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—
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Mr. Guy Lauzon

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•(0915)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Official Languages will now begin its meeting which, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), will focus on ministerial priorities.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, the Honourable Josée Verner.

Ms. Verner, you have 15 minutes to make your opening remarks, after which we will begin our round of questions.

Welcome, Ms. Verner.

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Like other colleagues here today, we went to the other room. I apologize for being a few minutes late.

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the committee, it is my pleasure to appear before you today to discuss my vision for official languages as Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for La Francophonie and Official Languages.

I am accompanied by Ms. Diane Fulford, Assistant Deputy Minister, Citizen and Heritage, of the Department of Canadian Heritage, Mr. Jérôme Moisan, Senior Director, Official Languages Secretariat and Mr. Hubert Lussier, Director General, Official Language Support Programs Branch.

I would like to tell you today about the government's very strong commitment to the Official Languages Act and the parameters around which the implementation of that commitment is based. I also want to speak about the orientations of the policies and programs that I expect to put forward, in order to advance the equality of status of the two official languages and to permit all of Canada to fully take advantage of the richness offered by its linguistic duality.

There is a consensus with respect to official languages: Canada's linguistic duality represents an essential component of Canadian identity and an extraordinary richness for all society.

[English]

The government has taken a clear position in favour of the Official Languages Act. We intend to ensure that English and French have equal status for use in all parliamentary and governmental institutions. We support the development of official language communities in minority situations and will help them to contribute

fully to Canada's prosperity. We will make sure that full recognition of French and English is promoted throughout the country.

We have demonstrated our support for linguistic duality on numerous occasions. Moreover, allow me to remind you that in November my colleagues and I helped adopt Bill S-3, which reinforces part VII of the act. This section stipulates the Government of Canada's commitment to encourage the development of official language communities in minority situations and promote full recognition and use of both official languages. A firm commitment on the part of our entire caucus ensured the passage of this bill.

[Translation]

I would also like to remind you of the Prime Minister's full, personal commitment to official languages and particularly to the French language, which he uses often. The government's support of linguistic duality, as a foundation of Canadian society, remains unequivocal and I would like to add that this support includes the recognition of the essential and crucial role of Quebec with respect to the vitality of the French fact in Canada. We are committed to practice "open federalism that recognizes a unique place in a united Canada for a strong and dynamic Quebec."

We have five government priorities which will guide us to our ultimate objective: building a stronger, more prosperous and united Canada. I think that it is inconceivable to imagine a strong, prosperous and united Canada without the contributions of official language minority communities across the country whether they are big or small.

We want to establish the foundations of open and respectful collaboration with all levels of government and organizations from all sectors. It is in this spirit that I am taking on the mandate that the Prime Minister has conferred upon me. I will be supported in my work by my colleague, Mme Sylvie Boucher, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and La Francophonie and Official Languages.

I would now like to define my responsibilities as Minister of Official Languages. I have two distinct complementary roles. The first is to ensure a horizontal coordination of all federal activities with respect to official languages. These activities concern minority official language community development, the promotion of linguistic duality, the language in which federal institutions serve the public, and the linguistic rights of federal employees.

I will work directly with my colleagues in cabinet, particularly with those who have responsibilities in key departments in this area. I'll mention particularly the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency which develops and coordinates bilingualism in federal institutions, or Justice Canada, which is responsible for the administration of justice in the two official languages.

My second role is derived from the statutory responsibilities of the Minister of Canadian Heritage related to the federal government's commitment to enhance the development of official language minority communities and to promote the full recognition and use of the two official languages. This includes the coordination of federal activities in these areas, direct support to communities, education and official language services agreements and the promotion of the two languages throughout the country.

This double official languages machine is added to my duties as Minister of La Francophonie and I would like to say here that this is the first time that all of these responsibilities have been brought together under one minister. You can see a clear indication on the part of Prime Minister Harper to ensure that our efforts to reinforce Canada's linguistic duality are as coordinated as possible within the government and elsewhere.

Now, I would like to define the orientations of the policies and programs that I want to put forward to accomplish my work with respect to official languages. As you know, the official languages programs regroup all of the activities which permit the federal government to respect the obligations and commitments of the Government of Canada regarding the Official Languages Act.

As Minister of Official Languages, I must ensure political leadership and horizontal coordination of the program for the whole of the Government of Canada. The Official Languages Secretariat supports me in this work. In terms of political leadership, this means that I: discuss issues related to linguistic duality with my cabinet colleagues; express the government's point of view on current official languages files; represent the government to the provinces and territories.

For example, this is what I will do when I co-chair the *Conférence ministérielle sur la Francophonie canadienne* next October.

My horizontal coordination role includes: ensuring concerted government action with respect to official languages, particularly in collaboration with those institutions that have statutory responsibilities under the Official Languages Act; supporting other ministers in their sectoral initiatives; spearheading constructive dialogue with communities and their members as well as with the provinces and territories; as needed, intervening with the Commissioner of Official Languages, parliamentary committees and other parties; reporting to Parliament on official languages program results.

● (0920)

As I mentioned, our government chose to concentrate its efforts on five priorities, including accountability. In this regard, the action plan for federal accountability, unveiled on April 11, 2006, contains accountability measures that will affect all federal government departments and agencies.

The particular challenge in official languages, especially with respect to support for official language minority communities,

remains its horizontal and intergovernmental nature, as well as the number of parties able to influence the targeted results. The challenge is even bigger since the Official Languages Act was amended in November 2005.

Now, federal institutions have an enforceable obligation to take positive measures to implement the federal commitment with respect to official language minority communities and the full recognition of English and French in Canadian society.

The horizontal management framework is one of the policy tools that will help with this challenge. It will help to measure departmental and governmental official languages results attained, such as demanded by the Government of Canada's accountability policy. The framework constitutes, essentially, the first instrument of this type to measure government-wide performance on a horizontal file respecting sectoral responsibilities. Concretely, this signifies that we'll be present in all steps of a project. We will intervene not only at the developmental stage but also after it is implemented. This should allow for increased coherence within all federal initiatives and the evaluation processes to which they are linked.

I would now like to present the policy tools and programs that the Department of Canadian Heritage uses to implement its responsibilities found in part VII of the Official Languages Act in more detail. In doing this, I wish to mention the results that we are targeting through effective use of these tools. I will also mention some actions already undertaken.

On the one hand, the Department of Canadian Heritage plays a lead role in coordinating the implementation of the federal government's commitment as stated in part VII of the Official Languages Act. This commitment consists of supporting the development of official language minorities and promoting the full recognition of the two official languages.

In this way, more than 30 federal institutions, designated because of the impact their activities have on the minority communities, present their action plan and achievements to the department each year.

I will soon report to Parliament, as required by the act, on the activities of these institutions, as well as the results of all the Department of Canadian Heritage's official languages support programs.

This coordination and support work, which spans all of the federal government, is particularly important at this time, since the recent amendments to the act target reinforcing the federal commitment in this area. That's how, by collaborating with Justice Canada and the Public Service Human Resources Management Agency, the department actively supports the current efforts of federal institutions.

For example, at presentations or other forums, the department ensures that the institutions fully understand their responsibilities under part VII of the act. Department officials are also working to developing a strategic and user-friendly guide on the implementation of section 41, which should facilitate better consideration in all federal operations of the government's obligations to promote English and French.

On the other hand, the Department of Canadian Heritage's financial support is offered within the framework of two major programs. One concerns the development of official language communities, and the other the enhancement of English and French across the country.

In the first case, the program's objective is to ensure the vitality of official language minority communities. More precisely, we support communities in improving their capacity to live in their language, participate in Canadian society and ensure their long-term development. We also aim to ensure that they have increased access to federal, provincial, territorial and municipal programs and services in their language, and to ensure that they have better access to quality education in their language within their communities.

The program also tries to see that there is better synergy between the multiple partners working to develop and expand these communities. In this way, their work will be more targeted and concerted.

• (0925)

The same type of coordination is also sought after by the second major program based on promotion of duality and second language learning.

The initiatives undertaken through this program target an increased proportion of Canadians who have a functional knowledge of the two official languages as well as a better understanding and appreciation of the benefits of linguistic duality.

We are working now to sensitize, not only federal institutions, but numerous other partners, including the private and voluntary sectors, to the importance of supporting the reinforcement of linguistic duality throughout Canada.

I have already met many of my provincial colleagues and numerous representatives of organizations. I think it is essential to work in full collaboration with all the key players in these often complex files.

Therefore, I concluded education agreements with all of the provincial and territorial governments and everything is now in place to transfer the \$1 billion to the provinces and territories forecast for 2005 to 2009. These funds support their efforts with respect to minority official language education and second official language instruction.

[English]

Also, since our government was elected, agreements have been signed with seven provinces and territories with respect to provision of services in the official language of the minority. An agreement with Quebec concerning services offered by the province to the English-speaking community will soon be concluded. This is

excellent news for these communities, as well as for all of the provinces and territories.

This new approach of cooperation has already proven effective in other areas, particularly health care. In this area, innovative partnerships that produce clear results have been established with French and English minority-language communities. These partnerships are beginning to serve as a model for others.

Another example is the opening of the Centre de recherche en technologies langagières on the campus of the Université du Québec en Outaouais.

This is what we can accomplish when we cooperate with not only our federal partners, but other levels of government and the private sector, and when we focus on the economic, cultural, and social benefits of our linguistic duality.

Moreover, I recently had the pleasure of announcing funding for the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario to help the association launch its activities and make the voice of French-speaking Ontarians heard loud and clear.

Finally, I have just begun an important tour to meet with representatives of English and French minority-language communities across the country.

[Translation]

I had a very interesting meeting with the *Conseil national des présidents et présidentes de la Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada*.

And, during my recent visit to Manitoba, I was able to see just how dynamic and organized their francophone community is. I was impressed by the warm welcome that the Franco-Manitobans gave to the international Francophonie members. I've also just returned from New Brunswick, where, in addition to having jointly announced major investments in education with the provincial government, I had the opportunity to discuss the needs of the francophone community with representatives of *la Société des Acadiens et des Acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick*.

At the same time, I was able to learn more about the Acadian situation in all of the Atlantic provinces through discussions with the *Société nationale de l'Acadie*.

Tomorrow, Sylvie Boucher, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, and I will meet representatives of the anglophone community in Quebec to conclude a collaborative agreement with them.

I want to become an ally of the communities, to listen to their needs and have discussions with them to ensure that our support remains the most efficient and pertinent possible.

We have challenges before us if we want to perpetuate and enrich the formidable heritage our forefathers have left us.

If you ask how you're going to do it, I would tell you that there is no miracle solution, but that we have lots to gain by working as a team and sharing our experiences. And I want to follow an approach founded on collaboration and coordination.

I'm talking about the education sector, where we need to double our efforts to ensure that our francophone youth not only begin their schooling in French, but that they complete it in French as well.

I'm talking about second-language learning, so essential to the future of Canadian linguistic duality, and about bringing francophones and anglophones closer together, both in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada.

I'm talking about our ability to focus on immigration to ensure demographic and economic benefits in the communities across our country.

I am also working closely with my colleague, Beverley Oda, Minister of Canadian Heritage, to find out how we can do more with respect to arts and culture to benefit the anglophone and francophone minority communities. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Sylvie Boucher, also supports us in our efforts.

The possibility of creating a francophone secretariat within the department is being examined to ensure that the distinctiveness of the Canadian francophonie is taken into consideration systematically in decision-making processes related to departmental cultural programs and policies.

All this, without forgetting of course, that the government itself must become a model of respect and reinforcement of linguistic duality within its own structures and internal practices. Federal institutions should set the tone. I will therefore ensure that all of my colleagues in the cabinet cooperate towards implementation of this objective.

In summary, I intend to defend bilingualism with passion and heart. I want to work to increase equality between the two official languages in all federal institutions, to reinforce minority official language community vitality across the country, and to make sure that the two major linguistic communities in Canada understand and mutually enrich each other better.

I invite you to share your ideas and vision with me so that Canada's linguistic duality remains one of our fundamental values.

Thank you for your attention.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Verner. It is up to us to thank you.

Before we begin the question and answer session, I must mention that we have set aside the last 15 minutes of this meeting for an in-camera session, to discuss future business.

We'll start the first round of questions with Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Madam Minister, for your appearance here today. The Official Languages Commissioner will be stepping down on July 31st.

Do you have someone in mind for the position?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

I know that the commissioner will be leaving in July and I'd like to take advantage of this opportunity to thank her for the excellent work she's done.

It is a process which must be submitted to Parliament and the Senate. I have no announcement to make today. The process is underway.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, do you not find this situation worrisome, given that, in theory, the House will be rising around June 23rd? Ms. Adam will be stepping down on July 31st. The appointment must go through Parliament and the Senate before it is effective. If I've understood correctly, there's a chance we may not have another commissioner before she steps down.

Hon. Josée Verner: Are you asking me whether I find that worrisome? No, because we will assume our responsibilities and this appointment, which is within the purview of Parliament, will be made in due course.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: All right, but that is not an answer, Minister, because in actual fact, we will be leaving in two weeks, whereas Ms. Adam will be stepping down in July.

So, let me repeat the same question, because the communities are also concerned. In fact, Mr. Jean-Guy Rioux made a public statement to that effect recently. In a way, we are sending out a message with respect to how important communities are.

Will we, yes or no, have a commissioner to replace Ms. Adam when she steps down?

Hon. Josée Verner: I heard your question, sir. Our government is steadfast in its commitment to linguistic duality. The House of Commons and the Senate will proceed to the selection of the next commissioner, as they've always done.

● (0935)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Will the committee have an opportunity to question this person?

Hon. Josée Verner: Ms. Fulford or Mr. Moisan, would you like to answer?

Mr. Jérôme Moisan (Senior Director, Official Languages Secretariat, Department of Canadian Heritage): The terms do not provide for a meeting with the committee, but we could look into the issue and get back to you on that.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chairman, from what I understood this week, Ms. Adam was interviewed by the committee. So we would expect the situation to be the same for whoever replaces her.

Let me change subjects. My next question has to do with the Action Plan for Official Languages which was tabled by the government and which is currently in effect. When you went to New Brunswick, in May, you wanted to change aspects of the plan. Could you tell us which ones exactly?

Hon. Josée Verner: Sir, we support the action plan. As a government, we have no intention of ever providing less than what the communities have obtained in this area. As the implementation progresses, we will determine whether the plan should be enhanced or improved.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: All right. You suggested possibly changing some elements. Are you considering some at this point?

Hon. Josée Verner: I am currently on a tour of the various communities, as I committed to doing. In light of the suggestions and recommendations I received from communities, if changes, improvements or enhancements are warranted, I would certainly be receptive to that.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: So you are open to the idea of increasing the budgetary envelope, in other words renewing the plan after 2008 and maybe increasing the envelope. Are you open to that?

Hon. Josée Verner: I am open to hearing the recommendations, suggestions and concerns of linguistic communities.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You may be open to hearing them, but you will not necessarily undertake to renew or enhance the plan.

Hon. Josée Verner: In due course, if changes are warranted, specifically with respect to the budget, I will let you know.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Well, thank you. That's nice. I feel privileged.

What is the situation with respect to the bilingualism of deputy ministers?

Ms. Diane Fulford (Assistant Deputy Minister, Citizenship and Heritage, Department of Canadian Heritage): Several deputy ministers speak French. Ms. Judith LaRocque, the deputy minister for the Department of Canadian Heritage, speaks both languages impeccably. Some people speak less French or are less bilingual than others, but I believe deputy ministers are making extraordinary efforts to communicate in both languages, throughout the country.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: According to what I gathered from the last committee, some efforts remained to be made on this front. There are many francophones within the public service. However, the upper echelons are composed in large part of people who do not speak French.

My second question then becomes moot. I wanted to ask you whether you had an idea of the level of bilingualism of deputy ministers, and if so, what you plan to do to increase it.

Because that has not been assessed, there must not be any measure to that effect. That is what I gather.

Mr. Hubert Lussier (Director General, Official Languages Support Programs, Department of Canadian Heritage): I think a distinction needs to be made here. When you refer to senior public servants, you are referring to deputy ministers, at the highest level. They are appointed, as you know, by order in council. However, based on the statistics, which I do not have before me, I believe you'll be satisfied by the well documented proportion of bilingual francophones among senior officials.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: All right, can you provide us with that?

I only have 20 seconds left, Mr. Chairman! You're being hard on me today.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What was behind the transfer of the management of official languages from Treasury Board to the Department of Canadian Heritage?

● (0940)

Hon. Josée Verner: Actually, it is a very clear commitment on the part of the Prime Minister to give the minister responsible for official languages all the tools she needs in order to carry out her duties in the field.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll continue with Ms. Barbot.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Madam Minister, I would like to get back to what happened upon the arrival of Mr. Abou Diouf. There is a motion which I tabled before the committee several weeks ago and which should have been debated last Tuesday. But colleagues from the Conservative Party asked that we wait for your appearance before making any decision, which led me to believe that you had specific revelations to make in this regard.

In the course of your presentation, you mentioned that your dual responsibility for official languages and the francophonie reflects the importance of linguistic duality within the machinery of government as well as outside of it. In this respect, I believe your role as minister responsible for the francophonie is important.

You replied to a question I asked in the House that you were pleased that I had been there to welcome Mr. Diouf. What you didn't say and which I did not deem necessary to add, was the fact that I was also convinced by the people who were there and that I had to personally extend my apologies for the blunder. I would have liked to have seen someone take responsibility for this by stating that there was a mistake and by extending some apologies.

The fact that you constantly repeat that Mr. Diouf was pleased is a testament, I believe, to his generosity of spirit, but in fact, his country, Senegal, took offence. So, I would like to know whether you have anything new to add to the issue.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you, Madam.

What was said with respect to the welcome extended by the Franco-Manitoban community of Canada to Mr. Diouf still stands. And in that regard, I'd like to refer you to a copy of a letter that Mr. Diouf sent to me where he mentions that on the occasion of his visit to Canada he was touched by the kind words I had to say about him. The Secretary General of the Francophonie mentioned on several occasions that he felt he had been well received by the community in Manitoba, welcomed by our government and that he wanted to turn the page.

That being said, Madam, I'd like to add that according to the protocol used by the previous government as well as ours, there was no breach when Mr. Diouf arrived in Canada. There was an unfortunate incident, everyone agrees, for which we expressed our regret.

I'd like to say that from 1998 to 2005, Mr. Diouf came to Canada seven times. On no occasion was there a Liberal government member there to greet him at the airport. Our government expressed regret for the incident that arose with Mr. Diouf. The Minister for Official Languages did the same thing. Mr. Harper, the Prime Minister, had a conversation with Mr. Diouf, and the matter is closed, as stated by Mr. Diouf himself.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: So, you're saying that the fact that Senegal complained and that the country requested formal apologies from Mr. MacKay had nothing to do with the incident. I understand that you're saying Mr. Diouf said nothing. However, I can assure you, because I was there, that his country formally requested an apology.

I'd also like you to tell us what difference you see between a breach and an unfortunate incident. Was Mr. Diouf searched on the other seven occasions when he came to Canada?

Hon. Josée Verner: According to our information, Mr. Diouf was not searched, Madam, when he travelled here in May.

• (0945)

Ms. Vivian Barbot: I would have liked you to have said that in the House, because we never got any clear statement on the part of the government as to what happened. We had to rely on what journalists were saying. It seems to me that the House would have been the ideal place for the government to say what actually happened, to account for the results of the investigation it held. We could have avoided all of the hype, and by the same token, you could have told us what response you gave to the Senegalese Ambassador, if there was a response given.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your comments.

I'd like to say that the Prime Minister, when he rose in the House, stated that he had asked for a review of the facts. We now have this review. The fact is that Mr. Diouf was not searched while he was in transit, I should add, in Toronto.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: Sure, but he was arriving in the country.

Hon. Josée Verner: Madam, if you will allow me, I would say that you mentioned you were relying on media reports. I think you would have been better advised to rely on what the government was telling you. And the government, at the time,...

Ms. Vivian Barbot: You didn't say anything.

Hon. Josée Verner: Madam, you asked me a question. So if you will allow me, I'd like to answer it.

I would like to say that the Prime Minister rose in the House to state that there would be a review of the facts. That being said, I can tell you today that based on the information we've obtained, first of all, Mr. Diouf was not searched. Second, protocol with respect to welcoming the Secretary General of the Francophonie was the same as on the seven or more occasions when the Liberal government was in office. Third, Mr. Diouf said that he was satisfied, as stated in the letter he sent me, with his visit here and the conference which was held in Manitoba.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: Does that mean that you will refer to every instance when the Liberal government erred in the past to do the same thing yourselves and base your conduct on what was done in the past?

Hon. Josée Verner: Protocol rules are clear. They are established, and were followed by the previous Liberal government, and were suggested to us as they were.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Minister and Ms. Barbot.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

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

Welcome, Minister.

I didn't intend to dwell on this subject, but I believe the investigation determined that, although he was not searched, he was asked to remove his coat to go through security. Is that true?

Hon. Josée Verner: Sir, much has been said about a search. But, based on the information we've obtained, the Secretary General of the Francophonie was not the subject of a body search.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman, but that does not answer my question.

Was he asked to remove his coat in order to go through security?

Hon. Josée Verner: I understand your question.

Mr. Yvon Godin: This is not anybody else's question, it is the question put by Mr. Yvon Godin, member for Acadie—Bathurst.

Hon. Josée Verner: And I am replying to your question, Mr. Godin.

There was a review of the facts. At this point, based on the information I've obtained, he was not searched.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I will ask you my question a third time.

Hon. Josée Verner: I heard your question, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Could you respond to my question, please.

I'm not asking you whether he was searched. Was he, in actual fact asked to remove his coat in order to go through security?

Hon. Josée Verner: I will say the following, sir. First off, there was no body search.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I understood that, because you're repeating it for the third time.

Hon. Josée Verner: I believe it's important.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I understood that.

Hon. Josée Verner: Allow me to respond, sir.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, but you're not answering my question, Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: If you gave me a chance to speak, I would answer with pleasure.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right, thank you.

Hon. Josée Verner: Based on the information I have at this point, there was no body search. If you would like to get a response as to whether he was asked to remove his coat, we will ask the question and provide you with the answer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I've asked the question. I'd like you to...

Hon. Josée Verner: The question...

Mr. Yvon Godin: ...provide the committee with the answer, please.

Hon. Josée Verner: I would like to insist upon the fact that there was no body search, because people have insisted on saying that there was one.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I understand, but I want to know whether he was asked to remove his coat.

• (0950)

Hon. Josée Verner: We will get you that answer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have visited many countries as a parliamentarian, and I was never asked to remove my coat, etc. At any rate, I was never asked to do so in those countries that I visited.

Hon. Josée Verner: I understand what you're saying, sir.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'd like to talk about your responsibilities as Minister for La Francophonie and Official Languages. Mr. Rioux, the President of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, asked the previous government several times to increase the \$18 million budget because, since 1992, there has been such a decrease in the amount of funding granted to francophone communities that they are being adversely affected. I'm referring to the Canada Community Agreements. Take, for example, the Acadian communities of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, as well as those communities in Newfoundland, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, throughout the country, even in British Columbia, where there are now a significant number of francophones. There's even an Acadian association in Vancouver. It would be interesting to see this throughout the country.

An additional \$18 million was requested. According to what I have understood, an extra two million dollars was provided, with a study to follow. Could you tell us what stage that study is at and if the government intends on increasing the francophone community funding?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question. As I stated previously, I am currently travelling throughout the country. I thought, as the new Minister for La Francophonie and Official Languages, that it was important to consult and to travel in order to meet these communities and hear what they have to say. I met several times with the President of the FCFA, Mr. Rioux, as you know. We have had some excellent exchanges. My travels are not yet over, and I will be assessing the requests that communities are making to us. I am very aware that the previous government made cuts in these communities. It is certainly the intention of this government to collaborate with these communities and with our various partners in Canada.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The Société Radio-Canada, or CBC, is an extremely important public radio station in Canada.

It is your government's intention to provide CBC with guidelines that will ensure a greater presence in rural communities? I will give you an example. Usually, I hear our national news—and I've often said this before this committee—not from Radio-Canada, but Radio-Montréal. You can't even call it Radio-Québec, because no one talks about the Gaspésie or the North Shore. I used to call it Radio-Québec but I realized that in fact it was Radio-Montréal.

I think that if a cat were to be killed on Ste-Catherine Street, the Maritime news would be interrupted in order to mention this on RDI. The Maritime news on RDI was interrupted six times over a very short time period. In one case, a press release was reported, in which Mr. Parizeau was wishing Stephen Harper good luck as Prime Minister after his electoral victory. In another case, Stéphane Bergeron was congratulated for having won elections in Quebec. This is very frustrating and insulting.

Therefore, as the Minister for La Francophonie and Official Languages, what guidelines will you be giving to CBC?

Hon. Josée Verner: Listen...

The Chair: Minister, could you please make your answer brief.

Hon. Josée Verner: I will no doubt be discussing your comments and questions with my colleague, Ms. Oda, who is responsible for CBC.

The Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage, Ms. LaRocque, has just joined us. I don't know if she would like to follow up on my answer but I will certainly pass on your concerns.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will carry on. Ms. Boucher and Mr. Harvey will share the next five minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoulu, CPC): Minister, Stephen Harper merged the key roles of horizontal coordination and the specific mandate outlined in part VII of the Official Languages Act.

Could you tell us what advantages you think there are to this merger?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you, colleague.

Yes, the Prime Minister has given me the responsibility for both the horizontal coordination of federal institutions' activities related to official languages, and the specific responsibilities related to the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

This is mainly because it is the Prime Minister's wish to streamline his cabinet, to put all ministers on the same footing, and to focus on priorities. Furthermore, the dual role I am taking on will give greater consistency to government actions, because it will not only provide me with an overview and the opportunity to coordinate activities, but it will also provide me with the necessary tools, as I have said previously, to set the tone and to provide some political impetus thanks to the official languages support programs under Canadian Heritage.

Indeed, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight your new role, Madam. That was an excellent decision on our Prime Minister's part. Ms. Boucher, who is also the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, is the first Parliamentary Secretary for La Francophonie and Official Languages. I think that this was a very important move and one that is very promising for the future.

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): I met with the Ambassador for Togo last week. He told me that the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie had drafted the document on procedures to be followed when very important people such as Mr. Diouf come to Canada. The suggested procedure was to travel to Montreal because Montreal is a francophone city and because Montreal airport had been advised of the Sommet de la Francophonie in Saint-Boniface. So there were therefore services available.

Mr. Diouf decided to travel to Toronto. Did he explain why he made that decision?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you, colleague, for your question.

This is a very technical question. I'm not responsible for the itineraries that dignitaries use when they're coming to Canada. I'm sure we could find an answer to that question. As chair of the Conférence de l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie in Saint-Boniface, I can tell you that the Secretary General for la Francophonie was given a very warm welcome. He stated several times that he was satisfied not only with the outcome of the conference, but also with the welcome that he was given in Manitoba.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to point out that one of his very close collaborators, who was in Eastern Townships around ten days ago, Ms. Desouches, also stated that Mr. Diouf was pleased with his welcome, with the outcome of the conference, and that he wanted to move on. Out of respect for the Secretary General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, I think that we should respect his wishes.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Blaney.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Minister, it gives me great pleasure to have you here. You mentioned, like Ms. Adam, that linguistic duality is a pillar of our identity. I think that we sometimes forget that in Quebec. I've been to Saint-Boniface and to Acadia. One realizes that Canada is not made up of two distinct blocks but rather of intermingled linguistic communities.

Are you confident in the future of linguistic duality? We know that the French language is a reality in Canada, but if you look at the whole of the North American continent, you realize that there are significant linguistic pressures. I would like to hear you on that issue. Are you confident, or are you concerned about the future of linguistic duality in this country?

• (1000)

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

The most useful thing we could do for the linguistic communities would be to look forward to the future with confidence while being extremely vigilant and responsive to their needs, which vary from province to province. The province of New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province in Canada. The people of that province have specific needs, as do those in Saint-Boniface, where there are fewer francophones.

I am confident and conscious of the fact that our government's commitment to linguistic duality is what will help me fulfil my mandate in this area. I decided to begin a tour for good reason. I want to establish a dialogue. Although we live in a highly anglophone environment due to our American neighbours, I am very enthusiastic and very impressed by the energy and vitality of the various communities I met with not only now as minister, but also when I was a member of the shadow cabinet.

When I went to Vancouver last year, and my colleague was there as well, for the FCFA's annual general meeting, I met with the community in British Columbia.

I'm confident that by cooperating and staying open, we will be able to advance the cause of linguistic duality.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now be starting a second round with Mr. Simard.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your attendance here, Minister.

I'd like to make a comment with respect to Mr. Diouf. Because the conference was held in my riding, Saint-Boniface, I was very proud of my community and of the way in which he was received. I had a private meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal. He was very disappointed with the government's welcome. All he was asking for was an apology from Prime Minister Harper.

We do not understand why Mr. Harper won't do that. It's incomprehensible. We should demand an apology, and I imagine we will be working together to that end.

Minister, you indicated in your presentation that you intend to passionately defend bilingualism. I have no doubt you are being sincere in saying that, and I believe you'll do that. However, your actions demonstrate the opposite.

In the throne speech, which would be the document setting out the government's priorities, the official languages are only mentioned in the Governor General's preamble. The issue has practically been forgotten and no mention of it is made in the budget.

You mentioned the Franco-Manitoban community's energy. However, there have been cuts to early childhood programs. We believe there was some momentum building there, but people are disappointed to note that there will be cuts.

It's all very well to say that you are going to support communities, but your actions demonstrate the opposite.

Can you comment on that?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

With respect to Mr. Diouf, we have said everything there is to say about that, in keeping with his wishes. I'd like to remind you that Mr. Diouf publicly stated that he was satisfied with the welcome he had received from the Government of Canada.

You're talking about cutbacks in the communities. When I went to Manitoba, I signed an enhanced agreement with Mr. Selinger, the Manitoban minister. There were no cuts to early childhood services in Manitoba. Moreover, your previous government's plan contained very little for communities.

With respect to concerns about early childhood within communities, I'd like to add that pursuant to some agreements, amounts have been allocated to community school centres which offer early childhood services.

• (1005)

Hon. Raymond Simard: Minister, these agreements were negotiated by the previous government. In March of next year, all early childhood programs will be cut. The Prime Minister has said so.

You say that the previous government made budget cuts. However, it was our government that established the Action Plan for Official Languages. We allocated \$751 million over five years to minority communities. These are not cuts, but a significant commitment to the communities.

I would like to come back to Mr. Godin's question on agreements between Canada and the communities. Mr. Lussier can confirm that there were talks and negotiations on the way to improve the agreements. There has already been significant consultation and cooperation with the communities. We have already established that the agreements must be improved. So to travel across the country again... Communities are extremely tired of being consulted. They want action.

Do you recognize that needs have already been identified and that the agreements must be improved?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question, Mr. Simard.

Since my tour began, I have lot really had the impression that communities were tired of being consulted. I have been welcomed very warmly wherever I have gone. I believe I will be welcomed just as warmly by the other communities I plan to visit in the coming weeks and months.

You are correct in saying that funding had been approved within the framework of the Action Plan for Official Languages. However, I will remind you that there were major cuts, as mentioned last fall at an event I had the pleasure of attending in Ottawa with the communities.

There were major cuts as well in the 1990s, it must be said, and the plan did inject amounts in areas that were lagging behind.

The Chair: I will have to stop you, because this discussion is at the end.

The second question in this round will be from Mr. Steven Blaney.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Minister, I would like to assure you that promoting linguistic duality is important to all of us, and the committee has been doing excellent work in that area. It is a very pleasant committee to be on. If we continue as we are, we will become a model committee that will demonstrate how we can move things forward when we work together and set partisanship aside.

Hon. Josée Verner: Let us hope that you will be heard, Mr. Blaney.

Mr. Steven Blaney: We met with representatives of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages who outlined the problems at Air Canada and talked about the previous government's bill, which does not seem to be achieving its end in insuring that services provided by Air Canada and all its subsidiaries are...

Ms. Vivian Barbot: We can't always talk about the previous government.

Mr. Steven Blaney: What I am trying to say is that we need to look forward. Canada is an important symbol of linguistic duality. There are changes that need to be made, and I would like to know what your position is on this.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question. In passing, I would respond to the comment made by the member of the Bloc, who said that we keep hearing about the government. But that is the prerogative of a party that could take power.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: I mentioned the previous government.

The Chair: Ms. Barbot...

Hon. Josée Verner: My colleague Lawrence Cannon, the Minister of Transport, will be testifying before the committee soon, and will be able to provide more detailed answers to your questions on this issue.

Mr. Steven Blaney: It is important that we have a bill that encompasses all the different corporate entities of Air Canada. Air Canada has been fragmented and its components all have different names. Nonetheless, I believe the spirit of the legislation is to ensure that all of Air Canada's components are covered.

• (1010)

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question. As you know, I will be working very closely with my colleague on this issue.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Minister, I would like to ask you a question about the Action Plan for Official Languages, and its \$750 million budget. Could you please tell us about current expenditures, as well as achievements that have been made and challenges that we face.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

Thus far, a significant number of intergovernmental accords, the majority of which are multi-year agreements, have been further developed and improved. I could cite, by way of example, the accords that the government has with New Brunswick and Manitoba.

I also appreciate that linguistic communities are still waiting to see whether their expectations concerning the plan will be fulfilled. I am still in the process of holding consultations with communities, but a decision will be made in the near future.

The Chair: Over to you, Ms. Brunelle.

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Good morning, Minister.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I have two questions. Firstly, you told us that you have a full report as to what happened when Mr. Diouf arrived in Canada. Could you please table that report with the committee?

Minister, you are a Quebecker. You know that the presence of French in Quebec serves as a foundation and a support for all French-speaking communities across Canada. I am utterly convinced that the more French is used as the normal workplace language, the more strength it will gain across the nation.

Secondly, the official languages committee is committed to increasing the use of French from coast to coast. We are allies on this issue.

I would like to ask you a question concerning your presentation. You said that, since your government came to power, it had worked to reach an agreement with Quebec on the services provided to the province's English-language community. Do the provisions under this agreement differ from those that currently exist?

Later on in your presentation, you again said that your government was going to sign a collaborative agreement with English-language communities. Were you referring to the same agreement on all three occasions? What exactly does this agreement entail? Will additional funding be given to Quebec's English-speaking community?

I would like to have an explanation, please.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question, Ms. Brunelle. You made several assertions in your preamble. Firstly, I never professed to have in my possession a report on the events surrounding Mr. Diouf's arrival in Canada. I never said that, Ms. Brunelle.

Secondly, you spoke of how important it is to support French-language communities outside Quebec. I would say to you that if that were indeed your conviction, you should have supported Bill S-3, which provided support to linguistic communities outside of Quebec. Your party was the only one to vote against it.

I would point out that your colleague and fellow Quebecker, Mr. André Boisclair, recently said that there is no francophonie outside of Quebec. I think that your party should reconsider its position on linguistic communities outside of Quebec.

Thirdly, the agreement to which you refer is an agreement with Quebec's minority English-language community. If I am not mistaken, it is the first time that an agreement has been signed with this community. I would ask our expert to provide more information on the agreement.

•(1015)

Mr. Hubert Lussier: You are right, Minister. It is indeed the first time that what we call a collaborative agreement has been signed with this particular community. By means of this collaborative agreement, the budget for Quebec's English-speaking community has been increased by 11 per cent.

In addition, you made reference to a future agreement that will be signed with the Quebec government for the provision of services in English. That agreement will also constitute a first, as no such agreements have been signed for several years.

Ms. Paule Brunelle: Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have one more minute.

Ms. Paule Brunelle: I had the privilege of being in the House when Bill S-3 was adopted; as you were not, certain elements must have escaped you.

To our minds, it is problematic to create a situation of enforceable equality between French and English in Quebec. The Bloc Québécois asked that Quebec be granted an exemption on this matter; our request was refused. We therefore had no choice but to vote against Bill S-3. Our decision was in no way related to our commitment to the French language or to our appreciation of how important this matter is for the various linguistic communities.

Thank you.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, I assume that you will grant me a few seconds to answer.

The Chair: You have approximately 28 seconds.

Hon. Josée Verner: You are right, I had not yet been elected at that time. However, together with my colleague who is now the chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I was our party's critic on the bill.

We tabled an amendment aiming to protect Quebec's jurisdiction on linguistic matters, but the Bloc Québécois voted against it. I would remind you that we are talking about federal institutions offering services in both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move on to a second question for Mr. Godin.

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

I have got it now! It took me a while, but your excellent explanation made everything clear, Minister. When our guest arrived in Canada, we gave him such a warm welcome that he had to take off his coat. He was too hot!

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): It was a warm day.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Minister, a lot has been said about the previous government. However, that does not change the fact that whenever we speak about language or the need to provide training in the regions so that services can be provided in both official languages, the former official opposition, now the government, asks, "How much is that going to cost us?". It is almost as if it were a pre-recorded message.

Are you currently focusing on how much it will cost to promote and ensure the respect of our country's two official languages?

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you, Mr. Godin. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say that is not what we are doing. As you know, we supported Bill S-3. Our commitment to Canada's linguistic communities is unfaltering, and we fully intend to see that all communities get the services to which they are entitled.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to officially congratulate Ms. Sylvie Boucher on her appointment as parliamentary secretary. I do have to say, however, that it took quite some time for the appointment to be made. I think that is why Canadians feel that official languages and matters relating to the francophonie are not a priority for the government.

Secondly, one of my colleagues asked you a question on the appointment of the Commissioner of Official Languages. We would like to know whether the commissioner will take up his or her position before the end of summer. I understand that you have to familiarize yourself with your portfolio. You have not yet dealt with the matter. However, this is an extremely important issue for us. We cannot simply ignore it. Communities regularly file complaints with the commissioner. It would be unthinkable for us not to have a commissioner for the months of August and September. The Commissioner of Official Languages is an officer of Parliament with an extremely important mandate.

Ms. Adam deserves to be congratulated for the work that she has done during her term as commissioner. She worked to promote both official languages, not just one. You would not want to give the press the opportunity to say that the Conservative government has no respect for official languages because it was too late in dealing with the commissioner's appointment.

Lastly, we were told last week by Service Canada officials that, from now on, no job offers would be posted on their web page without first having been revised by a translator. And when I say a translator, I am talking about a person and not translation software. Do you support Service Canada's position?

• (1020)

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

My first comment is on the budget. Our government has set out five priorities. However, in no way whatsoever do these priorities preclude us from pursuing the other aspects of our programs and commitments. In other words, nothing has been stopped, nor diminished in importance because of our five priorities.

There's no need to be concerned over the communities, since the budgets have been maintained, and most recently, I announced several multi-year agreements with the provinces.

I also want to reply to your comment on the Commissioner of Official Languages. The commissioner meets the needs of different communities.

As regards Service Canada, I will be discussing that issue with my colleague. I invite you to address your concerns on official languages to my colleagues.

I believe Mr. Lussier may wish to complete my answer.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: Not on that point, no.

The Chair: Thank you. That ends the second round of questions.

We have time for a third round of five-minute questions.

Go ahead, Ms. Folco.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Verner, for coming here.

Before asking my question, I wish to clarify a few things. Since I am the third Liberal to speak, I have the opportunity to come back to certain comments some of my colleagues did not have time to make.

Earlier, my colleague, Mr. Raymond Simard, talked about budget cutbacks. You pointed out that it was the Liberal government that had made those cutbacks. I simply want to point out, Minister Verner, that the Liberal government was forced to make those cutbacks because we were running a \$42.5 billion deficit—

Hon. Raymond Simard: Per year.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: ... a yearly deficit that was left by the government that was in power before 1993.

I believe that it is high time to stop saying to people that it was the previous government that was responsible for this or that. This government came to power four months ago, and we are still waiting for it to make decisions and give new directions. As the saying goes, it's about time the government got down to business.

As for Mr. Diouf, I believe that his beautiful letter speaks very highly of him. The letter that you read before us at this committee is entirely in keeping with African etiquette, which is the least that can be said in Mr. Diouf's case. He was very honourable, whereas our government was not.

Your 18-page presentation in French was a huge disappointment for me, Madam Minister. You talked about your responsibilities, which we are all aware of, as Minister responsible for the Francophonie and Official Languages. What we are expecting of you, Ms. Verner, is that you make us aware of how you intend to guide your department, and of your ideas, in your capacity as Minister Responsible for Official Languages, appointed as such by the Prime Minister.

Unless I do not understand the French language, I noticed that after four months of being in power, nothing is new aside from what was established by the previous government. I do not want to talk about politics here, that is of no interest to me. What is of interest, however, is knowing whether or not you want to change things. It is up to you to tell us so. I, for one, haven't heard anything of the kind.

My following question is on the Action Plan for Official Languages. The Commissioner, Ms. Adam, took note of delays in allocating the funds that were earmarked.

Of the \$381 million set aside, how much has been transferred to the provinces, and which ones have received these transfers? When will the sums be made available, particularly to the province of Quebec? How much will be allocated to educational programs for the anglophone minority in Quebec?

Minister Verner, I am looking for a clear, specific and straightforward answer.

Thank you.

• (1025)

The Chair: That is a shame, Minister Verner, because Ms. Folco took up more than four minutes to ask her question.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: The minister has one minute to reply if you do not interrupt her.

The Chair: Please keep your answer brief.

Hon. Josée Verner: The honourable member made a certain number of statements. She said that budget cutbacks were made because the Conservative government had left behind a deficit. That is unfortunate, because given the Liberal government's priorities, linguistic communities have had to bear the brunt of those cutbacks.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: The entire Canadian population has had to bear the brunt.

The Chair: Ms. Folco...

Hon. Josée Verner: I believe that given the fact that those communities were living in a minority situation, they should have been given particular attention. However, during the last 13 years, the government set up extremely expensive programs that became wasteful and made the headlines many times.

As to Mr. Diouf, he publicly said several times that he was satisfied with the interventions made by myself and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. MacKay, in addition to the conversation he had with the Prime Minister. In my opinion, the matter is closed. Given his stature, we must be respectful of his wishes, and consider the events a thing of the past.

As for our major orientations, I will not elaborate on them until we finish consulting communities. Regardless of what the honourable member for St. Boniface says, communities do not appear to be at all fed up with consultations. I believe that they are extremely enthusiastic with the idea of being heard through this new approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Verner.

Ms. Barbot, you have the floor for a second question.

• (1030)

Ms. Vivian Barbot: Perhaps I have time to read to the minister article 29 of the Vienna Convention, which Canada signed. The article clearly stipulates that:

The person of a diplomatic agent shall be inviolable. He shall not be liable to any form of arrest or detention. The receiving State shall treat him with due respect and shall take all appropriate steps to prevent any attack on his person, freedom or dignity.

In 1988, Canada designated the Francophonie as an organization whose diplomatic representatives would enjoy the privileges provided for in the Vienna Convention.

Madam Minister, I simply want to say that we ask our question on behalf of all Canadians. Mr. Diouf is free to say what he thinks, that is only one aspect of the issue. However, we would like to know what the government thinks on this matter.

I would like to know if you're satisfied with what happened and if you believe that it was appropriate.

Another point I would like to raise is the quality of the French that we speak on the international stage. Would it be possible to make sure that when a spokesperson speaks on behalf of the government in international fora, that that person fully understands French and is able to read French text in a way that is intelligible.

Hon. Josée Verner: In response to your first question, I will remind you that we expressed our regrets, both in private and in public. I spoke, in my capacity as Minister responsible for the Francophonie, as did my colleague, the Minister of Foreign Affairs,

as well as the Prime Minister. We all expressed our regrets over the unfortunate incident that took place in Toronto. In no way whatsoever is this practice considered appropriate. What I am telling you, is that the Secretary General of the Francophonie has said that he is satisfied with the outcome of his visit to Canada.

As for your second question, I don't know if you were referring to something specific. What are you alluding to exactly?

Ms. Vivian Barbot: It is directly related to the speech read by Mr. MacKay in Winnipeg, which was completely unintelligible. I would have preferred not to have to mention his name, because I respect the minister and I appreciate the efforts he has made to speak French correctly. However, I think that in an international forum, specifically the Francophonie, it may have been preferable to find someone who could read French texts to the assembly in a way in which people could understand them. Clearly that was not the case at this meeting.

Hon. Josée Verner: Madam, on behalf of my colleague, I feel extremely embarrassed by your comments. You attended various events with Mr. Diouf, namely a cocktail during which my colleague the Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke to Mr. Diouf and to the people who were there. I can only reiterate the efforts made by my colleagues to learn French and I believe one must be a spoilsport to judge the quality of the results when someone is making an effort to speak our language.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: Do I still have a bit of time?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Vivian Barbot: I did not mean to judge. I expressly said that I was very sorry to have to make that comment. I'm simply saying that when an official document is to be read in French in the name of Canada, I would expect it to be read just as well as an English text would be read, in other words very well. That's all I have to say.

Hon. Josée Verner: Madam, I think your comments speak for themselves, and to be frank, I am speechless.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaney has a very important question to ask.

Mr. Steven Blaney: In fact, it is more of an invitation. I thought you were referring to the party we are organizing today for our friends from other parts of Canada.

We had a meeting this morning. I want to thank you for meeting with us and agreeing to be in the spotlight, if I may say so, Minister. There are members from various parties here, which is normal. Our institution is political in nature and members defend the interests of their respective parties.

Beyond that, the committee seeks to find ways to promote linguistic duality. In your speech, you referred to two main thrusts. It may be slightly administrative terminology, but I think it is referred to as horizontal coordination.

If I'm not mistaken, you would like the French language to be welcomed throughout government, in all departments and all agencies. Moreover, we have to promote duality in communities. In fact, we have representatives from these communities within our committee. I think that that is also an asset.

You will also note that much of the work done in this committee is done in French. Even if we seek to promote linguistic duality, we have to face reality and focus specifically on the French language in a minority setting, as well as on the English language in a minority setting, as is the case in Quebec. Three per cent of the people in my riding are anglophones.

You are listening to communities, and I think that's important. You want to express a vision stemming from a solid base. It is important to take the time to do that. Also, we sense that you are committed and that your government is committed to establishing a real partnership with linguistic communities. I think that above and beyond everything else, that is what transpires from your comments. It's a step in the right direction.

I referred to one issue. The previous bill did not seem to address the need for Air Canada to offer services worthy of a former crown corporation.

I think the committee will be vigilant in that regard and that we will be issuing recommendations to the government.

I thank you for your visit. If you would like to come back—

• (1035)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Are you good, very good or...?

Mr. Steven Blaney: Do you think it may be useful for you to reappear before our committee once you have other things to discuss, be it projects or initiatives you would like to undertake?

It's an open invitation and I would like you to tell us how you feel about that.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you, dear colleague, for your comments. Obviously, I intend to exercise my duties in the most transparent way possible. If there's any further information I can share with the committee, I would be pleased to do so.

The Chair: I thank my colleagues. Mr. Godin will have the honour of asking the last question.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I wouldn't say that if I were you, given what I'm about to ask.

We can't forget the past. First, there is the precedent and then there is the future. We can look at what happened and what is happening today. Some say that the Liberal government inherited a \$42-billion deficit. In actual fact, workers now have to shoulder a \$49-billion deficit. That's more than 42. Because of changes to employment insurance, \$49 billion was taken from workers, which has led to a great deal of poverty. Moreover, although there was a \$42-billion deficit, that did not justify additional cutbacks for communities. I feel they went too far.

Each year, the Minister of Canadian Heritage reports to Parliament on issues relating to the official languages mission. Total expenditures for the Official Languages Support Programs Branch were \$264,550,000 for 2003-2004 compared to \$302,200 in 2001-2002.

There has been no report since then. Mention is made of the official languages mission, but we know that the report was from Canadian Heritage. There is now a new department for la Francophonie and Official Languages.

Who will report to Parliament and tell us where things stand? There was a \$100-million cut. What is the status of things now?

• (1040)

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question, sir.

You mentioned a report produced by the previous government. I will be presenting the next report.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You will? All right.

Hon. Josée Verner: I will be presenting the next report.

I don't know if Ms. LaRocque, Deputy Minister for Heritage, has anything else to add.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque (Deputy Minister, Department of Canadian Heritage): The situation has not really changed, the minister responsible for official languages tables the report to the House of Commons.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When will that be tabled?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: It's a matter of weeks. We are referring here to the report for committee members for the fiscal year 2004-2005.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right.

With respect to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, there was an agreement pursuant to which Quebec took over some responsibility for part of immigration to the province. They may go to other countries. Take for instance the fact that Quebec has sent representatives to France, and other countries as well. When it comes to communities sur as ours, outside of Quebec, such as New Brunswick, I'm reminded of the fact that the former leader of the opposition at the time said that Quebec could emulate the Belgium model and take care of francophones while the rest of Canada would focus on anglophones. It was the subject of much controversy. I was very worried by that.

What is the government doing to ensure that we are represented in the field of immigration so that people may immigrate to New Brunswick, for instance?

I'm sure that the President of the SAANB has brought this to your attention or to that of the department. Francophone communities outside of Quebec are worried. They are concerned about the lack of francophone immigration to the regions. They do not want strictly anglophone immigration.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you for your question.

Indeed, Quebec does have some authority in these matters. If I'm not mistaken, that was set out under the Couture-Cullen Agreement. Citizenship and Immigration Canada is responsible for these matters, as noted by the expert I am accompanied by today. We discussed the issue with communities. We understand that there is a real interest there.

When I went to St. Boniface I had an opportunity to meet with concerned citizens about that, at the University College.

I intend to work closely with my colleague the Minister for Citizenship and Immigration Canada on this file. We will certainly make sure that communities get an opportunity to be heard. We understand that there would be additional advantages for them as well.

Mr. Yvon Godin: One of the problems we have is that we get the impression that people from other countries have no idea of the existence of francophones in Canada outside of Quebec. There was a French student who wanted to come to Moncton. I had to sign a letter in my office and send it to the Canadian Embassy in France in order to confirm the existence of the University of Moncton. Otherwise, he would not have been allowed to come to Moncton, because it is not designated as an institution in Quebec.

Hon. Josée Verner: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all members of the committee. I'd like to thank our witnesses, specifically the Minister for International Cooperation, the Francophonie and Official Languages, Ms. Verner.

We will adjourn this part of the meeting, and resume in camera in two minutes.

(Proceedings continue in camera)

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