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Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0910)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): We'll continue the meeting in public.

[English]

We would like to thank you for being with us this morning to welcome

[Translation]

Major-General Walter Semianiw, Chief of Military Personnel, National Defence, and Major-General Daniel Gosselin, Commander of the Canadian Defence Academy.

Welcome to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. We apologize for this slight delay.

Without further ado, we hand the floor over to you. You'll begin with a presentation of approximately 10 minutes, then there will be a period of questions asked by parliamentarians.

Major-General Walter Semianiw (Major General, Chief Military Personnel, Department of National Defence): Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

Mr. Chair and members of the standing committee, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting both General Gosselin and me here today.

As you've heard, I am the chief of military personnel and the champion for official languages for the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Today, as I said, I'm accompanied by Major-General Daniel Gosselin, Commander of the Canadian Defence Academy, who reports to me. He is also responsible for CFB Borden.

[English]

I would like to first address some strategic issues, then I will ask Major General Gosselin to speak to the Borden situation.

Unlike other federal departments, National Defence is a hybrid of two institutions, the Canadian Forces and the Department of National Defence.

[Translation]

At National Defence, we decided that, to do things right and to comply with the Official Languages Act more fully, we had to make better use of our skills in the other official language and, as a result,

to facilitate the establishment of an environment conducive to the use of both official languages. We must also be able to do that while performing our everyday duties, in particular leadership, the provision of services and instruction.

[English]

To achieve such results we had to define a new vision that could bring about a significant change in the way we lead, train, administer, and support our members of both official language groups. That vision and its approach are described in the National Defence official languages program transformation model 2007 to 2012. The work started as planned on April 1 of this year.

The transformation model is intended to address the shortcomings that we have marked in our official languages performance. Indeed, these shortcomings have led the Canadian Forces to move away from a positional to a functional approach for official languages purposes.

The goal of the transformation model is to ensure that National Defence personnel are led, trained, administered, and supported in their official language of choice. This focus positions the department and the Canadian Forces to more effectively support domestic and foreign operations, while better meeting their legal official language obligations. It also sets out a practical vision of an integrated military and civilian official languages program.

The transformation model has three aims.

[Translation]

First, to ensure that National Defence's linguistically qualified military and civilian personnel are assigned to the right place at the right time in order to provide effective support for Canadian Forces operations and to comply with the Official Languages Act.

[English]

Second, to establish an enhanced Official Languages Act awareness and education program that ensures that civilian and Canadian Forces personnel are fully cognizant of their linguistic rights and obligations.

[Translation]

Third, to establish a performance measurement system that will make it possible to accurately evaluate the ability of National Defence military and civilian personnel to provide, in a coherent and standard manner, leadership, instruction and bilingual services when and where provided for under the Official Languages Act.

•(0915)

[English]

The implementation of the functional approach is pivotal to the successful realization of the transformation model. Allow me to explain. Military personnel do not “fill” positions, as sailors, soldiers, and air force personnel are liable to move away from their home, overseas and at home in operations, to serve anywhere at any time and to pay the ultimate sacrifice. They are rotated through various tasks within units to which they are assigned to meet specific and often changing training and operational requirements. This makes for a very mobile and dynamic force manned by very busy people.

Because personnel are often away from home, they do not and cannot, like others, secure a regular presence at any one post. So you can see why the public service positional approach for ensuring bilingual capacity—that is, filling static positions with linguistically qualified incumbents who usually remain in one position until they choose to move to another—cannot work for the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

That does not mean that the Canadian Forces are not taking any measures to guarantee competency in both official languages, as required by the Official Languages Act. They are doing so, and have been for many years now. They transfer bilingual personnel in order to guarantee that bilingual services and functions are ensured when and where necessary.

[English]

This approach is in fact that the National Defence Act requires unit commanding officers to employ their resources, including their personnel, to the best of their ability to perform the missions assigned to them. In the military, the functional approach alone can ensure that personnel are led, trained, administered, and supported in their official language of choice. But first, we must ensure that our work environments themselves are in compliance with the Official Languages Act. To that end, the language of work of every unit of the Canadian Forces is accurately identified as bilingual, English, or French. We then identify what functions need to be conducted in both official languages and in what unit.

[Translation]

The transformation model is an optimistic plan for solving the problems it is important to solve. It is a plan that may last five years. We cannot solve all the problems at the same time.

[English]

I believe we're on the right track, however. With the profound and fundamental changes we've undertaken under the transformation model, I must say that the situation today, despite some anomalies, is much different from what it was a few years ago. We have and will continue to make progress.

At this time I'd like to give Major General Gosselin the opportunity to address the members of this committee on the situation at Canadian Forces Base Borden. There are many reasons why the situation in Borden was not addressed in a timely manner. In the end, I make no excuses in front of this committee as to why the situation was not addressed; it should have been. For that, I accept

the full responsibility as the current chief of military personnel. Nevertheless, I know full well that the plans that are in place right now will see us realize what we need to do to ensure that the Canadian Forces has the leadership and is compliant with the Official Languages Act.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Gosselin, it's your turn; you have three minutes left.

Major-General Daniel Gosselin (Major General, Canadian Defence Academy, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chairman, members of the Standing Committee, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity to update you this morning on the situation at the CFB Borden with regard to instruction and services in French.

[English]

As was stated, I've commanded the Canadian Defence Academy since July of this summer. That includes, in this capacity, the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, the Canadian Forces College in Toronto, Canadian Forces Base Borden, and a number of schools throughout the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Allow me to mention, first of all, that I welcome the involvement of the Canadian Forces' ombudsman in this case, since it is in our common interest to improve the services provided to Canadian Forces personnel training and on duty at Borden. So we're taking these findings seriously. A force that promotes the vitality of its linguistic groups and an understanding of diversity is a more seasoned force that has more resources.

[English]

We fully appreciate, as well, that for the recruits this initial period of training will influence how they view the Canadian Forces as an institution. We also recognize their rights to have the instruction and services in the language of their choice. We are working very hard to address the issues raised by the ombudsman.

Let me briefly outline some of those, and I can expand on any in the question period, if you are interested.

•(0920)

[Translation]

In August of this year, the commander of CFC Borden proclaimed the Canadian Forces Base Borden Official Languages Strategic Plan for 2007 to 2010. The plan also states the resources required for its implementation. I am working with General Semianiw to ensure that the highest priority is given to the necessary resources for the plan's implementation. We have a few initiatives, in particular the selection of a senior officer as official languages champion for CFB Borden, the introduction of an awareness campaign including articles in newspapers, postal missions and improvements to our Borden Web site.

We also hosted a open house style activity in October, receiving more than 25 organizations from the regional Francophone community. I personally visited CFB Borden on two occasions. I met with the base's officers and senior non-commissioned officers in order to emphasize the importance of the Canadian Forces' Base Borden Official Languages Strategic Plan. I also met with more than 300 Francophone recruits to discuss their concerns. Last month, I visited the base again and held information sessions with personnel and a number of students taking courses in French. I also sent two teams from my staff to assist the base commander.

[English]

In order to maintain this momentum, we've also begun implementing a number of initiatives to ensure that the provision of training, education, and services continues to improve, especially for francophone recruits. We are providing all new staff and students arriving at CFB Borden with information on their linguistic rights and responsibilities and we are seeking their feedback when they leave the base. We are enhancing our cadre of linguistically qualified instructors, educators, and service providers. We have invested additional resources to translate course material into French. We have begun working with civilian education and training providers to improve our instructional and support capability, and we are continuing to enhance education awareness on official languages.

[Translation]

To sum up, we recognize the need to protect the rights of all members of the Canadian Forces. The ombudsman has identified deficiencies at CFB Borden, and will correct them vigorously and energetically.

Significant progress has been achieved since his visit. However, despite the initiatives and additional resources invested, a sustained effort over a number of years appears to be required in order to improve the official languages situation at Borden to a satisfactory level. We nevertheless remain committed to building on recent progress in order to achieve that goal.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Now we will proceed with the first round. In view of the time allotted to us, the first round will be one of five minutes and the second three minutes.

Without further ado, I hand over to Mr. Rodriguez.

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

Thank you, sir, for being here with your team. I listened to your presentation and I thought there was a lot of positive attitude. You seem very positive.

General Gosselin, you just mentioned the word "momentum", as though things were headed in the right direction. And yet one would say that nothing is changing. In general, one would say that official languages, not only at Borden, but in the Forces as a whole, are a necessary evil, that is to say that, in some way, you are stuck with it and sometimes you don't really know what to do with it.

In this case, I don't get the impression things have improved much. The ombudsman or his team conducted follow-up in June, I believe, and it seems to me that the situation has not improved either.

Can you tell me why we get the impression that, despite your good will, not much is changing?

MGen Walter Semianiw: Yes, Mr. Rodriguez.

In February, the Borden commander prepared an action plan for the base, but it was sent to headquarters here in Ottawa. Despite the fact that the plan was there, it wasn't until July and October that General Gosselin and I decided to implement it. However, there was an action plan, and it's now that we're seeing the details. The plan was there. I'm talking here today about things to come, not about things from the past.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I understand, but sometimes you have to dwell on the past because sometimes the past is indicative of the future.

I don't doubt your good faith. I'm sure you want things to change, but this is a big machine. Sometimes—I'll say it again—one would say it's a necessary evil.

Are Francophones aware of the situation before they arrive? According to the testimony, one would say that Francophone recruits arrive on the base and are completely surprised, because they thought they were entering an environment where they could work or learn in their language. But they realize that they receive orders in English only, that they don't have any textbooks in their language, etc.

Is there anything that prepares Francophones for that?

• (0925)

MGen Daniel Gosselin: The first question you asked—I think I can also answer the second—is that a lot of things have been done. Perhaps I didn't run down the entire list, but we've invested additional amounts, nearly \$1 million, to translate courses; we've recruited additional bilingual personnel specifically to assist recruits, because we know that, as you say, they are the most vulnerable individuals.

So now, from the moment they arrive on the base, we make sure they are briefed on their rights. They are aware of the person they can speak to if they have any complaints to make, there is a working system for handling those complaints, and all courses for recruits are offered in French.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You've recruited additional personnel? When did you hire those individuals?

MGen Daniel Gosselin: In fact, that started in August, September, and we continued. In some cases, it's still continuing. For example, we're trying to recruit an additional bilingual, Francophone dental hygienist. The process is underway. We're having trouble finding medical personnel.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Isn't that a little late, considering what has happened and comments that were made. I read that it was an urgent matter for the ombudsman. Isn't this a little late?

Ultimately—and this isn't aimed at you personally—hasn't the Forces' reaction been precisely to the fact that they had their hands slapped and that there's nothing spontaneous or voluntary in this. Do you understand?

MGen Daniel Gosselin: I'm going to answer only the part that concerns me.

In my case, and even before I arrived, people had a plan for moving forward. A plan had been developed stating the required resources, the required additional personnel and so on. As you can understand, in our organization, sometimes it takes time before you can get resources, award contracts, recruit personnel. It's not done from one day to the next.

We can do it more quickly for certain activities. For example, we managed to get a contract with the Canadian Corps of Commissioners to increase our bilingual capability in some of the activities that we offer. That took some time. We had to establish contracts.

The Chair: Thank you, General Gosselin.

We'll now go to Richard Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, General Gosselin and General Semianiw.

[*English*]

MGen Walter Semianiw: It is pronounced Sem-ee-an-off.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau: So it's Ukrainian?

MGen Walter Semianiw: No, I come from Thetford Mines.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Richard Nadeau: But is your family name Ukrainian? So much the better for Thetford Mines.

MGen Walter Semianiw: No, but that's a good question because my father arrived here in Canada—

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I have 10 minutes; thank you very much. You got me there. I simply wanted to know the origin of your name and to be nice in my introduction.

We met Mr. O'Connor, who was Minister of National Defence at the time, and we heard about the plan and so on. I would like to help find some solutions to this problem.

In 1867, it was the Dominion of Canada. The Canadian Armed Forces did not really take shape until World War I. We know the history. I find it unfortunate to see the position that French Canadians and Acadians, as they were called at the time, occupied in the Canadian Forces. Today they're referred to as Quebeckers and minority Francophones, even though Quebeckers form the majority in their province. However, it appears that their position in the Canadian Forces is something second class and of little interest: official languages in a nutshell.

When Mr. Côté came here, I wasn't here. I wasn't the Bloc Québécois representative at that time; I wasn't available. I read the transcript and minutes of the meeting, as well as the articles. They state that everything is in English and that managers aren't aware enough of this issue. They also say there is a lack of training manuals

and that the quality of the instructors' French is very poor. They even tell people to choose another course, when documents aren't available in French for a given occupation.

Trivial things become complicated as a result of poor knowledge of the language. The quality of life of people whose first language is French or who do not speak English as a second language becomes complicated. You say there's a plan now. I'm willing to believe that, but the situation has existed for such a long time that it's becoming difficult.

My father was a Franco-Ontarian. When he left Hawkesbury, Ontario, to join the Canadian Armed Forces during World War II, he was sent to Cornwall. Since he had trouble understanding English, they said he was a slow learner. They sent him to Petawawa, which didn't improve matters. Lastly, he wound up in Quebec City, at Valcartier, where he became a sergeant, instructor and so on. The same thing happened to his two brothers, Georges and Maurice, who are my uncles.

It's very insulting for someone to read on the soldier's transcript that he's a slow learner. The slow ones are the Canadian Armed Forces. I don't understand why the situation is still the same in 2007 or why you're telling me today that there is a plan. In fact, the situation has regressed, and that's utterly unacceptable.

As parliamentarians, we need documents, and we need access to the translations of those documents. How is it that you can't even translate training manuals? That's incomprehensible. You tell me that the introduction of services is limited by available funding. As far as I know, these are the "Canadian" Armed Forces, and they represent two nations, Quebec and Canada, which together form a single body that goes into combat. They should have these instruments.

You say that, on the base, Mr. Bouchard is a resource for soldiers who are having trouble. I hope that's not the solution and that it's only to provide help.

How can you guarantee me that you can find a quick solution to problems that seem systemic and correct the obvious lack of will that has existed since the inception of the Canadian Armed Forces and that still persists in 2007?

• (0930)

The Chair: General Semianiw or General Gosselin, after that long preamble, you will have to answer briefly because you have one minute left.

MGen Walter Semianiw: Indeed, that question deals with a number of aspects, Mr. Chairman.

First, as a result of all those aspects, there is a new plan. I'm sure that the plan will succeed and that I will be back here in eight months to provide you with details on the plan's success. As a result of the situation at Borden, Saint-Jean and elsewhere, the former minister decided to implement a new plan. I know the details of that plan, and I'm convinced it will succeed.

In my opinion, Borden is the base I must focus on. Then we'll see what's going on at Saint-Jean, at Gagetown, not only for Francophones, but for Anglophones as well. So we'll start with Borden, then it will be Saint-Jean, which is also the responsibility of Major-General Gosselin, who is studying the situation as well. We have a plan, and I'm sure it will succeed.

The Chair: Thank you, General Semianiw.

Mr. Godin.

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

Welcome. General Semianiw, I know you say you don't want to focus on the past, but on the future, but we also have to look at the present. Personally, I've been sitting on the Standing Committee on Official Languages since 1999, and we've been talking about this since then, not to mention the fact that it was talked about before that.

I read a newspaper article about you, Major-General Daniel Gosselin. According to that article, Major-General Daniel Gosselin, a Francophone with 33 years' seniority in the Armed Forces, said that the problem is not as serious as Mr. Côté seems to believe.

Just before that, it states that Mr. Côté met with approximately 40 young recruits at a meeting last year and that the ombudsman's investigators spoke with many other recruits during a visit to the base in June. Mr. Côté added that he found it unfortunate that every new member of the Armed Forces, Anglophone and Francophone, winds up in a training environment where he or she is spoken to in a language that person does not understand and that there's no way to raise the issue. In his view, they suffer as a result and their morale is low.

I find that serious. It's unacceptable.

The government defended itself by saying that we were at war in Afghanistan, that we were spending a lot of money and that there were problems. They raised the fact that even the receptionist wasn't bilingual. Is it that costly to hire a bilingual receptionist? That's a problem.

Earlier my colleague Mr. Nadeau talked about slow learners. As we speak here, it is the Canadian Forces that are the problem; this is the second official language, or one of the official languages. In New Brunswick, for example, Anglophone nurse practitioners have all passed their exams, and four of the five Francophones failed them. Are we that slow? No, that's not the problem. The Francophones have translated manuals and they can't follow them. So there are deficiencies.

Now, sending Francophones to the Borden base to make them mechanics or chefs when the instructors aren't bilingual puts them at a complete disadvantage. Even today—I'm talking about the present, not the past—in the December 2 edition of the newspaper, they talk about a unilingual Anglophone on a naval reserve. This is a person who has just been appointed. A woman will be leading the naval reserve, but in English only: she's a unilingual Anglophone.

At Borden, are there any instructors who only speak French, not English? Are there any generals who only speak French and not

English? Does this problem exist in the other direction? I've been here since 1999, and I've never heard of the reverse problem. I think that this is insulting, that it isn't fair and that it isn't right. National Defence is like the RCMP: you represent our country; you represent the laws of our country, and they're being broken.

I'd like to hear your comments.

● (0935)

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you've used up all your time on your comments. You'll have a chance to speak again.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'll take it on my next turn, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I don't think there are any quick solutions. Something has to be done, but it's not a matter of money. I was a member of the Armed Forces for 20 years. My colleagues know it, but perhaps not you.

[*English*]

And I'd like to remind the committee that our military has been in decline for over 20 years. When I joined the military

[*Translation*]

in 1980, 85,000 persons belonged to the Canadian Forces. When I retired in 2000, there were 63,000. So we're talking about a significant decline in human resources. We note that the rate is high, perhaps because of Afghanistan, our NATO commitments or our training commitments.

[*English*]

These are very real commitments.

My concern is that the Canadian Forces, right now—the soldiers we're talking about—are stretched very thin. They're asked to do a lot with very few resources. So I see the first challenge as being with resources. As I have said, when I speak of resources I'm not talking about money, because money will not fix this problem. I'm talking about having trained, qualified personnel.

When we come to instructors, Monsieur Godin might say, just throw a mechanical instructor in there, for heaven's sake. But we're talking about military equipment, and military equipment is different from civilian equipment. You can't find very many weapons technician instructors in the civilian sector, not ones who are fully conversant with military weapons systems or with fire control systems. Not only do you have to have someone who is capable of instructing in French; you have to have someone who is qualified on military equipment, and it's very specific military equipment. I see that as being one challenge.

The second challenge is bilingual training.

● (0940)

[*Translation*]

As our commissioner said, bilingualism training in the Canadian Forces has been a real failure in the past. I was part of that system.

Given that situation, the Canadian Forces are presenting a new program designed to improve bilingualism. The fact remains that, for the moment, we're living with the consequences of a failure. There aren't enough bilingual individuals who qualify to take training in both official languages.

[English]

I look forward to seeing positive results with respect to the new bilingualism policy. But I want to be clear: the situation in Borden has to improve, and we have heard some of the initiatives that have been taken to improve it.

I'd like to ask a couple of questions. One of them is with respect to bilingual instructors. As you know, we've asked the Canadian Forces to focus on recruiting and to increase the number of people who join the forces. My understanding from contacts I have is that at CFB Saint-Jean, where recruit training—the basic training—is done,

[Translation]

the capability to train recruits in a Francophone environment has increased. There has always been training in French at Saint-Jean. That's why I would like to know whether you are able to transfer bilingual or Francophone personnel from Saint-Jean to Borden.

[English]

I ask the question because my understanding is that Saint-Jean has been able to accelerate its training. They've been able to graduate many recruits, but not to do the follow-on training. The follow-on training is where there are still choke points. It might be possible to decrease some of the training resources at Saint-Jean and increase some of the training resources at other institutions.

MGen Walter Semianiw: Mr. Chairman, the questions and comments posed raise a number of issues.

First it comes down to the issue of commitment. I would like to put this before the committee so that you are aware. Currently we are making many changes across our personnel management system. Starting this month, there will be no promotion to the rank of lieutenant general or vice-admiral unless the individual has a CBC competency.

[Translation]

Then I'll really take measures to increase the percentage of newly promoted colonels/navy captains to 80% by 2008 and 90% by 2009 in order to guarantee that military members promoted to the rank of brigadier-general or commodore after 2011 really have CBC language competency.

[English]

Mr. Chairman, I would submit that's an example of commitment at the strategic level to move ahead with the plan in a very aggressive way.

I'll let General Gosselin address the Borden and Saint-Jean issues.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have to move to the next witness.

We're going into the last round and we'll begin with Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Semianiw, Monsieur Gosselin, allow me to be pessimistic, because as associate minister of defence at one point, I was responsible for these files and

I'm very disappointed that the military has abandoned the course that we'd set back then to do much less.

To follow up a bit on Monsieur Nadeau's questions, in 1967 we did the *bilinguisme et le biculturalisme* commission, and in 1969 we in this country approved in Parliament an Official Languages Act. I want to know this. Is National Defence subject to that act, sir?

MGen Walter Semianiw: Mr. Chair, on the two issues, first on the question posed on the abandonment piece, clearly my view is that I see it differently. We haven't abandoned it.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Sir, my question is whether National Defence is subject to the Official Languages Act?

MGen Walter Semianiw: Yes, it is.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you.

So how much time has elapsed since 1967 to actually respect this act?

MGen Walter Semianiw: It depends in what measure and what scope.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Since 1969, sorry.

MGen Walter Semianiw: It depends in what measure and what scope. If one looks at the Canadian Forces at large to try to find areas where perhaps there are challenges, the answer is yes, and there were those same challenges through the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, and the nineties. They continue today, but with the plan our intent is to move forward

The challenges have been there throughout; they are not something new that has just been developed. Even with the plan that was put in place before, there were those challenges.

●(0945)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I'm aware of the challenges, but I'm also aware that in 40-plus years we haven't been able to meet them really. Why would National Defence appoint, as Monsieur Godin has brought up, someone in charge of the naval reserves who is unilingual?

MGen Walter Semianiw: You're addressing your point to Commodore Bennett, I believe, who just last week was appointed the commandant, naval reserve. First, when we say "not bilingual", if I can get into some of the details, if you look at what she discussed as part of her change of command parade, her comments were in both official languages—first point.

So clearly there is a will there. Secondly, if you look at the details of where she comes from, from a class of service—class A, class B, class C—which would take a lot of time to explain, Mr. Chair, all that is to say we need to address that as well. In the past, that group of individuals in the reserves were not expected to meet that requirement—even in the past. With the new plan they will be.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, the problem for me—and I think most people will have a similar feeling—is that we're talking about reservists here, that is to say about a possible entry to National Defence. So, in Quebec City, we're appointing someone to the naval reserve who, according to all the reports we've seen on the subject, does not speak French. In my opinion, that shows the attitude, the mentality that reigns at National Defence. That may be the cause of the problem.

What I find comforting, however, is knowing that the Commissioner of Official Languages and the National Defence ombudsman will be closely monitoring what's being done about training in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I would like to recall that the purpose of the meeting this morning is to evaluate the situation at Borden.

We'll now go over to the Conservative Party, with Mr. Chong.

[English]

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the generals for appearing in front of the committee and also tell them that while my last name is Chong, I'm a Canadian from Fergus, Ontario. I want to ask you, Generals, and specifically the major general in charge of chief of military personnel, two questions.

First, are you aware of any similar problems at other bases; for example, with anglophone recruits in bases in Quebec? Second, are there any similar problems with francophone recruits at bases in the rest of Canada, other than Borden?

MGen Walter Semianiw: The answer is that we believe there may be, maybe not to the same scope and scale as that one found in Borden, but General Gosselin is looking already at the Saint-Jean issue, and we're looking into Gagetown as well and how we can do that.

I come back to the question posed here. If one moves to an approach that tries to do everything at the same time, I would submit one gets nowhere. The focus now is on Borden, to get it right in Borden with the leadership behind that, and then to move to the next location. We're going to look at Saint-Jean. I would submit there are probably similar challenges in bases in different locations, for both *les francophones et aussi les anglophones*.

Hon. Michael Chong: Could you tell us a bit about some of the specific measures you've taken in the last six months or so since this problem was first brought to your attention and what you anticipate will happen in the next six months?

MGen Walter Semianiw: I'll pass that to General Gosselin, who will focus on the Borden issue.

MGen Daniel Gosselin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We've done a lot of work. I think we've already moved forward in a number of areas. In other areas we'll see results in the coming months.

For instance, to free up francophone instructors, bilingual instructors, we've now contracted courses out of Borden and other areas so that we have more francophone instructors available. One specific example—and there are a number of them—is that we contracted out a course for firefighters, for instance, to one of the community colleges in an anglophone province. So we can run a francophone course earlier and we'll have the instructor. That's a specific example.

We've also done a significant awareness campaign. Next summer we are moving more francophone people to Borden. We're finishing the assessment. We will transfer more people.

I should mention, as was raised before, that from a statistics point of view we have 1,763 military personnel in Borden. And out of those—in Borden, in that anglophone community—we have 850 people who have declared French as their first official language. It's a significant proportion, considering the area on the base.

So we have a number, but we have areas that we're trying to solve. Obviously the base services are another area we're putting a lot of focus on, especially for the recruits who need initial services when they arrive. So the base hospital and pay services were getting special attention.

• (0950)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Major-General.

Now we'll continue with Mr. Gravel.

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Good morning. I'm new to the committee.

I'm 55 years old. We've had problems preserving our French language since I was very young. That's the way it is across Canada; we even have that problem in Quebec. I listened to you and I got the impression I was hearing wishful thinking. The Canadian Armed Forces reflect the present government. Many ministers don't even speak French. They are ministers, they are unilingual Anglophones, and no one says anything.

Earlier Mr. Godin raised the point: if it were the reverse, what would we do? If they were unilingual Francophones, I'm not sure that would last long. I believe there would be a reversal somewhere. Even here in the House of Commons, if there were unilingual Francophone ministers, they would have their cages rattled much more than Anglophones. But I'm sure they wouldn't be ministers.

You also talked about Saint-Jean's problems, because there are problems there. I have a friend who's currently in Afghanistan; he's a Quebecker with the Royal 22nd Regiment. He told me that all his training had been done in English and that, if he wanted to be promoted in the Forces, he absolutely had to speak English.

I listened to you speak as though everything was going well in the best of all possible worlds, and I'm not sure things are going that well. I don't know what to think.

The Chair: General Gosselin.

MGen Daniel Gosselin: I'm going to make a comment. We accept the findings that have been made; we're not saying everything is perfect. Major-General Semianiw mentioned it. We want to improve a number of places. I already have a team that's gone to Saint-Jean, for example, to examine the services. One of my colonels was there yesterday with the ombudsman's team. There are places that we will have to improve. In Saint-Jean, we'll have to make improvements in the other direction: services in English for Anglophones who are in Saint-Jean. We've noted deficiencies: we're going to make adjustments and correct them.

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Gravel.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I've finished.

MGen Walter Semianiw: I'd like to make a comment, please, Mr. Chair.

To be promoted, Anglophones today have to meet the same requirements as Francophones. To become a chief warrant officer or chief petty officer in 2011, you'll have to have competency BBB. For colonels, captains and generals, it's CBC. Today it's exactly the same for Francophones and Anglophones. I'm a product of that situation.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: What you say is all well and good. You have your experience and you can cite examples of that kind. The fact nevertheless remains that Francophones have a serious problem. If an Anglophone goes to a military base in Ontario, he will have books so he can take training. If he goes anywhere in Canada, they'll find books so that he can take his training. Whereas, in French—and that's what is happening in Borden—they go so far as to have someone change occupations because they don't have the documents in that field. As you can see, the problem is serious in that respect.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

We'll now conclude with Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In my last speech, I didn't get an answer. That was my fault because perhaps I talked too long.

You say that people will have to be bilingual to get certain promotions in 2011. The Chair said we weren't here to talk about that, but rather about National Defence, but appointing a unilingual Anglophone to the naval reserve after all the fanfare around bilingualism will start the fuss all over again. Your comment was simple. She said a few words in French and she's going to learn the other language.

I'd like you to respond to the comments you made. It's important because that goes together with the attitude. General Gosselin, you said that the problem was not as serious as Mr. Côté seemed to believe.

Do you still think it isn't that serious?

• (0955)

MGen Daniel Gosselin: Thank you for that question. The article you cite is taken from the *Barrie Examiner*, if I'm not mistaken.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, exactly.

MGen Daniel Gosselin: I spoke with the journalist by telephone for 20 minutes. The article quotes 82 or 85 words spoken by me. I'm not saying I was quoted completely out of context, but I was talking about the terminology that was used by the ombudsman. I visited Borden. I had been there twice and I had seen the situation. From my

standpoint, I wasn't describing the situation in the same way. It was in that context that those comments were made. Naturally, it's easier to say that they were reported out of context, but the journalist selected what he wanted.

The situation is serious; I'm not putting that in doubt.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You're officially saying the situation is serious.

MGen Daniel Gosselin: Yes. I would say it's now no longer serious in the same way. A number of corrective measures have been taken, and a number of adjustments made. I would say that there are deficiencies and that there are still observations that should be corrected, but—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, is the receptionist now bilingual?

MGen Daniel Gosselin: What receptionist?

Mr. Yvon Godin: According to Mr. Côté's report, even the receptionist wasn't bilingual.

MGen Daniel Gosselin: Mr. Côté didn't tell us exactly which persons he had met.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have something else here: the Borden strategic plan. Here's what I'm reading in the notes we've received from the Library of Parliament:

Major Jack Bouchard was appointed official languages champion at CFB Borden. Recruits were informed that they could contact Major Bouchard on any matters concerning official languages and would receive a response within two working days. A report on the results achieved is expected by 1 December 2007.

Has that report been filed?

MGen Daniel Gosselin: A report signed by Major-General Semianiw was submitted to the ombudsman yesterday. He can answer the question in more detail.

MGen Walter Semianiw: I sent the report yesterday. I spoke with the ombudsman and I told him that the report had been sent. It was there.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to make a final comment. I like how you referred to Saint-Jean: you went to check, there was a problem, and you are going to correct it. We just want the situation to be corrected in the other places as well, not for people to work at trying to correct it.

MGen Walter Semianiw: That's because my family is in Saint-Jean.

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

With that final speech, we are going to conclude this part of the meeting.

I would like to thank the representatives from the Canadian Forces for taking part in the committee's proceedings. As you know, the role of the Standing Committee on Official Languages is to promote linguistic duality, particularly within federal institutions. This morning, you will have understood that committee members are concerned about the fact that these institutions should offer equal opportunities to all Canadians.

Thank you for being here and good luck in promoting linguistic duality.

MGen Walter Semianiw: Thank you committee members and you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to suspend the hearing so that we can receive our next witness, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1000)

The Chair: I invite committee members to return to their places so that we can continue with eighth meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Today we have the pleasure of hearing from the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee will commence its study of the Court Challenges Program and the State of Affairs from the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

Minister, welcome to the Standing Committee this morning. Without further delay, I turn the floor over to you.

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Colleagues and members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I am pleased to appear before you today as Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages.

Since I took up this position, I have met representatives of English and French official-language communities and Canadians who care about our country's linguistic duality. I was impressed by the dynamism and determination of these men and women. The discussions that I have had with them have motivated me to work together with these Canadians.

We are making significant efforts not only to support these people in their work on official languages, but also to ensure that our linguistic duality helps us build bridges between various components of Canadian society. The data from the 2006 Census published by Statistics Canada on December 4 underscore the importance of the Government of Canada's programs and initiatives to promote official languages. The Canadian reality is enriched by an ever-increasing pluralism.

[*English*]

Since the beginning of its mandate, our government has redoubled its efforts to lay the foundations of a stronger, more prosperous, and more united Canada. In my opinion, we will reach this goal only when we allow all citizens to live and grow in French as well as in English. We can make this happen through the education of our young people.

Since my arrival, I have signed bilateral education agreements with every province and territory that will allow us to invest no less than \$1 billion over four years, an unprecedented amount. In these agreements we touch on several different responses to the challenges of teaching in a minority setting in order to advance the goals that are important to our government and to communities, such as recruiting

and retaining students, bridging the gaps between school and community, recruiting teachers, and improving access to post-secondary studies.

- (1005)

[*Translation*]

In accordance with our stated goal of making a better future for official-language communities, we have launched pilot projects on the advantages of offering enriched services in French to preschool-age children. I believe that this is an important first step not only for the development of these children, but also for the future of official-language communities.

With respect to second-language education, the provinces and territories are developing new second-language teaching approaches, improving primary and secondary students' language skills, and modernizing teaching methods. Like us, these governments believe it is important for young Canadians to know our two official languages to succeed in a world of global communication.

As we announced in the 2007 Budget, we will spend \$30 million over two years to help Canadians use their language more on a daily basis. Over the next few months, I will be making a number of announcements about how this major investment will be shared across the country.

We have a simple yet worthwhile goal. We want all young Canadians to have the opportunity to appreciate our linguistic duality and to understand what a treasure this cultural heritage is for our country.

This year, the Department of Canadian Heritage, through its Official Languages Support Branch, will target youth activities that will give young people in official-language communities more opportunities to live life in their own language. In so doing, we hope to encourage their commitment to their community.

Supporting local projects by and for young people would seem to be the most relevant approach - such everyday activities as sports, cultural pursuits, and developing Web content. Young people become more attached to their language by regularly taking part in activities in their language. Leisure activities provide key opportunities for social interaction and building identity.

[*English*]

As you know, our government wants to involve not only young people from English and French minority language communities but all young Canadians. Learning their second official language is growing in popularity among our young people. The adults of tomorrow recognize the personal and professional potential that language learning can afford them.

It's therefore important to target youth activities that create opportunities for young Canadians to have linguistic and cultural experiences in their second official language.

To do this, we support extracurricular and cultural activities that promote use of the second language or exposure to the second language outside of school. From these experiences, young people can learn to better appreciate the culture that accompanies both languages while improving their language skills. For young anglophones, this type of experience makes the French language more relevant to their lives.

[Translation]

I would now like to speak briefly about how we are dealing with the changes that are happening in official-language communities.

The most recent census clearly indicates that these communities are undergoing a transformation. They are becoming more urban and more multicultural. We need to provide them with places adapted to their needs.

On the other hand, there are also dynamic and unified rural communities, firmly anchored in tradition.

To respond to the concerns of communities throughout the country, the cooperation that exists between the federal government and the provinces and territories is invaluable.

The construction and expansion of school-community centres across Canada are a wonderful example of this in the community and education sector.

In terms of health care, the construction and renovation of cultural and community spaces in the Saint Thomas Community Health Centre is often mentioned.

•(1010)

[English]

This fall I was honoured to take part in the latest federal-provincial-territorial ministers conference on la Francophonie in Canada. At this gathering we restated the importance of working with provincial and territorial governments to make sure our investments in official language minority communities have maximum effect.

[Translation]

Some provinces have added their voices to ours on the subject of Francophone immigration. A few months ago, we implemented a strategic plan on Francophone immigration in the provinces in partnership with the country's Francophone and Acadian communities.

The work that we have done over the past few months with the Government of Quebec has focused mostly on celebrations for the 400th anniversary of Quebec City. The cradle of French civilization in North America, the site of the earliest chapters of Canadian history, and an important player in the promotion of French today, Quebec is an important partner of the Government of Canada. We are particularly pleased to work with the Government of Quebec and the Société du 400^e to make 2008 a landmark year for all Quebecers and all Canadians. Our Government is providing more than \$110 million and offering valuable support in preparation for this anniversary, both for infrastructure and for the artistic and cultural programming.

In addition, the next Francophone Summit will take place in Quebec City in 2008. It is no accident that the heads of state and heads of government of Francophone countries have decided to hold their discussions in Canada. Our country is a beacon in its support of the French language. That is why we are investing \$2.5 million to ensure that Francophones from all regions of Canada are represented at the activities that are part of the Summit.

Other important activities are planned in connection with the 400th anniversary, including the 13th Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers' Conference on La Francophonie in Canada.

As we mentioned in the most recent Speech from the Throne, our Government recognizes how important it is to promote our two official languages and support linguistic duality in Canada. We will confirm our support for our linguistic duality through concrete actions in the coming months. This spring, we will propose a strategy to bring about the next phase of the Action Plan for Official Languages.

[English]

To date, the action plan has generated investments of close to \$810 million in education, the federal public service, and the development of language industries and official language communities. This plan expires in March, providing an ideal opportunity to breath new life into our efforts to strengthen our linguistic duality.

We are currently reviewing all projects and the federal strategy on official languages. This will allow us to renew or perhaps even change government projects that deal with official languages. We may sometimes need to strengthen them and also to adjust and modernize them, to build on partnerships, and to raise interest among Canadians.

[Translation]

This week, we launched consultations aimed at taking the pulse of the population to see what this new strategy should focus on. These consultations will allow us to understand the viewpoints of all stakeholders. Such as key organizations in the area of linguistic duality, universities, and representatives of the volunteer and private sectors.

Bernard Lord will moderate the regional consultations that will be held in seven Canadian cities in the first two weeks of December. As former Premier of New Brunswick, Canada's only bilingual province, Mr. Lord is the ideal candidate to successfully lead these consultations. His extensive regional experience, as well as in the area of official languages, provides him with the necessary expertise to understand and moderate these consultations.

In our discussions about developing a new strategy, we will consider our ongoing dialogue with the provinces and territories, particularly the work of the Ministers' Conference on La Francophonie in Canada.

•(1015)

The Chair: Minister, could you wrap up, please? You have about one minute left.

Hon. Josée Verner: I have two pages left. I'm coming to the conclusion.

Of course, we will also take into account—and it's important to say this—results of community gatherings like the Sommet des communautés francophones et acadienne, reports from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, results of the 2006 Census and an important follow-up study on community vitality by Statistics Canada.

Of course, the important work of the House of Commons standing committees on official languages will be given careful consideration.

Conclusion.

[*English*]

As you can see, our record in the area of official languages is solid and diversified.

[*Translation*]

Our Government will continue to build on what we have already achieved to ensure that Canadians can benefit from the many advantages offered by our country's two official languages—a national cultural treasure that is unique in North America.

I am determined to work toward this, in the spirit of open federalism, and respectful of provincial and territorial fields of jurisdiction.

Thank you for inviting me and taking the time to listen.

Of course, I should have introduced my Deputy Minister, Judith LaRocque, whom everybody knows well, and Hubert Lussier, who is Director General.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and welcome to those persons with you.

It was worth it to hear the end of your address. We thank you for your kind words about our committee.

We will now begin a five-minute round, then a three-minute round, as we did with the previous group of witnesses. We will start with the Liberal Party representative, Mauril Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chairman, sometimes I try to be patient and courteous, but at some point we'll have to tell it like it is.

If the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages comes to meet with us for only one hour, whereas she should be here for two hours, and she uses up the first 15 minutes, that doesn't leave us much time to ask questions.

In fact, those are fine words. Even the Commissioner of Official Languages has begun to get tired of fine words and suggested in his first report that the government start taking action.

Ms. Verner, you've held the position of minister for approximately 22 months.

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes, roughly that.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Could you tell me how many times the members of the Committee of Deputy Ministers on Official Languages has met in those 22 months?

Hon. Josée Verner: That committee meets on a regular basis.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque (Deputy Minister, Department of Canadian Heritage): As you know, the committee of deputy ministers has not been restructured, but a committee of assistant deputy ministers meets regularly. It is chaired by Mr. Manion, of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: So the committee of deputy ministers has been dismantled and a committee of assistant deputy ministers has been established. Is that correct?

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: The fact is that subjects concerning official languages are examined by a number of other committees of deputy ministers, such as the Human Resources Management Advisory Committee and the Social Inclusion and Justice Committee. So these issues are addressed where they should be.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Minister, could you tell me whether the Cabinet ad hoc committee on official languages has met during those 22 months?

Hon. Josée Verner: During that period, I have regularly attended meeting with my colleagues to deal with certain issues.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: But there have not been any meetings of the ad hoc committee on official languages?

Hon. Josée Verner: No, sir.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Since the Privy Council Secretariat was transferred to the Department of Canadian Heritage, has a report been prepared on the Secretariat's achievements?

Hon. Josée Verner: An evaluation on that subject is currently underway.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's underway. May we know when it will be completed? Will it be disclosed?

Hon. Josée Verner: Perhaps someone can tell me that.

Mr. Hubert Lussier (Director General, Official Languages Support Programs, Department of Canadian Heritage): The evaluation is underway; it's a matter of a few months. These documents are regularly made public on the departments' Web sites.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: All right. Can you also tell me, Minister, whether reports or follow-up were done on the establishment of the horizontal management framework for the Official Languages Program in the public service?

Hon. Josée Verner: What is your question about?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: It's about the horizontal management framework for the Official Languages Program. It was requested by the communities, and they haven't heard about it in 20 months. Can you tell me whether some sort of report has been prepared on the implementation of that horizontal management and accountability framework?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The framework is used for the operation of the Official Languages Program. It is the current guide to the operation of the Official Languages Program.

There isn't any specific report, if I understand the meaning of your question.

• (1020)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: There isn't any follow-up either.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: [*Technical difficulties - Editor*] which, once again, guides the operation and application of the amounts allocated to official languages initiatives.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Minister, can you tell me why, if there are consultations for the communities in Toronto tomorrow, a person was only invited yesterday, without knowing what topics will be addressed and without being able to prepare? You've just boasted about the consultations that Mr. Lord will be conducting. Why are people invited to those consultations only one or two days in advance? You announced it in June.

Hon. Josée Verner: Indeed, in June, I announced that there would be a broad consultation. We worked with the departmental people to establish the various parameters and the context in which we wanted the consultation to be held.

We also consulted FCFA about the themes selected and the organizations that should be invited. I myself signed invitation letters. Now, I'll have to inquire into the reasons why groups apparently received their invitations—

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: —yesterday, for tomorrow.

Hon. Josée Verner: —only yesterday. I'm going to have that checked. You understand that I didn't mail them myself.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Can you tell me why it's in camera?

Hon. Josée Verner: Pardon me?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Can you tell me why these consultations are being held in camera?

Hon. Josée Verner: The manner of proceeding, as I just said, was decided in consultation with FCFA in accordance with a very specific framework. That's the answer that I have to give you.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Minister, I still have a question to ask you. The action plan calls for annual and even semi-annual departmental consultations. Have you personally conducted formal consultations with the communities, as used to be done?

Hon. Josée Verner: There's definitely an ongoing dialogue with the various communities. Over the past 22 months, I've met with a large number of groups. I went to Vancouver and across the country. I also attended the opening of the Sommet des communautés francophones et acadienne here in June. A dialogue and consultations are being conducted with the communities on a regular basis.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much.

Now we're going to go over to the Bloc Québécois, with Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, Ms. Verner, Mr. Lussier and Ms. LaRocque.

First of all, I'll admit to you that I'm very skeptical of your government. Your leader and Prime Minister has never repudiated the little sentence he wrote in a book, that bilingualism was a fallen god in Canada.

In my humble opinion, this approach says a great deal about how he sees the English and French facts in Canada, but especially about his perception of the communities that every day wonder whether tomorrow their children will have the opportunity to speak French, their language and that of their grandparents.

In that perspective, I'm thinking of the Court Challenges Program. That instrument has proven itself and has made it possible not only to make gains, but also to have rights that were theirs recognized. We had to have that kind of program in order to make significant gains for the communities.

Minister, I would like to know what assimilation is for you.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, I think we're first going to do a reality check here.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Minister, what is assimilation, for you?

Hon. Josée Verner: The Prime Minister's commitment was very clear in the Speech from the Throne.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Pardon me, Mr. Chair—

Hon. Josée Verner: That said—

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I asked the minister a very simple question.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, could you ask the member from the Bloc Québécois to be polite and give me a chance to answer him?

Mr. Richard Nadeau: These five minutes are mine, Mr. Chair. If the minister doesn't want to talk about assimilation, I'm simply going to try to make her understand that the situation of the French minority Francophone communities in Canada is becoming increasingly awful from one decade to the next, and has done so since 1951. We were able to see that following the last census.

As minister, you are responsible for this situation, and you must ensure that the communities have all the possible tools to combat assimilation, that is to say the loss of their language and culture. By supporting, like your predecessor, the dismantling of the Court Challenges Program, you have removed a very significant tool from the communities.

Now I'm going to let you speak, but I nevertheless want to tell you that assimilation is a major factor. Even in Quebec, where we are a minority in North America, we see that the French fact is weakening, as is the case in Canada's other communities.

• (1025)

The Chair: I would just like to manage your time efficiently. If you could put questions to the witness, perhaps you could give her the time to answer.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I asked the honourable minister what the issue of assimilation represented for her. I'd also like to know why the Court Challenges Program was cancelled, when it was a major tool for the communities.

The Chair: Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: I really have a right to answer?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you very much.

It involves a lot of things, of course, since the member from the Bloc Québécois has cited a long litany and outlined his moods concerning the official language communities.

The first thing I must say—

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Pardon me, Minister, but they aren't moods: this is an actual situation.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, I'm prepared to cooperate, to come and answer questions from colleagues around this table. However, if, from the moment I open my mouth, that doesn't suit the Bloc Québécois member and he doesn't allow me to answer, I find it hard to see how I can do my job and cooperate in this democratic exercise.

I'll resume what I was saying.

It was very clear in the Throne Speech that the government made a commitment to linguistic duality and that it recognized French, in particular as a founding language of Canada. That said, Mr. Chair, the Bloc Québécois voted against it. Today, when the member from the Bloc Québécois stands as an ardent defender of the communities and of linguistic duality in Canada, it is I who am a bit skeptical. I think we have to ensure that we offer the minority communities services and education and provide them with the necessary tools across the country, to enable them to live to their full potential and to ensure their vitality.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We should find a *modus vivendi* and more effectively manage the time that must be shared between the witness and parliamentarians. I appeal to your sense of collaboration.

Mr. Godin.

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

I would like to welcome the minister.

We live in a democratic country where you love to give answers. That's what I heard earlier, I believe.

Hon. Josée Verner: Pardon me?

Mr. Yvon Godin: You want to be able to respond to the committee.

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'd like to know why you chose to come here today. We asked you, by invitation, to talk about the Court Challenges Program. You know we are preparing a report. But you chose not to talk about it at all in your address, not at all.

Furthermore, the Standing Committee on Official Languages made 39 recommendations in May. In those recommendations, it asked what the Conservative government's position was on the Court Challenges Program. Once again, Minister, you chose not to answer our question at all.

Why has the Conservative government cancelled the Court Challenges Program? You say you're listening to the Canadian population.

We did a national tour. We went from St. John's, Newfoundland to Vancouver. All the communities told us that that would affect the minority communities in Canada. We don't need Bernard Lord to tell us that, I can guarantee you. If there are French-language schools in Prince Edward Island, it's thanks to the Court Challenges Program. If there are French-language schools in Nova Scotia, it's thanks to the Court Challenges Program. If we were able to separate the school boards in New Brunswick and finally have French-language school boards, it's thanks to the Court Challenges Program. If we still have the Montfort Hospital and if a small amount of \$75,000 was provided to finish the challenges, once again it's thanks to the Court Challenges Program.

And before a committee where you were asked to come and tell us about Court Challenges, you avoid the subject.

I would like some answers, Minister. I'll let you give the answers you want. If you still want to avoid the subject, I'll let you do that because you've been quite successful so far.

• (1030)

The Chair: Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the member for his questions. I'd like to recall two things. I understand that the committee examined the issue of the Court Challenges Program. I'm going to wait for the committee's report and will look at the various elements it contains.

As regards the Court Challenges Program as such, as you know, sir, that matter is the subject of a court case and I cannot comment on it at this time.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's incredible. It's quite simply incredible. You can't comment on a program that you've cut.

What are you going to do if dear Mr. Lord, whom you've appointed, visits all the communities and all the communities tell him that they want to see the Court Challenges Program reinstated?

Bravo! You decided that the meetings would be held in camera. Bravo! I think you decided that because you don't want people to speak publicly in front of Canadians.

Isn't that in fact the reason? You need to have a good explanation to conduct this consultation in camera when you claim to be a transparent government.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, I recall that we also have online consultations. It's obviously accessible to everyone.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, we're talking about assumptions here. The purpose of the consultation conducted by Mr. Lord is to gather as many points of view as possible from the groups whose ideas we would like to hear and to discover the vision of linguistic duality in Canada. Among other things, I'm thinking of groups like the second-language teachers and other groups of that kind.

At the end of the consultation conducted by Mr. Lord, we'll see what different themes have been addressed.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Lord, Mr. Chairman, was Premier of New Brunswick. Today it's announced that French is losing ground in New Brunswick. Good job, Mr. Lord!

In his press conference, the Prime Minister very clearly said that Mr. Lord had made decisions such as, for example, appointing a Commissioner of Official Languages in New Brunswick in 2003.

We've had a federal Commissioner of Official Languages for years and years. He submits recommendations to the government that you don't consider. Do you agree with us?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Minister, perhaps you could give a very brief answer.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, as I said in my speech, and I probably escaped the member's attention—

Mr. Yvon Godin: I was very attentive, Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: When the time comes to implement the next phase of the Action Plan for Official Languages, all the reports prepared will have been considered.

The Chair: Very well, thank you very much.

We'll now move over to the government side.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'd like to thank you for coming to meet with us today and for sharing your point of view with us. My colleague began a discussion about Mr. Lord, and I'd like to ask you this:

[*English*]

what does he bring to the table in terms of these consultations, in particular with respect to his experience, perhaps, or things that he might have done previously?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: First, it should be kept in mind that I made a commitment at the Sommet des communautés francophones et acadienne in June to conduct a broad consultation on action to be taken on the present Action Plan for Official Languages.

Mr. Lord will conduct the consultations and report to me. Other consultations are scheduled, and there is an ongoing dialogue with groups across the country. Mr. Lord was Premier of the only bilingual province in the country. We are sure he has the experience, skill and listening ability required to hear the viewpoints that will be expressed during the consultations.

Allow me to add that the themes selected are very definitely important and current. They are issues that the various groups are concerned about across the country. These are themes that were selected in cooperation with FCFA. We're talking about demographics, economics, new technologies and governance.

•(1035)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'd like to know whether you think the consultations are important. I ask the question because my colleague Mr. Godin told the House this week that the consultations had been conducted by our committee, that a report had been prepared and that the consultation period was over.

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you.

As I emphasized in my address, we very clearly appreciate all the work that has been done. Here I'm talking as much about the committees and summits, such as that of the FCFA, as about the reports submitted by the Commissioner of Official Languages. However, we also wanted to consult other groups. That's important for us. We thought that was a positive measure taken by our government, and, as stated in the Throne Speech, we wanted to be sure that everyone could take part in the next phase of the Action Plan for Official Languages.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you.

Mr. Bélanger said that you should act and take real measures. I'd like to talk about two important components. First, you announced that \$30 million was intended mainly for the official language minority communities and an amount of \$30 million was allocated to Canadian Heritage for festivals.

Back home, *L'écho d'un peuple* and a number of other festivals celebrate the vitality of our heritage. So we also have access to the \$30 million allocated to Canadian Heritage.

I would like to know what kind of feedback you've received from the communities concerning the two \$30 million amounts.

Hon. Josée Verner: They've been very well received. The first \$30 million amount will be used to provide direct assistance to the communities, particularly young people. As I said in my address, the idea is to fund projects designed by and for youth. The objective is for young people to feel very much alive in their community and to be able to express themselves. We want them to be able to contribute to the vitality of their community.

We're also aiming at projects on linguistic duality. We are convinced that there are enormous needs in this area as well and that, for the vast majority of Canadians, Anglophone and Francophone, the two official languages are important. We want to fund this kind of project and, those that have proven themselves, that is to say infrastructure projects.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin our second round with Mr. D'Amours.

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

Thank you for being with us this morning, Minister.

I'm going to ask you some relatively easy questions. I expect brief answers because they shouldn't be complicated.

With regard to your consultation, you said earlier that you wanted as many people as possible to be able to provide you with information. Is that correct?

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Minister, your consultations are not open to the public; they're restricted. When the Standing Committee on Official Languages went to meet with the communities, public invitations had been sent out. You said earlier that participation in your consultation was limited.

Is that participation open or limited? I think it's easy to answer that question.

You also said that you wanted to gather ideas. Minister, I don't know whether it was your parliamentary secretary once again, but when we conducted our consultations across the country, at virtually every meeting, your parliamentary secretary asked the people who were making presentations whether they had any suggestions or ideas to give the government. You're telling us now that you want to do the same thing.

Didn't you take the time to read what the witnesses told us at that time?

Then, Minister, you said that you had had consultations with FCFA.

Did you inform it that the meetings would be in camera or did it ask you that they be in camera? I'd like a brief answer please.

I'll repeat quickly, Minister. You said that you had discussed the matter with FCFA. Did you inform FCFA that the meetings would be in camera or did FCFA ask you that they be in camera?

• (1040)

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chairman, I'm going to answer the member's three questions or statements—

The Chair: With your permission, we can do a five-minute round for each of the witnesses—

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: May I finish?

I'm going to finish asking all my questions, Minister, then you'll have a chance to answer them.

Hon. Josée Verner: I don't know if—

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I have two left.

In your address, you said: "This spring, we will propose..." In my mind, there's a difference between proposing and implementing. When the Dion Plan for Official Languages expires, it won't be the time to propose; it will be the time to implement something else immediately. You say you're only going to "propose". Why will there be a gap between the end of the Dion Plan for Official Languages and the introduction of a new plan? The official language minority communities are going to fall into a void. Can you explain that to us?

In closing, you mentioned a linguistic duality project. Can you explain to us what that linguistic duality project will be?

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, as there were a number of questions, I'll give a number of answers.

As regards the process, it is open. For operational questions and questions discussed with the various parties, there is a limited number of groups. They are invited, but the process is open. I would recall that online consultations are underway at the same time. Everyone has a right to speak out on these consultations which will lead us to the second part of the Action Plan for Official Languages.

You talked about the various suggestions, various viewpoints that were expressed during the committee's tour. I said that our thinking process would take into account all the reports that had been prepared by various committees and associations. We hope to conduct the broadest, most extensive consultation possible.

As regards the technical details of the negotiation with FCFA, I will forward that answer to you. I didn't negotiate, but I will ensure that someone from the department provides you with the answer.

As to your fourth question, or statement, no, there will not be a void after what you call the Dion Plan, which we call the Action Plan for Official Languages. Our government has made a firm commitment to promote linguistic duality. It acknowledges the importance of the various linguistic communities across the country, and no one, apart from the member, has understood that were abandoning the communities at the end of that plan.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, for answering those questions in sequence.

We'll go over to the government side now.

Mr. Michael Chong.

[*English*]

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing in front of us today—Minister, Madam LaRocque, and Monsieur Lussier.

It's interesting that we're having this meeting right now, and you've made reference to this in your report, that we are increasingly living in a diverse country. The 2006 census highlights the increasing diversity of this country, a country that is one of the fastest growing in the world and one where one in five Canadians now is foreign-born, a number that is only going to increase in future years.

I commend you and your department for starting to tackle the challenge of diversity while, at the same time, trying to preserve our institutions and some of the values on which our nation has been founded, values like official bilingualism and linguistic duality. So I commend you in that work and I strongly encourage the department to continue tackling that challenge, because I think it will be one of the biggest challenges we face in the coming decades—how to accommodate that diversity while preserving some of these cherished institutions and cherished values on which our nation has been founded.

In that context, a very important part of maintaining some of these values, like bilingualism, has been the action plan for official languages, which we all know is expiring in March of next year. My questions for the minister and the deputy minister are these. Maybe you can describe to this committee what steps will be taken between now and April 1 of next year to renew the action plan for official languages. And when might we hear about the successor to the action plan for official languages?

• (1045)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: Thank you.

There are indeed challenges, realities with regard to linguistic duality in this country. Our government is very sensitive to what is going on. It is especially very determined to comply with the Official Languages Act, of course, but also to promote linguistic duality across the country. I repeat: the reports prepared by the various groups, whether it be the committee, the FCFA summit or others, as well as the recent Statistics Canada data, will definitely fuel our thinking.

A solid and clear commitment was made in the Throne Speech. In that speech, we said that the next phase of the Action Plan for Official Languages will be implemented. It must be understood that, for reasons of liability, we first had to ensure that we conducted an evaluation of the various programs proposed in the plan, consult our partners to determine what worked well and what worked less well. That evaluation is still under way.

Of course, the consultations are taking place as we speak. There will be a summing up in January, which will enable me, among other things, to receive Mr. Lord's report on the results of consultations that have been conducted across the country. At that point, we'll be able to get to work to begin the next phase of the Action Plan for Official Languages.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have 30 second left.

[*English*]

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

I guess the first we might hear of this might be in budget 2008-09, about phase two, possibly afterwards.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner: It's impossible for me to tell you what the next budget—

•(1050)

The Chair: So we'll have to wait for it to come out.

Mr. Gravel, go ahead, please.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To my short question, I'd like to have a long answer.

First, I would like to make a comment, since this is not the first time I've heard Ms. Verner talk to us this way. A little earlier, she told my colleague that the Bloc Québécois had voted against the Throne Speech, recalling a beautiful sentence contained in the speech, that is to say that the French fact was a founding aspect of our big beautiful country. As though we had to vote in favour of the Throne Speech because of a beautiful sentence it contained! I have trouble accepting that.

I'm a new member; I've been here for only a year. However, it's not because a beautiful sentence was slipped into a Throne Speech that you necessarily have to support the entire speech. In my opinion, it is dishonest to constantly remind us of that, as she has done in the House on a number of occasions. I think she does well when she does that because she doesn't answer the questions.

Furthermore, my colleague asked a good question on assimilation a little earlier. For years now, we've been fighting to preserve French,

and the quality of the language, not only in Quebec, but across Canada as well. The government tosses out ideas, but absolutely nothing happens.

Could the minister tell us what assimilation represents for her?

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, I unfortunately wouldn't have enough time to explain my way of interpreting the dishonesty that can come from the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Would you need a dictionary?

Hon. Josée Verner: I don't think we should venture into that kind of discussion. It's neither appropriate nor respectful. Some facts nevertheless remain.

When we presented our Speech from the Throne, even the Leader of the Liberal Party hailed our initiative on the next phase in the renewal of the Action Plan for Official Languages.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Coming back to assimilation, do you need a dictionary to know what that means?

The Chair: Mr. Gravel, please—

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, I would appreciate our colleague remaining polite.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I'm offering you a dictionary, madam.

Hon. Josée Verner: I don't think the member's attitude is appropriate. We're here to discuss ideas.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I asked a question and I want an answer.

Hon. Josée Verner: I'm going to answer you.

With respect to the linguistic situation, our government has made a commitment to strengthen these communities across the country. It has announced additional budgets. It has taken initiatives such as the Strategic Plan to Foster Immigration to Francophone Minority Communities, which is particularly aimed at Francophone communities across the country. This is a good way to support the linguistic vitality of these communities, since this plan was expected. These communities experienced the same reality as we do in terms—

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Mr. Chair, my time is running out. I asked the minister a question; I asked her what assimilation was and I have yet to receive an answer.

The Chair: Pardon me, Mr. Gravel. We'd have to know—

Hon. Josée Verner: You asked me for a long answer—

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Within the time allotted to me, Minister.

Hon. Josée Verner: I'm telling you about our commitment.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: What's assimilation?

The Chair: Pardon me—

Hon. Josée Verner: I'm telling you about our commitment to strengthen the various linguistic communities across the country.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Mr. Chair, I find that pathetic. I asked a question and I haven't obtained an answer.

What is assimilation?

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, I'm responding to a concern stated by the Bloc Québécois member, who wanted to know how we could help the various communities across the country become stronger and ensure their survival, and that's what I'm explaining.

The Chair: Mr. Gravel, you have one minute left.

I ask you to try to manage your time with our witness.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: My question takes five seconds, and the rest of the time is for the answer.

What is assimilation, Minister?

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, I'm going to continue to explain to the member what we can do to help reinforce the various linguistic communities across the country.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: That's not the question I asked, madam.

Hon. Josée Verner: These are positive and constructive measures that our government has taken to ensure that the communities are able to live, grow and face the future in their mother tongue, in particular, and also in both official languages.

• (1055)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I'd like to ask the clerk a question. When a question is specific, and Mr. Gravel's question—

The Chair: Mr. Rodriguez, that's not a point of order; it's a debatable question.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: No, I'm asking the question—

The Chair: I'm answering you.

We're going to move on to the other witness.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: His question consisted of three words. What doesn't she understand? I want to know why. Isn't she required to answer?

The Chair: Mr. Rodriguez, I would simply like to take this opportunity to remind you that you are free to manage your time, of course, and that the witnesses are free to give their answers.

As we have only five minutes left, I'm going to grant them to Mr. Godin so that he can address our witness.

Mr. Godin, go ahead, please.

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

I won't ask you the definition of the word "assimilation" because you don't know it.

My question will concern something else. You say that your government is adopting measures or moving forward to help the communities. If you don't want to answer that question either, I can tell you that you have disabled the minority communities outside Quebec by cancelling the Court Challenges Program. If the Francophone communities have managed to make progress, it's been thanks to the tool that was given to them. I won't ask you for an answer because I won't get one.

Let's talk about your program to help the minority communities through immigration. Do you believe, for example, that we could bring Francophone immigrants from other countries to Vancouver to reinforce the Francophone communities there?

Hon. Josée Verner: Sir, that's precisely the aim of the strategic plan we announced in 2007. At the time, Mr. Monte Solberg was Minister of Immigration. That's precisely what we aim to do: promote immigration in the Francophone communities, work with them so that they can offer services to these newcomers and ensure that they can also retain them in the community.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Please go on.

Hon. Josée Verner: That was precisely the aim of the strategic plan that was put forward in 2007.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, could a Francophone from another country come to Vancouver if he didn't speak English, if he were a unilingual Francophone? Is that kind of thing consistent with your action plan?

Hon. Josée Verner: The purpose of the plan is to promote Francophone immigration to Francophone minority communities across the country.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I'd like to have an answer, not a text. Could that person be a unilingual Francophone?

Hon. Josée Verner: Mr. Chair, a Francophone immigrant or newcomer who comes to settle in a Francophone minority community of course only speaks French. As you know, there are two official languages in Vancouver, as elsewhere in the country. So what we want to do is to ensure that these Francophones can continue to live and grow in French, but the reality, sir, is that there are two official languages in the country.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We aren't required to speak both official languages; we can speak only one in our country.

Hon. Josée Verner: The member is talking about a Francophone minority community, but we also speak two official languages which are spoken in the country, two official languages, including English in Vancouver.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's good. Could a unilingual Francophone immigrate to Vancouver?

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes, if he or she chooses.

•(1100)

Mr. Yvon Godin: If there is a family assistance program for residents, a person from Vancouver, for example, could ask a Francophone to come to Vancouver. That would increase the popularity of French, if that person does so in accordance with our rules and our Canadian laws. I think you said you were going to promote that. The person would therefore be welcome in Vancouver.

Hon. Josée Verner: The person would be welcome. When we announced this program, we were in Winnipeg. Francophone immigrants were settled there, and the program was very well received. The purpose of that is to expand the economy.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you for your answer.

You also said that you had promised \$110 million for the 400th anniversary of Quebec City.

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Can we expect to receive several millions of dollars for the Congrès mondial acadien, which will be held in Acadia in 2009?

Hon. Josée Verner: Yes, indeed, we're going to do—

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'm not jealous; I'm talking about fairness.

Hon. Josée Verner: At the outset, I'll say that the Société du 400^e anniversaire de Québec makes its own choice of programming. There are strict rules for managing public funds. That said, it will be a pleasure for us to assist the Congrès mondial acadien.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I remember, for example, that the government granted \$5 million to celebrate Canada Day in Quebec City and that it only gave Ontario \$900,000.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Hon. Josée Verner: Do you want me to answer?

The Chair: Yes, please, we're going to wrap up.

Hon. Josée Verner: There is a different situation in Quebec. There's not really any programming in Quebec for celebrating Canada Day, which, I'm informed, isn't the case in other provinces. In other provinces, there are other sources of funding for Canada Day.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Check—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin. Thank you, Minister.

This completes the hearing of our witness this morning. I would like to thank the minister for being here. The committee is in the process of completing its report, which should be available shortly and which will be considered by the minister in order to complete the Action Plan for Official Languages, an initiative which moreover has been hailed by the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Thank you very much and until the next meeting.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'd like to give a notice of motion to the effect that the members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages are invited to attend the consultation session in January, as planned by the government. I'm going to give you that in writing, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much and good day. The meeting is adjourned.

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