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Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Good morning everyone and welcome to this 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This is our second meeting pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) on the Canada-communities agreements, which are known as the collaboration accords as well.

Just before we begin, I would like to inform you that next Tuesday, April 8, Mr. Bernard Lord will be with us. He has accepted our invitation to come and tell us about his recommendations on the new Action Plan for Official Languages. Mr. Godin has tabled a motion in this regard.

Mr. Godin.

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

All House of Commons committees would like to have their proceedings televised. We do not want to work in the dark, we want all Canadians to see what Parliament is doing. As we know, it is not possible to televise committees in every meeting room. In the past, I remember that 90% of one committee's meetings were televised—and that was the Standing Committee on Official Languages. We even had to make an exception to the rule for our meetings not to be televised.

Given the importance of the Action Plan for Official Languages, the importance accorded by the government to a consultant hired to study the action plan, who's now agreed to come to the meeting next Tuesday, April 8, I think it is important that this meeting be televised. It would make it possible for us to have a genuine public debate and would allow people to follow our proceedings. For this reason, Mr. Chair, I am pleased to move this motion that our meeting be televised.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

If there are no other comments, we will move to the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We will go now to our witnesses. This morning, it is our pleasure to have with us representatives from the Association franco-yukonnaise. They are Mr. St. Pierre, the Executive Director, and Ms. Marlynn Bourque.

Welcome to the southern part of the country. You have brought with you the spring sunshine and wind that we have been waiting for so long. Our usual procedure is to give you about 10 minutes to

make your presentation, which is followed by a question period. As I was saying, we were expecting other associations to be here today. Since you were able to respond to our request quickly, you are our main event today, and we are very pleased to have you here. Without further ado, I will turn the floor over to you.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre (Acting Director General, Association franco-yukonnaise): Thank you for your warm welcome. I will let the board representative, Ms. Bourque, begin, and I will continue later.

Mrs. Marlynn Bourque (Director, Education Sector, Association franco-yukonnaise): Thank you for inviting us to appear before you. I am very honoured to represent the francophone community generally in our country. And I am particularly happy to represent my wonderful community in the Yukon. We are a growing, dynamic community.

Our place in the larger community is undeniably very important and well-recognized. In the Yukon, there is a favourable perception of francophones and they are encouraged. In recent years, an official francophone community day has been set aside. On May 15, we celebrate the francophone community in Yukon. This special event is an indication of how welcome we feel in our territory. We have proven that we are growing all the time.

Moreover, over the past 35 years, the French-speaking population has doubled. More and more anglophones are learning our language. We see that in the immersion programs for young people. There are courses given in French in the territory. Territorial government employees and other people living in the Yukon frequently learn French. The community appreciate that very much. We regularly have a good turnout for our activities, including many anglophones.

I am proud to say that we offer many activities on a regular basis and that we are firmly established. Of course, we appreciate the government's support, because without it, we will have a difficult time continuing to build on our foundation. I will turn the floor over to my colleague, Mr. St. Pierre, who will provide you with the details. Personally, I have only been a member of the board of directors since November. However, I have been in the Yukon for 21 years. My children grew up in French and are completely bilingual, and I am proud of that as well. I hope that future generations will be able to grow up in French, because francophones have been a very visible presence in the Yukon from the beginning. Francophones opened up routes in the Yukon from the earliest days of our settlement there. Their descendants did not stay, so we are currently working on increasing the number of francophones currently living in the Yukon. We are quite an outstanding example in this country.

We hear some things from the outside, but in our community, we see the great success we have achieved. I am very proud to continue living as a francophone, because my roots are in Quebec, where I grew up. I am also very proud to live as a francophone at the other end of this country, to take part in all sorts of wonderful activities, and to have my children attend a French-language school. This flexibility makes all the difference in our lives.

I would like to thank you for supporting our development and to invite you to come and see for yourself what is going on in the Yukon, if you have an opportunity to do so.

I will turn the floor over to Mr. St-Pierre, who has some more technical details for you. Once again, I would like to thank you for your invitation.

● (0910)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We have prepared a chart. It is hot off the press, because I have just finished it. It illustrates data that are essential for you, because the federal government is our most important partner. We could simply explain this in words, but we have prepared charts that the clerk will distribute to you shortly.

First of all, it is wonderful to be here in Ottawa. The Yukon is the most western part of Canada. It is situated 200 km west of Vancouver, and is the most remote and most northern point, but we care very much about French language and culture. I have attended Acadian celebrations because many members of my family, the Landrys, are Acadian. Moreover, the celebrations for Quebec City's 400th anniversary took place this year.

My son is part of the first Franco-Yukon generation that is now transmitting its language. We were completely assimilated. What does Dawson City mean, or the gold rush or the Klondike? Dawson City was founded by Joseph Ladue, a francophone. The first school in the north was a French-language school. During the very first elections, before the Yukon even existed—the Yukon was founded following the gold rush—there were francophones there. French language and culture existed even before the Yukon itself did because the first nations, the Métis people and francophones worked together.

Unfortunately, there were no francophone institutions there until the mid-1980s. This means that, in the Yukon, there was neither a French-language school, nor a French-language organization that could speak for francophones, nor any services in French. Thanks to the federal government, the government of the territory and the people of the Yukon, which took the initiative without going to court even once, we succeeded through dialogue in establishing institutions because of the work done by pioneers and people who were—as you are—Canadian parliamentarians.

The results have been significant. The assimilation rate is dropping constantly. In the Yukon, there are more people speaking French at home than there are francophones. You might well wonder how that could be. According to Statistics Canada, my children are not francophones because my spouse is an anglophone. The first language they learned and understood at home with their mother was English.

This may be a paradox, but it is the kind of paradox that most francophones here experience. In our French-language school, 78%

of young francophones are from mixed families. What is a mixed family? You saw the statistics yesterday. More and more people are marrying someone of a different culture, or of a different race. This is not unusual in the Yukon. The result is that the number of people speaking French is constantly growing. In the Yukon, over 3,600 people speak French. That is almost 12% of the entire Yukon population, and 20% of its young people. When we say that French language and culture are alive and well here, those are not just words, but the absolute truth. We have seen how it is growing. We are now talking about agreements between the Canadian government and the community. The first francophones came together in the Yukon in the 1980s, with the federal legislation that was developed and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It did not happen on its own—we need your ongoing support.

Are Canada-community agreements important? Is there any way of improving them? Absolutely. They are very important. Without federal government support, without the work that you do here... I am saying much the same as a member of your committee did—not everyone watches television, and even fewer people watch all programs, but in the Yukon we often watch parliamentary debates.

We had the opportunity of meeting Bernard Lord, who chaired the hearings on renewal of the action plan. I went to Vancouver. I was very happy to receive the government's invitation. This came about after the meeting we had with Minister Verner in spring. We are looking forward to see what the government puts on the table, because all this takes a great deal of energy. Our community is small, and we have to put in a great deal of work whenever there are hearings or consultations like these.

On that issue, I read in the press releases that we had invested—and when we invest, we want to know whether we will have a return on our investment.

● (0915)

When I look at my RRSP funds, I wonder whether they have gained in value. The results are significant—the anglophone community is increasingly bilingual, the francophone community is increasingly numerous, and the assimilation rate is dropping. In my view, when people instituted programs like the collaboration accords, the goal was to ensure that communities would flourish and gain in visibility. Those achievements were not arrived at only through our work, but also through the work of our partners.

Of course, these are not things we can achieve without funding. We hope that the agreements will be renewed and the funding increased. In Yukon, we have full employment. We are undergoing what's being called the boom in the west. We often talk about it. Last year, for the first time in Canada's history, we had the opportunity of welcoming the Canada Games at Whitehorse in the Yukon. It's said that the games were the most bilingual in Canada's history. Just imagine—this was in the most northern and most western part of the country, the region furthest away from the cradle of French language and culture on the continent.

So in answer to the question about whether our work is generating results, I would answer yes. To the question asking whether we could do more, I would also answer yes. To the question on whether my children and grandchildren will be able to live and grow up speaking French in the Yukon, I can only hope that the answer will be yes.

• (0920)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. St-Pierre.

Earlier, I said that you had brought the spring with you, and now I think you have also brought some warmth to our committee. Your remarks have been very interesting. I would myself add on the subject of the Klondike that my grandmother's father, Mr. Cout, brought back a few gold nuggets to his small town, Saint-Narcisse, and those helped him establish the local economy. That is another page of history.

Now, we will come back to official languages and begin our first round with Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours.

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

First of all, I would like thank you for having traveled here to meet the committee. It is very important for us to hear what you have to say. You have touched on a number of issues, but money and services are really at the root of it all. Of course we need will, but in spite of everyone's best efforts, we cannot get very far without financial support.

We have been talking about agreements, programs, the Action Plan on Official Languages, and problems receiving services in one's own language. The francophone community might be growing, but does it need to fight to exercise its rights, or does everything happen smoothly? Do you have to fight to obtain services in French, or can you obtain them without any difficulty?

Mrs. Marlynn Bourque: No, we do need to make the effort.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There are always challenges. There is no guarantee, but with more funding we generally manage to do more. I will give you a very specific example that will illustrate your question very well. The last round of negotiations for the agreements began in 2004. Consultations were held with a view to concluding the agreements for 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009. Those agreements were renewed. So in March 2009, I will receive the same funding that was agreed on in 2004.

So everybody has to keep on going with the same funding we were receiving in 2004. With that funding, I have to pay my employees, travel, and so on. At the time, in 2003-2004, heating oil cost 57¢ a litre. The last bill I received showed that it now costs \$1.02 a litre. Yet I am not receiving more money to help me pay those bills, so I have to cut elsewhere, something that is becoming more and more difficult. However, everyone is facing the same problems.

My spouse works for the Yukon government. Over the same period, her salary was increased six times. In the Yukon, I don't know many private-sector employees who have received no pay increases. In fact, it's the opposite—we have full employment, almost no unemployment, except the structural unemployment among those who cannot work in the winter, for example. There is an unprecedented economic boom in the west. We had the Canada Games in 2007, and the Olympic Games are coming up. Alberta has an oil boom. We have difficulty keeping and recruiting employees. All that to say that it is difficult to keep going today with the same funding we were receiving in 2004.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: So you are having more and more difficulty operating—you illustrated that very well with an example—but oil is not the only issue. The cost of living is going up in general, and people want more, otherwise it becomes difficult to keep employees because they can go elsewhere. Are you finding day-to-day management difficult, without knowing whether you'll get the assistance tomorrow, or how much you'll get? Don't agreements that are renewed on an annual basis make long-term planning impossible?

I also want to talk about education. Do you have any problems there? Can you say that there are no problems and the school is in place because there is a need for it, or do you keep having to push for your rights? Are things easy for you? From the remarks you made at the beginning of the meeting, everything seems to be going well, but are there any problems on the ground? If you need a bigger school or additional services, is government assistance easy to obtain?

• (0925)

Mrs. Marlynn Bourque: I'll give a brief answer to your question on education. There is no doubt that we are growing. Our French-language school is marvellous, but the number of young people is going up. The same school also houses a high school, and in two years there won't be enough space for all the young people there. We will have to expand the school. The challenge is also to keep secondary-school students. Our community has a very good integrated education program. In order to continue the program, we clearly need support because we will be needing new teachers.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: You say that you will have to expand the school in two years. Do you have any guarantees that you will have the money you will need to do it?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There were two aspects to your question. As for the first one, we clearly recommend that the federal government renew the agreements on a multi-year basis in the future. We would also like reporting to be done on a multi-year basis. If we were to sign a four-year agreement, we would not have to redo all of the same procedures, administrative work, reports, and so on, every year. Otherwise, our only advantage would be having a guarantee that we would have the same amount of money in four years. That is the effect that these multi-year agreements have had over the past four years. Our only guarantee was to have the same amount of money in 2008 as in 2004. Therefore, we are fine with the multi-year agreement, provided that it includes an increase in keeping with inflation or another mechanism that officials could put in place.

As regards education, I am the former president of the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon, the only one, and I sat on the committee that was struck to build the school in 1995. We had been fighting for that school since the 1980s. The school projects the image of a beautiful castle, but that does not mean that it wasn't built without a lot of hard work.

When the only francophone school in the Yukon was built, the federal government paid two-thirds of the cost, although education is a provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Building this school did not cost the Yukon government very much. Two schools were built at the same time. The francophone school cost \$8 million, and the anglophone school, \$9 million. The Yukon paid for the anglophone school in its entirety and for approximately one-third of the francophone school.

We need to expand it, because at the time, in the 1980s, there were only 26 young people. At the time, people said there were no francophones in the Yukon.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. St-Pierre. You may continue later.

We will now go to the Bloc Québécois and Mr. Gravel.

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Thank you for coming. I am relatively new to this committee. Moreover, I don't know anything about the Yukon. What is the population?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: It is approximately 31,800 people. You can round it up to 32,000 people.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Earlier, you said that there were currently 3,600 francophones.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Statistics Canada provides four definitions of "francophone". As I said, according to Statistics Canada, my children are not francophone. There are 3,600 people in the Yukon who speak French. Pure francophones who do not have multi-cultural families make up approximately 4% of the population, which is equal to 1,300 people. That is the only population whose number and relative weight in comparison with the general population has increased. So, our percentage continues to increase, as do our numbers.

•(0930)

Mr. Raymond Gravel: You said earlier that Mr. Joseph Ladue founded the Yukon. Was he a francophone?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Joseph Ladue was a francophone who had a rather interesting background. He was a Franco-American.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: How did the francophones who settled there become anglophones?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Historians have difficulty explaining it. I was not there at the time, but—

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): You were too young at the time.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Essentially, they were assimilated. Why were they assimilated? That is a good question.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: I don't know, because I am not familiar with the history of the Yukon. Today, you say that it is easier to get by in French. If you compare yourselves to the anglophone community in Quebec, do you have the same advantages that it does? How do you perceive that?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Honestly, I don't engage in comparisons. My children were born in the Yukon. The francophone population in the Yukon has doubled. More and more people are maintaining their language and culture and flourishing. Our community is so unique that I could not even compare it with the Acadian population in the Maritimes. I won't allow myself to be drawn into a comparison with an anglophone population, because it is too far removed from my world, from my reality.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: You said there was a big school for children who speak French. That means that the people who want to preserve their language and attend that school may travel far distances. They need a means of transportation to get to the school. They cannot receive services in French in their part of the country, in their towns.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There is only one such school in the Yukon Territory, and it is located in Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon. Fortunately, most of the francophones live in the capital, and most anglophones... Whitehorse and its surrounding area encompasses 85% of the total population of the Yukon. The population of the city is approximately 23,000 people. The second largest city has a population of 1,600 people.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: We hear from many people from francophone communities in Canada. They often mention to the Court Challenges Program which was abolished. Did you need that program in the Yukon?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We did use the program in the past. Presently, we are using it by scraping the bottom of the barrel, and we would use it in the future. It is an essential program for francophone communities. The program has been successful and has helped us. We did not go to court. Why? Because people, advocates, pioneers in the Maritimes, in Ontario and in the west did the work for us. All of the francophones won their cases in court. None were lost.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: So it was an important program.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: It is an essential program. It is more than important, it is essential.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Very well.

You have an agreement with the federal government. Earlier, you said that the federal government was your best partner for preserving and promoting the French language.

Does the Government of the Yukon cooperate? Is there cooperation between the Government of the Yukon, the federal government and your communities?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes. I said that it was one of the most important partners. The federal government has bipartite agreements, including two major ones.

The first is the Yukon Languages Act, with the languages being French, English and the aboriginal languages. This act was adopted in 1988 and has the federal government financing 100% of the cost of developing services in French in the Yukon. So it is an essential partner in that sense. The act is reviewed every five years under a community, federal and territorial mechanism.

The other type of bipartite agreement deals with bilateral agreements on education. Here again, the federal government plays an essential role by allocating funding for the development of educational programs in French in the Yukon, including French as a second language, French immersion, and French as a first language for the francophone school in the Yukon.

Mr. Raymond Gravel: Earlier, you said it was an essential partner. What would you like to improve in that agreement or in the programs that the federal government offers in the Yukon?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Many things are working. It would be even better if the agreements were more flexible, if there was less bureaucracy and a little more understanding. The AFY signed its first agreement in 1983, and sometimes we feel like we are being treated as if we were still on our first agreement. When you negotiate with a banker for 30 years, normally he does not make you constantly sign the same papers: he has a sample of your signature, the files, and so on. Sometimes we fill out form after form for the reports.

I think there is a formal commitment by the federal government to its communities that is not in question. On the contrary, we are flourishing. Therefore, this message could be more apparent in the procedures. When 26 agreements have been signed with a key partner, it seems to me that there could be a little less paperwork and a little more acknowledgement. The financial means are often the sinews of war.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. St-Pierre and Mr. Gravel.

We will now continue with Mr. Godin.

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

Welcome, Mr. St-Pierre and Ms. Bourque. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to our committee and to hear positive things. It is interesting to see how things could be improved.

You said you met Mr. Lord during his national tour. Where did you meet him?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We met him in Vancouver and we invited him to come to the Yukon next time. He was very receptive. We were told that during the pan-Canadian tour, there would be a visit to the north. The north makes up half of the territory of Canada. We were very happy to have been invited to Vancouver.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When you went to Vancouver, you were not the only group.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There were three people from the Yukon and approximately 25 from British Columbia.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In these groups, were there any people who talked about court challenges?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes. Someone mentioned that it was a mechanism that had been used in the past and that had yielded meaningful results.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When you examine the agreements and realize what is expected of organizations, it is rather... I want you to correct me if this is not the case in the Yukon. You said that you were tired of seeing everything gone over with a fine-tooth comb after 30 years of cooperation. In your view, since everything has gone well, there should be some confidence. You were not being criticized for having done something wrong. You are going in the right direction.

Are the agreements signed on time? Are you forced to wait? Some groups have told us, for example, that their new agreement was to begin on April 1, but they had still not received anything in May, and that they were forced to take out a line of credit to continue their programs.

Do you have the same problems in the Yukon?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We face similar challenges. For example, it is difficult to explain why these multi-year agreements are often received and signed during the summer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Explain it all to me. I want to understand. You talk about the summer. How much time goes by, when an agreement expires, before it is renewed? Approximately how many weeks or months does it take?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Normally, we receive the signed agreements in our offices five months later.

Mr. Yvon Godin: If all is going well and you can survive five months without money, that means that you are rich.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: The mechanism has been improved somewhat.

Mr. Yvon Godin: How long did it take in the past? Twelve months?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: An improvement was made to the mechanism that may lead to an even greater improvement. As it stands, an amount is released in the first quarter of the fiscal year. So normally we receive an amount.

The Association franco-yukonnaise is different because it is diversified. Canadian Heritage agreements represent less than 25% of our annual budget. We have diversified our economic development, employment assistance services, immigration services, and as a result we do not have the same problems as other community groups. We are an advocacy organization, but we offer several services.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Despite that, Canadian Heritage still makes you wait five months. You say that things are running well and that with 75% of funding, you are more independent, but when you deal with the government... I am not out looking for problems, but I am asking you to be direct.

● (0940)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Several agreements were reached with the federal government, but the financial mechanisms and forms are different in a number of cases. In fact, there are 26 different forms. It is a bit strange to think that one department can provide us with funds every month while another makes us wait five or six months.

Perhaps it would be easier to adopt a mechanism by which funds would be made available at the start of the year. I am always told not to worry, and that the money is in the appropriations. For example, after listening to last year's throne speech, we were very pleased to learn, regarding our agreements, that additional money would be put into the support fund.

The announcement was made in February. At the end of the summer, during the holidays, we received a letter calling on us to undertake projects. The letter was sent out in August, during the Yukon summer. We were given until September 26 to submit agreements. In other words, we had four weeks to draft those agreements. At the end of February, we received the official document announcing that some projects had been accepted, but I had yet to receive the agreements at my office. That is a concrete example of things that occur year after year.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Your organization has to spend a lot of time simply trying to obtain those agreements when it should rather be implementing them on the ground.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Indeed. Moreover, the projects are viable when we submit them, but they become difficult to carry out once we receive confirmation of their acceptance. That is the case, for example, if a project must begin on October 1, 2007, but I receive a response in March 2008. I then have to prepare my project retroactively and change all the budgets. That is not always easy to do. In some cases, the Association franco-yukonnaise has had to turn down funds.

Mr. Yvon Godin: For example, if you prepare a project starting in August and the funding is only given to you the following March, then things simply can't work.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: In fact, there have been improvements, and we do take all that into account when we draft our applications.

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

I would also like to thank our witness.

We will now move on to Pierre Lemieux.

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

Thank you again for your presentation.

I would like you to talk about culture, which plays a significant and even crucial role in the vitality of our minority official language communities. As you might know, I represent a riding with a francophone majority. This is an official language community in a minority setting.

From time to time, we hear people say that arts and culture do not receive enough support, but a few weeks ago, I was able to announce a \$30 million investment to support community radio stations. The initiative was supported by the Bloc Québécois, whose members here I would like to thank. The \$30 million are part of a major initiative for our communities.

I would like to know what kind of cultural projects you undertake in the Yukon.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: The funds that we obtain through the Canada-community agreements are used as a stepping stone. They allow us to hire a permanent employee in the cultural sector. That person has to work incredibly hard to obtain funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and Yukon Arts Fund, among others. That is of great help.

Language and culture are the essential components of a strong francophone community. Concretely speaking, in terms of culture, we now organize a multilingual and multicultural festival. It is held on June 21, in conjunction with National Aboriginal Day, which is celebrated across Canada, and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, the traditional holiday on June 24. The festival also reaches out to the French and Acadians. It is a festival for the Francophonie, but in a multilingual and multi-ethnic setting. We've named it the Solstice because the days are very long in the Yukon around June 21. The festival showcases music in French, English and often in aboriginal

languages. There are bilingual presentations and bilingual artists. This is a way of promoting our culture. As well, a cultural caravan will cross Canada this year and stop off in Whitehorse, Yukon. The Fédération culturelle canadienne-française and artists from the Yukon will contribute.

In the early 1980s, there were very few francophone artists in our region. Today, the culture is alive and well. Some artists produce compact discs and have their own websites. That is the case, for example, of a group called Soir de Semaine, with whom we partner. You can go to their website and listen to their music by typing their name in Google. The group is made up of Yukon residents who perform music in French in the Yukon, where most people are English-speaking. All the same, residents pay to go see their shows. Just imagine! So, is culture important? It is very important.

With regard to our Franco-Yukon community, even our association is composed of people from various countries. We do a lot of promotion in Europe to increase the number of francophone residents. In fact, people in our area do not belong to a single culture. We have Acadians working in our offices. Our demographics include Franco-Ontarians, people from the Ottawa area, and, of course, from Quebec, but also people from France, Belgium and the Ivory Coast. Given the statistics that were published yesterday, we will have to increasingly think in those terms. Needless to say, travelling to Europe to do promotion as part of our work is expensive, whether you consider the price of plane tickets or hotel rooms, or the exchange rate with the euro.

There are Canadian programs, but more of them could be offered in our communities. Rural development is also very important. There are people from rural areas here. The remote regions should not be overlooked when these nice programs are designed. It is all well to bring immigrants into the major centres, but you cannot overlook Canada's rural areas. If you want a vigorous Francophonie and a strong Canada, then there has to be immigration everywhere.

● (0945)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you.

You talked about a project and a festival that will be held, but I would like to know whether associations or organizations play a key role in Yukon's cultural life. What is their relationship with you?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Things are going well because in fact we are dealing with our own members. We are labelled an association, but we are a kind of francophone community assembly, an integrated Francophonie. The association, which is the mouthpiece, includes what we call sectors. The cultural sector of the Association franco-yukonnaise is responsible for developing cultural projects.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: And what about les EssentiElles?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Les EssentiElles is the women's advocacy group.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Very well.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: The name is a play on words given that women are essential. At the Association franco-yukonnaise, the cultural committee in fact organizes or oversees the activities. It does not always organize them, but it does overall coordination. In March, there were more than 16 cultural celebrations, including an informal talent night. Young people, both anglophones and francophones, went on stage to show off their talents, while the audience enjoyed a dinner among family and friends. Over 150 people attended the event. In the Yukon, that amounts to 10% of the population.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: You were able to hire a few employees thanks to the agreements. Those people coordinate the shows and solicit the financial support of the federal government by way of other programs. I have already mentioned the \$30 million amount. Is that how you operate?

● (0950)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes. As I indicated, our funding is very diversified. At present, less than 25% of our funding comes from the agreements. On the cultural level, for example, we receive funding from the French Embassy to organize CINÉ-France, a French film festival. The French Embassy supports this initiative.

As well, we celebrate Francophonie Day and the French national holiday. We also receive funding from the Bureau du Québec, through the SAIQ and bipartite agreements, in order to promote cultural products. There are also agreements with the Yukon government and the federal government's arts fund. Yes, the base funding allows us to go and get... We could not survive with a minimum level of funding.

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

We have now completed our first round of questions. Given that we have only one witness, some committee members have suggested we have a second round. After that, it will be up to you to decide if there are other questions. We will begin the second round with Pablo Rodriguez from the Liberal Party.

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

Welcome Ms. Bourque and Mr. Saint-Pierre. I am very pleased to hear from you. I would like to congratulate you for your determination and commitment to protect and promote the French language.

Your comments are quite unusual. You are probably the most positive group that I have met here, and I have been a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages for four years. That's something. Generally speaking, I believe that things are going rather well. If you had to name one major challenge, what would it be? Are things going as well as you say they are?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: No. Nine men out of ten in western Canada are married to an anglophone—I am as well—and do not pass on their language and culture to their children. Can I appear before you and say that I am not pleased to acknowledge that my two children speak French just as well as anyone in the world, that I have a francophone school in the Yukon, that I have just attended a Francophonie festival, that I can celebrate my culture and my language, that the Government of Yukon has proclaimed May 15, 2007, as Francophonie Day in the Yukon? Yes, what we have to say is different. I understand and I am a bit...

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I wasn't criticizing you, on the contrary. Hearing from Mr. Godin all the time, you get the impression that everything is wrong.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to raise a point of order, Mr. Chair. I am simply doing my job as a member of the opposition.

Mrs. Marlynn Bourque: Let me just say that I have lived there for 21 years, as I mentioned. I am married to an anglophone who learned to speak French. Everyone in my family is bilingual. When we had children, we decided to speak only French at home because there is so much English everywhere. Speaking either language was never a challenge for them. They are very comfortable in both languages. I gave them home schooling for a few years and now they attend a francophone school. I am very glad that my children got their education in French.

I am a newcomer to the board of directors. I only joined it last fall. I was not involved before because I was living outside of town, at a 40-minute distance from downtown Whitehorse. Last year, we moved and I decided that it was time for me to get involved. I have some very close friends who have worked very hard to promote our beloved francophone culture. It required some effort, and I derived great benefit from it. I really saw how much hard work had been done.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Certainly.

When your colleagues, your counterparts from the Northwest Territories and Saskatchewan testified last week, they told us that if there was a problem with the Canada-community agreements, it was due to the one-size-fits-all approach and that we should take regional needs into account. This was true with regard to the Northwest Territories and Saskatchewan.

Are you of the same opinion? If you are, how should we adapt the program to Yukon's real needs?

● (0955)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Regarding this very point, I had written in my notes that we should recognize regional differences, community growth, specific economic situations in certain regions, for example the boom in the west, and the growth of Yukon.

Of course, the national picture cannot be described in such rosy terms. The demographics of official language communities are shrinking almost everywhere except for a few small regions of Canada. How can we improve the situation? For example, we held meetings in Yukon with 10 consultants hired by the government of the territories to meet with three members of the Yukon government. We were told that we were about to reach new agreements and recognize the needs of our communities. However, in the end, everyone got the same thing. Everyone got the same percentage of increase, everyone was treated in the same way. In Yukon, there was no infrastructure in the 1980s. Today, we have a new school, a new child care centre.

In my opinion, if we stop there, we will come to a point of exhaustion and lose our personnel. We have reached a critical mass for the child care centre and the school. All the space is being used, and that also applies to the community centre.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You have a high rate of turnover.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Extremely high.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Can you listen to Radio-Canada in French?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Without any problems? And do you also know all about the traffic jams on highway 40 in Montreal?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Indeed, there are some problems. For instance, current events are not covered very well. In fact, we would like to have local coverage. In English, they have the CBC—

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I said that because Mr. Godin says that he is fed up with hearing about traffic jams on highway 40 in Montreal, when he is in Bathurst.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez.

Maybe some people in Yukon will not use their cell phones while driving.

Now let us continue with Mr. Harvey, of the Conservative Party.

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): First, I am sorry for being a bit late this morning. My vehicle was broken into, the windows were broken, etc.

An hon. member: When will you finally understand that it is dangerous to be a Conservative?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Luc Harvey: It sure is dangerous. Therefore, I am sorry I had to miss your presentation. However, I see that you have nonetheless succeeded in transmitting your love of French to your children and to society at large. I think that your dynamic efforts are reflected in your results.

It is often easier to become bilingual or to learn another language when it is done for pleasure and not out of obligation. I think that you are making it pleasant for everyone. This might be the reason why you got such good results.

We mentioned your priorities, which are interesting. As you know, we have come up with new proposals for minority official language communities. If some big change was made, some adjustment that you could say is exactly what you wanted, what new changes or adjustments would you like to see in the next agreement?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We spoke of recognizing regional differences and recognizing the fact that in 2009 we cannot live on the same means as in 2004. It is good to have an agreement that reaches over several years, but we also must recognize this fact. Everyone has the right to minimum wage increases and to a minimum income. We must recognize local differences, so that we do not have to hear people say that everything is decided in Ottawa.

There should be some regional decentralization so that the agreements could be reached with regional powers, so that we can use the existing mechanisms and the regional offices. The powers of implementation and decision-making should be decentralized so that things can move faster, with less red tape, and so that more work can get done. If we want to promote the love of a culture and if we want to hold activities, we must be present on the ground. We cannot be constantly busy with drafting the reports.

●(1000)

Mr. Luc Harvey: I have no further questions.

The Chair: Let us continue with our guest member this morning, Mr. Jean-Yves Roy from the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Welcome, Ms. Bourque and Mr. St-Pierre.

As I listen to you, like everyone else, I feel that things are going well. That being said, you are nonetheless sending us some important messages. Basically, you constantly have to justify to the federal government the way in which you spend the funds that you receive.

You said that you spend much time with red tape and with justifying your activities to various departments, and that this is a huge waste of time. Nevertheless, government matters always require some accountability.

How could you simplify your organization's accountability procedures? After all, you are receiving taxpayers' money.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Accountability is crucial. My children must be accountable to me even if they have been living with me for 15 years. If I receive money from the government, I must be accountable for it to the government. If I am running a business, I must be accountable to my shareholders.

As a member of the board of directors, I must be accountable to my people. I must also be accountable to the federal government.

Usually, if we want more authority and control, more accountability and more reporting is expected of us. If we want just and fair control and flexible measures, we ask for a flexible solution. If we reach an agreement that covers several years, our accountability should also cover those years. This seems quite logical.

There could also be interim reports as well as a final report after the three- or four-year period. This already applies to requests for funds.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: How are your negotiations with the government going?

Do you deal with officials who tell you they have no power and cannot change anything? Do you get that message across in your discussions with senior officials?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There is a lot of turnover in the public service. There is also a high turnover in the population of the Yukon, as is the case of officials in departments. You often have to do the same work over and over again. You have to introduce yourself, even to your partner. That could change in government. The Department of Canadian Heritage is supposed to be our main partner within the federal government, but we sometimes have the impression that that is not the case. The department is like family which does not know us.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: You are always dealing with different officials, if I understood what you said. You are basically dealing with new people all the time.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Turnover is normal. Having to deal with new faces is not necessarily the main issue here. What's important is the message Parliament sends out.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: In short, if I understand correctly, the turnover itself is not the issue. Rather, the problem is that the new people are stuck with the existing culture of the department.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Exactly.

Sometimes, we deal with new consultants who talk about accountability. The objectives of a project must be met. We have to use certain keywords. We would like to stop dealing with the flavour of the day and agree on overarching issues. I believe that Parliament's message is clear, regardless of which party is in power. There has been a consensus in that regard for the last 25 years.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: I would also like to talk about education. You said that things are going well now.

One of the main problems of isolated communities occurs when young people are ready for high school or university. You certainly do not have any francophone high schools in your region.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes, we do.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: But you certainly do not have a university. Are there any colleges in the Yukon?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We don't have a French or English university in the Yukon.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: Are there any college-level institutions?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yukon College offers courses in English only. Our association is involved with issues surrounding post-secondary education. Some Canadian universities offer distance learning. There are also scholarships to study in francophone institutions.

• (1005)

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: So if the majority of your young people wish to pursue a post-secondary education, they would have to go to British Columbia or elsewhere.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Exactly. That is why we created a program called Place aux jeunes—Yukon. We want to stay in touch with them, to bring them back for their internships, and to encourage them to settle in the Yukon and have families there.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: How many of them come back?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: What's interesting is that today more young people between the ages of 19 and 25 come back to the Yukon than there are people of the same age group who are born here and who never left. Our programs do attract a good number of young people. It's not perfect, but one of the most important things for us to do is to stay in touch with our youth, the next generation, the people who will have their own families.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: I have a final question. The other services, for instance health care services, are they only provided in English?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Health services are the most important issue. We will invite you when we open our bilingual health care centre. It will be a success.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: All right.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Roy.

Our witnesses are well prepared this morning.

We'll move on to Mr. Godin.

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

Perhaps we should prepare the committee to go to the Yukon. We haven't been there.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): They're nicer.

The Chair: It's simpler to have representatives from the Yukon come here.

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: We could meet only with those who were nice—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I'm almost led to believe that people in the Yukon have found the right formula, since they're really bilingual: a francophone guy marries an anglophone girl. I don't want to congratulate the government for that, I want to congratulate you personally.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Yvon Godin: It's not easy and I'm being serious here. I'm from a francophone Acadian background. Some families left the province for northern Ontario. Continuing to speak French in an anglophone environment is not an easy thing. It's up to the parents to preserve the French language through incredible discipline at home. Outside the home, people speak English, and inside they speak French. That way, you learn both languages. Spouses learn each other's language. I see where you're coming from because I experienced the same thing, as did my family.

I know that you are proud of your school. There are 33,000 people; 28,000 in Whitehorse. They established a federal school and it was high time they did so. You don't have your own colleges and universities. So there's not much crow about. With the billions of dollars in surpluses, it seems to me that a college could be established. I don't want to sound negative, but I do understand there are still many things that remain to be done.

There is one positive aspect when you consider that if the infrastructure was in place, people could be given the tools to preserve their language and work. The Yukon can be taken as an example, as it is a small territory. It's possible to establish a school there because it's small. Many people in Whitehorse can attend that school. Look at the results today. If we extend this to Saskatchewan, Manitoba or Alberta, all the francophones who work in the oil fields could do the same thing.

How do you distribute a budget envelope among the various organizations in your territory? Who makes the decision to wait to fund the arts, for example? Is it individual, do you have to go to Heritage Canada, or do you participate according to your association?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: The distribution of the budget envelope we receive is specific to the Yukon. We have the community issue table. Federal funding and cooperation agreements are divided into four parts: the community newspaper, youth, culture and my salary. We reduced investments in administration to a minimum in order to increase them for youth and culture. It's not because we're the best in the world; it's simply because the Yukon has a community centre where we take care of the accounting and administration for everyone.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It's only one city. I have trouble figuring out how this could be done in Caraquet, Moncton, Edmundston and Campbellton.

•(1010)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: You're right, Mr. Godin: the community needs support. The University of Moncton has a research centre on linguistic minorities. Mr. Rodrigue Landry, a researcher and professor, said it bluntly: if there's no balance struck between community infrastructure and health care centres, schools, and so forth, the community will not be able to survive nor flourish. Therefore there has to be investment in establishing community infrastructure. You can't simply open up a school and expect that a youngster will speak French as soon as he walks through the door of that school. When that door is closed, what language will he speak?

Mr. Yvon Godin: It goes further than that. We remember that we were told in Sudbury that even if the Collège Boréal, among others, did exist, there was also a need for organizations that support francophones. They managed to get them and we have to continue in order to get the public to participate.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: To flourish, you need a balance, you need a strong and viable community structure. The day you stop moving forward, you start to go backward.

My approach is positive, so that we can get more and so that tomorrow morning, when we knock on your door to obtain funding to expand our school which is almost full, we'll get money for the high school.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That means that the Standing Committee on Official Languages has done a good job over the last few years.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: That means that people have worked hard.

Mr. Yvon Godin: With you—

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Yes, but they worked hard even before the existence of the Standing Committee on Official Languages—

Mr. Yvon Godin: The committee has existed since the act came into force.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: I wrote a little brief in the 1960s. When we prepared our first brief, before the Official Languages Act even existed, we stated that we needed strong communities.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Excuse me, but there's noise around you. Could you repeat that please?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: In the 1960s in Canada there was no Official Languages Act nor any recognition of minority communities. An inquiry asked what was needed to ensure the vitality of these communities. When comes time for us to be accountable, I'm asked to justify our existence for a period of one year. You can't justify the

existence of a community for one year; you justify the existence of a community for a generation.

I'm here to tell you that it did work. Indeed, before we were recognized in the Canadian Constitution and when we stopped being told to hide our French books and were allowed to have French schools, there was nothing in the west and the north. My friends in Manitoba had to hide their books. I'm saying that it works for a generation.

Mr. Yvon Godin: However, people from the Northwest Territories and Nunavut tell us that none of this exists. They still have a great deal of difficulty. They are not grouped together in a city like Whitehorse; they are scattered here and there.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: We're lucky.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, you're lucky if you're compared to other communities in the Northwest Territories.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. Godin.

I allowed a little more time for the witness to respond.

Are there other members of the committee who would like to ask questions?

Mr. Petit, go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. St-Pierre and Ms. Bourque.

A little earlier, you drew my attention to a point that has already been raised in our history books. You talked about presence and you cited a very concrete example: the French Embassy provides you with support for your francophonie film festival. You explained what this involved in a nutshell. If I'm not mistaken, the French presence is strong in the Yukon especially because of religious communities that worked with the Déné tribes. They were there long before you, the francophones who came from Quebec.

The French Embassy seems to be very close to your organization because it seems to provide you with assistance. Does it help you financially? I'm trying to understand how it helps you. How does the French Embassy intervene? It represents a francophone country, but it's not Canada. You are after all in the Yukon, not in Quebec. I'd like to know if this aid is due to a very strong French presence there. Many religious communities evangelized the Yukon, especially the Déné tribes. I read that in history books. Perhaps you could correct me if I am wrong. Is that why the French Embassy helps you? And how else does it help you apart from the film festival?

•(1015)

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: There are different aspects to your question and I will start with the last, that is how the French Embassy assists us.

In the Yukon, there is a group of people of French origin who work jointly with us and who help us. For example, the embassy provides us with funding for Ciné-France. They provide us free of charge with films that normally are very expensive to present. So that has a great monetary value. They pay for the annual celebration of the French national holiday. They help us with exchange trips. This year, we're celebrating the 50th anniversary of Robert W. Service, a great Yukon poet who married a Frenchwoman and who ended his days in France. The French government helps us bring our young people to trace their history in the cradle of the francophonie in North America. There are often exchange trips to Quebec, sometimes to Acadia, as well as to France. This year, the youngsters will go to France. The embassy supports us financially and from a logistical standpoint. The Vancouver office of the embassy even helps us from a commercial standpoint.

We have a lot of tourism enterprises. The Association franco-yukonnaise recently went to Europe to promote the Yukon. We want the French and the Belgians to know that they can come to the Yukon and obtain services in French. If they are sick they can go to the hospital in Whitehorse and receive service in French and they can also receive French-language service at the bank. That's very reassuring for tourists. It's easy to sell beautiful landscape, mountains and Mount Logan. From a commercial standpoint, the embassy also helps us disseminate our brochures. A French tourism guide will be launched in May and the Yukon government has just announced that this year it will translate its tourism website into French. Together with New Brunswick, this will be the exception in Canada. These are concrete gestures.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Now I understand the formula. Being here at the committee, I was able to hear about it. There is now interim financing, as you mentioned. You are given part of what you budgeted for, which means you don't have to wait. I think that it is in the order of 25%.

You stated that you had other sources of revenue. All the francophone groups that seek additional funding very actively take this into account. For example, you talked about the French Embassy. You stated that the federal government provided 25% of your funding and the remaining 75% comes from the work of the community. Did I understand you correctly?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: No. I don't want to mislead you. I said that the Canada-community agreements represented about 25% of my budget. For immigration, it's the federal government, in accordance with agreements. There's an agreement with the federal government for economic development. Therefore, there are various sources of funding. But I have to be realistic and obtain funding from the private sector for my newspaper. You can easily place an ad in the English-language newspaper and reach thousands of readers. Therefore it's difficult to obtain funding from the private sector.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Is the current change—multi-year funding—a source of difficulty for you? One year is a lot to begin with, two years is even more, so three years... Is it difficult for your organization to do up a two- or three-year budget?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: I have a short answer: no, because you have to have a budget review mechanism. A budget is a forecast. We revise our budgets. What's difficult is that we're being asked to draw up a budget now and we're being told that the amount won't increase. That's not realistic. It's not difficult to draw up a budget and put numbers to things, but our sources of funding are being limited. And then there's the accounting. If I've been a partner for 26 years, met all my goals and always produced good results, it would be nice if I were given most of the money and told that the funding had been approved. What I find bizarre is that I'm told not to worry because the money is in a government account. I would like that money to be in my account.

• (1020)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Chairman, could I ask one last question?

Nunavut has recognized three official languages: French, English and... I don't know how to pronounce it.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: Inuktitut.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Yes. Does the Yukon territorial constitution recognize two or three languages? I'm talking about the territorial constitution, not the federal one.

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: The Yukon Languages Act recognizes French, English and the aboriginal languages. Yukon has no Inuit population, but it does have an aboriginal population made up of a number of nations that speak various languages.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Do they all have the same status territorially?

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: I don't want to speak for them. The act gives them all the same status.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings our meeting to an end. On behalf of committee members, I would like to thank you for your refreshing candour, which is not unlike the weather. We found the pot of gold this morning: the smallest francophone community in Canada. You practically deserve our applause, but I will leave that up to the discretion of committee members.

Some voices: Hear, hear!

Mr. Régis St-Pierre: You are all welcome in our community any time. Don't be shy. It's not cold in the summer; it's actually very nice.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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