



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Official Languages

LANG • NUMBER 004 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

—
Chair

Mr. Steven Blaney

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Standing Committee on Official Languages

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

•(0905)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Welcome to the fourth meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today, Tuesday, February 24, we will hear from Mr. Tommy Théberge, Director of Services at the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille. We want to welcome him to our committee.

We were also scheduled to hear from two other witnesses, Mr. Côté from Quebec City, who was unable to come due to illness, and Ms. Landry from Shédiac, who was unable to come because of the weather. After we have heard from our witness, we will see whether the committee members still wish to hear from these other two witnesses at a future date.

So without further ado, we will begin with opening remarks by our main witness. Then, we will proceed with our usual rounds of questions.

Mr. Théberge.

Mr. Tommy Théberge (Department Head, Alternative Media Production Service and Technical Devices Services, Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille): Thank you very much.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's a pleasure for me to be here with you this morning to talk about braille. It's extremely interesting to be here with you all, because we are celebrating the 200th birthday of Mr. Braille, the ingenious inventor of this tool. I am also going to talk to you about the impact of the new unified braille code, both in terms of rehabilitation and alternative media. This is what I will be speaking about today.

I'd like to start by saying a few words about myself and my role at the Institute. The Chair has suggested that I give you a little introduction. I have been working at the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille for the past seven years. I am responsible for two services: technical assistance and alternative media formats, meaning everything related to the production of braille, e-texts, tactile graphics, digital full text DAISY, large print and, of course audio.

Technical tools are made available to the visually handicapped—be they blind or seeing impaired—to ensure that they can resume their activities, be it writing, reading, or getting around. These tools range from computers to braille note takers, braille output devices and white canes—in short, everything that is related to the provision of technical assistance. That is my role at the Institute.

The Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille is a rehabilitation centre that provides adaptation and rehabilitation services to the visually

handicapped living in Quebec, specifically in Montreal, Laval and the Montérégie region. The Institute covers a very large territory that represents approximately 50% of francophone clients in Quebec.

Other rehabilitation centres provide services to the visually handicapped in Quebec City or in other regions such as Trois-Rivières and so forth. They also provide services, but the volume of those services is more concentrated in the urban areas. Understandably, mobility is often an issue. As a result, in order to have access to these services, these individuals often live in urban centres.

Essentially, we provide services in various fields. It can be in the area of helping people resume their daily activities such as getting dressed, feeding themselves, etc. When people lose their vision, they must relearn to do things such as brush their teeth. When people suffer a substantial vision loss, they need to relearn things or learn how to do things differently. We help people do that.

We also help people with mobility issues and with getting around by showing them how to use a white cane or a guide dog. We also provide psychological support services and lessons in braille to people of all ages.

In 2006-07, some 8,000 individuals were registered at the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille for direct user services. We're talking about 5,350 direct services, excluding optometric services. These are services that I have just described, whether it be helping people resume their daily activities or get around or teaching them braille and so forth.

Some of the clients of the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille are blind and use braille. In Quebec, approximately 1,500 are able to read braille fluently. We could add to that figure some 300 or 400 francophones, maybe more, living outside Quebec.

Before continuing, I would like to stress the fact that there are two types of braille: grade one braille and grade two braille. Grade II braille and Grade I braille. Grade I braille is a letter-by-letter, word-by-word transcription.

●(0910)

Grade II Braille is a series of approximately 900 abbreviations presented in documents. For example, the word “necessary” is transcribed by “nc”, and the word “certainly” becomes “cn”. It is similar to stenography, which you may be familiar with. Why are there two types of braille, Grade I and Grade II braille? It has to do with the ability to quickly read documents and the volume of paper needed for braille. On a 8 1/2 x 11, 12 points font page of paper, braille has a ratio of 2.5. When you are producing a document that is 2,000 pages long, it works out to 3,000 pages of braille. Grade II allows good readers to read information more quickly.

The Institute Nazareth et Louis-Braille is about 150 years old. The Institute has been operating for about 35 years, providing services in its current form. You may recall that before 1970, the blind were sent to separate schools. When integration became the norm, the visually handicapped were able to integrate regular schools, while continuing to receive support from the Department of Education and the Department Health, through rehabilitation centres such as ours.

The Institute has always been concerned with the issue of alternative media formats and the role that it plays in this area. The Institute is a founding member of the Canadian Braille Authority, which is a pan-Canadian body responsible for various issues related, among other things, to standardization. On the anglophone side, the standardization of English braille is an issue for this body. On the francophone side, this initiative began in 2001 and was completed in 2006-07. I will come back to that a little later. We also play a role with regard to the Canadian Braille Authority.

We are very involved in the Comité québécois de concertation sur le braille, the CQCB. This committee falls under the Office des personnes handicapées du Québec and brings together four networks: education, rehabilitation, culture and community living. The CQCB is a very active organization in terms of promoting and ensuring wider access to braille.

We also work in close collaboration with the group of international experts on all braille-related issues within the Francophonie. Recently, we undertook an initiative to reform Grade II braille, since this need was identified by Francophonie members. Quebec, France, Belgium, Switzerland and the African countries are now meeting to ensure that once we have dealt with reforming Grade I braille, we can move on to address Grade II braille.

We also provide assistance as a member of the advisory committee of the Canadian Transportation Agency, which will be meeting shortly. We play a consultative role with that agency with regard to adapting transportation and documents provided to individuals using public transit. There are also other issues related to accompanying the visually impaired.

We are very concerned about the issue of public transit, especially throughout Quebec. We are therefore cooperating with the Société de transport de Montréal et with AMT, the regional transit authority, in regards to transit issues.

The new unified French braille code was adopted in response to a need that had been identified. In the past, a number of codes were used throughout the Francophonie. Document layout was left to the

discretion of the individual publishers, who simply followed established guidelines.

●(0915)

A blind person might read a document and, depending on whether he or she were in France, Quebec or Manitoba and depending on who produced that document, the layout would be different. So we wanted to standardize document layout rules. We also wanted to review the use of symbols. We needed to agree, for example, on how to standardize indicators for enter/return, upper-case, bold, or italic. This standardization process came about as a result of the problems we had faced. This was a collaborative effort that began in 2001 in the wake of the Casablanca agreement and that led to the creation of a task force that examined this whole issue.

The standardization process was completed in 2006. In fact, France adopted the code in 2006. An order was issued, and the code was enforced as of that date. In Quebec, the code is slated to come into effect in September 2009. We finally gave the go-ahead in November 2008. We agreed on a date, on ways to disseminate the new information, and on an implementation schedule. The code must be implemented in the educational, rehabilitation, and cultural communities, so in several areas.

Today, I'm going to talk to you more about rehabilitation, although I am comfortable answering questions dealing with other aspects. As you can well understand, the rehabilitation community is very small. One often comes across the same people.

The Chair: Mr. Théberge, if you don't mind, we'll start to go around the table, and you can answer members' questions. We'll start with Mr. Pablo Rodriguez, from the Official Opposition.

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

Good morning, Mr. Théberge. I'd like to thank you for being here today. I'm trying to wrap my head around this topic as it is rather complex. We are not used to discussing this subject. This is certainly true for me, but I'm very glad that we have the chance to discuss it today.

I'd like to know who has standardization authority. For example what is the federal and provincial governments' role in Canada in standardization matters? And internationally, is there a supranational body which ultimately coordinates what happens in France and here for example? Is there a concrete procedure in place?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: In Canada, there is the Canadian Braille Authority, which I briefly alluded to earlier. The organization has a permanent seat and is comprised of representatives from the Francophonie. However, the Canadian Braille Authority is a committee that does not have the means to do a lot. In terms of standardizing French braille, the province has taken a more active role. The Comité québécois de concertation sur le braille has largely taken on a leadership role with this project. This body brings together the educational, the rehabilitation and other related networks and communities as well as French, Belgium and Swiss partners. So that's how the initiative came about.

• (0920)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What specifically seems to be the stumbling block at this time? What decisions need to be made to solve this problem?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: Money is often one of the main issues. In order for an organization to operate properly, it must have some financial leverage. English is by far the main focus of the Canadian Braille Authority. And that's one of the reasons why Quebec stakeholders in the community have taken matters into their own hands.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Is English standardized, across the board?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: Not yet. The process is underway, and I can tell you that it is tumultuous.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Why is that?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: There are a whole host of issues to consider. When you undertake a process of that sort, tradition, for example written tradition, becomes an issue. Agreeing on a set of symbols means dropping others. And sometimes it's difficult to compromise. We face the same difficulties in French. One of the hot topics when the French-language CBFU was adopted was figures. The recommendation is that Antoine figures be used. In Canada, two kinds of figures are used: Louis-Braille and Nemeth figures. In Quebec, the latter were used. One issue was that in France, Antoine figures were used.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm sorry, but can you explain to me what Antoine figures are?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: There are three different ways of indicating figures in braille depending on the symbol used and the indicators. There are three ways that blind people receive information. And one of the problems was agreeing on the kind of figures to be used. It was an issue for francophones and it's also one for anglophones. And there are other issues, of course.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You said you needed resources. Who can provide them: the provincial or the federal government?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: The onus is certainly on the federal government to support bodies that can speak on behalf of both the Francophonie and the English-language community. And they need to be financially autonomous so that international task forces can be set up. Clearly, that's the federal government's responsibility.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: The federal government currently does provide funding for that.

Mr. Tommy Théberge: It does give some money to the committee.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: It gives it directly to the committee?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: I think so. I'm not sure of the amount.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: It's really interesting to be here today and to be discussing braille and matters affecting the blind. I get the sense that we don't usually talk about this. Do you understand what I'm saying? You have to talk about it to realize that we don't actually talk about it.

Mr. Tommy Théberge: There's a lot needed, that's for sure. Both when it comes to adapting texts and to access to services. The visually impaired often have to work really hard to promote and

increase awareness of their rights. There's really a lot of hard work to be done in that area.

The Chair: We'll continue this conversation with Mr. Richard Nadeau.

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

Good morning, Mr. Théberge.

You said you're aiming for a deadline of September 2009 for across-the-board standardization within the Francophonie. What still has to be done for this standardization to occur? Will it be achieved?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: To begin with, I'd like to clarify the issues that we're dealing with when it comes to three specific areas, culture, education, and rehabilitation.

As far as culture is concerned, in Quebec, the Service québécois du livre adapté, which is part of the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales, provides all users with access to documents in braille and in other alternative media formats. The new code has changed the way producers do things. The Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille is a producer. Mr. Côté, who's absent today, is also a braille producer. The new formatting rules now apply to the layout of braille documents to which blind persons have access. So he'll have to make some organizational changes to his processes and practices. That's one of the first cultural issues at stake.

In terms of education, the new code will be adopted as of the first year of primary school and so it will affect young children. I referred earlier to changes to figures. Those concerned will now have to use the new layout code.

Of course, we are expecting a transition period. Students currently at CEGEP or university will still have access to 1955 or 1996 braille documents, which is what they know. Ultimately, in 10 years time, all users will use the same code. So that's another issue.

When it comes to production and textual adaptation, we are foreseeing an overlap for time where various codes will be used in the layout of documents.

As far as rehabilitation is concerned, to begin with we had to review our rehabilitation tool, in other words the way we teach braille. For Grade I braille, we worked over the course of last year with the Association des établissements de réadaptation en déficience visuelle au Québec. We mandated a committee, which I also look after, to review braille teaching methods based on the new code's new rules. At the same time, we worked on pre-braille, in other words getting used to exploring true touch prior to actually learning braille per say.

Rehabilitation is another issue. It involves training and awareness building. Documents will be disseminated based on the new code as of September 2009. So we have to make our clientele aware of the new changes they'll come across in their daily reading.

• (0925)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: So that means that francophones, whether they are from Switzerland, Belgium, France, Quebec, Canada, Acadia, or elsewhere in the francophone world, will be able to read the same way.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: That's right, they'll pick up a document and will explore it in the same way, and come across the same indicators. For example, the indicator .12 means that what follows is in bold. This really has to do with the rules for document layout and symbol use. But that's a long-term project that we are just getting into.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Will teachers also all be on the same page by September 2009?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Each network has taken charge of training, awareness building, and implementation. And each network is going to ensure that these individuals are properly trained.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Perhaps this is a little utopian, but can an individual who uses braille get his or her hands on a document within a reasonable timeframe?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: There are two parts to my answer to this question. First, as regards education, there are adaptation services available which allow universities and CEGEPs, as well as elementary and high schools, to have access to people who will produce the documents. Of course, creating a document and transcribing it into braille does take some time. To give you some idea, a braille technician can transcribe about 100 pages into braille in a good work day. Of course, if we have 3,500 pages to do, this does take time, plus the time for checking and quality control.

The second part of my answer to your question has to do with access to the books of one's choice. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done in the area of leisure activities, for example, because at the moment, the Service qu  b  cois du livre adapt  , which is supported by the Quebec department of culture offers a good selection of books transcribed into braille—perhaps 400 each year. That means they must make choices. When choices are made, some things are left out. So, obviously, individuals who read books in braille have access to only a fraction of what is available.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Th  berge.

• (0930)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

Is your business card written in Grade I or Grade II braille?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: It is Grade I braille, and there are no capitals or indicators. It simply says INLB.

The Chair: I see. It would take a very clever person here to be able to decode that card this morning.

Mr. Godin.

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

Welcome, Mr. Th  berge.

I would like to start by thanking Monique for suggesting this subject. This meeting gives us an opportunity to learn a little more and to realize that we did not know that there was a problem with this. Only people in this situation are aware of the issue. At least, this gives us an opportunity to become aware of the problem. I am hardly an expert in this field. That is why you are here: to inform us and so that we can see whether we can help you.

I have a few questions for you. You will be changing the way you do things in September. Is that correct?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Then there will be the new training. What will happen to all the books written in the past with all the new people coming along, who will be learning the new version of braille? Will people learn both versions, or will one of the two eventually be eliminated?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Of course we are not going to simply throw everything we have into the garbage can; we are keeping our collections. Access to Grade I one braille remains quite easy, because the changes that have been made are all in the layout rules. For future production, everyone agrees that it will be very easy for braille users to have access to these documents. Of course, the documents that were transcribed with other codes—1955 braille and 1996 braille—will contain some symbols that may be unknown to readers. However we and other groups will provide concordance tables that readers who have not necessarily had the training can use to match up the symbols. In any case, one of the services we offer at the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille is the teaching of braille. So if users have too many problems, we could send them to an expert who would help them learn how to read the documents correctly.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Have you thought about anglophones who are learning French, and who are accustomed to writing in braille in their institution? Are there any French-language institutions where it would be as easy for them?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Let us take the example of the Ontario and Manitoba Departments of Education. They deal with Quebec producers for the adaptation of documents. Clearly, we will be applying these new presentation rules for braille in French.

I do not know what happened or did not happen regarding the implementation, training and raising of awareness in areas outside Quebec. This is an issue that should be taken into account and may not have been.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'm aware of one institution in Quebec. Do people from other parts of Canada have to come to Quebec? I believe there is only one institution in New Brunswick, but clearly it would not be of the same calibre as the one in Quebec. What happens to people from other regions of the country?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: When they want to transcribe a document, they turn to Quebec producers. The CNIB in Toronto also does this. The production is shared between Toronto and Quebec, because the CNIB can also meet the needs of francophones for texts in braille.

In Quebec the IRDPQ is the umbrella group in charge. And elsewhere in Canada, the CNIB is helpful in this regard.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It helps out with the documents or texts themselves, but what about the training aspect?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: They can also turn to these people. The school boards—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Is training available in Toronto, for example?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: They can provide it, but I would not want to answer for them.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Very well.

Do you have the support of francophones in the rest of Canada?

• (0935)

Mr. Tommy Thériault: In the francophone community, Quebec assumes a leadership role for the most part. I should say that no one from outside Quebec expressed an interest in taking this on. It would have been interesting if someone had come forward. One weakness may be the fact that we do not have at least one individual from outside Quebec who is involved in this project. You will also appreciate that there is the whole financial issue. Our resources are minimal.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We will now go to Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for appearing before the committee.

As far as this matter is concerned, I'd like to point out that Mr. Jacques Côté, the President and CEO of Jymico, a company that produces braille documents, works in my riding, not far from my office. My riding is also home to deaf people who are blind as well, who need instruction, and so on. There are two or three institutes in my riding. In addition, for about 50 years now, in my riding, the government has centralized a number of activities to help the visually impaired.

I raised a number of issues when we met with the representatives of these institutes. There is definitely support at the provincial level, as you explained. Not far from here, there is also the CNIB which does different work. We were struck by something rather unique. In our riding, some people are working with braille, and others are working with an audio system known as Audiothèque. The place I visited uses the Audiothèque system. Many people lose their vision because of old age or because of accidents. The person in charge of the facility I visited is Mr. Schram, whom I'm sure you know. About 100 volunteers come in to record newspapers, novels, and so on. I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, but I understood there was a sort of rivalry between braille and the Audiothèque system, which enables persons who have become visually impaired, for whatever reason, to pick up the telephone, dial a number and hear about everything going on that day, because someone on the other end of the line is reading for the visually impaired person.

Because I'm a federal Member of Parliament, I asked another question, specifically whether the federal government offered the same service. Let's say that you are an older person, that you are very wealthy and that you become blind or visually impaired, but you have to manage the money you do have and file your income tax returns. Are income tax returns available in braille from the federal government or the provincial government? I know that they are not available from the provincial government. Are they available from the federal government? I would ask you to answer afterwards.

There is something I would like to know about the services offered at present. We know a convention is being planned. Mr. Côté spoke about it. However, at the federal level, can the people you represent have separate services in braille or audio?

Mr. Tommy Thériault: You've asked a very interesting question. It also brings us around to discussing new definitions for the roles

that people play in society. I would just like to clarify one thing. When you talk about audio recordings, that is an alternative media format, just as braille and large print are alternative formats. Depending on a person's needs and his or her preferred way of reading, he or she may have various options to choose from.

At the moment, what you say is correct. In my role as a voter—and I say "my", because I am also a visually impaired individual—in my role as a taxpayer, I do not necessarily have access to the documents in the medium I would like to use or need. You spoke about older individuals who prefer audio recordings. Others may prefer braille, because audio recordings are difficult as well, and present different issues. At the federal level, the CRA had put out two calls to tender for the adaptation of documents into braille. By some twist of fate, neither call for tender proved successful in terms of locating a producer, and, in the end, no service was offered. As a result, the service is available in audio only.

The situation is somewhat similar for other issues as well. Of course, this is all related to the question of reasonable accommodation as well. That is the context of this entire debate. Federally, I remember that Elections Canada had approached me two or three years ago to see how the ballot could be adapted from coast to coast to coast, in the 308 ridings, if I remember correctly. I was asked how this could be done. Naturally, I made some suggestions, but there was no follow-up on this either.

So I think there is a great deal of work that needs to be done on that score.

• (0940)

The Chair: Thank you for your answer, Mr. Thériault.

Thank you, Mr. Petit.

We will now begin our second round of questions. We seem to be touching upon more subjects with each set of questions.

Ms. Zarac.

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Good morning, Mr. Thériault. I'm very happy that you're here with us today to educate us on a subject that I personally know very little about. Our discussion has centred primarily on braille, but earlier, you also briefly mentioned quality of life and how people's day-to-day lives are affected. This is what I'd like to focus on.

Do you believe that standardizing braille could improve people's quality of life because they would be able to get around more easily every day? I would like to hear you talk about that.

Mr. Tommy Thériault: There is a link between the standardization of braille and quality of life. Often, when a person loses his sight, one of the first things he needs to "tackle" is finding a way to resume his regular daily activities. These people are just starting out and must learn new ways of doing things. One can conclude therefore that the impact will be apparent from the way they relearn to do certain things.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Are services different for people who have to move from one place to another, from one province to another? Is a person able to orient him or herself easily?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: You've brought up an interesting point. Take, for example, elevator advertisements. Under the standardized French braille code, the Louis-Braille code is to be used for all advertisements posted in public places. Therefore, even though the Antoine figures are used in written texts, prepared documents, etc., a francophone living in Quebec, Ontario or British Columbia will still be able to recognize the same figures in public places. As far as advertisements in public places are concerned, there has been no change.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: However, there are not enough advertisements or posters. But that's another issue.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Earlier, you mentioned that things are further along on the anglophone side. However, you also said that there were problems.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: As far as Grade II braille is concerned, yes.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Standardization also affects Grade II braille. Do you think you'll encounter the same problems? Will you be able to meet your September 2009 objective?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: September 2009 was our target date for Grade I braille. With respect to Grade II braille, the committee of experts has already met. At the beginning of January, I had the opportunity to be involved in celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Braille, in Paris. It was a chance for us to meet with our French cousins and to initiate some discussions on Grade II braille. Very quickly, we came to a consensus on several things. Perhaps I am a consummate optimist, or perhaps it's just my personality. I expect that progress will be made more quickly on the question of Grade II braille than it will for Grade I braille. The trend is toward fewer abbreviations. So then, the overall number of abbreviations, of which there are currently 900, could be reduced.

In addition, we would like to target abbreviations according to the words that appear most often in a document. A woman by the name of Ms. Fontaine did a doctoral thesis which put us on to this very interesting approach. The words that appear most often in a document are the ones that perhaps should be abbreviated. This is more or less the basic premise that will be guiding our work. The members of the Francophonie seemed to be intrigued with this approach. In my opinion, we should see some progress fairly quickly on the issue of Grade II braille.

• (0945)

Mrs. Lise Zarac: You also mentioned that funding remains an outstanding issue. Do you believe that the current economic crisis will affect your goal, or are you confident that the work will be completed?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: In my opinion, the work should continue at its normal pace because the process is already under way. Where the impact of the economic crisis might be felt is in the area of requests to access to documents. Users could be denied access to documents at various levels, because of budgetary issues. However, we do have a commercial component. Many private companies work with us. However, I certainly am anticipating a small decline in the number of requests of this nature.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarac.

We will now continue with the member who brought this subject to the committee's attention, Ms. Monique Guay.

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivi  re-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Th  berge.

My father is blind, and as such, is very familiar with the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille. I have a few questions to ask you, particularly concerning financing.

You offer a vast array of services to the blind and you even help them get around their neighbourhood. You show them how to use their cane to step down from a sidewalk and how to listen for things; like it or not, they develop other senses.

My father listens frequently to audio books. You provide audio books to the blind. However, books like this are in short supply and the selection isn't great, or so I've been told. I was there when a young woman brought him some audio books and she talked to me about financing. The blind have certain needs, and only specialists are really able to help them. Not just anyone can serve as a volunteer and teach a blind person to use the new tools that are now a part of their everyday life.

As I was saying, my father listens frequently to audio books, but at the same time, given his age, it is certainly harder to learn braille. Do you have a special technique that you employ to help people like him?

As far as financing is concerned, what is it that you really need and what can we, at the federal level, do for you to help you provide more effective services to the visually impaired?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Funding is indeed a major issue. Earlier, I briefly talked about the Service qu  b  cois du livre adapt  , the Quebec service for book adaptation. Currently, in Quebec, there is a centralized alternative format portal that people can use to request audio transcripts and braille transcripts. People make requests like this. Funding is modest, even if it was increased recently. Certainly, a larger number of documents could be made available. In the case of educational and learning institutions, be they CEGEPs or universities, all documents are not accessible. Often, students must make choices and sacrifice some of their courses because the material is not available. Choices that have to be made are sometimes based on purely economic considerations. It all comes down to a question of funding levels for post-secondary institutions, primary schools and secondary schools, as well as for the Department of Culture.

In addition, in Quebec, there is a visual aid program for disabled persons. This program falls within the purview of the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec. Some coverage is therefore available. I mention this at this time, because it is one of the issues I'm working on with the Institut. These individuals may qualify for technical aids, depending on their situation. Obviously, there are rules. The choices are not limitless. There are restrictions on prices or on access to certain types of assistance, depending on whether a person is working, in school, or unemployed. If a person is unemployed, they qualify for less assistance than a student or a worker. These are some of the perceived inequities of an individual program. Funding is provided by Quebec's Department of Health which, in my estimation, is a model organization. I have been able to review a number of assistance programs for the visually impaired, in Canada and abroad, and I can say that the Quebec model is increasingly viewed as a model to emulate.

Conversely, in Ontario, people have to assume 25% of the cost of technical assistance. A video magnifier, a device that is used to enlarge text on a television screen, can cost about \$2,000. The province requires payment of 25% of the cost, or in other words, a payment of \$500. People can use this device for five years and then, if they want a more advanced model, they are eligible for the same subsidy. However, not everyone has \$500 to spare. One must be aware of the fact that within the visually impaired community, average income and education levels are very low. For those who are well off, this isn't a problem. However, those who have needs unfortunately do not have the means to meet them must go without this technical assistance.

In Quebec, a health care professional commissioned by a rehabilitation centre does an assessment. People are then able to receive assistance free-of-charge and the training services that came along with it. It is clear that access to these services is an issue for visually impaired persons living outside Quebec.

• (0950)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Théberge.

I now hand the floor over to our Parliamentary Secretary for Official Languages, Ms. Shelly Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Théberge.

As a new member of Parliament, I am truly impressed to be learning all of this. You spoke about Grade II braille, which consists of 900 symbols. In Parliament, acronyms are used and it's difficult to know what they all stand for. I can only imagine how long it takes to abbreviate symbols.

I would like to talk to you about France. You said that France has been implementing code standardization practices since 2006 or 2007. Are we talking about Grade II braille or Grade I braille? Grade I braille? Alright.

I learn from my own mistakes as well as from those made by others. I'm wondering if there were any surveys conducted in France to identify the type of errors that were made or the changes that need to be made to refine standardization.

Mr. Tommy Théberge: In France, the new code has been in use for the last two or three years. It has had the greatest impact on producers, those who are responsible for braille transcription rather than on readers, because readers are taught how to read the document. There may not have been any studies done.

During my most recent trip to Paris, I got the impression things were going rather well. I had the opportunity to visit l'Institut national des jeunes aveugles, an institution serving 200 young people who are blind. It is an institutional setting, which seems to be the type of setting most people who are blind are in. Things seem to be going rather well.

• (0955)

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I'm really quite impressed. You seem to be quite a talented man and you are working on several fronts. Thank you.

Mr. Tommy Théberge: It isn't always obvious, there are a number of intermediaries.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: You mentioned transportation services. In my riding, there are blind people who take the bus. Do you know what the provinces are doing to standardize bus schedules? Is that part of the braille standardization initiative?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: You raise a good point. I have often seen braille on bus doors. Louis-Braille numbers identify the door number. However, it could take a long time for a blind person to find these numbers on a door. The conventions are not quite in place yet as to where the braille would be located.

You referred to schedules. We might as well forget about that. No transit corporation issues its schedules in braille. The institute offers plans and has developed expertise in the field of geospatial development. Two years ago we signed an agreement with the STM that allowed me to access all of their plans. We adapted 44 out of 69 stations in Montreal to the tactile system. Blind people can consult a booklet and see, for each level and transit shelter, where they would gain access to the metro and bus stops. We are currently working on this for Montreal.

There is a great deal of work to be done in other cities and public places, like, for instance, this wonderful place we find ourselves in today. There is no site plan for this building any more than there is for the House of Commons. How could a blind person conceptualize the space he or she is in? We now offer a new product, for the development of tactile matrixes on paper, allowing blind people to understand where they are and what route they should take to get to a given location. There still is a great deal of work to be done when it comes to access to transit, public buildings, museums. We are navigating in uncharted waters.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: You talked about elections. Do people who are blind receive special ballots? Is that how it works?

Mr. Tommy Théberge: Currently they use numbered templates. A number appears on a plastic template. I have not experienced that myself. We have numbers; not the names of the candidates. Obviously, you have to know what to check off. There may be some thing to look into. It would have been a good idea to produce the ballots in braille. In an ideal world, a person could then vote alone and independently, instead of having to use the template.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Théberge.

We will now complete our second round with Mr. Gravelle, from the NDP.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Th  berge.

A project such as yours must be quite costly. I know you receive government funding, but do you have any other sources of funding?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: No, none whatsoever.

Mr. Claude Gravelle: How much does your project cost, approximately?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Which project are you referring to?

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Braille standardization.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Well—

The Chair: Pardon the interruption, but I would like to raise a point of procedure. I'd like to point out that Mr. Gravelle is an associate member of the committee and that we require consent from the colleagues for him to ask questions in Mr. Godin's place.

• (1000)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. All parties agreed that in cases when one extra person attends a committee meeting, this person could take some of the time allotted to a regular committee member to ask questions. That said, this person does not have the right to vote, regardless of which political party he or she belongs to. All whips have agreed to this.

The Chair: You could ask your whip to bring you up to speed. I'm sorry for the interruption.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): I think that if Mr. Godin has been replaced by someone else, then he has to withdraw from the committee. We cannot simply add members to the committee in random fashion.

The Chair: Alright, thank you.

Mr. Rodriguez would like to speak to this topic.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I would not want us to be steered away from today's debate, which I think is very important. I think we'll have to deal with that matter next time around.

Mr. Godin, no one was advised of this. I do not object to having Mr. Gravelle take part in today's discussion. I would really not want us to get off topic. However, we should get back to that issue later.

The Chair: This is what I would suggest. Once we have finished questioning the witness, we will be discussing committee business. That is when we can then address this matter and continue on.

If there are no further comments, we will continue as agreed, and address this matter later on.

I'm sorry. I would like to remind you, Mr. Th  berge, that you are here within a partisan setting with representatives of the people.

On that note, let's move on. Mr. Gravelle, you have another 4 minutes and 28 seconds.

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Mr. Th  berge, approximately how much does your project cost?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: The question is not quite clear. A number of initiatives have been discussed this morning, including adapting documents and the CBFU.

For instance, with respect to the metro stations braille adaptation project I carried out for our users based on STM plans, the costs are in the order of \$50,000. This project was funded by the Fondation de l'Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille. So, the project received no public funding. I submitted a request for funding to the institute's foundation, which financially supported the project.

In actual fact, this should be a public initiative. The access to public buildings initiative, in this case metro stations, should have been put to public tender, in which case, it should have come from the STM and, ultimately, from the Department of Transport.

Take for instance a project that would involve all museums in Canada. Because it would be related to culture, I would imagine that Canadian Heritage would have overall responsibility for the project. The department could then solicit bids to have site plans adapted into a tactile form. As a result, a blind person attending museums could access these documents.

When I went to Paris in January, at the Louvre, the Pantheon and the Sainte-Chapelle, they had taken measures to improve facilities and access measures to give us a good understanding of where we were located. It was well done.

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Very well, thanks.

Do you also receive support from the provinces for your projects?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: No, we do not. This falls within the purview of the Quebec Department of Health.

Mr. Claude Gravelle: In the other provinces, such as Ontario, is assistance provided?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: I know that the Ministry of Education pays for documents produced for students in alternative format. With respect to the public sector, I'm not in a position to answer that question.

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Thank you very much.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: The CNIB could probably answer these questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gravelle.

Can I find a copy of *Harry Potter* produced in Grade II braille?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: We produced a version this fall, my friend.

The Chair: In Grade II braille?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Yes. If my memory serves me correctly, this version contains a total of 2,500 braille pages.

The Chair: You've transcribed the first book in the series?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: We've transcribed all of them. In fact, we've just completed *Millennium*.

The Chair: We will begin our third round with Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours.

Mr. D'Amours.

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

Mr. Th  berge, thank you for being here today.

There's been a lot of discussion about taxes, the right to vote and other issues, but you've come here primarily to discuss the standardization of braille in French. In my riding, it is not as though a majority of people are using braille. However, several people have visual impairments and have to use braille.

The smallest village in my riding has a population of 140 people. Access to these documents is certainly not easy. You stated earlier on that documents are now available at a cost. But in actual fact, how can these people have access to them? It's difficult enough for them today, so if you want to change the entire system... How do they even have a chance of receiving documents like people living in more urban areas?

• (1005)

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: I'll answer your question in two parts.

First of all, that is a concern for the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille, because we serve the Mont  r  gie. It is a very large area which includes Valleyfield and Vaudreuil-Soulanges, even Granby. There are a number of small remote villages in this area.

The Institute produces 10 editions per year of *Carrefour Braille* and *Nouveau D  part*. These magazines will be available in standardized braille as of September 2009. In preparation for this, we've planned to include in this edition a special section with an insert explaining changes to presentation rules to our readers. This service is free, for all readers. Even francophone readers from outside Quebec and from Europe receive our modest publication. It is a tool that allows people to receive reading material for free, in the comfort of their own homes. It is funded through our operations, but the idea is to provide people with a minimum amount of reading material.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I wondered about access to services in remote regions.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: The Quebec service for alternative format books of the Biblioth  que et Archives nationales du Qu  bec provides document delivery services. A person can choose a book over the phone or by Internet and receive it in the mail in braille form or on a laser disk, in an audio format. It can then be sent back postage paid. You know that braille documents are postage free in Canada. That is one additional way to ensure that people in the regions have access to documents. Obviously, the documents would have to have been transcribed to begin with.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That is truly a dilemma.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: That is the issue.

• (1010)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Some services are offered, but if they're not available... It's all well and good to have a product, but you have to understand it. Harmonization is a good thing, but what will people have to do to understand? It's like learning a language: when things are going in one direction, you follow. If all of sudden someone decides to make changes, you have to learn to adapt. It is not obvious.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: We are here to offer support. All rehabilitation services in Quebec can meet this training need. I'd like to point out that when it comes to the symbols that make up the unified code, an *a* remains an *a*. The letters have not changed. A *b* remains a *b*. The difference has to do with the way in which information is presented.

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

Mr. Lemieux, welcome to our committee, sir.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Th  berge for joining us here today.

Last week I was in my riding. On Sunday, I attended an event and spoke to the parents of a boy with less than 15% vision. We discussed his education and braille. They told me that their son had started learning braille, but that he had decided to give it up in favour of other technology which can be helpful to him, such as computers, software, etc.

I would like to know if you have information to share with us on other technology that can help young people. I would also like to know what effect this new technology has on braille. Will braille remain as important, given this new technology?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: Your first question has to do with the teaching of braille and other methods available to students. When a student under the age of 10 is blind, we initiate him to braille without using any other tools. When you can see, you can see words, when you are blind, you need to touch them. For instance, the word water in French has homophones, it can be written in several ways. For educational purposes, young people must learn braille. It is doing young people a favour to teach them early. All grammar and spelling rules are a major consideration for young people. Very early on, they have to learn them if they want a long, happy, and successful academic career.

Your second question is interesting. Comparing braille with new technologies is a subject of some debate. Some people wonder whether braille will disappear. I will make an analogy, which may be somewhat shaky. When e-mail became accessible to all, people predicted that that was the end of paper. I don't think we've ever had as much paper as we have today. When it comes to braille, the same thing may apply. Over the last few years, I have sensed interest on the part of some private companies and public or quasi-public organizations who have requested braille transcriptions from us. We have noted an increase in the use of paper. Annually, we produce over one million pages of braille. This figure could easily increase.

Obviously it comes down to personal choice. Some people prefer audio tools, and model-based speech syntheses that use adapted software. They may use computers that provide verbal responses. A braille display unit shows the information appearing on the computer screen. It is one of the ways to compensate for the impairment. I personally think we need as many tools as possible in the tool box, including the ability to use braille. Often we work with a number of media, braille, paper and sound. It is by combining methods that people become more skilled at reading and writing.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Based on my notes, there are approximately 2,000 people using braille in Quebec. I would like to know whether you have an idea of the number of francophones in official minority communities who use braille.

• (1015)

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: In Canada, there may be 2,500 or 3,000 of us. I am not basing these figures on anything specific. I think, if you're counting francophones throughout Canada, there are approximately 3,000 of us.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

Ms. Guay will complete our third round.

Ms. Monique Guay: Thank you very much.

To the contrary, I think that braille will never disappear. Braille is the alphabet for blind people. They need to learn their letters, numbers and syntax. Braille cannot disappear. If you don't know your letters, it will be impossible for you to write with the help of a computer. Even if you are able to communicate orally, this is an essential base that must remain.

I am learning braille with my father, and it is not easy. I think it is more difficult for a sighted person to learn than it is for someone who is visually impaired.

We are going to have to invest increasingly in braille and in assistance for the visually impaired, given the high number of degenerative diseases. My father suffers from a degenerative hereditary disease. We will be seeing more and more of these cases. Families and the people who are called on to assist them will have to be prepared for this psychologically.

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: The caregivers.

Ms. Monique Guay: Yes, there are the family caregivers. In the case of my father, I realized that the people who were coming to see him in his home were professionals. They were volunteers, but they were able to work very well with the visually impaired. These are not people that you find just anywhere. These are people who have been trained by the Nazareth Institute and who provide their assistance.

Back then, my father had screen enlargement for this television. Every time that there was a change in technology, the Nazareth Institute would call him to find out whether everything was going well and whether he wanted to change to a new technology. He was able to do so at that time; however, he no longer can now. Every week, someone brings him audio books that he can listen to, because he does not yet read braille well enough. He is 90 years old, and it is difficult for him to memorize things. He is no longer a 20-year-old and therefore things are more difficult and take longer.

I would like to thank you and encourage you to continue. If we can do anything, do not hesitate to contact us. I will be suggesting to the committee later on that we invite other witnesses to come and talk about this matter to us. This matter is extremely important. We often think that someone else is looking after this or we assign greater priority to other disabilities besides blindness. This is a disability that we really need to deal with, and you will have my full support.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Guay.

Do you have any comments to make, Mr. Th  berge?

Mr. Tommy Th  berge: To conclude, I would simply like to thank you for the interest you have shown in the issue of alternative media. If I can do anything whatsoever to help you, I would be pleased to do so. I provided Ms. Dumas with documents containing my contact information. If you need help or support, I would be pleased to provide it.

I will also be sending Ms. Dumas a document that summarizes the various issues pertaining to braille, but also as it relates to access to documents. We talked about various topics: voter and taxpayer rights, access to public buildings, geospatial representation. Braille involves many things. With the standardized French Braille Code, we will come to an agreement on a range of conventions that will be used to adapt future documents. But we need to have these documents and we need to be able to work on them.

Thank you very much. I look forward to seeing you again.

The Chair: Mr. Th  berge, thank you very much for meeting committee members this morning.

We will take a few minutes to thank our witness and then we will resume committee work after a brief pause. Thank you.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•

• (1020)

The Chair: Before we begin, I would like to present a housekeeping motion. It pertains to our study on the standardization of braille in French. I need committee members' support for the proposed budget of \$12,950. Is that agreeable to you? We will forward this matter to the proper authorities.

Mr. Galipeau?

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orl  ans, CPC): Mr. Chair, maybe I wasn't paying enough attention, but I would like to know what the \$12,950 are for.

The Chair: It's the committee budget to cover the expenses of the witnesses that we are inviting as part of our study on the standardization of Braille.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: How many witnesses are we planning on hearing from?

The Chair: We have put eight of them down. We usually put down fewer rather than more, so that we do not have to bother the members with a subsequent motion.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A voice: You mean fewer rather than more.

The Chair: We put down fewer names rather than more.

We will now proceed to the other motion.

Ms. Guay.

Ms. Monique Guay: It's concerns braille. Can we hold an additional meeting? Can we continue our discussion?

The Chair: Yes, we can discuss that immediately. As concerns the witnesses, at least one other working meeting has been scheduled to hear the two witnesses that we did not hear from this morning.

Ms. Monique Guay: Some witnesses were unable to come. I know some people who would like to testify, but they were unable to prepare their submission by the deadline.

The Chair: Perhaps you should send your—

Ms. Monique Guay: We'll do that.

The Chair: —to Ms. Dumas.

Two groups were scheduled for this morning. The Canadian Braille Authority was also mentioned. This seems to be, at the national level, the association with an interest in the subject at hand, that is French and English braille.

I have been told that the Office for Disability Issues, which is part of the Department of Canadian Heritage, is the federal organization that should be invited. If the committee members agree, we can check the availability of representatives to come and testify on this topic. This morning we not only addressed the challenge of standardization, but also service delivery and our role at the federal level with regard to persons with visual impairments. If you agree, we will give ourselves some leeway so that we can see where this subject leads us.

Mr. Petit.

• (1025)

Mr. Daniel Petit: I have contacted certain witnesses, and in my riding, a number of them are on the agenda. One of the problems that certain witnesses seem to have is that the period between when they are invited and when they appear is so short that they do not have time to make the necessary adjustments. We should perhaps consider the fact that we sometimes miss out on hearing some witnesses because the timeline is too short.

The Chair: On Thursday, we will be hearing from the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Daniel Petit: He is here in Ottawa, and so there is no problem.

The Chair: We definitely will not be hearing from the next witnesses on standardization before next week, which will give them a bit more time to prepare.

Mr. Daniel Petit: I discussed this with Ms. Guay, and it's definitely a problem. Today, we were forced to turn away good witnesses who would have given us excellent guidance. This is not an easy topic, and I would like us to give special attention to these witnesses.

The Chair: Pardon the pun, Mr. Petit, but I would say that we are flailing around blindly in this area.

Let us now go on to the motion tabled by Mr. Godin and distributed by the clerk's assistant.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, this motion is usually introduced at the beginning of each meeting, but I think that it was forgotten this time. It reads as follows: "That, whenever possible, all meetings held

with a Minister or with the Commissioner of Official Languages be televised."

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Are there any comments on the motion?

We have ensured that on Thursday, the appearance of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Graham Fraser, will be televised.

Are there any questions or comments on the motion?

Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Thank you, Mr. Godin, for your motion. I am in full agreement.

The Chair: Excellent.

Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: I would just like to say that I thought that, according to the rules that govern the committees, any committee that is hearing from a representative of Parliament—like Mr. Fraser—or a minister, is automatically obliged, or at least its chair is obliged, to reserve a room in which there is a TV camera. There are two parliamentary rooms that have a camera. I thought that this was an obligation, but now Mr. Godin has me doubting that.

The Chair: It's common practice, but we can make it official through a motion, if committee members agree.

Mr. Petit, or rather Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It's a good thing that I ate a hearty breakfast this morning. He called me "Mr. Petit." Don't ever call me that before breakfast, because I simply am not in the same league as Mr. Petit.

Voices: Ah, ah!

Mr. Yvon Godin: This is the only committee that has objected to being televised. A motion was tabled to solve this problem and we never heard anything further. Now I am introducing a motion so that this doesn't happen again.

The Chair: I think that I have unanimous consent from the committee members who have spoken.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1030)

The Chair: This morning, we had three rounds. All the members were able to speak, except for two members on the government side. I'm going to read the short excerpt that I was shown concerning rounds of questions in the Marleau-Montpetit. Section 55 reads as follows:

[At the committee's discretion], other members of the House may attend committee meetings, question witnesses and participate in the committee's public proceedings, unless the House or the committee orders otherwise. They may not, however, move motions, vote or be part of a quorum.

I will take a few questions and comments on the replacement of members by associate members as part of the rounds of questions.

Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I just want our operating rules to be clear. We discussed them briefly, and I think it is important that we keep this meeting on track. Mr. Godin seems to think that all parties are aware of these rules, but I am not sure of that. I was not notified. I will check, and if the parties were notified then it's not a problem. It's just that we should be operating under clear, specific rules. According to what the clerk said, a guest member of Parliament may only speak with the consent of the committee.

The Chair: In the document, it says that it's at the discretion of the committee—

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: In other words, that approval of the committee members is required.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Glover, I'm going to ask Mr. Godin for some information. He is the whip and he may have attended some meetings. He will inform the committee members and then we will proceed.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, it is not my responsibility to inform the other political parties. I apologize sincerely, and I will just tell you what happened.

I already spoke over the phone to the Conservative and Liberal whips. This is an agreement that we reached when we struck the committees and when we had to decide if they were going to be made up of 11, 12 or 15 people. The political parties agreed on the makeup of the committees. However, the week before the parliamentary recess, there was an incident during one of the meetings. A committee member stated that according to the rules, he was not required to listen to the person. Then, the Conservative whip said that he was going to settle the question. So it's supposed to be settled.

I don't want to say any more, I just wanted to tell you what happened. That's why I asked the whips, as soon as that happened, to clarify things with their members and their committees. If they have arguments to bring forward, they should do so within their political party.

The Chair: So we should each check with our respective political parties. For example, Mr. Nadeau could have come to the committee with an associate member, someone from the Bloc Québécois, and that person could have participated in the round of questioning.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, in the Bloc's round. If the Bloc Québécois has seven minutes, they can share their time. In certain cases, this allows people who have some expertise on the topic to participate. We have 37 members in the House of Commons and our party is the only one that is not represented by two people on committees. This situation would also give us the opportunity to ensure that everyone knows how the committees work. The associate member would not have the right to vote or to introduce motions or anything like that, and he or she would not use up the time of any political party. The Conservative whip certainly did not say that the committee member had to leave the room when the other person spoke.

The Chair: I would still like to limit the interventions. We will have to check with our respective political parties. That will clear up any doubt, because otherwise, we could end up with 20 speakers. I see that some people want to say something.

Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I just have a question about procedure. It's a good question, but I think we should settle it before a problem occurs. Apparently it is permitted according to your procedures, but I'm wondering how we can ask the committee for permission before a witness appears. This has really relegated our debate to the sidelines.

The Chair: Ms. Glover, there is an expression that says that we shouldn't air our dirty laundry in public.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I agree with you, Ms. Glover. I never thought that this would happen. I thought that it was settled because the agreement was reached with the whips about one month ago. I thought that the whips had told all the committees. I apologize. That's why I didn't bring... If I had, it too would have sparked a discussion.

The Chair: In the wake of what Ms. Glover said, I suggest, as chair, that we organize a meeting after having heard the witnesses when such things happen, so that we can clarify things.

Mr. Lemieux.

•(1035)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: If there is an arrangement, then that's fine. I'm just a little concerned. The primary responsibility of certain members is to be present here on the Official Languages Committee. For example, a witness testified for an hour and a half, which is somewhat exceptional. Usually, there are one or two witnesses for an hour and then another group of witnesses. Certain members did not get to speak. Often, the members of the Liberal Party and another party cannot participate in the debate because there is not enough time. I sit on other committees, and the same is true for my colleagues. It is curious that the NDP asks a question in every round, but it's... Wait, Mr. Godin.

The Chair: Mr. Lemieux, Mr. Godin has a point of order.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, the issue has been settled. The NDP is entitled to ask a question in each round. Mr. Lemieux should learn the facts before making such a statement. Furthermore, the NDP member did not take up other people's time. He is using my time.

The Chair: I accept your point of order to the extent that Mr. Lemieux needs to be reminded that the speaking order was the subject of a long debate. By the way, I would like to talk to you about something immediately afterwards.

Mr. Lemieux, have you finished?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, not yet.

The Chair: I would like to come back to... Pardon me, Mr. Lemieux, I just want to tell you... wait a moment, I want to...

Mr. Yvon Godin: I thought that this problem has been resolved. But the question is being asked again this morning.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, please, I would ask you to...

Mr. Yvon Godin: It is not just today; it has always been like that.

The Chair: Just a moment. This morning, our witness was able to give us a good briefing. I must say, to Mr. Lemieux and to all committee members, that, as chair, I must follow the speaking order, and I did so up until the third round.

Here is what I am proposing. I do not know if you want to make a decision on this this morning. If the committee members feel that each parliamentarian has been able to “grill” the witness to their satisfaction, and if you so desire, after the third round, I can allow committee members who have not had the opportunity to speak in the previous rounds and who wish to do so to speak. If you tell me that you obtained all the information you wanted, I could then give the floor to one or two members who had not yet been able to speak.

In my opinion, it is preferable to talk about it now instead of in front of witnesses. I am now going to listen to a few speakers. If my proposal is not acceptable, the existing speaking order will apply.

Mr. Lemieux would like to finish making his position known. Then, I will listen to Mr. Nadeau, Mr. Petit, Mr. Galipeau and Ms. Guay.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I wanted to say three things but, Mr. Godin interrupted me after the second.

First, it's fine that there was an agreement among the whips. My first words were “it's fine”.

Second, as a member, I am entitled to raise a concern. It is my right to do so. If you wish to criticize me, that is fine, but I have the right to voice my concerns.

Third, if the NDP asks a question in each round and the committee is an agreement, I will accept that, like the last time. I also accept the fact that he wants to have someone here to ask a question in his place. However, I have the same concern as members who come here every week but are unable to take part in the discussion.

Mr. Chair, I have nothing more to day.

The Chair: I could submit to you yet again the speaking order that was determined at the first committee meeting.

Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Chair, it would be wise, instead of what you are proposing, to proceed with the fourth round, and if the first party to speak, for example the Liberal Party, does not wish to do so because it has exhausted the subject matter or because of any other reason, we could move on to the next speaker. You need only put that question. It would be much simpler that way.

•(1040)

The Chair: I will take note of the committee's wishes in this regard. I find your idea interesting.

Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Chairman, we have tried to come up with some kind of procedure that will enable us to work. The Standing Committee on Official Languages has already met twice, and the same problem has come up in other committees on which my colleagues and I sit. I'm concerned about the fact that there will be two useless Conservative members here, because when we have

three rounds, there will always be two members who are unable to speak.

There is something that is beginning to worry me a great deal. During the last session, our side had four members, each of whom managed to speak. Now, we are five—yet two members on our side will not be able to ask the witnesses questions, or even speak to you, Mr. Chair. That is very serious. We should take a close look at the length of the rounds of questions. Instead of giving everyone seven minutes for the first round, we could give everyone three or five minutes.

The Chair: That time is already five minutes, Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Chairman, I'm trying to express my concern. This time, I had the opportunity to put the first question, but that may not always be the case. Sometimes, I might be left with the impression that I have no business here.

There is one thing we can agree on. I know that this is very good for Mr. Rodriguez, since the Liberals will have an opportunity to ask questions. I call that muzzling the members of Parliament. Indirectly, this procedure stifles our freedom of expression, and I find that absolutely inconceivable.

I would ask the chair to study this issue very closely, along with other people. He might even see what other committees are doing. We have to find some way of allowing my colleagues and myself—those colleagues who may be unable to take the floor—to address the committee and to ask questions of the witnesses.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Petit.

I have three speakers on the list. Let's move on. I have Mr. Galipeau's name.

Ms. Guay, you have the floor.

Ms. Monique Guay: We followed the same procedure when the Liberals were in power. They were six on the committee, and they did not all always have a chance to speak. They never had a fit because they could not speak. Moreover, I am against limiting testimony to one hour. When we welcomed the witness this morning, we did not specify that his testimony would last from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. No specific timeframe was given. I think that the information we were given was extremely useful. I think that restricting our time with the witnesses, or cutting off their testimony at the end of one hour, is irresponsible and disrespectful. These people travelled here to see us. And on that topic, Mr. Blaney, I hope that you will play your role as chair and determine whether this is appropriate or not.

Let's please stop whining. It's awful. We look like school children, but we're parliamentarians. Take the time allotted to you. If some of you don't want to speak, then don't speak. You have that right. If some of our members don't want to speak during the fourth round, that's up to them. They are intelligent enough to make that decision themselves. But if we start fighting at every meeting, this committee's work will not go very well. We will never be able to work properly, and we will never deal with any issues as we should.

The Chair: If I may, perhaps this is a tempest in a teapot. If we count the first speaker and the four rounds, four government representatives spoke. Earlier, Mr. Nadeau said that it would depend on what parliamentarians wanted, if they have any questions to ask. I would put my trust in parliamentarians.

I will listen to one last comment, Mr. D'Amours. If others speakers wish to have the floor, we will hear from them, but I have no desire to revisit the debate on the speaking order. I think that we will be able to find a way to make this work.

Are there any other comments?

So we will hear from Mr. D'Amours, followed by Mr. Godin and Mr. Petit.

• (1045)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Chair, I will not drag it out. The government members of this committee should be honest enough to recognize that there was a vote and that the decision was made to establish a new schedule, different from the one in place during the previous Parliament. The government members should be respectful and stop talking all at once. Whether it works for them or not, that is one thing, but we voted, and the majority ruled. I think that we need to stop hearing about this. We could also vote on other things, and it might further upset government members. Let's remain calm and move on.

I hope that we won't need to discuss this again because if we do, I would be pleased to table a motion to vote on this matter again. There are more important things than fighting about whether a member is entitled to speak. If the members wanted to share their time to allow their colleagues to speak, there were entitled to do so.

The committee made a decision about the speaking order, and that decision should be respected once and for all.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, you seem somewhat reluctant, like you are trying to avoid...

I want to add that I agree with Mr. Nadeau. Today, for example, we had a lot of time; in fact we have until 11 a.m. We could have given everyone a chance to speak, as we have done in the past when I chaired the committee that toured the country. We had the time. If others wished to ask questions, we gave them the opportunity to do so. It's not the end of the world. When we are short on time, we are unable to do this. When we have enough time, we will be reasonable. I think we need to adopt this approach to our work.

Also, we have already decided who will speak and when. I am not saying that we are pleased with the decision. The Conservatives and the Liberals have opted for a formula that is not to our liking. I think that people can change their minds. I lost a round. I wasn't here for the fourth round. You do not have to believe me, but I was planning to pass on the next one. I'd already asked the questions I wanted to ask. That is how we need to proceed.

Furthermore, there is nothing unusual about this. I have seen Liberals do it when they were in power, and you've even done it yourself in the past few years. When certain members have five minutes they ask questions for two and half minutes, and then they give their colleagues the rest of their time. This is what happens.

The Chair: I will conclude this discussion. I apologize to their government members, but the witness caught me a little off guard. He thanked us. I could have allowed the committee members the opportunity to speak. The witness caught me off guard when he said he was happy to have been invited and thanked us.

Next week, we will hear from the Commissioner. Thank you.

Meeting adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

**Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:
Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante :
<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

The Speaker of the House hereby grants permission to reproduce this document, in whole or in part, for use in schools and for other purposes such as private study, research, criticism, review or newspaper summary. Any commercial or other use or reproduction of this publication requires the express prior written authorization of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Le Président de la Chambre des communes accorde, par la présente, l'autorisation de reproduire la totalité ou une partie de ce document à des fins éducatives et à des fins d'étude privée, de recherche, de critique, de compte rendu ou en vue d'en préparer un résumé de journal. Toute reproduction de ce document à des fins commerciales ou autres nécessite l'obtention au préalable d'une autorisation écrite du Président.