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Chair

Mr. Guy Lauzon

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• (0915)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC)): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome our witnesses who are here in person and on the telephone, as well as all committee members. We have technical difficulties this morning, but I think they will be cleared up.

We will proceed as follows: our witnesses will have five minutes each to give their presentations, and committee members will then ask their questions.

We will begin with Mr. Potié. Mr. Potié represents the Association de la presse francophone.

Sir, you have approximately five minutes to give your presentation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Danielle Bélisle): We can tell our two or three other witnesses that we will hear from them afterwards. I am told that they can hear us.

A witness: Yes, we hear you.

The Chair: Thank you and welcome.

Mr. Francis Potié (Executive Director, Association de la presse francophone): I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk to you about the concerns of the Association de la presse francophone, as well as its views on the vitality of communities and the Action Plan for Official Languages.

The Association de la presse francophone is made up of weekly and by-monthly francophone newspapers in minority situations from across Canada, with the exception of Quebec, obviously.

Our mandate is to promote the francophone print media across Canada, defend its interests and ensure its development.

I will begin by talking to you about our position on the vitality of communities. Francophone newspapers are an indicator of that vitality. When there is not a single francophone newspaper in a given region, that is not a sign of community vitality, but when an area has a number of francophone newspapers, that is a good indicator of the community's francophone and economic vitality.

Newspapers are also a source of vitality for those communities. Communities without newspapers have a much harder time ensuring social cohesion and carrying out development projects, whether they be social, economic, political or educational, if there are no other adequate means of communication. We also benefit. Evidently, a community whose population is decreasing or whose economy is in

trouble will have difficulty supporting a newspaper or radio station. The media need community support.

With regard to the action plan, I can tell you that the addition of measures in the areas of health, justice, immigration and literacy has contributed to the vitality of those communities and, by extension, our newspapers. But I cannot quantify the economic spinoffs or the articles that these measures have produced. It is very difficult to assess the exact impact of the action plan on our newspapers.

We have noted, however, that there is almost no mention of communications in the action plan. The entire document contains only one or two very brief references in this respect. We obviously find that to be a major shortcoming, given the role communications play in today's world.

We are talking about communities that have access to a newspaper or radio broadcasting. We live in a world with an enormous number of media outlets. We have to compete and fight assimilation. The fact that people can watch 70, 100 or even 200 English-language television stations, and have access to over 100 English magazines at the convenience store amounts to major competition for us. Among other things, it is very difficult to provide our young people with content that will interest them and stimulate them enough to continue living in French. We believe that the action plan comes up short in this respect.

Another shortcoming of the plan is that people were not consulted prior to its drafting. I attend meetings where organizations assess the plan. It is very difficult for me to know what has been done with regard to the plan.

• (0920)

The francophone public has no idea of the development efforts made in their community. There might have been some concern about not properly spending funds, but no communications were established with the public. The money would not necessarily have been wasted. I am talking about ordinary people who are not part of an organization that discusses these matters on a daily basis.

Our organization is part of the family of francophone organizations. Like the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, we believe that the allocation of funds to national and provincial francophone organizations does not take into account inflation and the increasing number of issues we have to work on.

To respond in an effective and realistic fashion, we need more substantial funding, not on a project basis, but to support the basic infrastructure in the various community sectors. The number of sectors has increased, but we still only have two or three people working on all the standing committees, etc. At a certain point, we will no longer be able to keep up.

I will talk about specific measures that we could take to assist the francophone press and the overall communications sector. We are currently concerned about the fact that Canada Post is withdrawing its financial contribution from the Publications Assistance Program. That amounts to a 25 % loss in mail delivery assistance. We have yet to determine the consequences of that withdrawal for our newspapers, but that is something we are concerned about.

There is also a series of publishing support programs in the Canada Magazine Fund. For all intents and purposes, there is little or no French-language magazine industry outside Quebec. In order to respect the Official Languages Act and the amendment that was adopted making Part VII enforceable, the fund needs to be adapted to the reality of our communities and the print media we can develop has to be supported, rather than requiring that unrealistic criteria be met, such as publishing a given number of copies of a glossy magazine.

Staff training and retention and the management of advertising are two other concerns we have. The level of federal government advertising is not what it was prior to the advertising moratorium. Things have improved, but the level is still far below what it used to be.

Thank you for your attention.

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

We will now move on to our second witness, Pierre Bélanger, Chairman of the Board of the Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins.

Mr. Bélanger, you have approximately five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Bélanger (Chairman of the Board, Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins): Good morning. I hope the fact that we are talking over the phone and not able to see one another is not a bad sign for the future of Franco-Ontarian community organizations. I hope that I am not speaking to you from beyond the grave, because we learned yesterday that the Superior North regional ACFO, in Sault Ste. Marie, closed its doors owing to a lack of funding.

Community organizations are in crisis, that is obvious. I will talk especially about the ACFOs and the Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins, given that we have changed our name and our make up to better reflect our community and better ensure our survival and effectiveness.

There is no doubt that we are in crisis, and that crisis is essentially of a financial nature. Mr. Potié alluded earlier to the lack of funding for francophone and Acadian organizations. That is a fact.

The other problem is that many more organizations are receiving funding. Grassroots organizations, those that work in the communities, saw their funding decrease in the 1990s. Evidently, their funding did not keep up with inflation, so much so that the Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins, which serves 19,000 francophones

in Timmins alone, cannot even hire full-time staff: neither a secretary, nor a director general, nor a development officer. We have part-time staff and volunteers. This is volunteer work that I have already termed, on Radio-Canada, extreme volunteer work, because people have to work in the evenings and on weekends; it is extremely difficult.

I would like to briefly remind you of the importance of local organizations, grassroots organizations like the Alliance de la francophonie, the Kirkland Lake ACFO, Cochrane-Iroquois Falls ACFO, Temiskaming Shores ACFO, etc. It is thanks to the work done by such organizations that we were able to obtain French-language high schools in the 1960s, community health centres, francophone day care centres, literacy centres and, in some communities, cultural centres.

In Timmins, we fought to have a newspaper and now we have francophone newspapers. We also fought to have French-language colleges. I do not have to tell you how important the ACFOs and other such organizations are in developing communities and ensuring the vitality of francophone minority communities in Ontario.

The crisis is due to a lack of means, especially financial, which provide us with the administrative support to carry out our work. You know that we experienced enormous budget cutbacks in the 1990s. For example, our budget in 1985 was \$50,000; it bottomed out at \$31,000 in 1997-98.

In 2006, we received a mind-boggling \$37,600, to be exact. Obviously, that does not take into account inflation, because if we used the Bank of Canada's inflation calculator, \$50,000, in 1985, would come out to \$86,000, in 2006.

Such a level of funding would allow us to have at least two full-time staff members. We would have the means to do our work and develop priority issues. For example, Timmins needs a community health centre. We have been working on this for years, but we always come up against new governments and changing political priorities. Timmins, with its 19,000 francophones, does not have a community health centre. I do not have to explain to you the problems we have recruiting francophone doctors. That is a priority issue.

The Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins developed the francophone component of the city's strategic plan. We are fighting to obtain a new campus at the Collège Boréal, which would be a trade school serving the entire region from Hearst to New Liskeard, where Timmins is the natural socio-economic development centre. That is another of our priorities.

● (0925)

Realistically, we would need \$86,000. Last week we asked the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage for realistic funding of approximately \$60,000, with a new funding formula.

If the money does not go directly to grassroots organizations fighting to provide quality services to the francophone population, fighting against the assimilation of our communities and working together with other organizations, of which the Association de la presse francophone is obviously a very important agency, we will not have the means to do our work and we will simply have to close our doors. Currently, we are at the end of our rope.

For over 10 years now we have been working in close collaboration with the community to get the money to compensate for this lack of funding. We are working extremely hard to develop projects, and to be able to pay for more or less full-time staff to run our organizations.

We are at the end of our rope now. The communities are no longer what they were. There have been significant economic changes. Quite often, francophone entrepreneurs have sold their companies to American anglophone multinational companies. These people do not have the same sensitivity with regard to the community. It is difficult to get them to help us. So this is an avenue that we have explored but that has not provided the hoped-for results. This cannot compensate for the lack of federal funding.

Obviously, we are in the midst of a crisis. The Cochrane-Iroquois Falls ACFO is experiencing a financial crisis because it received a huge envelope of \$18,000 last year. The Kirkland Lake ACFO and the Rive-Nord ACFO, in Elliot Lake, are experiencing the same problem. There has been a major crisis for 10 years now, but things have come to a head. If we are unable to obtain better funding to allow us to operate, we will have to close our doors.

The challenges are enormous because the forestry industry is experiencing a very arduous crisis that is affecting our communities. There is a crisis with regard to access to American markets, and restructuring is underway. This is not helping us in our attempt to obtain funding so we can do our job. We could play an important role in helping to resolve this crisis, but we lack the means to do our job adequately because we do not have full-time staff.

● (0930)

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, do you have any final comments?

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: O.K.

In conclusion it is essential that we find a solution to increase the provincial envelope so that local organizations, grassroots organizations which have their ear to the ground, are well integrated, know the needs and work with the bone and sinew of their communities, can have stable funding that will allow them to operate appropriately and with structure.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Please stay on the line.

We will give five minutes to Mr. Grenier, from *Le Voyageur* newspaper in Sudbury, for his presentation.

Mr. Grenier.

Mr. Réjean Grenier (Publisher and Editorial Writer, Journal Le Voyageur): Yes.

The Chair: You may begin.

Mr. Réjean Grenier (Publisher and Editorial Writer, Journal Le Voyageur): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you.

I will speak quickly and honestly. I am known, in Sudbury, for being a straight shooter and—

The Chair: Mr. Grenier, if you could wait one moment; we cannot hear you very well. We are going to adjust the volume.

Let's try again.

Mr. Réjean Grenier: I changed phones, perhaps that will help a little.

The Chair: That is much better.

Mr. Réjean Grenier: I am known here for not mincing words. Right off the bat, I want to tell you something fundamental: I firmly believe that Canadian unity can only be achieved by having dynamic and healthy French-Canadian communities. You can adopt all the motions you want on the Quebec nation, but as long as communities outside Quebec are dying, Quebecers, who are not stupid, will know that Canada is not their country. So, it's clear that communities outside Quebec are the key to national unity.

This morning, I want to talk to you about the vitality of francophone communities, in terms of the action plan commonly known as the Dion plan. I also want to talk about communications.

I have worked in media for over 30 years, and I faithfully cover the entire issue of francophone communities. I know the leaders and the communities, I have followed the epic battle for schools and all sorts of things.

I want to say that the federal government made itself responsible for this community. That responsibility is recognized in the Constitution, in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Official Languages Act. Obviously, the federal government has not taken this seriously. I also think it's clear that the Dion plan has not had any impact on communities.

One of the most devastating things that we have noted, particularly in the past seven or eight years, since the first HRDC scandal, the former Service Canada, and since the sponsorship scandal, is that the government machinery has become paranoid, which means government subsidies are now almost inaccessible and as ineffective. Projects are being subsidized, but no one is being paid to administer them properly. People are being given projects, they are told that they have so much money to implement a project but they're not paid for rent or phone services. Finally, not much is being paid and these people have to obtain results. We are then asked to analyze the results of all kinds of things.

This is much more difficult to implement. Programs specifically for minority organizations are often organized for the majority. I'd like to give an example. There are programs for young interns, with all kinds of criteria, but these criteria are directed at the majority and are easy to meet. For example, in my community, I have to hire francophone graduates, but there are substantially fewer francophone graduates than anglophone graduates. So, right from the start, my choice is more limited.

Second, if I want to hire a graphic artist, the fact that there is no graphic artist course offered in French in Sudbury is not taken into consideration. However, according to the criteria, I cannot hire someone from outside the region; I must hire someone from Sudbury. This situation is not working for francophones outside Quebec. This works for the majority because courses in Sudbury are in English. They have the choice, but I don't. However, there would be an easy way to resolve such situations.

Recent decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada—I am thinking in particular of the Summerside ruling—give clear guidelines with regard to the treatment of official language minorities. Justice Bastarache explained at length in the decision that equal treatment does not mean the application of the same criteria. He even added that, often, in order to resolve an unfair situation, more had to be given or given differently in order to achieve equality. This seems clear to me but it doesn't seem clear to the people developing such programs within the government.

• (0935)

Public servants tend to generalize and to try to ensure that everything is equal for everyone. Yet, legislation and these decisions allow for different treatment. We must remember that official language minorities have a very long road to travel.

So, the Dion plan has had no impact on francophone communities in Canada, first because it was countered by this immobility within government, by this decision to treat everything equally, which penalizes francophone communities. Another flaw with the Dion plan—I think that Mr. Potié alluded to this earlier—is the communications sector but this is not being talked about. We are talking about health and education, justice, immigration, which are all provincial responsibilities, it should be noted, which means that money is being given to the provinces, that spend it the way they want.

In some cases, such as in Ontario, the money was used for education, for French programs within the school boards. So much the better. In other sectors, I have no idea what happened. Mr. Potié referred to that too. Nowhere does the Dion plan indicate for whom this plan was developed and what is being done with the money. Some \$750 million are being spent but people are not being told how that money will be spent. Yet, I don't think that anything needs to be hidden.

I'd also like to talk to you about communications and I would remind you that, in 2004, Mr. Potié from the Association de la presse francophone made a presentation on the slow but programmed death of a number of publications. For example, two years ago, I purchased the only business magazine published outside Quebec, *Le lien économique*. When I purchased this publication, I did my homework. Mr. D'Amours, if he is still here, will certainly understand that the BDC would not provide funding for the purchase without first being provided a business plan. The plan was based on figures I had obtained from the company I was purchasing. So the business plan highlighted various contributions from the federal government, which constituted a certain quantity of advertising. It wasn't huge, but it was something. Since I purchased the magazine in 2004, the federal government has purchased only 1 advertisement in 15 issues. I move a hair, and the magazine will probably close forever. This is the only such magazine outside Quebec.

The other problem concerns the Publications Assistance Program, which Mr. Potié talked about. As I own two publications, Canada Post's withdrawal of its 25% share in this program means a net loss of over \$40,000 for me. *Le voyageur*, and *Le lien économique* have never had profits of more than \$40,000. So we have one of two choices: we stop publication or we increase our prices.

Our community will absorb the price increases up to a certain point, but there comes a time when this no longer is an option. Yet, this is a publication that, within eight years, has increased the number of subscribers by 650%. So this means that there is interest. We started with 2005 households and we are now at 15,000 households. So the demand is there. The world wants it. We will be unable to keep it alive if programs such as the Publications Assistance Program are cut.

• (0940)

The Chair: Mr. Grenier, may I ask you to conclude your presentation?

Mr. Réjean Grenier: In conclusion, I want to say that, in 2002-2003, the Publications Assistance Program gave \$10 million to Rogers Communications; \$9 million to Transcontinental; and \$2.5 million to Quebecor. It gave much less than \$1 million to all francophone publications outside Quebec; we are talking here about 26 publications. This doesn't make sense to me.

I want to reiterate what the APF told you two and a half years ago: a number of publications outside Quebec are now dying a slow but programmed death. Over the past two years, things have only gotten worse. I wonder when things will change.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Grenier.

We are going to start with questions. I would ask to members to identify the witness to whom they are putting their question.

Mr. D'Amours.

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

I want to thank Mr. Potié and Mr. Bélanger for coming. Thank you, Mr. Grenier, for being with us by telephone.

• (0945)

The Clerk: I think that Mr. Lacroix is here too. He did not say anything, but he is there.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: So, thank you to all those who are joining us long distance.

My question is for two of the witnesses: Mr. Potié and Mr. Grenier.

Mr. Grenier, when we were in Sudbury, we had the opportunity to discuss the situation and the problem regarding the Publications Assistance Program since Canada Post decided to stop providing its share of funding.

You explained earlier the impact that this could have. I understand that you are fully abreast of the situation. Just because a company is making a profit does not mean that it automatically has money left over, because it has to repay the capital on its loans. Ultimately, the impact of the Canada Post decision on official languages communities could be enormous, as you said earlier.

That said, I would like you to tell us more about the risks that could occur. You said earlier that *Le Voyageur* now has 15,000 subscribers but in the short and intermediate term, meaning within the next few months to a year, what would be the real impact on your publication?

Mr. Potié, from the Association de la presse francophone or the APF, could you talk to us about what this could mean on a national scale for newspapers in official language minority communities. We are really talking about small newspapers publishing fewer than 50,000 or 35,000 issues a week.

The Chair: Mr. Grenier.

Mr. Réjean Grenier: Thank you.

The first thing I must say is that there will be a different impact on the magazine I publish, because our situation is extremely precarious and our commercial advertising base is much smaller because, as I told you, the federal government is no longer advertising with us. Furthermore, this magazine has a much smaller subscriber base—the business world outside Quebec—and cannot appeal to Microsoft, for example, which does not advertise in a magazine that distributes fewer than 100,000 issues. So, right from the start, this really threatens the future of the only business magazine, which, in passing, is printed on glazed paper and looks very nice. We hear a lot of positive comments about it.

As for the newspaper, we already announced that we would be increasing the subscription price. We have also increased our advertising prices. We hope that the community will be able to absorb this increase. In a year, I can give you a much better answer, but at present I am going to transfer the shortfall to my community; I have no other choice.

Second, of course, we are devising several other advertising projects through which we may be able to collect several thousand dollars in profits here and there on various projects that could make up at least in part for the loss of this \$40,000. As I told you, *Le Voyageur* has never had a \$40,000 profit. So it is clear that if we don't want to run a deficit and if we want to pay back our debts, as you say, we'll have to find other means.

However, I think it would be even simpler if the federal government were to compensate this 25% cut in its Publications Assistance Program.

The other possibility would be to tell Canada Post that, although we understand why it is making that action and does not want to give any more money to Rogers Communications, which has more money than the former does, it must still take into consideration the impact of this decision on francophone communities and respect Bill S-3 and the Official Languages Act—

The Chair: Mr. Grenier, I have to stop you here so that Mr. Potié can have a few minutes to respond.

Mr. Francis Potié: Fine. As far as the Publications Assistance Program is concerned, I would like to point out that it is a subsidy for the mailing costs of newspapers and magazines. Normally, the papers are sent to subscribers. In the case of several of our papers, it's the only solution in terms of distribution. For example, in Vancouver, we do not include our newspaper in the Publisac which goes out to everyone living in Vancouver. That would be a prohibitively expensive way for us to reach our readers. So we have no choice but to send our paper directly to our readers, namely to those who specifically asked to receive our publication.

Minority newspapers are more strongly affected by certain changes because they do not have any alternative solutions. It is

difficult for them, for instance, to adapt to a significant increase in postal rates or to find another method of distribution. Further, the papers which are sent to subscribers operate in areas where there already are other publications. In Eastern Ontario, for instance, several papers are distributed to every resident because of the population pool. However, in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, in the north and in the Atlantic provinces, papers are sent out by subscription. In these places, people are always on edge, because they are never sure that they will have enough resources for their paper to survive.

Le Gaboteur, in Newfoundland, and *L'Eau vive* in Saskatchewan, had to cease their operations several times and could only publish again with the support of the community, and, it must be said, with grants for francophone communities. However, there is very little leeway. Will another paper close down? It's hard to say. The fact remains that this situation does not make life easier for regional papers, which are already experiencing many problems.

I agree with what Mr. Grenier said. Canada Post's contribution has been reduced by \$15 million. But, in fact, there should be a \$15 million surplus due to the dividend Canada Post will realize for the government at the end of the year. Either way, there is no difference for the government.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Potié.

Ms. Barbot.

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

Thank you, gentlemen, for being here via teleconference. I would have liked to have you here in person, but this is the way it is. In certain situations technology enables us to communicate.

As far as the funding of communications is concerned, I have noted some things which, in my opinion, are absolutely horrible. It is almost impossible to believe that communication was not included in the plan which was developed, given that the government bears significant responsibility for the vitality of francophone communities outside Quebec.

Further, I would like to point out that there is federal intrusion in areas of provincial jurisdiction. The government has chosen to fund areas such as health and education, which fall under provincial jurisdiction. Further, the funding given to companies such as Rogers and Transco, amongst others, is much more significant than the funding given to local organizations. These organizations have lost all of their subsidies.

Mr. Bélanger, you talked about how important stable funding was. That's quite understandable: it applies to every organization which receives funding. You also clearly stated that funding was the main problem. However, I would like to know whether you manage to find competent people for the positions you have been forced to fill with volunteers.

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: There is no doubt that in our community there are competent people who want to work for francophone community organizations. The only reason we cannot hire them is because we cannot pay them. These people have the right to work full-time and to lead a normal life. In some cases, we benefit from their expertise when they work for us on a volunteer basis, but the fact remains that without adequate funding, it is almost impossible to benefit from their services on a full-time basis.

As Mr. Grenier said so well, we always have to create new projects. In these conditions, we might turn to people who are in training. In some cases, this involves very competent people, but the fact remains that without stable funding, we cannot pay these people on a regular basis. Consequently, we do not have the best choice. We cannot advance issues or be as effective as we would like to when we do not have any full-time staff. But people are the key to any organization's success.

• (0955)

Mr. Sylvain Lacroix (Executive Director, Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins): Mr. Chairman, I would like to add a few words. I have been the executive director of the Alliance de la francophonie de Timmins since 1995. Since 1998, I have worked on a part-time basis because the alliance could not afford to pay me full-time. During the day, I work for the school board, and in the evening, I sacrifice my time with my family because I believe in the cause and I am fighting for this association as best I can. Is it acceptable, in a society like Canada, to have organizations that defend the Franco-Ontarian nation struggle with so many problems that they have to count on people like myself, who work part-time, and like Mr. Bélanger, who works on a volunteer basis? I believe that we live in a cutting-edge, progressive society, and we must ensure that our francophone organizations have the will and the duty to flourish.

The Dion plan provided support for existing infrastructure, such as school boards, colleges and health care institutions, but it actually undermined working organizations. There was nothing in the plan to help people working on the ground trying to fix the problems in our francophone communities.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: I acknowledge your concerns and I can tell you right now that we will table a motion with the committee to that effect, because there are serious problems. I myself have worked extensively as a volunteer. Volunteering is all very well and good, but at a certain point, governments must live up to their basic responsibilities. I find what is happening to you unacceptable.

Mr. Bélanger, you said that Heritage Canada should provide you with basic funding in the order of \$60,000. As well, you talked about a funding study. I imagine that you are referring to a study on long-term funding for your organization.

Can you tell us a little more about this?

The Chair: You will have to give us a very brief answer, Mr. Bélanger.

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: I will make my answer as brief as possible. Core funding of \$60,000, you know... What we need is \$86,000 to keep up with inflation and have the same purchasing power we had in 1985. We wanted to be realistic, but when I heard what Mr. Grenier was saying earlier, I don't think that was realistic. I am convinced of the same thing as he is: namely that the federal

government has to give us proper resources. Proper resources would be \$86,000.

As you know, the agreements, the interdepartmental document and sections 41 and 42 require federal government departments to help us develop projects. We should not be required to know the workings of the public service like the back of our hand, we should not be required to be familiar with every program. We do not have the resources to do that. We should be able to work much more easily with departments such as Service Canada and others to set up projects in our communities.

With respect to the third item, we would like the funding formula to take into account the number of francophones served as well as the communities in which the associations must operate. In some communities, there are no newspapers, community radio stations or other media in French. Community development is a huge undertaking, and the people involved in it should have more funding. I certainly liked what Mr. Grenier suggested earlier. If equality is our objective, we are automatically at a disadvantage, because we do not have the infrastructure that exists in major centres to do community development work.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

I would now ask Mr. Godin to ask the next question.

• (1000)

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

I am pleased to have an opportunity to ask our guests a few questions and to make a few comments myself.

You say that francophone communities are slowly dying out, and that concerns me in the long term, because that is the direction in which we are heading. The reason the francophones outside Quebec have made progress is thanks to the work of their organizations. I'm thinking of organizations such as the Société des Acadiens et Acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick, the SAANB, the Société nationale de l'Acadie in New Brunswick, and ACFO in Ontario. These organizations worked with their communities. I cannot imagine a community moving forward and succeeding when its members get up in the morning, go to work and come home at the end of the day feeling they are isolated. I do not see how we could survive like that. Although Ms. Barbot says that we should not call ourselves a minority, that is the fact of the matter.

We need only look at the scandals that have happened here in Ottawa. The Auditor General said the programs themselves were not bad, but that they were poorly managed. So we should not be punishing everyone. We should not be punishing those who were helped by these programs by cancelling all of them; we should be managing them better. This opens the door to the government, which now says that there are some programs in place but that it cannot manage them. So it is abolishing them and using the money to pay down the debt. In 15 years, the net debt will be eliminated—whether it is net debt or whatever, I really don't care—and we are going to pay the price of this. There will be a terrible price to pay. It is like trying to pay off a mortgage in two years but deciding not to buy any groceries. That is what the government is doing.

Organizations are suffering from all the cuts in programs such as the Court Challenges Program and various literacy programs. The current government does not seem to believe that organizations of this type should exist. It is following the American model and is giving individuals some money and telling them to look after themselves.

I would like to hear your comments on this question. Should the government not be reviewing this entire matter? In its report, should the Standing Committee on Official Languages be questioning the decisions made by the government and telling it that it has taken the wrong tack by taking away from our communities the organizations that they need to get people working together and to set up programs? In Sudbury, we heard it clearly: the Collège Boréal said that without ACFO, it simply would not exist. The same is true of the francophone health network in Ontario: without ACFO and certain other organizations, it would not exist. No one will do this work for us. In your presentation, you said clearly that you needed money to do this work. It cannot be done with volunteer labour.

I would now like to hear Mr. Pierre Bélanger's comments.

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Bélanger.

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: You are quite right, Mr. Godin: we have to get our priorities right. We have to ensure that there is proper funding for community organizations. We suffered a great deal because of the sponsorship scandal and the fact that some programs were poorly run. To some extent, we became suspect. We were blamed to some extent, even though we had nothing to do with the problems, because we were very transparent in the way we ran things. The public money we spend is justified by the many efficiency reports we have to submit. It costs us about \$2,000 in accounting fees every year to ensure that every penny got from Heritage Canada or the federal government through various programs was spent properly.

That is what is happening, and this is a major crisis for grassroots community organizations. I very much liked what Mr. Grenier and Mr. Potié had to say. The situation exists in that area as well. Heaven knows we need a healthy francophone press, because when we cannot talk to each other, it is difficult to get the younger generation to take up the torch. It is hard to fight assimilation. All the tools that were put in place have to be used. The money must be available. Francophones outside Quebec are not merely referendum material. People love us a lot when Quebecers are making a decision about their future. However, between referendums, our funding is cut off, and we are unable to do our work. The work we do is very important because we know what the needs of our community are. We ensure that government funding is spent effectively and properly.

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

●(1005)

Mr. Sylvain Lacroix: I would just add that with the new Official Languages Act and Bill S-3, I think francophone organizations will have to start taking action against the government if it does not provide the funding we require and does not serve us in keeping with our rights. We are not a minority. We are part of an official language community. We are founding people and the Franco-Ontarian nation starting now demands its rights.

The Chair: There are 30 seconds left.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The other aspect has to do with newspapers. There is Canada Post as well. It may have suited the government, perhaps it spoke with Canada Post. Cutbacks of 25% have been announced. As you said, it looks like rebates are going in the same direction. Funding to organizations is being cut. The government is cutting everywhere to pay down the national debt.

Mr. Réjean Grenier: I think that there are, clearly, some easy solutions. I would not want to get onto the slippery slope of government policy; I will leave that up to you. You are very good at it. But I do think there are some easy solutions. For example, Canada Post could offset what has been done with respect to French-language newspapers outside Quebec, because there is a legal framework for this. Canada Post Corporation could say that it would buy advertising in our newspapers in an amount equivalent to the amount it cut in subsidies. That would be a very simple solution, and the corporation would make a great deal of money by discontinuing its subsidies to large organizations that may not need it. I do not want to speak for Canada Post, but I know we need help, and there would be an easy way of providing it.

Another easy thing to do would be to change Treasury Board regulations to ensure that there are specific criteria for francophones outside Quebec that take into account their uniqueness and their difficulties in all federal advertising and federal programs. The same rules must not apply to everyone. I'm thinking, for example, of the apprenticeship program to which I was referring earlier. I think that would be a very clear example. If a magazine is published only every two months, but a government ad campaign lasts only one month, it is just too bad, it falls between the two months when the magazine is published. In that context, the only business magazine in French Canada cannot benefit from government advertising. And yet, we see the advertisements in English in other publications.

The Chair: I must interrupt you, Mr. Grenier.

I would ask Mr. Lemieux to ask the next question.

M. Réjean Grenier: It is important to listen to the answers, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: We only have five minutes, and it is now Mr. Lemieux's turn. Everyone has important questions and answers.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Could we at least let him complete his thought, just this once?

The Chair: No, I have to treat all committee members equally.

You have the floor, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): It is hard to start after all that.

Good morning. I would like to thank you for your presentations. As a member of Parliament, I am very aware of issues facing Franco-Ontarians, because there is a very significant, dynamic Franco-Ontarian community in my riding. The total population of my riding is 100,000, and 65,000 of them are Franco-Ontarians.

I would like to talk a little about the community associations. Last Saturday I attended ACFO's annual meeting in Prescott-Russell, in my riding. Yes, the Prescott-Russell branch of ACFO is in a crisis at the moment. I would like to talk about subsidies a little. In a presentation I have here, there is reference to program subsidies rather than subsidies for operational costs. In my opinion, program subsidies produce results. That is important for the government, for taxpayers and for all the communities. In my community, we think it is important to see concrete results.

At the moment, one of the challenges facing the Prescott-Russell ACFO is to determine the level of support it has within the community. Will this organization continue to exist? What mandate will it have?

I would like to ask Mr. Bélanger the question: How do you assess the support your association has in your community?

• (1010)

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: In our case, that is quite easy to determine, because we organize activities and carry out projects that we ourselves developed. Whether we are talking about the Clin D'Oeil Child Care Centre or our newspaper, *Les Nouvelles*, we have worked very hard to do the feasibility studies, to get funding and to get the process going.

Let's talk about results. At the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, we were still receiving adequate funding. The basic grant we had was enough. I would like to emphasize that we were very effective. A basic grant does not mean that people stay in their offices drinking coffee and doing nothing. With this basic grant, we had some full-time employees. We worked with the community to set up projects that met our needs.

There are two ways of measuring the support we have from the community. First, the community used our services. The Clin D'Oeil Child Care Centre is now prosperous, because it met a genuine need. It is growing, and serves hundreds of families. We established this program in Timmins, in partnership with the school board. It is a success.

ACFO's annual general meetings are always followed by many francophones, despite the fact that life is not easier in Timmins than in Ottawa or Toronto. People do volunteer work for many organizations. Their workload is not getting any lighter; in fact it is getting heavier. There are always people at our annual general meetings and at the cultural activities we organize thanks to certain programs. People also use organizations that we have established and sit on their boards of directors, for example. Our organization works extremely well in partnership with other community groups.

Our basic problem is this. After 10 years of cutbacks, we are no longer able to hire full-time staff to continue the outstanding work we have done, for example with the child care centre and with the anti-violence squad we established with the City of Timmins. This program allowed us to offer services to francophone seniors to work against fraud and to provide training for young francophones. This project was carried out in partnership with the Timmins police.

We no longer have the resources we need for these programs. We are not opposed to having the federal government establish programs, but if they are to be developed and we are to have

innovative, community-oriented projects, we need a minimum amount of funding, and that we no longer have. We need full-time employees, a stable office, a place where we can go to pay the rent, to have access to a computer and a telephone that works all the time in order to carry out these projects.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bélanger.

Would you care to comment, Mr. Potié?

Mr. Francis Potié: I have nothing against special projects as such. They make it possible to do many innovative things. However, we do need some basic infrastructure, as Mr. Bélanger said, so that we can invent projects, generate new initiatives and be in touch with emerging needs. Without basic resources, we become far less effective in some respects.

Here is what I have to say about the projects. A project is part of a fiscal year, but in actual fact, in real life, it is rare for a project to get underway on April 1 and to end on March 31. So we carry out a project, and then we have to do some follow-up work. The project produces spin-offs. After a study, a survey or training program, we have to follow-up, and it takes people to do that. In other words, the development process is a series of highs and lows. One year we have three employees, the next we have six, and then all of a sudden we are down to two. It is very difficult to work like that.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Potié.

We will begin our second round. Each speaker will have five minutes.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Simard.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses today.

My first comment is for Mr. Grenier and Mr. Potié. I'll then ask a question.

Our committee mandate is to assess the vitality of francophone communities outside Quebec and to look at the repercussions of the action plan in order to see whether some things should be changed, and whether we should extend the plan, at what cost, and in order to know what recommendations to make to government.

Mr. Grenier, you said that the action plan has had no impact. Based on our information, I can say that it has. Some things have worked very well, for instance in the field of health care. We have received very positive comments in that area. We've seen very positive results in terms of immigration, despite the fact there was not much funding there, with respect to justice, it is going well. As for education, it is too early to assess. Apparently, we do not yet have enough information in order to know whether immersion programs have had a positive effect until now. We have also noted that there have been shortcomings from a cultural and communications standpoint.

Based on the comments we're hearing today, there is indeed real instability in print and other media. If we could include communications and the cultural sector within a new action plan, it would lead to some stability.

Is it obvious? Would you support core funding for communications?

M. Réjean Grenier: That is a good idea, of course. We never refuse money. However, that being said, you're going to have to deal with one problem. There are two types of media in French-speaking regions outside Quebec. There are private newspapers and non-profit organizations. The problem is related to government grants: often, the private sector can't access them. It is not any wealthier than other sectors, precisely because it can't access these grants. It survives only on advertising revenue. The problem has to do with the distribution of that money.

In my opinion, the advertising sector would be fairer for all, throughout the country and would provide the government visibility, namely for the Dion plan, its successes, etc.

Mr. Francis Potié: We would of course like communications to be included under the action plan, as one of its pillars. We have initiated discussions and established an issue table on communications with the Télévision française de l'Ontario, the Alliance des radios communautaires du Canada and the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, the FCFA. Some issues came out of those discussions.

I won't speak on behalf of other stakeholders, but I could add that we know that community radio is concerned, namely, by a radio production fund for community radio.

Earlier on, I mentioned that in terms of francophone print media, there is a support fund called the Canada Magazine Fund. It should be adapted to market reality or to markets within which French-language communities or editors have to work. That is another interesting option.

We know that all francophone communities are interested in having the mandate, distribution and broadcasting of TFO expanded. There is also the issue of the production fund. Measures were taken within Telefilm Canada to set aside an amount for francophone producers and production outside Quebec.

It would be possible to develop a series of initiatives, measures or even to adapt existing programs and this could really give francophone media in Canada a boost and create momentum.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. D'Amours can have the rest of my time.

Le président: You only have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Chairman and witnesses, I simply want to give 48 hours notice of a motion. The following motion may be debated at another time:

That the Standing Committee on Official Languages recommends that the government maintains the funding provided by the Canada Post Corporation for the Publication Assistance Program for official language Communities.

I would like to advise the witnesses that members received a copy of this motion, which will be debated at a later date. I think it is very

important if we want to be able to help official language minority communities. That is why I am tabling this notice of motion today.

• (1020)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

Ms. Boucher may now ask the next question. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Mr. Chairman, I just wanted to point out one thing. I know that it will not be the subject of debate right away, but the motion does not say the same thing in English and in French.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Boucher, you may start.

Ms. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoulu, CPC): Good morning. I am pleased to meet Mr. Potié here, in person, and to have this exchange with people who may be a bit further away, but with whom we can talk.

As you know, I've said it before and I'll say it again, our government provides unshakable support for the francophonie and official languages. It is important for us to work with people in a positive way to find possible solutions in order to enhance the vitality of communities while taking concrete action. We signed agreements; the minister signed agreements. We have an agreement on immigration.

I've been listening to what's been said and I see that the most important thing is the money which goes directly to communities. You have spoken a great deal about that. I'd like your opinion on the matter.

Mr. Potié, how do you see your organization's role in this respect?

Mr. Francis Potié: As I stated earlier, newspapers benefit from community vitality. For community development organizations, it will have an impact if they have adequate funding for basic infrastructure and funding which allows them to generate a host of new initiatives for community development. I think we've seen it, the positive effect it does have on newspapers. I don't think any newspaper would object to the fact that there could be adequate funding for community development. It is good for the francophone press and vice-versa. The existence of the press is good for community development.

Is that the purpose of your question?

Ms. Sylvie Boucher: You also referred to the action plan shortcomings. According to you, what was the most significant shortcoming in the action plan?

Mr. Francis Potié: I'll say it again, I think we were surprised, because you have to think of the environment we're operating in. We work with satellites. There is no mention of communications; yet, we live an era of communications. You want to enhance the development of minority francophone communities, but you're disregarding the fact that communications play a huge role in our daily lives, from a personal and public standpoint. If you turn a blind eye to that, I think you're missing a big piece of the puzzle.

There's also the issue of informing people, mobilizing them, encouraging them to get involved, encouraging an exchange between the government and the general public as well as between organizations and the general public. Nothing was said as to what would be done through this plan. I think that would be important. Mr. Simard is right: some things were done with these funds, namely in the fields of health care and immigration, but there was no strategy for us to work together to ensure we were on the right same page about issues.

Ms. Sylvie Boucher: Mr. Bélanger, do you think communications were the biggest shortcoming in the action plan, or is there anything else?

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: Obviously, communications are one major shortcoming. It is fundamental for community organizations to be able to work in partnership with effective health communications officers.

It is impossible for us to do our work, mainly in the area of fighting assimilation and preserving the identity of our youth, if they can't relate to the media, if we don't have our community newspapers and radio. In that case we face another battle, that we are losing against anglophone media.

The Dion plan set out broad outlines; it strengthened educational institutions, it worked on immigration and contributed to the creation of a northern health network. However, I agree with Mr. Potié that the Dion plan has had no effect on communities, on people working out in the field, in the regions.

I'll give you a concrete example. It has been 15 years now that we, in Timmins, have been working to establish a francophone community health centre. We almost succeeded 10 years ago, but for political reasons, another centre was granted the funding, even though our application was more solid and better structured. We do not control the vagary of politics and program management.

There is a network, but what tangible effect does it have on citizens living in Timmins, who have to receive part of their health care services in English because there is no francophone community health centre? In the field of health care, the Dion plan has had no tangible impact.

• (1025)

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger, I'm sorry, but I'll have to stop you there.

Ms. Brunelle, you may now ask the next question.

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Good morning, gentlemen. It is quite an interesting experience to listen to you this morning, mainly Mr. Grenier.

I must admit that I am dumbfounded to see to what extent the sponsorship scandal injected a sense of paranoia within the machinery of government. It is becoming increasingly obvious. You're suffering from this, and so are several organizations in Quebec, mainly festivals, etc. I'm wondering how we will manage this. It is just deplorable to see a political scandal having this effect on people who are acting in good faith to advance their causes.

Mr. Grenier, you said that program criteria were hampering francophone communities. What I've gathered is that we don't really understand what you're going through. Our committee should

perhaps get involved in looking at programs in greater detail after we have completed our travels. It would be important to see how we could support communities. Given the shortage of available funds, it is important to use what we have as efficiently as possible.

Mr. Grenier, you said that the Dion plan has had no effect on communities, that it was perhaps more harmful than anything else. If the plan really was ineffective in your case and for your communities, what do you have to suggest? What amendments should be made?

Mr. Réjean Grenier: Thank you for the question.

I think that the action plan should focus more on communities at the local level, as Mr. Bélanger said earlier. Of course, we have made progress in the area of education. There has been some progress in Ontario, but it did not necessarily happen at the community level.

We mentioned that the ACFO will close its doors and that many people are doing a lot of volunteer work. None of that has changed, on the contrary. The Dion plan is not responsible for this state of affairs. Rather, it is due to the standpattism within government, whereby officials and the people in charge of developing projects try to play the security card, if you will. That is where the problem lies.

In my opinion, the Dion plan contained marvellous initiatives in the area of health care and in other sectors. There have been certain results, but they are limited to major infrastructure projects.

There's also the issue relating to the relevance of local organizations, which Mr. Lemieux alluded to earlier. There's no doubt that these organizations are relevant. If it hadn't been for the ACFO, the Collège Boréal in Sudbury would not exist anymore. However, today, the college is filled with students.

It is obvious, that community organizations lead to these results, with a bit of help from the federal government. And of course, we want that to continue.

• (1030)

The Chair: Ms. Brunelle, you have one minute left.

Ms. Paule Brunelle: Mr. Potié, as far as funding is concerned, you said that the growing number of issues is making life difficult for you. I would like you to give us a few examples.

Mr. Francis Potié: I would say that there is no end in sight. This goes back to the Action Plan for Official Languages, and even before that. Under Part VII of the Official Languages Act the government is required to support francophone communities in various areas of activity, such as health, early childhood education, and others. Consequently, as stakeholders, we are called upon to deal with many people. That's fine, we don't want it any other way. I'm not saying that this is a bad thing, but in fact, people call upon us from all sides. That's fine, but if we don't go, the perception is that we are not doing our job. We do not want to give this impression. But we accomplish all this with the same basic infrastructure.

Let me give you the example of the Association de la presse francophone. We receive enough program funding to pay three employees. I have to generate projects for the rest. This is not really how projects should operate, and this is not how I will be able to create the infrastructure for the association which I should create.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Potié, but your time is up. Five minutes is not very long.

Mr. Francis Potié: So my time is up then?

The Chair: Yes. I will ask Mr. Godin to ask the last question.

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

I will begin by asking a question. I do not know if I will have enough time to ask two.

Mr. Grenier, when we met in Sudbury, you talked about a joint project with the Collège Boréal. Mr. Hubert from the Collège Boréal told us just how effective the program was as far as the *Le Voyageur* paper was concerned. Newspapers—I don't know if yours is a daily or a weekly—have an agreement with the college to get young francophones to read this paper.

Can you tell us more about this issue? What can you recommend we do for other francophone communities in Canada?

Mr. Réjean Grenier: The Collège Boréal is involved with the program, but it also involves the two school boards, the public one and the Catholic one, in our area. This, in fact, is why we have such a high number of subscriptions. We have one of the highest subscription rates in Canada outside Quebec.

The only problem with this program is that the school boards and colleges have to pay for the subscriptions. I would like to give the paper away, but things just don't work that way. In any case, the Publications Assistance Program, which was referred to earlier, does not provide financial support if the paper is given away for free. So we are stuck between a rock and a hard place and therefore must sell it.

A subscription costs \$42. We charge the Collège Boréal \$12. Therefore, the college receives a 30\$ subsidy per subscription. I don't mind doing this for the greater good. I feel if I increase the number of subscriptions, I might increase my advertising revenues. It's a big risk, there are no guarantees, but business is never a sure thing. The big problem in all of this is that the Collège Boréal does not have anymore money than we do. The same holds true for the Théâtre du Nouvel-Ontario, which buys \$6,000 worth of advertising per year, but pays us only about \$600. We provide the balance for free. Thanks to us, community organizations are able to survive up to a certain point. However, if we cannot bring on board young people today who often only read this newspaper, which is their only source of French at home...

● (1035)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Grenier, based on what you say, you are subsidizing minorities to a greater extent than does the federal government. Perhaps you should exchange your role under section 41 of Part VII of the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Bélanger, can you tell us what percentage of the population your community represents? Are francophones in a majority or minority situation? What part of Ontario does your region cover? Is it only Timmins?

Mr. Pierre Bélanger: We represent 41% of the population of Timmins, and we represent about 54% of the population of the service district. We are therefore the majority in the service district, but we are a minority in the town itself.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

Mr. Grenier, let's come back to the newspaper, which is something I am interested in. I think this is a great initiative on your part, and all the more so because you charge \$12 per subscription for college students, whereas it would normally go for \$42.

What do the people from the college think of this? What types of results has this initiative yielded?

Mr. Réjean Grenier: You know as well as I do that francophones outside Quebec are not complainers. They also do not tend to be effusive in their compliments. These are people who don't talk a lot. However, when we happen to meet one, two or three students, they tell us that they are very pleased to have our paper. Some even say that they are glad to be at the Collège Boréal, in part for that reason. But there are other reasons, of course. This is the type of result we get.

Some professors also use the newspaper in class. We even prepared a teaching document focused on how to read the paper. Professors have given us very positive feedback on that. Let's hope that in the long term it will encourage young people to maintain their French.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Grenier, that concludes our meeting. I would like to thank all of our witnesses, as well as the members. We will continue our deliberations in camera.

Thank you.

[*The meeting continues in camera.*]

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