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Mr. Pablo Rodriguez

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Tuesday, March 22, 2005

● (1900)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.)): Good evening.

[English]

Welcome to all of you.

[Translation]

You may have noticed that Marc-Olivier Girard is not sitting on my left today, but rather someone new. Since Mr. Girard was assigned to two committees, he had to withdraw from this one. We are therefore pleased to welcome a new clerk, Mr. Mark D'Amore.

If you wish, I will thank Mr. Girard on your behalf for his work over the last few months.

[English]

As requested by the committee, we have the pleasure of having with us tonight the President of the Treasury Board.

[Translation]

He is here as part of our study on bilingualism within the Public Service of Canada.

As you were told, the minister will have to leave at 8 p.m. So, without further a due, we will proceed with his presentation and the questions and answers. We have one hour.

At the next meeting, I thought we would spend a half-hour discussing the committee's future business. We will have discuss the committee's travel throughout the country.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Alcock.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I have a short opening statement, then we'll go to questions.

As you know, my portfolio includes the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency, and the Canada School of Public Service. We have developed Bill C-8—and actually, thanks to the members of the government operations committee, we have the bill in place now—which really creates the portfolio model of management linking these three units together. As part of the same team, they'll be more effective, as they are at the core of the government's learning and management mandate. They will create new synergies and give a better sense of direction to official languages in the public service.

[Translation]

I am also very conscious of the key responsibilities in ensuring the values and principles of the Official Languages Act are fully respected.

[English]

As a Manitoban, born and raised in Winnipeg, these values are very important to me. They reflect my province's history and its diversity. In the past, Manitoba has had more than its share of language conflicts. Today, the climate there and in Canada as a whole is very different; by and large, it is a climate of cooperation and inclusion.

To my mind, the promotion of our official languages in federal institutions is an integral part of our efforts to ensure better governance through public service modernization. We want the federal government to work better, with stronger leadership and a higher standard of accountability. We want to serve Canadians efficiently in the official language of their choice, in particular by making better use of information and communication technologies. We also want to promote a strong public service that reflects both official language communities. In short, we want a public service that leads by example.

This type of leadership is much more than simply “walking the talk” on a personal or individual level. It is about measuring accountability and human resources management more closely for better and long-lasting results. It is leadership that integrates the four pillars of modern comptrollership.

● (1905)

[Translation]

They are values and ethics, performance information, risk management and stewardship.

[English]

Canadians, I believe, expect their public service to be accountable not only for the way their tax dollars are spent, but also for the way their values are defended. In official language matters they want a holistic approach. They expect their public service to have a vision for bilingualism.

The government's action plan for official languages is just such a vision. Among other things, it calls for the development of an exemplary public service. Starting in 2003-04 the government is investing \$64.4 million over five years to achieve this goal. This total includes \$14 million for innovations and service delivery and better language use in the workplace, equitable participation, and the management of the official languages program; \$12 million to strengthen the role of the agency's official languages branch as the centre of excellence that promotes sustainable cultural change in federal institutions; and \$38.6 million for better access to language training, the recruitment of bilingual candidates, and a review of language training governance and testing.

I fully intend to ensure that these commitments are honoured in a timely manner and produce lasting results. My message to public servants is that the official languages program continues to be a priority.

I should also mention in passing that last November I announced a multi-year initiative to strengthen the internal audit function across government. This initiative will no doubt improve the ability of federal departments and agencies to implement official languages policy requirements.

In light of rapid demographic and economic change, it is important that the federal public service rise to the challenge of improving the management of its human resources in areas such as planning, recruiting, and professional development. What makes the federal government work efficiently on a daily basis is not only the rigorous stewardship of public funds, but also the right mix of people, properly trained, respectful of each other, pursuing fulfilling careers, and last but not least, committed to serving Canadians in the language of their choice.

This is why we want to enhance the design and delivery, in particular, of language training. Such training would not be an afterthought, but would rather be an essential feature of an employee's professional development plan. It should be a positive experience, an opportunity to grow and to develop, that takes place early in an employee's career. We expect organizations to ensure access to this type of training for employees who express a commitment.

Bilingual jobs are not new and they're not news. About 39% of the positions in the federal public service are bilingual. What is new is our approach to this issue. Under the new policies that took effect on April 1, 2004, imperative staffing has become the norm, in particular for senior public servants. They should have the tools to do the job. However, to ensure fair access to government jobs, non-imperative staffing will continue to be used. Let me be clear, unilingual Canadians joining the public service will continue to have access to jobs and to language training. What we want to achieve is a unified approach to learning and development needs of all public servants.

That is also why we believed it was important to bring language training under the umbrella of the Canada School of Public Service so that language skills and work skills can develop together in greater symbiosis.

I understand that you recently had the opportunity to hear the views of APEX and of Mr. James R. Mitchell and of the Sussex

Circle concerning language training. We reviewed this firm's think piece and recommendations on efficient and effective delivery models for language training.

[*Translation*]

Quite simply, we want to develop a system that works better.

[*English*]

Mr. Chairman, this year marks the 35th anniversary of the first Official Languages Act. The Canada of today is very different from what it was in 1969. We've come a long way. The linguistic capability of the federal public service has improved dramatically. Federal government services are now generally available in both official languages wherever the law requires them. In bilingual regions most public servants can work in their preferred official language, and there is, in general, a fair balance in participation rates.

[*Translation*]

This said, there's obviously still room for improvement, for greater progress toward linguistic equality.

[*English*]

I want the culture of the public service with regard to language to change, and I will continue to work closely with my colleague, Minister Bélanger, Minister responsible for Official Languages, in achieving this goal. But beyond the policies and laws, what has also changed is the way Canadians perceive language duality. They understand that we cherish and protect our official languages because language duality is a living symbol of inclusion and respect. It is an idea that inspires me and that I intend to ensure inspires the leadership of the public service as a whole.

I look forward to your questions.

● (1910)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We'll start with Mr. Lauzon.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, Minister.

[*English*]

Mr. Minister, I thank you very much for your opening comments. As you know, we're trying to improve the bilingual nature of the public service on a couple of fronts, one through the recruitment and the other through the educational process and language training. I'd like to get your comments on some of the language training that's been done.

One of the things I've noticed in the statistics I have, which are from 2000-2003—I don't have statistics for 2004, so I don't know what's happened in the last year—is that at that level, the level-C proficiency, over those three years we're doing quite well when we're training francophones in English. The results are actually quite good: 81.9% of the people are passing the oral test, which seems to be the hardest. And the trend seems to be pretty much the same over the last three years. But there seems to be quite an anomaly and quite a reduction in the success of the anglophones who are taking the French-language training. I noticed that in 2000, 54% of the people were passing the oral test, and in 2003 only 38.7%.

Now, we've had a number of witnesses from different departments. We've had Ms. Adam here, the language commissioner, and she's saying that quite frankly there's no progress being made in the action plan.

Mr. Minister, I wonder if you have maybe an idea why our level of proficiency seems to be tailing off on the oral segment of the test.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Rather than having me trying to confuse you, why don't we ask Madam Monnet to respond directly.

Mrs. Diana Monnet (Vice-President, Official Languages, Public Service Human Resources Management Agency of Canada): There are a number of circumstances that help us to understand the drop in the success rate. One of them was coincidence with the deadline for the C-B-C EX requirement of March 31, 2003, so that those people who had left their language training until the very last minute were coming through, and as a general principle, those are not necessarily your strongest people, nor those who have the greatest facility to learn.

As well, the statistics reflect the number of times you go in and take the test. So for someone who succeeds the first time... If someone comes through and fails four times—and there are cases that go up from there—then it takes four successes on the first time.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Nevertheless, aren't you saying that—

Mrs. Diana Monnet: There is a problem.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Yes, it's not working. Obviously it's not working. If people are failing tests four times, it's—

Mrs. Diana Monnet: Yes. No, I'm not going to disagree with that, and I was going to say that in spite of this we do recognize that there is a problem and that's exactly why we put into the action plan a review of the language training and testing systems, and that review is taking place right now.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: It was noted in March 2003 in the action plan for official languages that the federal government will invest \$38.3 million to provide better access to language courses and to step up efforts in the area of language skills retention and improvement, because Ms. Adams and many other witnesses who have testified here have told us that another problem is retention. Apparently we're training people, they get up to a level C, but when they go back into their work area, because they don't use their second language, they lose their skills in that second language. So in the last year, what have you done to stop that from happening?

Mrs. Diana Monnet: In the past two years since the action plan kicked in, there have been a number of initiatives. I'll start off with the numbers that are in the action plan. There was \$36.1 million over

three years for language training to help get rid of the backlog and address some of the particular problems that certain groups were having with language training. There was the \$500,000 for the review I mentioned of testing and training, and \$2 million to work with the Public Service Commission to learn how to better target pools of bilingual-ready candidates to bring them into the Public Service bilingual-ready. So that work is progressing.

What else has been done is that there is an innovation fund, which you'll find in the action plan, for \$14 million over five years, and with that innovation fund, which provides seed money for new kinds of approaches both to the language of work, which you're speaking of primarily, and to service to the public or representation. We can try new ways to do things. And one of the messages we give to departments is we'd like to see something that's going to have a multiplying effect as projects.

• (1915)

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Maybe I could ask a question of the minister. On December 9, 2004, Michelle Chartrand, the president of PSHRMAC, said in her appearance before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages that the entire language training system is aged and needs to be updated. She said it's outdated. I wonder if the minister could tell us what steps have been taken to bring it up to date.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think there are two things. I was intrigued by your earlier question, Mr. Lauzon, about why there has been this sharp rise. I think part of it is that the new policy is an attempt to both raise the standards—which would by definition create people who don't meet the standards and require some additional assistance to get there—but also create a broad series of investments to strengthen accessibility to training and the quality of training received.

The reorganization of the school to bring all of the educational components together in the Canada School of Public Service is part of that. There are a number of investments that have been made through the action plan and the structural changes we've made to better deliver on the training and support that public servants require.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: But Mr. Minister, if we had our children in high school and they were achieving a success rate of 38%—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I must interrupt you, Mr. Lauzon; your time is already up.

We will continue now with Mr. Desrochers.

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

I would like to welcome you, Minister and Ms. Monnet, to this special meeting on this Tuesday evening.

Mr. Alcock, the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency was established recently. It comes under your responsibility. You were there for ???responsible for enforcing the official languages policy within Treasury Board.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Enforcement is an interesting term. I'm responsible for the management of the official languages program for the public service, for those public servants who are employed by the Treasury Board. There are about 250,000.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Some press releases show that there are 64,938 bilingual positions in the federal public service, Mr. Alcock. Do your statistics show how many bilingual employees there are in the public service? Some bilingual positions are not necessarily held by bilingual employees. Do you have any figures on that?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. Hold on for a second, I have to get to the right tab.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I'm talking about the number of bilingual positions compared to the number of bilingual employees.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: The most recent statistics—this comes from page 48 of the official languages report of 2004—show a total of 64,938 positions, of which 85% were satisfactorily filled by bilingual candidates; 8% were exempted; 4% had work to do to meet...and about 1,800 were incomplete.

• (1920)

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Your statistics are for the positions, not the employees. For staffing purposes, some positions are designated bilingual, but how many bilingual employees are there? Do you know how many bilingual employees there are? You spoke about 64,938 bilingual positions. I would like to know how many bilingual employees there are in these positions.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: The 64,938 are public servants, of whom 55,349 fully meet the language requirements for their positions. There is incomplete information on 1,849. There are about 2,300 whose language requirements are considered insufficient. So there are 55,349 people who fully meet the bilingual requirements for their positions.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Do you have any idea about the national breakdown of these positions?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: In the western and northern regions, 1,605 bilingual positions—5% of the total; in Ontario, 10% of the total, outside of the national capital region—2,079 positions; in the national capital region, 64% of the total bilingual positions—44,798; in Quebec, outside of the national capital region, 60%—12,119; in New Brunswick, 49%—2,600; in the other Atlantic provinces in total, 10%.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Does that cover all the departments, and all the services provided by these departments, or are these employees in certain targeted departments? For example, does the

Department of Justice have some bilingual employees in Manitoba to meet the needs of the francophone population?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Yes, although, just to be clear, this would respond to the positions for which Treasury Board is responsible, the core of the public service. In the Department of Justice in Manitoba, we have just opened in the last year three fully bilingual service centres in addition to the services that are available in federal offices in Manitoba, and are planning to open three more.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: When a department becomes an agency, Mr. Alcock, as happened with the Department of Revenue, which became the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency, is it the same rigour and the same follow-up as regards the official languages?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: What an existing department does—for example, your point about the Canada Revenue Agency... The answer is yes, although the management of the Canada Revenue Agency would be responsible for the delivery of the policy that is set.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Are you also responsible for bilingualism in these agencies, as you are for government departments and Crown corporations?

[English]

Mrs. Diana Monnet: Actually, it is the institution itself and the head of the institution that is responsible.

[Translation]

The figures the minister just gave you are for the public service. The other institutions must follow our policies, but not necessarily the details of all directives...

Mr. Odina Desrochers: From what you say, Ms. Monnet, when the employees came under the Department of Revenue, they were required to comply with the official languages policy. Now that they are part of an agency, who makes the decisions—the agency itself or the president of Treasury Board?

Mrs. Diana Monnet: No, it is still the institution that makes the decision. There must be compliance with the Official Languages Act whether we are talking about an agency or a department. They must also respect our policies in the area of human rights, for example. What differs is the method that is used.

• (1925)

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desrochers.

You have the floor, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. We see that there's been a failure when we analyze the official languages issue.

Mr. Lauzon earlier referred to the growing number of public servants who fail the French test. Ten years ago, over 90% of people in designated bilingual positions were bilingual. At the moment, the figure is 85%. There has been a decline in the number of bilingual public servants in designated bilingual positions in this country.

The studies done in last year's report of the Commissioner of Official Languages show that the perception of senior management regarding bilingualism is a significant obstacle. Francophones do not have access to work tools, and in some cases to training programs. Public servants do not always have an opportunity to speak the official language of their choice at meetings. There is also a lack of understanding about language rights and obligations. These points were made in last year's report. We can assume that this year's report, to be published in the next few weeks or months, will report the same failure.

My question is simple. Since the number of bilingual employees in designated bilingual positions is decreasing and since there are still problems, what measures are you planning to take to correct this situation, which is getting worse? Things are not improving, they are getting worse.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, I'm a little confused by that statement. In 2003 there were 52,360 people in bilingual positions. That's 84%. In 2004 there were 55,349; that's 85%. Eighty-five is an increase, not a decrease. There are—

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: In 1994, the figure was over 90%. Today, it is 85%. The difference between 85 and 90% is at least 5%. That is a reduction.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, no, no.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, yes, yes.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, no, no. Remember, there's been an evolving standard—in 1984, only 8% met the level C proficiency; in 2004, it was 30%. So there's been an increase, a steady augmentation, of the standard people might meet; each time you do that, you leave some behind, and they've got to catch up. But to suggest there are fewer, that it is diminishing, is certainly incorrect in terms of the statistics I have.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: The percentage of people in designated bilingual positions who meet the language requirements of their position has dropped.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes. The percentage has dropped from 90% to 85%. The government's figures may be different, but I think the math is very clear: the percentage has gone from 90% to 85%.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: That might be New Democrat math, because page 48 of the report says it was 85% in 2004, and 84% in 2003. That still strikes me as an increase, but perhaps I just can't do the math in the same way.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: How many were there in 1994?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I do not have the percentage for 1994.

[English]

I'll look for it, but I'm just going by the report as it was published.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: It was over 90%.

What steps are you going to take? If I understand correctly, you do not acknowledge that there is a problem.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, never; we can always, always, always do better. The ability or the desire to improve upon what we do is at the very heart of the public service. Why we've reorganized the school, why we've raised the standards, why we're investing more heavily into it—that's all to meet a goal of excellence, but it's a continuing process; it's a very human process.

But I don't see anything in the data that suggests we are worse off today than we were before. I just don't see it. And that's worse up against a higher standard.

• (1930)

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: The figures are quite clear.

What steps do you intend to take right now to encourage public servants to work more in French?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Say again?

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: What steps are you taking to encourage public servants to work in French more?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: We have, with the last round of the policy, raised the proficiency requirements for senior management specifically to create an environment in which employees can work in the language of their choice. Because there was deemed to be a... I think it was from Mr. Desrochers' question; while people may train to a certain level, it would diminish quickly if there wasn't an opportunity to utilize it. One of the reasons for raising the language standard within the executive cadre was so people could have a workplace in which they could work in French and exchange with their supervisors. That is one. That's quite recent.

We've made a substantial investment—some \$700 million—in the new policy to enhance the services available to people who wish to improve their language, to improve the proficiency of use within their workplace. We've invested in innovation to bring more people into a comfort with the language. So I'm not certain about the conclusion that we're not doing anything.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: I have one final question.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Is this \$751 million?

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: The Commissioner of Official Languages made a point in her report last year. The Public Service Human Resources Management Agency had not yet taken any steps to clarify the language obligations of the major airport authorities in our country. As you probably know, one of the points made in the report had to do with signs in English only at the Winnipeg and Edmonton airports.

Have you clarified this? If not, when do you intend to do so? The Franco-Manitoban community and the Franco-Albertan community are entitled to services in the two official languages.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think you may misunderstand. The Public Service Human Resource Agency is not responsible for the delivery of signage programs in the airports. We're responsible for the public service, the 257,000 public servants.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Julian,

[English]

I'm sorry, we're tied in our time, so maybe you can come back.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: This is right on page 24 of her report.

[English]

The Chair: You can come back with the same questions in the second round.

Hon. Reg Alcock: Can I just say one thing, Mr. Chairman?

We brought some information packages that I think explain in a little more detail exactly what we're responsible for and what we're trying to deliver on right now. So maybe we can get that to you to help with this.

The Chair: They're being distributed actually?

[Translation]

We will continue with Ms. Boivin.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): I would like to start by making a brief aside, Minister and Ms. Monnet. I want to congratulate our colleagues in the Conservative Party for deciding to support bilingualism in Canada at their recent convention. Bravo! This is something that should have been settled 35 years ago, but in any case that is not serious. At least, you are in step with Canada, and I congratulate you on that. However, I must confess that I was somewhat frightened at some of the comments I heard in one workshop.

Let me now come back to the minister. Staffing bilingual positions in the public service will become imperative on April 1, 2005 for EX-3 positions, and on April 1, 2007, for EX-2 positions in designated bilingual regions for the language of work and in unilingual regions if the duties of the position include the supervision of incumbents of bilingual positions in a bilingual region. Staffing is still not imperative for EX-1 positions.

What is your position about the tougher language requirement for members of the senior management group? Would you be in favour of imperative staffing for deputy ministers and EX-1 positions?

● (1935)

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: There is not a date set for that. It's a fairly massive change within the other levels. We'll get that implemented, then make the decision at that time.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: But are you in favour of having EX-01...?

[Translation]

Would you be in favour of imperative staffing for deputy ministers and EX-1 positions? I want to know what your position is.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: My personal belief is that we should have a workplace, particularly in designated bilingual regions, where people can work in the language of their choice. They can feel comfortable working in it. I think one of the concerns that led to the creation of the new policy by Madame Robillard was this sense that people could acquire the language skill, go into the workplace, and simply not be able to utilize it. So this was a move to strengthen and broaden the use of it, particularly from the management category, because the other employees would have to relate to that.

[Translation]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: I would like to come back to an issue that was raised by one of my colleagues. Many people have already appeared before our committee. Something that never ceases to surprise me is that we hear a great deal about so-called bilingual positions, imperative staffing and so on, which exists in order to provide services to Canadians. We all agree on that, because it has to do with one of the foundations of our country. However, the Official Languages Act is not limited to that: it also has to do with the language of work.

You were asked a question about what steps could be taken to promote the use of French at work. It has been demonstrated to us at the committee that this is where there were serious problems. Some representatives of APEX came to discuss this issue with us. I enjoy giving this example every time I can. I was surprised to hear four people with francophone names telling me that they used French about 5% of the time. That left a lasting impression on me.

Why is it that francophones do not speak French? Do you have something to tell us about this? How can we encourage bilingualism and make people understand that it is more than a piece of legislation, a certificate or a bonus? What can we do to ensure that francophones in my riding, Gatineau, feel comfortable working in French or in English, and feel that people respect their language of work?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think you will find in the data that there's a significant problem in the recruitment of anglophones into positions in the province of Quebec. Some aspects of that are similar.

I think there are two things. It's interesting that Monsieur Simard is sitting beside you at the table. In an environment like this in Ottawa, where you have much more of a bilingual milieu, it's possible to speak the language quite comfortably—certainly in any working place. I think if you go into the province of Manitoba, where we have a French community, we do have bilingual positions and people who are fully qualified staffing those positions, but I suspect that Mr. Simard will tell you that the majority of them still speak English. There is a natural tendency, which is difficult.

The concern that was raised, though, as I understand it, by Madame Robillard was that the reason they moved to imperative staffing and to raise the level in the management category was to bring people to a level of comfort and facility with the language so that they would feel comfortable speaking in either language, depending on the employees they were dealing with. It was to enhance the milieu.

It seems to me, though, the problem is when you ask how you can encourage that. You can move up the proficiency levels with the management. You can encourage it through leadership. How do you enforce it? It's a tough management question in a lot of these areas.

I know from my own experience in attempting to learn the language, if I spend time in Ontario or in Ottawa or in La Pocatière or Trois-Pistoles, or wherever, it's possible to learn very quickly. But if I try to go back, even to a town like Saint Boniface, it's more complicated—unless you know where to go and who to talk to. You don't get the same.... It's not in the environment in the same fashion.

● (1940)

[Translation]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: If I have any time left, take it.

The Chair: There are only 35 seconds left.

[English]

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): I might just follow up on that.

Hon. Reg Alcock: You can't say hello on that!

Hon. Raymond Simard: Welcome, Mr. Minister and Madame Monnet.

Just quickly, to follow up on that, the 5% or 10% of the time when francophones were speaking English in the workplace.... The other comment we heard was that the bilingualism bonus may not be the answer. I am wondering if there is maybe a possibility that we could use that bonus to incent people who encourage bilingualism or working in the second language. It would seem to me that would make more sense, and I would like to know if you have ever thought of that.

The second thing, Minister, quickly, is that you spoke of the bilingual service centres. It seems to me that they are also another option where *la langue de travail* is French.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simard.

A quick answer, please, Minister.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: This issue of creating incentives is interesting.

Mrs. Diana Monnet: The suggestion of using the moneys from the bilingual bonus is an excellent suggestion. I know a lot of people who would really like to see that happen—many of us included. The problem there is that the bonus is a negotiated item; it's considered part of the pay package, so it's a joint directive. It's negotiated with the National Joint Council, so it's not quite so easy to take the money and use it for language training, maintenance of skills, culture change.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Monnet.

Now we are on to the second round. We have exactly twenty minutes, so it will be five minutes each.

Monsieur Poilievre.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): To begin, I would like to thank my colleague Ms. Boivin for her congratulations. I would also like to say that we from the Conservative Party have always supported bilingualism and that we also support the principle—on which there can be no compromise—whereby services should be provided in both official languages. It's a principle on which we must continue to work. That's the reason why we of the Conservative Party are saddened to learn of the results obtained by the government. It says here that the success rate for oral exams for anglophones trying to learn French is 38%.

I will come back to this issue because it is very important.

[English]

I represent a riding that is largely composed of unilingual Canadians who live in the national capital region, who thus rely on the public service as a large source of job opportunities. They are probably widely represented in this number of 38%.

I am wondering if the minister can tell us if he really believes a 38% success rate is something for his government to be proud of.

Hon. Reg Alcock: I think I will ask Madame Monnet to explain the dilemmas with the test, while I find the statistics on the percentage of bilingual positions in the national capital region.

Diana, do you want to speak about the...?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: It doesn't sound like he has much to brag about when it comes to this 38%.

Hon. Reg Alcock: It doesn't sound like he believes it's a real figure.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Well it is a real figure. It's right in front of me.

Mrs. Diana Monnet: There is an issue with the test. That is why it's on the table and that's why it's under review at the present time. We've known that for a while. The numbers haven't been good for a while either. So this is why the Public Service Commission, in administering the test, has already introduced a number of flexibilities so that the administration of the test is a little less stressful than it has been. So there are improvements that are taking place now. There will be other improvements when the results come through of this study.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: I'm very pleased to hear that answer, Madame Monnet, because in my constituency I can assure you my constituents are extremely frustrated, as I am, with the bureaucratic nature of the linguistic testing system. They believe that it is infringing upon the merit principle and that there are many occasions when the language testing is so demanding that it actually becomes an obstruction to the merit principle.

I have spoken to francophone language professors who have told me that they believe the exam is overly bureaucratic. These are professors, by the way, who are part of the parliamentary system who have told me that they believe the exam is far too bureaucratic, and in many ways far more demanding than could ever be thought reasonable. And frankly, we believe that hiring in the public service should be based on merit, and merit alone, not just language testing. So I am very pleased to see that you're reviewing this.

I want to ask the minister, does he believe the failure rate should be attributed to the excessive demands of the language tests, or to the failure of language training? Which of the two?

• (1945)

Hon. Reg Alcock: I'm intrigued by the member's statement. Are you suggesting that being bilingual when one's applying for a bilingual position is not part of the merit...? When you say hiring through merit, are you saying this excludes language—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Normally I wouldn't allow the witness to ask a question, but because I'm such a big fan of the minister, I'll allow it.

Of course, I believe that language forms part of the merit, but the way these exams are operating, according to many who are present in the system, is excessively bureaucratic and has actually gone to the point of interfering with the merit principle.

Hon. Reg Alcock: There's no question that in the introduction of the new policy and the raising of the standard, some of the tools being used to assess that need work. There has been a fair bit of discussion on that and a fair bit of study done to see how it can be approved; that's a fact. But to suggest and to confuse that pass rate on an early tool that was used to assess linguistic capacity with the success in the national capital region—

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: So is it testing or is it training? What's the problem?

Hon. Reg Alcock: I just note here that of the 65,000 staff that were bilingual positions, 80% of them were filled.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Answer the question, testing or training? Which is to blame for your failure in this regard, Minister?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Total staffing, bilingual imperative, 80%.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Testing or training?

Hon. Reg Alcock: Total number of positions staffed, 65,000.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Testing or training?

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre. Your time is up.

Mr. D'Amours, you have the floor.

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

Thank you, Mr. Minister.

The best way of improving one's ability to speak one's second language is through practice. I would like to know what your position is and what the objective is when you want to invest in second-language training. The question is always the same: it should not be an obligation, but a way of showing senior officials the importance of speaking a second language and allowing people who speak the second language to do so if it is their mother tongue.

I would like to know what you think about this subject, and whether you think people should be encouraged even more to speak their second language at work.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: It's similar, in a sense, to Madame Boivin's question that you can make available the training, you can create incentives through bonuses and such to assist people moving into those positions, but there's a piece that is really leadership and management that you have to address through those kinds of tools, so it's the evoking of values, the building of champions, advancing the use of the language. In a sense it's like the ethics argument: you can build lots of rules and structures, but then you have to have people who simply walk the walk, who simply model the behaviour, who make it real. You can't do that through systems of rewards and punishment. You do that through what would be more fundamental leadership. And how do you drive that? I think it has to be driven at all levels throughout the public service because it's something you value.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Exactly. When you force someone to do something, the results are often not as good as when you encourage someone to do something. That way, people are more willing to do something of their own free will.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for your answer. I will share my time with my colleague Mr. Raymond Simard.

[English]

Hon. Raymond Simard: Merci, Monsieur D'Amours. The only way I can sneak in a question is to pick up at the back end of my colleagues.

Mr. Minister, what are the options? We always come back, it seems, to the language of work. I think it's important. If we train people we spend all this energy and all this money training people and they don't get to practise and obviously they're going to lose it. I think Mr. Lauzon has brought that forward quite a few times. One of the things we have done in Manitoba, which you're very familiar with, is *les centres de services bilingues*.

• (1950)

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, Mr. Simard, it's one of those questions that you have the answer to, in a sense. You've been one of the champions of this. You've been a moving force in the creation of first the three and now the expansion to six and the desire to move the policy across the west.

But if you go back to this question of values, when I started out we took a little French in school. Today not only are we building those kinds of milieus within the workplace, but there are nearly 100,000 kids in the prairies in immersion. The sense of this policy being a failure I just think is completely untrue. There's a respect for the two official languages that never existed when I was a child. You can see enormous growth in this over the last 30 to 35 years.

Can we do better? Yes, we can. Are we building the strategies, creating the tools, building the policy structures that continually advance the policy? Absolutely. That's what all this is about. Is it perfect? No. Is any human endeavour perfect? No. Is it getting better every day? Yes, thanks to a lot of hardworking commitment on the part of a lot of public servants. I do think this issue of leadership is an important one and it's something I'm dealing with a whole lot now that I'm thinking it through for this accountability work that I'm

doing. How do you incent positive value? How do you make it part of the milieu?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simard. That's all the time we had.

[Translation]

Mr. André, it's your turn.

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Good evening, Mr. Minister and Ms. Monnet. We have covered a lot of ground. But I still have some questions with regard to the public service and bilingualism.

What is the current percentage of bilingual deputy ministers and senior officials in the public service?

Mrs. Diana Monnet: We don't have any figures for deputy ministers. In fact, that is established by the Privy Council Office. It's more or less the responsibility of the clerk. So I don't have the percentage for deputy ministers.

As far as assistant deputy ministers are concerned, the percentage, for all EXs, is 80%. I don't have the number for EX-4s and EX-5s. As far as public service managers are concerned, 80% of them meet the requirements of their positions.

Mr. Guy André: In the documents I read, it says that the average is much lower with deputy ministers.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Oh, but don't believe everything you read.

[Translation]

Mrs. Diana Monnet: Most deputy ministers were assistant deputy ministers before becoming deputy ministers. So there is a certain level of bilingualism.

Mr. Guy André: The problem in the public service right now is that, despite the numerous training programs and some willingness to give the country a federal public administration that promotes bilingualism, and even though there has been a major investment in training employees, the documentation and discussions that we have had here in the committee have shown clearly that anglophones who learn French often lose it over time because they do not use it. The money invested does not always give a good return.

What we know as well is that there are bilingualism bonuses associated with all these policies. There are also situations of exclusion, exclusion orders. In some cases where there are no bilingual candidates, an exclusion order is used to put someone in the position, even though the person does not really know the second language.

If I ask you this question, it is because I have been asking myself the same thing. I think that we all need to ask it. Canada wants a bilingualism policy that applies to the entire public service. There have been some improvements, but things are not moving very much. Some figures have been presented by the gentleman here beside me. They show that the rates have dropped in certain cases over the past few years. We need to look at some of the approaches we are using.

Mr. Mitchell suggested increasing training budgets and developing new training. It reminds me of the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which people get together and bring out the groundhog every two or three years. I feel like we are in that movie, when we are talking about the public service and bilingualism.

Do we not need to take a different approach, and do we not need real political will in order to make the public service bilingual and simply eliminate exclusion orders and non-imperative staffing? I have always found the bilingualism bonus a strange thing.

The example that I have used at previous meetings is that if I were an accountant, I would have to have a degree in accounting, know how to count and do income tax. With the bilingualism bonus, the person has to be bilingual...

• (1955)

The Chair: Mr. André, your question is so long and so interesting that there is no time left for the answer. I am sorry.

Mr. Guy André: We could just take two minutes to talk about it.

The Chair: We really cannot do that.

Mr. Alcock, go ahead.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: You raise an interesting point. As we move to increase the level of proficiency, and to expect it, with the imperative staffing, I think this reflects a change in our base. I think it reflects, in a sense, the success of the program over time, because it's now possible to do that.

You mentioned how with accountants you have certain skills, and you get paid for those skills you have, which you have when you come in. It's possible now to expect that a young person who wants to join the public service after graduating from school understands that if they want to move into senior management, it will be a requirement that they be fluently bilingual, which means they'll have many years to prepare for this. That wasn't the case—

[Translation]

The Chair: I am sorry, Minister, but I must interrupt you.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I actually think it's an interesting point.

The Chair: It is an interesting point.

[Translation]

We will go to one more person.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I will try yet again to get some answers. It did not work the first time; I hope that I will have better luck the second time.

I cited the fact that, in 1996-97, 91% of designated bilingual positions were held by people who met the requirements, while the figure for last year was 85%. Where do these numbers come from? From Treasury Board. This information came from your own department. You have denied that there is a problem, but there is indeed a problem. So I will ask my question: how are you going to address this situation?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: There was a policy change that increased the level.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: In fact, the number of people who meet the requirements of their position has decreased. So I would like to know how you are going to...

• (2000)

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, no, no.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, yes, yes.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: No, wait; the requirements have gone up.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: You do not want to answer the question. I think that that says a great deal about your...

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I realize it's complicated.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: In my opinion, this represents a lack of respect for the francophone community.

I will go to my second question and I will begin with a quote from last year's report by the Commissioner of Official Languages:

More than two years after the Commissioner made a recommendation regarding the need to clarify the linguistic obligations of the authorities that manage Canada's major airports, the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency has not yet taken all the steps necessary to implement it.

My question seems to me to be quite a simple one. When are you going to take the steps deemed necessary by the Official Languages Commissioner?

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: I always think figures are kind of interesting. I'm not certain why you would reject the fact that the number of level C positions has gone up dramatically. I mean, this is not a complicated piece of math here. The reality is that the entire—

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: The number is the same as in 1996-97. According to the figures provided by the Library of Parliament, the difference is the number of bilingual people in these positions has decreased.

[English]

Hon. Reg Alcock: Well, I would just be repeating myself, but I could draw you a picture: the level goes up and the number of people as a percentage is smaller. That's why we provide greater training and new training to get them up to a higher level.

I don't know what's so hard to understand about this.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: That says a lot.

The Chair: You still have one minute left, Mr. Julian.

Have you finished?

Mr. Peter Julian: I believe that everyone has these numbers. The committee knows that the Treasury Board president is refusing to answer the question.

So I will come back to my question about the Winnipeg and Edmonton airports, with respect to which I quoted the commissioner's report, but if I understand correctly, you do not want to answer that question either.

[*English*]

Mrs. Diana Monnet: There was an audit done of the seven major airports and a review to see if progress had been made since the first audit. Those results will be posted soon.

We agree with you, there is progress that needs to be made. The airports you mentioned are certainly on the list of those that can improve the service they're giving.

[*Translation*]

With respect to when we will be taking steps to deal with the situation raised by the commissioner, I want to point out that we followed up on the first audit with a second one of our own. We are also working with the commissioner and people in her office to determine the legal basis for the obligations of these airports. The act and the policy have been interpreted in different ways over the years. The situation must be clarified from a legal standpoint. The

commissioner is right about this, and we are going to work with her office to address this issue over the coming weeks.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much. I appreciate your answer.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

[*Translation*]

That closes our meeting for today.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much Ms. Monnet. Thank you to the committee members as well.

I would remind you that we will be meeting again on Thursday morning and that we will be spending a half hour on committee business to deal with the committee's plans to travel to various regions of the country.

[*English*]

We are adjourned.

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