No, some aspects are running late, as I have acknowledged. Other aspects are moving ahead very well and are not behind schedule. So not everything is at the same stage, but I do not agree with the statement that the whole plan is behind schedule by a year and a half.

I mentioned the education sector. When I talked about the elections, I was not referring to just the federal election. There were seven or eight provincial elections last year. It is difficult to negotiate agreements in those circumstances. That is why there has been a delay in the education sector, but that gap will be closed this year.

• (0945)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, the Prime Minister announced, I believe it was last December, that large corporations would see their taxes cut by \$3 billion. Did the elections affect that cut? There were cutbacks in employment insurance in 1996. Did the 1997 election keep those cuts from going ahead? I have reason to believe that there are more problems in official languages than in other areas.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, I apologize for interrupting you, but you have had seven minutes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I will wait for an answer until the next round.

The Chair: On the next round.

Mr. Yvon Godin: If you would take note of that, I will not need to repeat my question. We will save time.

The Chair: It has been noted.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It will give me time to prepare. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Godbout.

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I too would like to congratulate my esteemed colleague for his important appointment as minister responsible for official languages. It would be wrong, in my opinion, to underestimate the

significance of this portfolio, which reaches across a number of departments, as you have said.

One thing that I would like to touch on is what I call the “Action Plan plus,” which goes beyond the Action Plan. You referred to it indirectly, but I would like to know a little about what planning is expected to be done for certain issues. I tend to agree: We have all received the visit from the official languages community representatives, we have talked about the famous OLSP, and we have talked about the money earmarked for the Action Plan. I think that the investment may prove to be inadequate at some point.

It may be worth looking at the fact that departments have not always passed along the funding from existing budgets that is earmarked for official languages communities. An example that comes to mind is the national child care program, that is being discussed right now with minister Dryden. As a government, we should not always take the approach of looking for extra funding for official language communities, in my opinion. Within existing budgets, I believe that there should be a portion set aside for those communities, which represent after all, over a million people, taking into account only the Francophone communities outside Quebec.

Another problem we are facing is the idea of *build it and they will come*. We see this happening in health right now. We have health services but the budgets that have been allocated for those services may not be adequate because people are calling for more.

What planning are you doing for the programs involving official language communities, so as to insure that they are not permanently in a situation of having to beg for money, but instead will benefit from the recognition through the planning process that a portion of the budget will be earmarked to address the needs of official language communities?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you very much, Mr. Godbout.

In passing, Mr. Godbout and I represent adjoining ridings. So I am fully aware of the reality he is dealing with, as a francophone like myself, and I know his background. He has a vast experience in education. I would also like to thank you, Mr. Godbout, for your help in the current negotiations with the provinces.

The “Action Plan Plus” is something that we are just beginning to talk about, but I think that we need to start to do so. You are right. You gave the example of health care. Right now, there are some 20 post-secondary institutions across the country that are involved in the training that I described earlier. Students just beginning their studies were accepted for two consecutive years. Next year will be the last year that students will be accepted into the programs, since we do not know if there will be any funding after 2008, so it was important to act quickly regarding health agreements with the provinces.

We have just ensured that it will in fact be important to plan these training programs further than 2008. The same is true for other areas. So you can understand that I will be concentrating for a little while longer on implementation and the progress report, but as soon as that report is prepared and tabled, we will need to look systematically at where we will go after the Action Plan. I have no doubt about that.

As far as targeted funding is concerned, I sometimes think that that may be the way to go. I can give you an example that my colleague, Mr. Simard, knows very well because he was a member of the committee when it looked into the issue of the Television Fund. There was one envelope for anglophone productions and another for francophone productions across the country. Independent francophone producers often did not have access to that money. Things finally came to a head, and the Official Languages Committee recommended that part of the francophone envelope be designated for independent francophone producers outside Quebec. That was done, and I believe that things have improved over the past while. So in some cases, that formula can work. I do not know whether it could work in all cases. It would have to be explored with Mr. Godbout.

There are other cases where the issue is not financial resources at all, but rather human resources. For example, we have the issue of judges. Whether it is one judge or another judge, the cost is the same. But the capacity is not really the same, depending on whether the judges are bilingual or not. So there is also a political will and the determination to ensure that, where the government is required to provide bilingual services, those obligations can be met. In some cases, it is not about the size of the budget envelope, but strictly the will to do what must be done.

• (0950)

The Chair: You have one minute remaining, Mr. Godbout.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Basically, the Action Plan should be seen more as a floor than a ceiling, in terms of departmental spending.

Another important aspect—which you have mentioned—is the whole area of transfer payments to the provinces. You mentioned health; there are a number of other areas as well. When I represented francophone and Acadian communities, the point was made that provincial accountability, in the area of intergovernmental affairs, for example, with respect to the allocation of federal funding to communities, be a criterion for transfer payments for official language communities, both for Quebec and for the other provinces.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You are quite right. Besides, this is the way in which the agreements are evolving. The last agreement signed with the Ontario government regarding transfer payments for education was the first case where the use of the funds was limited to three objectives. This was supposed to provide for more reporting and accountability. I am sure that the coming generation of agreements which are currently being negotiated with the provinces, will reflect this even more.

This time, funds were targeted for the Action Plan, mainly to ensure that the percentage of those who can get education in their official language could rise from 68% to 80%, I believe—I need to check the percentages.

The other targeted fund is meant for doubling the number of young non-francophone Canadians who want to learn French as a

second language. In the agreements currently being negotiated with the provinces, these funds will be targeted at those objectives.

Thus, things are moving ahead, and the Quebec anglophone community as well as the francophone communities in other provinces and territories all welcome this new direction.

[English]

The Chair: Merci.

Now we're going to go to the second round. This time it's five minutes each.

Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Mr. Bélanger, for coming this morning. It's a real pleasure meeting you. I do have a prepared question for you.

Since 1989, part VII of the Official Languages Act has been a recurring theme in the annual reports of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Three successive commissioners have repeatedly criticized the effectiveness of federal efforts to achieve part VII objectives. The current commissioner decided to place a high priority on implementation of part VII in fulfilling her mandate, and in her last four annual reports she's asked the government to amend part VII of the Official Languages Act, to make it executory in nature.

First, what has prevented the government from acting on this recommendation? Second, what is the government's position on Bill S-3, which is currently on the order of precedence in the House of Commons?

• (0955)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Well, “since 1989” is an interesting point of departure in time. Indeed, it was in 1988 that the previous government, the Mulroney government, amended the Official Languages Act to include part VII as it is currently written, and it is not executory. That's been indeed a debate since then. I have to be somewhat careful here, because there currently is a case before the courts about this very aspect. I do have to be somewhat careful.

On the matter of Bill S-3, as you know, it's the third or fourth incarnation of this bill. The previous one was Bill S-4, and it died on the order paper when the 37th Parliament was dissolved. Now it has come back, and it has been approved unanimously by the Senate. It sits on the order of precedence, and it'll be sponsored, I believe, by the member of Parliament from Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Mr. Boudria.

The government's position on this is that it is fairly sympathetic to the objective of the bill, but we will certainly want to engage in a discussion about it, and certainly at the committee level; I'm presuming it'll reach committee stage. We certainly would want to be engaged in a discussion of that bill, listening to the representations that the committee will receive. It won't go beyond that at this point.

There will be a need to provide substantial information to the House in terms of the impact of the bill. At this point, we are indeed preparing that information. If and when the House decides to proceed with the second reading, we would be prepared to provide the opinion of the government in terms of the impact of the bill and so forth.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Okay.

Perhaps I could shift gears for a moment. Because this program is so important, and official languages affect all government programs, I'd like to play the frugal taxpayer for a minute. There are many media reports about waste and mismanagement in government programs. I believe I read in *Maclean's* about senior bureaucrats receiving training in their other official language very close to retirement age.

I was wondering what parameters are in effect as to who can receive official language training. Who qualifies? And do you think it's a frugal use of taxpayers' money when somebody very close to retirement age receives training that could be worth \$100,000 just before they're ready to head out the door?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't think so, Mr. Carrie. I would not encourage, and I certainly would discourage, someone who's within a year or two of retirement going on language training. I'm aware anecdotally that it has occurred, and I would certainly hope we would stop doing that.

That's my position, and I've conveyed that to the minister responsible for the Treasury Board and the agency to make sure that indeed we review that. It is my information that this is being reviewed as we speak, if you will. Indeed, I would hope to see that reflected in the policies that will be announced sometime in 2005.

I think the bulk of the money that Canadian taxpayers provide for language training should be directed at people early on in their career in the public service, not later on in their career. I said that publicly, and that's my belief. I think that would be a wiser use of public dollars.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers.

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bélanger, my turn has come to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister for Official Languages.

At the outset, I hope that you will show enough leadership to convince Cabinet to get this committee out of the House of Commons. I believe, Mr. Bélanger, that we can use all kinds of indicators, but if we do not visit the regions to assess the real situation of minorities in this country, we will be unable to measure these indicators. Vast experience in this sector tells me that the indicators will become visible as soon as they are implemented. I think that the Official Languages Committee, if I remember correctly, has not left the House of Commons to visit the minorities.

Could we expect a useful commitment by the government whereby it would ensure that the committee can visit those people and hear them out, and get a more realistic picture of their situation?

• (1000)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you for your question, Mr. Desrochers, and thank you for your congratulations.

My answer is an unconditional yes. Besides, when I sat in the chair in which Mr. Rodriguez now sits, I, as well as the vast majority of committee members wanted to travel and to visit the regions to see and hear what is happening on the ground. With regard to the Liberal Party and its House leader, I answer yes, without reservations. We want to support and encourage committee travels, including this one.

Nonetheless, for a committee to travel, it must have the approval of the House leaders of all four parties. Currently, with a minority government, some constraints should be imposed. When a committee is travelling, all committee members must travel and not only one opposition member along with the government members. And in view of the constraints followed by all the House leaders, I think that I can tell you, personally and on behalf of the government, that there is no objection to the committee travelling. I will go as far as to say that we must encourage this committee to travel, because it is only by travelling and visiting the communities where they live that we can better understand them and their needs. Once that is done, we can act more forcefully and vigorously.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Bélanger, we realize all of the efforts that have been made, both by Quebec and Ottawa, to improve the quality of the French language. But what we hear on the air in the media is quite far from the efforts that governments are making.

Do you intend to intervene with the Minister of Canadian Heritage so that there are indicators? You mentioned indicators. Try as we might, Minister, to improve the French language, if you listen to the media, you can see that there is what I call an americanization of the media going on. Don't you think it would be a good time to intervene with Canadian Heritage or the CRTC? Regardless of the efforts of politicians and the Commissioner, without the support of communications and a tangible change on their part, the French language will continue to lose ground, in my opinion.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Desrochers, I have to ask you for clarification. Are you talking about the quality of the language here?

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Yes, because even if we speak French a bit clumsily, given the prevailing situation in the media today, we won't succeed, Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I don't even want to go there, Mr. Desrochers. The quality of the language is an entirely separate issue. I'm going to take the liberty of not answering your question. I'll have to think about it. I know that debates are currently taking place, for example, at Radio-Canada, where there is a kind of self-censoring with respect to the quality of French used by some of their... That debate is theirs to hold, and I'm going to leave it to them.

I'd like to come back to one of the committee's reports on the CRTC. The committee had recommended to government that the CRTC become one of those institutions required to prepare an internal action plan for its obligations under section 41, in particular, of the Official Languages Act. Up until very recently, the government had always refused that. But, last year, the government agreed to make the CRTC subject to the requirement to draw up a plan in consultation with the communities. I don't know where things are at today, but I will certainly find out. I think that the CRTC is an extremely important communications tool.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: That answers my question. However, I'd like you to give us some details.

Perhaps Ms. Frulla could also say a few more words.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desrochers.

I should remind you that we have adopted an alternating system. The next round will be different. It will start with the Conservative Party, then the Bloc Québécois, the Liberal Party, the NDP and finally, if necessary, the Conservative Party, followed by the Liberal Party, the Bloc Québécois and the NDP.

So we're going to start with Ms. Boivin. Mr. Godin will be next.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Mr. Bélanger, as I follow some official languages issues that are getting a lot of press, I wonder if I should congratulate you or wish you good luck, particularly as concerns the City of Ottawa.

I had two questions at the outset, but I am happy that Mr. Carrie asked one regarding Bill S-3. I got the impression that the Conservative Party might perhaps support the bill. This is good news for francophone communities.

Having said that, I come from the province of Quebec, more specifically from the National Capital Region. I grew up in this area in a francophone setting, and I did not have to fight the battles that Franco-Ontarian communities have had to experience from time immemorial. I nevertheless have the opportunity, my parents being Franco-Ontarians, to hear all kind of horror stories on the subject over the years.

Since reading the reports of the Commissioner for Official Languages, the Action Plan, etc., I keep asking myself the same question. You have a great deal more experience than I do with this committee, and I would like to know how you explain the fact that in 2004, we are still having trouble getting some people to understand that bilingualism is an asset for Canada.

I listen to everything that is being said, I read the Action Plan, I look at the deadlines we have set up for ourselves and I'm quite saddened to see that in 2004, we still are trying to get people to understand and accept that bilingualism, from coast to coast, is an asset for Canada. I cannot understand it.

Every time we table a plan, we know that there will be anecdotal situations and horror stories that will follow. I wonder if the goal is to hinder the progress of official languages. You may have some explanations to offer us on the subject.

●(1005)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: As far as your comment on Bill S-3 is concerned, I can tell you that it was indeed unanimously passed by the Senate. We can therefore presume that the Conservative Party may support it. However, time will tell, and we will see when the debate gets underway in the House.

You asked me an existential question on the future of linguistic duality in this country. Personally, I am encouraged. I am one who believes that in society, both the optimist and the pessimist are necessary: one invents the airplane; the other, the parachute. Personally, I am an optimist.

During the 1960s, as the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission was doing its work, the country experienced a very difficult situation. The result was the Official Languages Act of 1969. Since that time, there has been a remarkable evolution. It is even more remarkable when we look at it from a generation's perspective. Today, as I was saying earlier, young people form the most bilingual generation ever. This generation, more than any other before it, recognizes the added-value of speaking several languages, if not the linguistic duality of Canada. What we are talking about is the validity, the wish and the recognition of the added-value associated with learning a third or a fourth language.

I recognize at the outset that others are making similar efforts. For example, the Government of Alberta recently decided that as of 2006, all students in that province will have to learn a second language, English and another language. Some would have preferred to have that second language identified specifically as French. However, we can at least presume that a good number of these young people will want to learn French, given that it is the other official language of this country. In my opinion, it is encouraging to see that the Alberta Government recognizes the merits and the added-value of a second language and that it is imposing this on young people.

I believe that as these generations grow up, the issue of Canadian linguistic duality will take its rightful place. On the other hand, this is not to say that there won't be any pitfalls, resistance or inertia to battle along the way. Furthermore, the situation is difficult for minority language communities, given that one does not spontaneously opt for this linguistic duality. The issue of cost is always brought up. However, when we manage to incorporate this into normal overhead expenses, the cost is not necessarily exorbitant.

This is therefore the direction we are moving in. Some feel it is a rather optimistic vision, but I clearly prefer that to the opposite.

The Chair: Thank you. We will continue with Mr. Godin.

●(1010)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you. I await your answer.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The answer is simple, Mr. Godin. When an issue comes under one jurisdiction, it is easy to act. When it comes under agreements binding two levels of government, both parties must agree. Things can take more time for certain reasons.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Minister, please try and explain to me why 60% of National Defence employees are unilingual anglophones. We're not talking about two different jurisdictions here. This is within the federal government itself.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Sixty per cent unilingual anglophones is in fact the percentage throughout the entire federal public service, Mr. Godin. That reflects the situation in this country.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Then let's talk about National Defence, and not the country, rather than mixing apples and oranges. As you know, National Defence has been accused in the past of not taking on its responsibilities. This is again the case today.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: On that issue, Mr. Godin, I have to say you are right.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If I may...

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's easy. Thank you.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Just a moment. You will recall that I am one of those who made that accusation. When the Minister of National Defence appeared here, he recognized his mistake even before making his presentation.

Now I am here wearing another hat, that of Associate Minister of Defence, and I obviously intend to go and ferret about the department to ensure that progress is being made. But in defence of that department, I must say that they have prepared their own action plan whereas they were not compelled to do so. Moreover, they're serious about their implementation plan. It is my job, as well as the committee's, to ensure that they do what they say they are going to do.

Mr. Yvon Godin: What has the Minister of Defence done to try and correct the problem? If memory serves me well, there was a priest in Alberta who was not welcome there because he is a francophone. He took the train or the plane and came back. This happened just a few weeks ago.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There is an investigation underway, Mr. Godin, but I do not know what the result of it is yet.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: I would like to remind you that we do have a meeting dedicated entirely to Defence around the 14th or the 16th of December, as you had requested.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, indeed. But the fact is we are now in the presence of the Minister responsible for Official Languages.

The Chair: That is correct, but he will come back.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I know that the Minister of Defence will appear. The point is...

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I may accompany him.

Mr. Yvon Godin: ... the Minister responsible for Official Languages must be aware of what is happening in this country, all around us.

On November 12, the *National Post* published the following article:

[English]

"Linguistic crisis' looms in schools"

Richard Julian, professor of education at the University of Saskatchewan and a former French teacher, was more blunt about the pressing need to revamp core French programs if Ottawa is to meet its bilingualism goal. "Trying to get all the students into immersion would be completely unrealistic. The goal is to beef up the core French programs...."

[Translation]

As for myself, two weeks ago, I met an anglophone from Fredericton, who talked to me about his children. I think that the future generation is more open to bilingualism and to the idea that young people should learn both languages.

This is why it is important for us to promptly show support for immersion programs and schools. I believe the will is there among Canadians. I would like to be optimistic as well, but the problem is that we don't have the tools to give them.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I have not read the report in its entirety because it was tabled only at the end of last week, Mr. Godin. However, I have every intention of reading it. I consider Canadian Parents for French a credible organization that does good work. So I will not deny that the report just tabled is an important one.

There are two aspects to the report. The first is what we might call the core aspect—French-language courses as such. We know that we have to improve things there. The agreements I hope will be negotiated by the end of this year will ensure that a substantial increase is allocated to those entitled to receive it. In principle, this should be the core.

Then there is the immersion aspect, and immersion programs are going well. We are seeing more of them in every province, except in New Brunswick where they have declined very, very slightly. But we have to understand the situation in New Brunswick, which is somewhat different from that in other provinces.

I believe no problems were raised with the immersion programs. However, at present, the basic systems are not operating at full capacity. We would even need to increase the capacity, and that means recruitment, building facilities, etc. The government's willingness to move on this is in my opinion clear. We have succeeded in making progress in recent years. Now, we must make sure we do not go back, but continue to move forward.

•(1015)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Monsieur Poilievre.

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

On October 20, Mr. Minister, you remarked on Radio-Canada that "the government wants people from private industry as deputy ministers. So it shouldn't force them to know both languages before they're hired."

If you're willing to accept individuals as deputy ministers who have not met the requirements of bilingualism that are set out for others, is it your view that the requirements are too stringent in general or that the deputy minister position should not be required to be bilingual? How do you square that with your view that private industry professionals can come in without having met those requirements, when at the same time you believe those requirements should be stringently upheld for others?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The fact that the Government of Canada may wish to cross-pollinate its federal public service with the private sector is a well-known and well-established procedure. I think it's one that deserves our support.

For the rest of that, when they accept a position they also accept that at some point down the road, usually within two years, they will meet the requirements. I don't have a problem, at some levels—and that's the deputy minister level, which is where the linguistic requirement is not—that they all be bilingual at the time of acceding to their positions, because we want to be able to have some cross-fertilization. But once they come in, they must accept that they will meet the condition, and that's what is happening. We gave, and succeeding governments gave, the senior echelons of the public service lots of time to meet the conditions that they had accepted.

At one point, two years ago, the President of the Treasury Board said that by March 2003, those who had to meet criteria would have to have met them; otherwise, action would be taken. When the report from the Treasury Board was tabled last year, only 5% had not met the requirements and the actions were to be undertaken throughout the year. So when the next report is tabled in the next weeks, I would hope to see that fully completed.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Should that principle of allowing people to enter bilingual positions, and then learn the language later on, be applied all the way throughout the public service?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I think it is now.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: But there are many positions that have bilingual requirements on entry.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I see what you mean. If you have a pool of Canadians big enough to fulfill your requirements, then no, it shouldn't be.

The best example I can use is if there's a job in the public service that demands service to the public, direct interface with the public, in both official languages, then it stands to reason that whoever occupies that job, upon occupying it, must meet the bilingual requirements. I certainly support that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I have another question for the minister. Don't you see some inconsistency in the fact that ministers are unable to meet the language requirements to which their employees are subject? For example, the president of Treasury Board cannot speak French, though he has tried to learn it. However, many public servants have to comply with language requirements. Isn't there some contradiction when ministers are unable to achieve the same results as their employees?

• (1020)

[*English*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Are you suggesting, Mr. Poilievre, that only bilingual Canadians could run for a seat in Parliament?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, absolutely not, because I wouldn't qualify.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: So then it stands to reason that you can't have that requirement for ministers—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, but the question I'm asking you is—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: —because ministers come from the seats of the House.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: —why is it that ministers are held to a lower standard than people in the public service?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Is your party recommending that all ministers be bilingual?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: No, of course not. I'm just wondering if there's a contradiction when employees have to meet a much higher requirement for bilingual proficiency than do the ministers.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There's no requirement for the Minister of Health to be a doctor, yet some positions in the health department will require that those people have certain qualifications, including being doctors in some cases. It's the same for infrastructure. The minister responsible for infrastructure need not be an engineer, but there will be certain people whose jobs require that they have an engineering background to analyze engineering plans.

It's the same for some people who manage francophones or anglophones. There would be an expectation that those managers have this capacity. It's the same thing for people who offer services to the public in a bilingually designated region such as this one. There would be an expectation that they would be able to speak English and French.

The minister himself or herself—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm sorry, this is fairly significant.

He or she is not the one offering these services. It is his or her department.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It just speaks to the practicality of your policy if your own ministers can't meet it.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: If you're advocating that all ministers be bilingual, go ahead.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: You know I haven't.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Gentlemen, you can continue with this later.

Mr. André.

Mr. Guy André: This is the second round, Mr. Bélanger, and I have several questions for you. Is that all right with you?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Absolutely.

Mr. Guy André: Let's talk about accountability. I was listening to my colleague Mr. Godin and others who spoke, and I realized that much of what was said had something to do with accountability. On page 11, the Action Plan for Official Languages mentions accountability. It indicates that the federal government, through its minister, must ensure that measures designed to institute compliance with official languages are actually implemented.

In her annual report, the Official Languages Commissioner—Dyane Adam—mentions judges and the justice system. According to the report, francophones outside Quebec must wait two or three times longer to receive legal services in French for a divorce or some other kind of legal proceeding. That is one example of the problem. So to bring it back to accountability, the federal government must ensure that it hires bilingual judges. That is an important issue.

Mr. Godin also mentioned the problem at National Defence. We know that there have been many complaints there. Here again, this relates to the government's accountability—the government has to take action. This takes me to my question: since all this is in the Action Plan, has the federal government taken any concrete measures to ensure it is genuinely accountable for its decisions, and for its obligation to ensure compliance with official language requirements?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I know that this is quite an unusual request, Mr. Chairman, but can I appear before you again at the beginning of next year?

The Chair: Of course, if the committee so wishes.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would come back to present the accountability framework that we are now completing and in which communities have been involved. That is when we will be in a position to judge. If I may, Mr. Chairman, I would very much like to work together with the committee—this accountability issue involves not only official languages but all areas of government. We have an Official Languages Commissioner and an Auditor General because we need accountability in all areas. That applies to official languages as well. This committee is here to ensure the government is accountable, and, since this is part of my responsibilities, I would like to ensure that the law is properly applied and that the Action Plan is implemented. I would like to work together with the committee on this. So, if you agree, I would like to come back to present the accountability framework, along with Ms. Fortier and the officials who have worked with communities. The framework can be improved if it needs to be.

•(1025)

The Chair: You can of course come back if the committee so wishes. In any case, you will be coming back on National Defence, and you are here today. I'm beginning to believe you would like to come back as a member of the committee.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You never know, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: You are certainly welcome. If the committee so wishes, we can talk about this later. If you were to come back, it would probably be in February.

Mr. André.

Mr. Guy André: If the committee so wishes, I would be willing to come back to talk about the accountability framework.

But until our next meeting, I would still like to ask you a question on it. What powers do you have with respect to such accountability?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: My powers are those that are vested in me under the act.

Mr. Guy André: What measures have you taken to ensure compliance with that accountability?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: At the end of the day, there is a very persuasive authority—the Prime Minister and cabinet. If something does not go as it should, if a department does not act as it should in view of the government's express will, I put the issue before cabinet and ensure decisions are taken to remedy the situation.

I also have bilateral meetings with my cabinet colleagues, ministers, on a regular basis. I have already met with the ministers of Health and Social Development in preparation for their meetings with their counterparts. I have held discussions with the Minister of Immigration, and so on. The point is to ensure that my colleagues, who have specific responsibilities under the Action Plan, are aware of those responsibilities.

In addition, I receive reports from the Official Languages Commissioner, like the one I just received in my office this morning but I have not yet read. It is entitled *Doorway to the World: Linguistic Duality in Canada's International Relations*. I must ensure that my colleagues follow up on the recommendations in the report. My job is to push, encourage, cajole and coordinate, before banging a fist on the table. But when necessary, I bang that table.

The Chair: Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here this morning, Minister.

The issue of official languages is extremely important in New Brunswick, as in other provinces. As you know, New Brunswick is my province of origin. It has a significant francophone population, living in minority communities.

I would like to go into greater depth on something that was mentioned earlier. You talked about the advantages, the added value, of having a second language. Having a second language is also an asset that helps you get ahead personally in society. There is a genuine desire to meet those needs.

There are immersion programs in almost all provinces, including British Columbia. These immersion programs make it easier to learn the second official language in Canada. Don't you think that the Action Plan for Official Languages is coming at the perfect time? I think the time is ideal, first of all because it demonstrates the government's leadership in this area, and secondly because Canadians genuinely want to learn the second official language.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You're very kind, but I think you're giving the government a bit too much credit. Frankly speaking, we have to put things in perspective and render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.

When the government came into power in 1993, the financial situation was very difficult. Budgets were rationalized everywhere, and the exercise was very well carried out. We see the benefits today.

As part of the process, there was a will—first expressed by the official languages commissioner, who took on the role of spokesperson for communities—to encourage the government to reinvest significantly in official languages. Sensitive to that expressed will, Prime Minister Chrétien appointed the Honourable Stéphane Dion Minister Responsible for Official Languages, to coordinate these activities. Two years later, the Action Plan for Official Languages was published, and very well received by communities across Canada, except perhaps some groups in the cultural sector, where we heard criticism.

That is what happened, clear and simple. The government simply acted in response to the expressed wishes of the official language communities.

If the timing is good, then all the better. You are quite right; there is enthusiasm for immersion programs in British Columbia, particularly on the part of allophone communities. Communities of people from other countries see the added value of having a second or a third language. They learn Canada's two languages, English and French, in addition to their mother tongue. I find this terrific, all the more so since we are preparing to welcome the world to British Columbia to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

I hope we will be presenting a genuine portrait of Canada, a country that has fully incorporated the concept of linguistic duality into a pluralistic society. If the Action Plan for Official Languages and the “Action Plan plus” to which your colleague alluded contribute to this, then I will be very happy.

• (1030)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I'll be brief. In this committee, it is sometimes difficult to understand how the role of the President of Treasury Board, your role and that of the Minister of Canadian Heritage differ. Could you briefly—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Programs, responsibilities and budgets fall under the purview of departments. Treasury Board has a management role which it exercises through the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada. The Department of Canadian Heritage is responsible for programs involving negotiations with the provinces, education transfers, support to communities, support to cultural sectors, and so forth. Immigration Canada has programs as well. The same is true of the Department of Justice and all departments related to the economy, industry and economic development. Programs fall under the purview of the departments, as do budgets, and they have responsibilities under the Official Languages act.

My job entails implementing the plan and ensuring that the legislation is respected. That means pushing them in the right direction, coaxing and wheedling, encouraging them, and, sometimes, growling to make sure that things get done quicker. Primarily, my work consists of ensuring that government actions as regards official languages are consistent.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to you, Mr. Godin.

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

A little earlier, the Reform Party of Canada... No, excuse me, the Canadian Alliance... No, excuse me, the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada... I beg your pardon, the Conservative Party of Canada! Are you not concerned by the opinions expressed by that party, especially when its representatives say that we ought to take the system...?

The Chair: Mr. Godin, the party is called the Conservative Party of Canada.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Very well, the Conservative Party. Does it not worry you when the Conservative Party studies a plan similar to the Belgian model, under which French speakers would be in Quebec and English speakers in Canada, and say that this would cost our country less money?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I am not, nor will I ever be, in favour of territorial unilingualism. It is certainly not what the Government of Canada wants either. If political parties or leaders of political parties want to advance ideas such as that one, they are free to do so, but it is up to them to defend their position Mr. Godin, not me.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

Another thing concerns me. A little earlier, Mr. Chair, the minister told us that he did not want to get involved in discussions being held within Radio-Canada. That concerns me a little because Radio-Canada, which is under the auspices of the government, is currently discussing the issue of language quality. I should point out that the name is indeed Radio-Canada and not Radio-Québec or Radio-Montréal. Are we going to teach all Quebecers to speak Acadian? For example, we have our word for here, “icitte”, etc. Does that mean that there is no longer room for those of us who come from outside of Quebec in Radio-Canada? Our language is being called into question here.

This is something that concerns me, Mr. Desrochers. That is why I am asking the minister the question. He said that he did not want to get involved. I think that you ought to get involved, because Radio-Canada ought to reflect Canadian culture.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: On that point, Mr. Godin, I am in absolute agreement with you. We have said that it is part of Radio-Canada's mandate to reflect who we are as a country. However, I feel that interfering in a discussion on the quality of language, when I am by no means a teacher, or qualified to judge the quality of other people's language, would really be taking things too far. I have probably made my own fair share of mistakes in French this morning. My role is not to establish the quality of French to be used at Radio-Canada.

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, but is it not your role to ask the folks at Radio-Canada what they mean by the quality of French?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Godin, as you very well know we've done so, and I certainly intend to continue doing so and ensuring that all federal institutions, including Radio-Canada... Although that being said, Radio-Canada is a bit of a special case, because we can't get involved in content issues without being accused of political interference. We have to avoid being seen to interfere, but aside from that concern, yes, it's obviously up to the Government of Canada to ensure that all federal institutions reflect our reality, and that includes the reality of linguistic minority groups.

•(1035)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, when people tell us that they like our accent, it's often because it's different from other accents. The fact that Radio-Canada is calling into question the quality of the language is something that concerns me greatly. Radio-Canada is there to reflect our country.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Godin, allow me to make a suggestion. Mr. Chair, I would reiterate that it is perhaps timely for the committee to hear from representatives of Radio-Canada on this subject. However, it is not up to me to question or to interfere in the debate on the quality of the language or on content. There is no doubt, however, that it is in my remit to ask questions about Radio-Canada's mandate.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am just worried that la Sagouine will no longer be invited to appear on Radio-Canada.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That would indeed be a sad day.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Indeed.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It would be a sad day, Mr. Chair, but I don't believe that that's what Mr. Desrochers has in mind.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Could I make a comment on this subject, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I can't say what I have to say in five seconds.

I did not speak about the content of French language, but rather the quality of presenters' French. That's completely different.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desrochers. We've just got enough time left for one last round.

Mr. Scheer.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): I would just like to reassure my colleague in the Communist Party that we're going to stick with Conservative for the next little while!

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Anyway, this question might—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I want to come back here. It's fun!

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Socialists might not be interested in the taxpayers' money.

I just have a quick question, a very simple question. One of the recommendations of the commissioner was that the funding for the action plan, the \$751 million, not be subject to a federal spending review. In her meeting with us she also indicated that the program had never been audited. While saying that it has never been audited to ensure efficiency and accountability, she's also saying at the same time that we should not have a spending review of it.

I would just like your thoughts on that. Would you agree that 100% of that money is being spent efficiently and is targeted exactly where it's supposed to be?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Well, I'm not an auditor either. Those functions are carried out on an ongoing basis within departments by

the Auditor General. They will do their job, and if there are problems they will be highlighted.

But in terms of funding, allow me to say that if a government introduces linguistic duality as a priority in the Speech from the Throne, and the implementation of a plan as a priority, which is then approved unanimously by Parliament, it would stand to reason that the resources allocated to that plan not be cut. Would you agree with me?

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Well, there are lots of things in the Speech from the Throne about health and trade. When you have a spending review, it has to apply to the entire federal government. Even though the throne speech was actually covering all of those areas, they're still going to be looked at in terms of efficiencies and accountability.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes. I don't question that, and I've said that publicly as well. This is not an expenditure cut but an expenditure review to reallocate spending from lower to higher priorities.

Again, I ask the question: if a government declares in its Speech from the Throne, as it did, that the implementation of this plan is a priority, which is then supported unanimously by the House, would you not agree that it would stand to reason that the resources be kept in that plan?

Mr. Andrew Scheer: I'm just asking you....

So you're agreeing with the commissioner then that the action plan will not be touched by a program spending review?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm certainly not expecting there to be any cuts to the official languages action plan; that's correct. But that doesn't detract from every single penny being spent via that plan being accountable. And that is subject to revisions internally and by the Auditor General, as are all other expenses.

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Okay.

Just very quickly, you spoke earlier about respecting provincial jurisdiction in regard to health. One of the recommendations is that the next round of health care talks target minority language communities in current and future agreements. I guess what I'm trying to find out is, when we talk about health care transfer payments and ensuring minimum qualities in that, there's often a component of that where the federal government would ensure compliance with respect to transfer payments, so that if you didn't meet those requirements you might face funding cuts. Would that also be applicable in the next round? Can you envision a minority languages and official languages component to that?

•(1040)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Certainly in the case of education, with the transfers.

In terms of health, there's an agreement overall, which is subject itself, as you know, to.... All the provinces have agreed to a set of objective evaluation criteria being established and being made public annually in their respective provinces on a comparable basis.

But on the matter you're talking about, we've just begun, essentially. For the first time two months ago the ministers of health—federal, provincial, and territorial—actually engaged in that discussion. So it's a little premature for me to say what criteria they would buy into for whatever amount would be transferred. I would imagine that if there are agreements to transfer even more money, there would be criteria attached to them. But it's premature for me to comment on that at this stage.

Mr. Andrew Scheer: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: I am going to hand over to Mr. Simard now.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I have two questions. The first one brings me back to what Mr. André was saying about the Canada-Community agreements. We are told that funding for the communities is essentially the same as what it was in 1993. One of my concerns is that the Action Plan for Official Languages, which is certainly a sound initiative, is, nevertheless, very target-specific. It has very precise objectives, be they in education, in health or in other fields.

As I see it, ministers and departments may well think that in following the plan they have done what they needed to do for French speakers and minority communities. As a result, ministers aren't willing to find funds for francophone initiatives that were funded in the past.

The Action Plan for Official Languages is not a panacea for all concerns that French speakers have. For example, an increase of some \$20-odd million has been requested, bringing us to a total amount of \$42 million. Do you support that request?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: You probably know how funds are allotted. Requests are made through certain cabinet committees and then cabinet, followed by Treasury Board, approves the request before the funds are disbursed.

You understand, I would hope, that I cannot stand in for my colleagues who have front-line responsibilities for heritage, for example. However, I can assure you that if a department is trying to increase its resources to better serve communities, it will have my support.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Very well. We need this support.

My second question deals with senior officials. In my view, they should make ministers aware of their responsibilities regarding official languages. There are improvements to be made, in my view, in this respect. To senior officials, making their ministers aware of this is not a priority.

Can we do something along those lines? May be it should rank higher on their agenda.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That is an excellent question, Mr. Simard. I will ask Ms. Fortier to provide me with an initial answer and we'll discuss it again.

Mrs. Marie Fortier:

Thank you, Mr. Simard.

Actually, there is a committee of deputy ministers responsible for supporting the minister in his or her duties. This committee works not only with deputy ministers from those departments responsible for specific aspects of the action plan, but with all those with major responsibilities. I'm thinking of Treasury Board and of the Human Resources Management Agency, both of which have a major role dealing with the language of work, language training and policies that impact greatly on all public service bilingualism issues discussed today.

In this sense, we have the necessary tool. A support committee helps our group. We meet as often as possible. I was elected chair of that committee in the spring and I must say that participation is quite high. We met three times since I became chair. More needs to be done. It requires a constant effort on our part. Also, everybody must understand his or her role and know how to support his or her minister in discharging these specific responsibilities.

•(1045)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I think we should make better use of these tools, Mr. Simard. There are also champions in each department. I don't know if it's appropriate to mention it—Ms. Fortier will tell me if I shouldn't— but I would be keen to meet them in order to breathe more life into that structure. I think we could do better.

I would like to make one last comment, if I may. I agree with you that we should be careful and not see this as a cure-all. It is not. It was one approach at one given time. It was the next step, not the last. It is part of an evolution in the way the Government of Canada expresses its will. There are also other areas, that go beyond this, where the government will need to be vigilant and take steps.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Mr. Desrochers, you have the floor.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman, allow me in the first 30 seconds of my time to reassure my Acadian friend. I was in no way referring to the quality of French in the Acadian content; I was referring to program hosts, to presenters; I believe that Radio-Canada hosts or newscasters must speak proper French. In any case, this is not your area of jurisdiction, Mr. Bélanger. We will put the question to the minister who is responsible.

I would like to come back to one statement you made this morning. You said you supported linguistic duality and that you were proud of the action taken by Alberta but did not know if that province, in its efforts to promote linguistic duality, would pair English and French.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: No. Alberta will make it mandatory for all students to learn a second language.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: What are the official languages of Canada?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: English and French.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: And French.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: How would you react if Alberta requested that its students learn an Asian language? Would you view this as linguistic duality?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: To my understanding, Mr. Desrochers, it is not up to the Government of Canada to impose the teaching of both languages on each province, because theoretically the government could also ask the province of Quebec to impose the teaching of English. This is not what we want to do. However, I'm encouraged to see that a provincial government is asking, and making it mandatory, that its population, its children, learn a second language. It's a sign of openness that I commend.

The one and only officially bilingual province in Canada is New Brunswick, and it must be congratulated for that. I will never be among those who would discourage other provinces from making learning our two official languages mandatory, absolutely not. You must not misunderstand me. However, between not learning a second language and learning our country's two official languages, there is perhaps a stepping stone that consists of the obligation to learn a second language.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Yes, but I have trouble understanding your reasoning, Minister Bélanger, because you are the minister responsible for official languages. The official languages of Canada are French and English. How do you expect the situation of francophones in Alberta to progress if the province chooses another language then French?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: The choice is up to individuals, Mr. Desrochers, but I can tell you right now that in Alberta, French will be the second most studied language. This is what experience has shown in British Columbia, where there is insistence on learning a second language and where French is, by far, the most popular choice.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Will the Alberta initiative be part of your indicators?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: That's a good question. I don't know, I will check.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Your indicators must include places where the progress of French is measured.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: In that sense, yes, British Columbia is already a part of the indicators. We can tell you that British Columbia's enthusiasm for immersion is in large part a result of the provincial government's decision to impose the learning of a second language.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Bélanger, can you find out what second language the Government of Alberta intends to impose?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: We will have to wait until 2006, because it is only in 2006 that it will come into force.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Klein didn't say which language?

• (1050)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: People will be free to choose, meaning that several languages will be made available in schools, French being the first one. I was told this not by Mr. Klein, but by Mr. Denis Ducharme, a member of the legislative assembly who chairs the Francophone Affairs Secretariat in Alberta.

The Chair: You have one minute remaining, Mr. Desrochers.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I'm done.

The Chair: Good, thank you.

One last comment. Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

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

Let us get back to the subject of deputy ministers. The question asked by the Conservative Party was interesting. Ministers hire unilingual anglophone deputy ministers and expect that they will learn French. It is quite difficult for a unilingual anglophone deputy minister to require that someone learn French. I'm talking about leadership.

I'm wondering how many ministers here, in parliament, have hired unilingual francophone deputy ministers. This is problematic for me. In the public service, we ask thousands of people to be bilingual, and a minister cannot find a deputy minister in Canada who speaks both languages, who could provide some leadership. Don't you find this strange? Out of a population of 30 million people, a minister cannot find one bilingual deputy minister.

In fact, I believe there has been an increase in the number of unilingual anglophones hired as deputy ministers in the new government. It's been said in the media. Is this not of some concern to you, Minister Bélanger, that the current Government of Canada is not leading by example?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I have made note of your question, Mr. Godin. I'm delighted that my deputy minister is perfectly bilingual.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am delighted for you as well.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: However, I can tell you that I am not the person who chose her.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Was it the Prime Minister?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Yes.

I do not have the latest statistics on this. I will get them, because this is a subject that always causes a lot of talk, and I know the commissioner...

Mr. Yvon Godin: Everyone is talking about it.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: ...has a very definite opinion on this. So I will try to find out exactly what the situation is with respect to deputy ministers at the moment.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, it is ironic that despite the Dion plan and the \$755 million earmarked for languages, the new government is hiring more unilingual deputy ministers than...

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I do not know whether that is the case, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to have the figures, Minister, if I could.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I too would like to have them. We will get them.

Mr. Yvon Godin: And you will send them to us?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would be pleased to do so.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

This concludes our meeting today. I would like to thank all of our participants, particularly Minister Bélanger. I would like to thank him for being here and for taking the time to answer all the questions. Thank you very much.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you.

The Chair: We will meet again on Thursday morning, when our witness will be the Honourable Liza Frulla, the Minister of Heritage. At that meeting on Thursday morning, you will get the schedule for the upcoming meetings, so that you have some idea what is coming. Thank you very much. See you on Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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