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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 the 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

This meeting will be divided into two parts, with the same witness. We will begin with a review of the 2008-2009 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Official Languages, which was referred to the committee last Tuesday. In the second hour, we will deal with the commissioner's contribution to our study on postsecondary institutions and their efforts in promoting bilingualism in Canada.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome the commissioner and his team and I invite him to make his opening statement.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Good morning, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

Parliamentarians and members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, good morning.

To present the findings of my third annual report, I am accompanied by Johane Tremblay, acting assistant commissioner, policy and communications; Ghislaine Charlebois, assistant commissioner, compliance assurance; Pascale Giguère, attorney and acting director of legal affairs; and Lise Cloutier, assistant commissioner, corporate services.

[Translation]

The Official Languages Act is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Clearly, the parliamentarians who worked on its development, culminating in its Royal Assent in 1969, were visionaries.

This legislative framework was absolutely necessary for the future of the country. The language guarantees contained in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms provided a valuable basis that supported the review of the Official Languages Act. Many benefits arose from the charter in terms of human rights, culture, work force mobility and the economy. They benefit all Canadians, regardless of their mother tongue.

Nonetheless, the time has come to eliminate the road blocks and contradictions related to the implementation of Canada's language policy and to attain a certain level of coherence between the various government policies, programs and initiatives.

[English]

This year my report aims to measure the distance between the road that's been travelled and how far we have left to go with regard to three components: the learning of the official languages; the quality of services provided by federal institutions; and the organization of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

Despite the significant investment it represents for our country's future, access to official languages learning opportunities remains limited. By enabling young Canadians to acquire skills that will benefit them professionally, personally, and culturally, we are contributing to their professional mobility. In the current economic climate I find it unfortunate that governments and post-secondary institutions are not focusing enough on second-language learning programs.

Although students are encouraged to take the bilingual path throughout their academic careers, post-secondary institutions seldom provide them with opportunities to continue studying in their second language. After 40 years of language policy, it is high time we removed the last roadblocks on this path. The federal government should bring together the various players in order to create a true second-language learning continuum.

[Translation]

According to our observations of institutions, government services are offered in the minority language, when there is significant demand, 75% of the time. Very often, federal institutions do not actively offer their services in the language of the minority, and citizens hesitate to ask for these services in their language.

Moreover, we are too quick to settle on providing the linguistic minority with a translated version of the services provided to the majority. However, in an important judgment rendered on February 5, 2009, in the Desrochers case, the Supreme Court declared that federal institutions must consider both the nature of services and the specific needs of official language communities.

In other words, the obligation to provide services “of equal quality” in both official languages does not necessarily mean “identical” services.

Finally, the organization of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games clearly illustrates some obstacles to incorporating linguistic duality into our Canadian reality. I continue to be concerned our country finds it difficult to meet the challenges related to official languages at the Games in an exemplary manner—especially considering its 26 million anglophone and 9 million francophone inhabitants.

[English]

As indicated by the study I released in December and by the results of the awareness campaign subsequently conducted among federal institutions, the organizing committee and federal institutions must do more to ensure that the Canadian public and visitors have access to services in both of our country's official languages.

I'm still hoping that the games will reflect linguistic duality before, during, and after the athletes' arrival. There's little time left to solve the most pressing problems, namely those pertaining to translation, interpretation, and signage. Federal institutions that have a specific role to play must realize that the arrival of thousands of additional visitors will lead to an increased demand for bilingual services. This is especially important in terms of services provided at the games' venues, and services provided to the travelling public, mainly in the Vancouver and Toronto airports.

The Olympic Games are proof of the need to better integrate official languages into federal institutions, not only in terms of services, but also in terms of support for official language communities and the promotion of linguistic duality.

[Translation]

In 2010, it will be five years since Parliament strengthened part VII of the Official Languages Act. I am not very impressed with how the government has managed the implementation of the provisions in this part of the Act. The response has been slow and minimal. My staff and I will therefore be paying special attention to this issue in 2009-2010.

To foster linguistic duality in Canadian society, I call upon your stakeholders to get involved. As I will explain in a forthcoming presentation, I encourage postsecondary institutions to forge close ties between the second-language programs offered and the need for bilingual staff from employers such as the federal public service. I also encourage young people to continue improving their second language by taking advantage of opportunities offered by the other language community. Finally, I encourage public sector leaders and managers of public services to show leadership and commitment to make linguistic duality a value in federal institutions.

[English]

Public service renewal should facilitate the training of future leaders who are committed to promoting linguistic duality as a value through both their day-to-day actions and the implementation and management of language programs and policies. Naturally, all of this must be supported by sustained leadership on the part of the federal administration, based on a dynamic vision of linguistic duality that's characterized by respect, dialogue, and partnership. For this to happen, the federal government's ongoing commitment is necessary.

In June 2008, the government released its "Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality". I'm still concerned about the delay in the implementation of this initiative, the lack of information on certain projects, and the uncertainty that stems from the elimination of programs in some areas targeted by the "Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2008-2013".

The lack of specific objectives pertaining to the government "Roadmap" does little to assure us that it will be implemented

effectively. Community organizations, the education community, and provincial governments are concerned because they do not have a clear vision of the federal government's actions. While the investments allocated to various programs are certainly welcome, the government would do well to outline an overall vision and specific objectives that it intends to achieve.

● (0910)

[Translation]

The parliamentarians' vision in 1969 was bold, ambitious and above all crucial to the future of this country. Forty years later, other challenges lie ahead. At the time, this vision was a way to bring Canadians together and to ensure that the state could serve them in the official language of their choice; now, it is a way to help them to reach their full potential.

Thank you for your attention. I would now like to take the remaining time to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Commissioner.

I now give the floor to Ms. Zarac.

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Fraser, thank you for being with us here today.

After having read your report, I have the impression that you are uncomfortable and concerned given the government's inaction in the area of its responsibilities under the Official Languages Act.

When you last appeared before the committee, you shared your concerns with us regarding the transfer of responsibilities to Treasury Board. The committee therefore felt it would be relevant to invite the president of Treasury Board to meet with us. Mr. Toews appeared before the committee on the 5th of May. In his statement, he mentioned the restructuring, but he had not changed his responsibilities. He spoke to us of his responsibilities under parts IV, V, VI and VII of the Official Languages Act. However, in your second recommendation, which is addressed to the president of Treasury Board, you recommend among other things that he fully assume his responsibilities under part VIII of the Official Languages Act towards all federal institutions, including separate employers. Mr. Toews never mentioned his responsibilities under that part of the act. Since you mention it in your second recommendation, I believe it must be very important.

Do you believe he is aware of his responsibilities under that part of the act? Could you explain what those responsibilities under part VIII would be?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Part VIII gives him these responsibilities. I have discussed these recommendations with him since his appearance. I also had a discussion with Ms. Doré, the Head of Human Resources, who also appeared before you. The fact that the presentation on the new restructuring no longer mentions official languages was somewhat of concern to us. However, we were assured that it was just a technical error. Needless to say this did not encourage me to withdraw the recommendation that he fully assume his responsibilities.

As I have already stated before you, there are advantages and disadvantages to these transfers of responsibility to Treasury Board. A transfer always means there will be some instability, but one must recognize that the fact that these responsibilities have been strengthened by placing them under a central organization does present some advantages. People are quicker to answer telephone calls coming from a central organization rather than one coming from an organization at the same level as they are. This issue of "horizontality" is dealt with in greater detail in last year's annual report. We continue to raise the issue.

I'll ask Ms. Tremblay to give you more details on part VIII.

● (0915)

Mrs. Johane Tremblay (Acting Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Part VIII does indeed describe the responsibilities of Treasury Board. This is where we see that the responsibilities for the coordination of the implementation of parts IV, V and VI have been entrusted to it, but not for part VII. Heritage Canada is responsible for coordinating the implementation of part VII for federal institutions. That is why we referred to part VIII, which focuses on all of Treasury Board's responsibilities.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Perfect.

Were you reassured by that answer from Treasury Board, Mr. Fraser? Are you feeling more reassured, now that Treasury Board will have more powers? You say that there are real advantages to having those functions transferred. Is the answer reassuring? Do you believe they will assume their full responsibility?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I always hesitate to say I'm reassured when I have oversight responsibility, which requires some vigilance. I was happy to hear the minister and Ms. d'Auray insist on telling you—and me—that there have been no changes in responsibility and that the role of official languages has not been pared down.

However, the fact that the document they submitted setting out their responsibilities did not include official languages indicates that they do not consider official languages a priority. We must remember that. I talk about inconsistency in the federal government's approach to official languages, and that's the sort of omission that demonstrates the inconsistency.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nadeau.

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

First of all, I'd like to welcome Mr. Fraser and his colleagues.

I read your report, Mr. Fraser. I noted twelve points, but I know that in five minutes we could not touch on them all.

I worked at the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, and the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française. I worked hard for the right to manage our schools in Saskatchewan, and have taught in minority communities. I'm from a minority community. I am for an independent Quebec, but that's something we'll talk about again later, although it's a good topic.

I noticed that the word "assimilation" was never used. In fact, saying, "never" may be a bit strong; let's say it is rarely used. The survival of French in Canada, and in North America as a whole, is what I really believe in and am prepared to fight for. Canada has not done what it needed to do. Among other things, it has allowed the provinces to do dreadful things. That's why we need an independent Quebec.

In your conclusion, you state that we're much closer to having the languages on an even footing. But I feel we're still very far from it; in fact, we're getting further and further away from guaranteeing the survival of French. French is losing a great deal of ground. As I said in an article in the daily newspaper *Le Droit*, after your report, bilingualism in Canada exists in theory, not in practice. That's what hurts.

Regarding the issue of assimilation, on page IX of your report, you state: "[...] pressure for assimilation in official language communities remains strong". On page 55, you add: "Members of Francophone communities outside Quebec are among the most bilingual Canadians in the country (84% speak English and French)". I would prefer you to say "Acadians" or "French-Canadians", rather than "members of Francophone communities outside Quebec". For them, it's more a question of moving towards assimilation rather than ensuring the survival of French, in my view. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being bilingual. I'm bilingual myself.

I'd like to know why no one talks about French disappearing because of assimilation among people whose primary language from a very early age has been French. Why don't you mention this in your report? Would you like to tackle the issue at some future date? You could at least set aside two or three pages for it, to show that the danger's real.

● (0920)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I do not think that we are avoiding the issue. We speak of vulnerabilities and of challenges within the communities from the perspective of vitality. I would like to share with you a quote found on page 59. It is from Gratien Allaire, a historian at Laurentian University in Sudbury. He has been an inspiration for us not only through his work in historical studies but also through his commitment toward the community. The quote reads as follows:

These days, we talk about health in terms of improving well-being, that is, no longer simply in terms of the absence of disease. I'm happy to see that when we talk about community vitality, we are broadening this idea beyond the mere absence of assimilation.

Communities are committed and active. I think that has become apparent because of the success that has been achieved through the type of work that you accomplished in the area of school governance, i.e., the establishment of schools in western Canadian communities. The communities are stronger than they were in the past. Obviously, there still is assimilation. However, I have seen the efforts made by school boards to reach out and promote French-language schools to exogamous families. Promotional efforts have also been made by Ontario's Ministry of Education. I think we can say that these are signs of vitality.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

We will now move on to Mr. Godin.

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

Mr. Fraser, I would first like to thank you and your team for the support you have given to my bill, Bill C-232, an act to amend the Supreme Court Act. You said that it was a very strong message sent from Parliament, that it gave leadership to the country. In Canada, which is supposedly bilingual, two official languages were adopted. We are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act this year.

In your report you say that things are not evolving fast enough: either we are regressing or things are not going as they should. In response to a question asked in the House of Commons, James Moore, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, claimed that Canada had achieved much progress since the Official Languages Act was adopted. Let me quote this: "Mr. Moore has defended his government by quoting positive passages in Graham Fraser's report, which states that 'the future of official language communities is very promising'."

I see a contradiction there. Throughout your report you say that you are not pleased with the situation, but there you say that the future is promising. I find that problematic.

Yesterday evening, the House voted on my bill, which deals with Supreme Court justices. Not a single Conservative MP voted for the bill, not even the minister responsible for the francophonie. Not a single member of the Official Languages Committee, including the chair, stood up to support it, whereas this was a private members' bill, and MPs can vote without having to toe the party line in such cases.

Would you not agree that this is how the current government is telling us that it is not willing to accept the fact that there are two official languages? How can it be that, in a country with 33 million inhabitants, we could not find nine bilingual judges?

By the way, I want to clear one thing up: I really do not care whether a Supreme Court justice is a francophone or an anglophone, so long as he or she is capable of reading our laws in Canada's two official languages. As you yourself have said, the law is not translated: it is written concomitantly in French and in English. The court was established for Canadians. The appointment of justices should not be used as a way of granting favours.

If we cannot find nine people who are able to speak the two official languages, out of a population of 33 million Canadians and Quebecers, then we have a serious problem. I would like to hear your comments on that.

• (0925)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, I wish to congratulate the member on his bill. He defends very eloquently the principles that I myself defend, namely, that it is important that Supreme Court justices understand pleas, documents and Canadian laws. As the member said, these laws are not translated: they are drafted in English and in French.

The day before yesterday, during my press conference, I was asked about this, and I said that one thing struck me. I will open the

parentheses here and answer the member's question by discussing various interpretations of my report.

The language situation in Canada is complex. There are success stories and failures. The very nature of the political debate means that some people tend to point out the failures, the challenges and the problems, rather than the success stories. I accept all that in my report, and when I present it, my objective is to indicate future challenges.

In my opinion, when we see these kinds of situations, we quite clearly call them inconsistencies. We have a system that allows a citizen to be heard. In the current government framework, this system was even improved this year so as to guarantee that the accused has the right to a trial in the language of his choice. However, we make one important exception to this: the Supreme Court. I find that inconsistent.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We will now go to Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Once again, I wish to welcome all our witnesses. When I read your report, I was really pleased to see that you also focused on the successes. That interests me a great deal, because there is a saying in English and in French that says that success never comes before work, except in the dictionary.

We are continuing our work, and we hope to hear about many more successes. As you mentioned in your report, there have already been successes. I would like to remind you that our committee held a meeting this week. I want to come back to what Ms. Zarac said. Members of our committee are not necessarily always aware of what is happening in the field of official languages. I listened patiently while questions were put to our witness, the ombudsman. Certain questions on promotions within National Defence were repeated several times. Even our members did not know that on January 5, 2009, a general indicated in a letter that it was necessary to be bilingual in order to obtain a promotion. It was said that Mr. Toews was not very familiar with his department, but I would remind you that you do not always know everything either. On behalf of Mr. Toews, I wish to repeat that Part VIII refers to Parts IV, V and VI. It is not that Mr. Toews did not know that, it is that Part VIII does not exist without Parts IV, V and VI.

I would like to bet back to the success stories. I would like to quote a few words from your report: "[...] in the past year, Canadian Heritage has launched a number of initiatives to strengthen its interdepartmental coordination role for Part VII [...]"

We are aware that Canadian Heritage is now offering briefings to analysts from the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat in order to raise their awareness of the importance of Part VII in the way it should be taken into account during the examination of submissions and memoranda to cabinet.

Part VII is still mentioned, because there have been successes. Mr. Toews is aware of these successes, which have affected his department. That is how Part VII affects his department.

Canadian Heritage is currently putting the final touches on a tool for Part VII in order to help departments preparing memoranda to cabinet so that they can include a good analysis of the possible repercussions of their policy and program proposals on official language minority communities and on linguistic duality. These are examples of successes within Canadian Heritage, and there are others.

There is one thing I would like to know. If you were the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, what would you do differently?

• (0930)

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is an interesting but difficult question. I must admit that I have no ambition to become a minister. Therefore I hesitate to answer.

However, I can discuss the role of government in general, and this would be true for any government. There is one aspect that I find very interesting in Part VII and the amendment that was made to it in 2005. This opens the door to cooperation between federal institutions and communities.

I fully agree that Canadian Heritage has taken action to inform other departments and to hold meetings and briefings. However, the major successes linked to Part VII occurred when people took initiative, often in the regions, to establish direct contacts that led to cooperation. They brought interesting initiatives to the communities. What is interesting about Part VII is that it opens the door to such collaboration.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: You talked about meetings and cooperation

The Chair: We will get back to that.

Thank you, Commissioner.

We will begin our second round with Mr. D'Amours.

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

Commissioner, thank you for being here together with your staff. I have the flu this morning. I may not be in great shape, but I will do my best.

I would like to get back to what Mrs. Glover said. Commissioner, you mentioned that you were told that this was a typo. That is quite the typo. I am convinced that you took the time to read the committee transcript for the meeting in which he participated. He was not even able to distinguish in Parts IV, V and VI who was responsible for what in such and such a section. I do not think this was simply a typo. The minister probably just forgot. However, instead of letting Mrs. Glover answer instead, I think that we will ask the minister to come back before the committee. He will thus have a chance to explain for himself if there are things he does not know about in his department, especially when it comes to his responsibilities for official languages. After that, we will see whether he is truly willing to ensure that he respects people and his responsibilities.

I would like to get back to page 3 of your presentation. It says this: "In 2010, it will be five years since [...]". We are talking about Part VII, Commissioner. I will give you a concrete example, and you tell me if this is acceptable for official language communities and groups.

Certain groups submitted funding applications to the Conservative government in November. This is a typical example, but we could produce tonnes of them. So they filed an application for operating funds and another for project funding in November 2008. The agreements expired March 31, 2009. This is May 28. We are talking about two months after the expiry of the agreements. These organizations were forgotten, and they are wondering if they will receive their funding or if they will have to lock the door and walk away because the money is not available. They are wondering when they can carry out these projects—I am talking about education—in various colleges and universities. Do you think it is acceptable that organizations have to survive on the personal funds of managers or members of the board of directors—volunteers—and that two months later, they do not even know whether they will be able to implement projects throughout the year that would improve education and the official languages situation in minority communities, be they French or English?

• (0935)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, I cannot discuss this project in detail; I have just been told that there are problems. However, I can tell you that if there is one problem that appears all over the country—if there is one major problem experienced by all organizations that deal with the government—it is delays in funding. I have often been told, from the Maritimes to British Columbia, of the problems experienced by groups that have applied for funding and that eventually receive their cheque in October or December. We are talking about money that has to be spent before March 31.

This presents a problem on two levels. First of all, there is a euphemism that is often used in government, the expression "manage the risk". Managing risk, when you do not know whether you are going to receive a cheque, puts an incredible amount of stress on people who are working with very few resources to start with. However, there is another problem that was reported to me by more than one group. Quite often, these communities, these organizations work in small communities, and they want to use their funds to provide work for local people. When there is a study or recurring funding but the cheque is late and the work has to be done within the next two or three months, they cannot call upon a group in their region. They have to use a large consulting firm in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver, which has the resources to do the work immediately, on demand, for late December, to do work that has to be done by March 31. The challenge is twofold.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Commissioner, for an application of a few hundred thousand dollars—and I am not exaggerating—it takes seven months of evaluation, at the end of which no response is provided and not a cent is advanced. They do not even need the cheque; a simple answer would do, and they cannot even get that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours. We will go on with Ms. Guay.

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fraser, I am pleased to see you again. I will not ask you whether you would do a better job if you were minister, because I am certain that you would do a better job than what is being done now.

I have before me an article from yesterday's paper, which reads as follows:

Unilingual customs officers from Ottawa will not have to learn French.

Unilingual anglophone customs officers will be able to continue to welcome visitors at the Ottawa International Airport as long as they call upon bilingual colleagues to provide service in French to travellers who request it.

This, Mr. Fraser, is unacceptable today, especially in Ottawa. We are supposed to be a bilingual country. However, that is completely false. You just have to go on Sparks Street to see that you cannot get served in French. I find that completely unacceptable. This is something that certainly has to be examined closely.

In another article, it says that when it comes to bilingualism, airports perform poorly. The Vancouver Olympics are fast approaching. We know that there is a problem and that we will not be able to obtain service in both official languages. We have 9 million francophones and 26 million anglophones. We should be able to provide these services. And yet it will not happen. I am telling you, we are going to have a big surprise during the 2010 Olympics, and it will not be very flattering for Canada.

I would like to hear your views on this. The fact that customs officers are not forced to learn French is truly unacceptable. A complaint should be filed. Something has to be done to change that.

• (0940)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, we have had talks with the Canada Border Services Agency so that the service can be improved. However, I should point out that under the act, the linguistic obligation to serve the citizen is not an individual one, but rather an institutional one. So what is important is that the Canadian Border Services Agency serves the citizen in the language of his choice.

In response to the question by the member regarding airports and the Olympics, it was precisely to point out that challenge, in terms of the Olympics, that we conducted this horizontal study. We started with a study that we made public in December, followed by an awareness campaign for about 20 federal departments and institutions, precisely to tell these institutions that this is a global event. One of the responses we got and that I was quite concerned about was that it was business as usual. And yet it is not business as usual; this is a global event where the whole world will be watching and where expectations of Canada will be very high.

Ms. Monique Guay: All the stakeholders we met with about the Olympic Games expressed concerns regarding bilingualism. No stakeholder told us that everything was fine, that there was no problem, and this was true even when it came to broadcasting and on-site services to direct people. I am not particularly worried about the athletes; I think that the athletes will have access to services. However, when it comes to the people coming to see the games, I am very worried. I am worried about signage. It is not true that everything will be ready by 2010. People have told us this here in committee.

I would like to know what you could do to bring about some progress on this front.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I continue to have talks with the organizers and with the government. I have continued to point out the importance of this event. As I mentioned earlier, we did have an awareness campaign for institutions. We are using this annual report to signal problems that exist in our airports. We will do a more targeted follow-up of the report that we issued in December.

One of the things I said both to organizers and my organization is that we will not be waiting for the publication of the report in September to table an analysis of the problems. As soon as we identify a persistent problem, we will send our finding to the organizers. We continue to monitor this very vigilantly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I do not want to tell them what they should have been doing after the fact.

• (0945)

The Chair: It is a matter of being proactive. Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Ms. Guay.

We will continue with Mr. Lemieux.

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

Thank you for being here today.

Mr. Godin made some comments about Supreme Court judges. I would also like to make some. Obviously, as far as I can see, bilingualism is very important when the government chooses Supreme Court judges. This standard is so important that eight out of the nine Supreme Court judges sitting today are bilingual. This is a great achievement, not only by our government, but also by former governments.

[English]

But there are other important criteria as well, of course, when it comes to Supreme Court judges. For example, it's important to have judges from across the country to represent the different regions. I don't think any Canadian would be comfortable with having all Supreme Court judges come from only one region of Canada, but it's not mandated in law. For example, it's also important to have men and women as Supreme Court judges, but it's not mandated in law. It's important to have bilingual judges as well, but it's not mandated in law. If the government starts mandating everything—percentage of women, exactly which regions Supreme Court judges must come from, all these different criteria—you can imagine this would make quite a difficult situation.

[Translation]

However, in my opinion, the greatest concern is that if Mr. Godin's bill is passed, we are not promoting both official languages, because a crucial element of the Official Languages Act states that Canadians have the right to be unilingual, francophone or anglophone, or to be bilingual. This is a choice that every Canadian can make. According to Mr. Godin, if the best candidate is well qualified, an expert in legal matters and very competent, but he is a unilingual francophone, he is not acceptable.

[English]

And it's the same for anglophones. If you have a unilingual anglophone judge who is truly the best qualified candidate—he has the best legal experience—this law would say he need not apply. He's not acceptable to Monsieur Godin if this law passes. That's my concern, Commissioner. You're the Commissioner of Official Languages. I'd like to know what you would say to unilingual francophone judge candidates

[Translation]

... unilingual francophones who want to become judges—

[English]

and what you would say to unilingual anglophone judge candidates who are no longer acceptable to the government if his law applies.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, I have already spoken to judges and former judges of the Supreme Court, who, in their interviews of clerks for the Supreme Court, have made it clear they feel they cannot be sufficiently supported by clerks who are not able to read the documentation in both official languages. That's meant that at some universities, some law schools in Quebec, their students are no longer being interviewed, because judges have come to the conclusion that the students are not graduating from that law school with a sufficient mastery of both official languages.

I guess my response to you and to this committee would be that I think the ability to read the jurisprudence that comes up from lower courts in both languages is a critical quality for any judge of the Supreme Court. Any person who had ambitions to be on the Supreme Court would, I think, from an early age, decide they would have to have some familiarity with the jurisprudence in both official languages.

• (0950)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'm not sure all judges from an early age have the desire to be a Supreme Court judge. It's something that develops throughout their career. For example, in British Columbia,

[Translation]

the francophones account for 1.4%. Thus, if we need a bilingual judge who practices in French, there are a few candidates, but we would prefer having more of a choice.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: We want candidates with extensive experience.

[English]

I'm disappointed with your reply, because I don't believe it shows respect

[Translation]

toward unilingual people in Canada, francophones and anglophones.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Godin, I think that you would like to have the floor.

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

[English]

I don't want to lose all my time on this. The bill was passed last night. But just for the record, the information I got from the last time they looked at judges for the Supreme Court is that there were four candidates who were totally capable of doing the job, and the four of them were bilingual. The next appointment will be five years from now.

The representative from the University of Toronto who was here a week or two ago said it would be a good signal to send to the university, so they could start to train their people. The only reason they're not giving the training is because they don't need to do it. The minute they get the message that they need to do it, they will be happy to do it.

I don't think what Mr. Lemieux is bringing up is a problem. I think it's the principle of whether the court is made for the judge and the appointment or made for the citizens. Is it for the justice of the citizen, or is it to have a judge be appointed? We have judges in the smaller courts, provincial courts, or the Federal Court. You're not going to tell me that at that point they won't start to be qualified to be a Supreme Court judge. We have many judges in our country, and I trust our system on that.

[Translation]

My question is about Air Canada. Is Air Canada violating the Official Languages Act? I want to discuss the current prevailing situation at the Ottawa airport. In your report, you specifically referred to it, and you even emphasized it. Is it only because you are not satisfied with their way of doing things, or do you feel that the law has been violated? I know that journalists have asked why other airlines are not targeted by this legislation. However, let us remember that Air Canada is a company that was previously owned by the government; it was a public company. And when the current owners purchased it, they also purchased the obligation to respect the Official Languages Act. Therefore, they have an obligation in this respect.

I would like to hear your comments on this because I think that it is an important matter. This is a persistent problem that did not just arise last year.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, there have already been court cases involving Air Canada, when it challenged its language obligations with regard to service. After Air Canada appealed, the court decided that Air Canada is obliged to deliver results, that it was not enough for this company to say that it is making efforts, providing courses, etc. As far as language is concerned, Air Canada must deliver results. Therefore, when there are no results in terms of bilingual services, it is clear in my mind that Air Canada is not abiding by the law.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Fraser, if there are no results when the court decided that there had to be results, what is the next step? If I have no result because I am speeding on a highway, I get a ticket. Then, should we say that the government, which claims to be very proactive, very good and kind with respect to official languages, should adopt legislation whereby fines are imposed for non-compliance? What is the solution?

This is no longer an issue of goodwill: goodwill is not working.

Mr. Graham Fraser: In fact, one of our recommendations is that the government should come back to the House with a new bill that would cover the entire Air Canada family, because we noticed, among other things, that the federal government has tried three times, I believe, to table new legislative measures regarding Air Canada, and every time, the company was reorganized, with the result that suddenly, one of the parts of the Air Canada family was no longer covered by the legislation.

One of my recommendations this year, which I discussed with the minister, who said he was ready to consider or discuss it, is that we need legislation that covers the entire Air Canada family.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Now let us continue with Mrs. Mendes. Welcome to the committee, Mrs. Mendes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes (Brossard—La Prairie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Fraser, and good morning to the members of your team.

In the presentation you just made, you invited new stakeholders to get involved in developing official languages policy. I deeply believe that we must respect all the provincial mandates; that is clear. However, do you not think that the time has come to try to negotiate with the ministries of education throughout Canada to obtain a policy whereby bilingualism begins with primary school? I think that this is the best way to create a pool of people who are sufficiently trained in both languages.

Take me, for example. I was educated in three languages, and I speak all three of them; I read them, and I write them. I think that this is the best way to supply the federal public service with people who will eventually be able to carry out their duties adequately in both official languages. Ms. Giguère could perhaps give us some of the legal details of this and tell us what negotiations we should eventually hold with provincial governments. The time has come for the provincial governments to participate in the negotiations to develop official languages in Canada. I would like to hear

[English]

your thoughts on the subject.

[Translation]

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, when we decided to discuss the importance of calling upon new stakeholders, we were intentionally a bit vague regarding the way we should identify or appoint these new players. Nonetheless, I see that some provinces, universities, municipal institutions and school boards are showing an interest. This seems to show promise for the future. For example, last year in Quebec City, during the meeting of provincial ministers in charge of francophone matters, they adopted a resolution whereby they wanted more cooperation with the federal government. Thus, the door is open.

A huge amount of federal funding is already going to the provinces for education in a second language or for education in minority communities. Each time I raised the problem of accountability and transparency regarding these funds, I was told that the

federation did not work that way, that we did not require the provinces to identify exactly how they spend the money that they get from the federal government. It is not easy to follow up and to require full accounts. Nonetheless, I think that there is an opening. The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada is currently discussing the possibility of developing a voluntary test on commonly spoken French so that students can know what their level of spoken French is. They could be compared not only with the students in their class, but also with themselves, and their parents could find out what level their child has been able to achieve, nationally or internationally. These are promising signs, and they call for a will to cooperate.

• (1000)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendes: In closing, I would like to address the issue of the Olympic Games. In your opinion, given the short amount of time remaining before the opening date in 2010, what would be the most urgent recommendations to make to ensure bilingual services for these games? It seems to me that we need to act immediately.

The Chair: Mrs. Mendes, you have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have identified a number of problems. There are a great many documents to translate. Some of them, such as the biographies of the athletes, which will be arriving in December, have not been translated yet. There are disputes between VANOC and the Translation Bureau. I am told that VANOC has not made an explicit request to the Translation Bureau. I think that there are problems with translation, interpretation, signage and recruiting volunteers. In addition, we continue to highlight the importance of French-language content in cultural events.

The Chair: For example, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games are some of these cultural events.

Thank you very much.

Let's now go to Mr. Petit.

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

Good morning, Mr. Fraser.

I simply want to make one comment. I come from the province of Quebec. The Official Languages Act was created by the Liberals in 1969, that is, 40 years ago. Since then, what has happened? First, there was the passing of Bill 101. Second, there was the creation of a separatist party that opposes the other parties in Canada because it is difficult to have our language recognized by the other provinces. Third, the Montreal area went from being Canada's metropolis to a regional metropolis, as they call it. Fourth, we currently have one of the lowest immigration rates of all the provinces, even when the immigrants come from French-speaking countries. Fifth, the French language is used in business settings, but people speak another language at home in the evenings, because the culture of the non-francophones in question is not an old-stock culture, as it is called. That is what I want you to understand.

I do not want to be hard on you, but I want to understand. Earlier, you mentioned something that caught my attention. When answering a question and when making your own opening remarks, you stated that assimilation is a sure thing. That means two things. Look at your notes, you said that when you answered a question—I apologize, it was not in your opening remarks. If assimilation is a sure thing, then isn't Mr. Nadeau's theory valid realistically, that is, that we should separate from the rest of Canada?

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Your membership card is in the mail, Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Mr. Fraser, this is no laughing matter. Please understand that I come from Quebec, and I want Quebec to remain part of Canada. However, they have been saying for 40 years that we are not accepted in Canada because Canadians do not speak French, and so forth. You are holding a bomb in your hands. Either you disarm it, or you allow it to explode.

You, as Official Languages Commissioner, what would you do? This has been going on for 40 years. What do we do?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I will have to look at the transcript. I don't believe that I said assimilation was certain, meaning inevitable. What I may have said is that assimilation is a phenomenon that exists. I can't refute the numbers.

Considering the ground covered over the past 40 years, I believe we are in a better position now than we were 40 years ago in terms of the vitality of minority communities. French schools and French television and radio stations are accessible throughout the country today. Moreover, francophones are able to receive services 75% of the time throughout the country when service positions are designated as bilingual.

The situation is not perfect, and the level is not as high as I would like it to be. A student with a mark of 75% will not receive a scholarship. We are not winning any awards with a mark of 75%, but it is not a failure.

If we consider the ground covered, we must also bear in mind that during the 1960s, shortly after the act was enacted, people in Quebec tended to treat minority communities outside Quebec as dead ducks, as René Lévesque used to say. I am sorry, but that is not the case. When I traveled across the country from sea to sea, I was struck by the energy and vitality and imagination of these minority communities.

I must also say that it is difficult and at times complicated to choose to live in a minority situation, both for anglophones in Quebec and for francophones in a province other than Quebec. We are living in a changing world where there are language pressures, throughout the world. However, I don't believe that minority communities are doomed to disappear.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Petit.

We will complete the third round with Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fraser, I would like to go back to what Mr. Lemieux was talking about earlier. I clearly do not agree with him. One of the Supreme Court judges is a unilingual anglophone, and that is one too many. That is what must be understood. All nine judges should be bilingual. It is not complicated. They provide services to citizens. Bilingualism is not just for someone who goes to the Supreme Court. I will reiterate: It is service provided to citizens. That is very important.

On page 77, you talk about collaboration agreements. In the previous Parliament, this committee tabled a report addressing recourse to funding mechanisms. You are right. Having lived through it, I know that both the Liberals and the Conservatives have asked small organizations, which are small in size but large in terms of their activities, to do everything on a very specific timeline, otherwise they are punished. Then, the government sends the money seven months later. That continues to happen, and it is unacceptable. The report is well-known; you mention it in your document. I find that difficult for the communities.

I want to advise you of something affecting my riding. I tip my hat to Marie Lemay and others at the NCC. However, I would like to draw your attention to the case of Russell Mills, who is the chairman of the board. They chose him promising us he would become bilingual. But he is not. That tarnishes the French fact in the region, both in Gatineau and among Franco-Ontarians.

Minister Lawrence Cannon should continue to be responsible for the NCC file. I do not know if he was the one who appointed Mr. Mills, but he was the one who introduced him. At any rate, that is unacceptable, especially given that the organization has too much authority over municipalities in the region. For a member of a board made up of people from all over Canada to come and tell Gatineau or Ottawa what to do... They say it is a partnership, but in fact, they are the ones with the money and they are the ones holding the big end of the stick. In my humble opinion, that should be pointed out. Russell Mills, I am talking to you.

You talked about the Ottawa Airport and the issue of third parties. I also want to talk about the Canadian Tulip Festival, which takes place in Ottawa. The people in charge of the festival told us they are not obliged to provide services in French. However, they are an NCC third party. I am not blaming the NCC for providing tulip beds, but I am singling them out. That was an important file. It is of the utmost importance to tell these organizations that it is unacceptable for the people in charge of the Canadian Tulip Festival not to feel compelled to provide services in French, that it is good enough to take pity and provide services in French, because we are part of the landscape.

I am going to conclude by mentioning the official languages situation in the airports of Vancouver and Toronto, as regards the Olympic Games in Vancouver. Commissioner, that is an international event. Vancouver will be hosting francophones from around the world and people from different regions of Canada. If the official languages situation is unacceptable during the games, you can imagine what it is like for francophones normally. These conditions are all unacceptable.

• (1010)

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

Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I thank the member for his question. I have a two-part answer. Mr. Nadeau has identified several aspects affecting the National Capital. The NCC's exemplary behaviour regarding service to the public was pointed out. The same was true for the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Arts Centre. Clearly, actively offering bilingual service is a reflex for these organizations. If you buy a ticket at the National Arts Centre, you are welcomed at the entrance and shown to your seat by someone who speaks both languages.

My hope is that that spirit becomes part of the National Capital culture. That is clearly not the case at present. I think that it is very important to integrate both official languages into the National Capital culture as part of cultural and social events.

You make a distinction between the Olympics and everyday life. My hope is that, with the efforts that federal institutions are currently making to meet our higher expectations, that will raise standards after the Olympics, and we will not see that followed by a setback, a kind of sigh of relief once it is over and a return to former habits.

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

We will suspend the sitting for a few moments and then return to our study of post-secondary institutions.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, the Commissioner has been scheduled to discuss these issues until 10:30 a.m. I have other questions to ask him.

The Chair: You may ask them now or after the break. Mr. Fraser will have the time to—

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, it says on the agenda that we are discussing the Commissioner's annual report until 10:30. The other part is scheduled from 10:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

The Chair: We can continue to talk about this issue until 10:30. But to be fair towards all committee members, we could have another round of questions.

Mr. Fraser will present a report on second language learning opportunities. In any case, committee members will share the remaining time.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I'm not the one who drafted the agenda. It says here that the commissioner's annual report is to be discussed between 9:00 and 10:30. I don't know if any other members want to ask questions, but speaking for myself, I would like a fourth round.

The Chair: If Mr. Godin wants another round... I simply want to make sure that we have enough time to hear Mr. Fraser's statement and then to have a good round of questions.

Mr. Godin, do you have a question? Would you like another round?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair...

The Chair: One moment, please.

Mrs. Glover?

Mrs. Shelly Glover: If we are to give Mr. Fraser 10 minutes for his statement, I suggest that we have two-minute turns.

An hon. member: Three minutes.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: If we have three-minute turns, we will not have enough time.

The Chair: In that case, we will have three-minute turns. We will begin with the Conservative Party.

Mr. Chong.

• (1015)

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will ask my questions in English.

[English]

In your annual report, you note that it's not certain whether the target to double the number of bilingual Canadians between the ages of 15 to 19 is still in place. I'm surprised that this didn't form part of your recommendations. In other words, it's not in your recommendations to call on the government to have that target in place. Are you no longer in pursuit of that objective? Is this something that isn't as important as some of the other recommendations you made?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think it's a very important goal. I would say that the need to reach this goal was implied in my general comment that it was regrettable that clear objectives were not established for the "Roadmap". This was one of the pre-existing objectives in the action plan. One of the problems with the objective, which was established in 2003, is that secondary education is under provincial jurisdiction. It is hard to hold the federal government to account for something that's a direct provincial responsibility. Another of our recommendations underscored the importance of the federal government in bringing new players to the table to discuss the issues involved in the "Roadmap". Certainly, that is one of them. So I think the need to attain this goal is clearly in the report. The door is open to collaboration from the ministers responsible for francophone affairs, who passed a motion to that effect at their meeting in Quebec City.

Hon. Michael Chong: But we use the federal spending power to cajole provinces into meeting federal targets, as we did with the Canada Pension Plan and the Canada Health Act and many other programs of national importance.

Mr. Graham Fraser: When I make that point I get lectures about the current nature of federalism. So I would encourage the member to continue making that argument.

Hon. Michael Chong: Just a broader point, though. I think it's obviously a very detailed and well-researched annual report. So often we focus on the symptoms of many of the challenges facing the French language in Canada and we don't focus on one of the fundamental issues, which is that there is a decline in the use of French outside the province of Quebec.

I think this is a huge long-term issue for the country. Statistics Canada has noted that the number of bilingual Canadians between the ages of 15 and 19, the key demographic group, declined between 1996 and 2006, from 16% to 13%—

The Chair: There's one minute left, Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: If that trend holds, that is the most worrisome trend of all, more worrisome than any other issues around the use of French in the public service, the use of French in our judicial system and the like, because that is where the rubber hits the road in the next 50 years.

I would suggest that in future reports maybe a heavier emphasis could be placed on examining the role of federal institutions and the federal government in promoting bilingualism amongst our young people, not only in our post-secondary education, as I know you are presently focused on, but in our public school system.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

Mr. Fraser, I'm going to have to ask you to answer this question at the next round.

Madam Zarac.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We can go into it in more detail at the next session.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Lise Zarac: In the letter accompanying your report, you say that because of the economic crisis we are currently going through, a decrease in funding might be an obstacle to the continuity of this policy. You seem to imply this concern in your first recommendation, which is addressed to the Prime Minister of Canada.

Do you have any other recommendations? I think this is a very important issue. It is the first recommendation contained in your report, and you say that if we are to maintain linguistic equality, the government will have to demonstrate its commitment through concrete measures. So what would you recommend to the committee to ensure that adequate funding be provided?

• (1020)

Mr. Graham Fraser: It is that you continue to remain vigilant. I think you have already had a significant effect by putting the question to the minister and to senior officials.

There is something I have not forgotten, and it more or less underlies this recommendation, and that is the fact that we are still living with the repercussions caused by the cutbacks made in 1995. Just think of the closing of the Royal Military College in Saint-Jean. Despite the fact that the government has started to rebuild the institution, the education level which it provides today is only at the CEGEP level. We are not yet back to the level of education the institution provided when it was closed as a military training centre almost 15 years ago. This concerns me and I am keeping my eye on the matter.

When we are experiencing an economic crisis, investment is lower and resources are reallocated, which means that we must carefully monitor exactly what it is the government is doing.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Mrs. Zarac.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: In the conclusion of your report, you say, as regards government and its institutions, and I quote: "The fact that the English and French languages are and will continue to occupy an equal place in Canada must be demonstrated through concrete measures."

Do you believe that French and English are on an equal footing in Canada today?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that there is a significant discrepancy in the status of the two. The report indicates what these discrepancies are, but it simultaneously points to past successes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Commissioner.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin: On page 3 of your presentation you mentioned that in 2010, it will be five years since Parliament strengthened part VII of the Official Languages Act. As we know, part VII is about the advancement of French and English. I would like to congratulate the other parties that raised this issue, because the organizations in our communities are not receiving any money. Cases such as this are not violations of part VII. We claim to be promoting minority language, but we do not provide the tools required to do so.

The government has made a commitment to help the community and to provide funding, but when organizations have to use credit and credit cards and lay people off in order to survive, how can they possibly do any promotional work in their community? Mr. Chong spoke about education and people, but this was part of what he was saying.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair: I have already said that I thought the situation was very serious, because it means the organizations are very vulnerable. I hesitate to state here that one action or another is or is not a violation of part VII of the act, because we analyze all complaints regarding part VII. This is a serious evaluation.

Mr. Yvon Godin: With all due respect, I think the Commissioner of Official Languages is the watchdog for the official languages. That is your mandate under the act. You are an officer of Parliament and you report to Parliament. That is what you are doing today, you are reporting not to the Government of Canada, but rather to Parliament. That is your responsibility. Under your mandate, you can make complaints.

The lack of funding for the communities did not just happen under the Conservatives, it happened under the Liberals as well. I have been a member of Parliament since 1997, and I always hear the same complaint. When will the analysis be complete? Will anything be done? You have the power to do something.

• (1025)

Mr. Graham Fraser: To my knowledge, we have not received any specific complaints on the problem you mentioned.

Mr. Yvon Godin: May I make a complaint myself? Organizations may be afraid that they will get nothing at all if they complain.

Mr. Graham Fraser: You can, absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You will be getting one.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You studied 15 different institutions, Mr. Fraser. If I understand correctly, the performance of nine of these federal institutions had worsened. Twenty per cent of francophones do not manage to get service in French. These are some of the points that are made. Ninety per cent of the complaints are made by francophones. I am talking about complaints made to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

How do you explain that? I know that this does not happen just in the federal public service, but it is mainly in the federal public service. I would like to emphasize that I am not blaming public servants. You were talking about the institution a little earlier. Why is it that we are still in this situation? Who needs a kick in the pants if we want to see some change?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I continue to identify the problems you mentioned. My interpretation is that certain reflexes are lacking within institutions, particularly with respect to bilingual greetings and the active offer of service. I have concluded that the complaint process, which is reactive, is rather limited in what it can do to change the behaviour of institutions.

I have seen reports or complaint letters sent to institutions. Often they are about the same incident that happened over and over again, and the institution in question apologizes or explains why the service was not provided. This is the very reason we decided to play a more active role with the institutions. We want to change the way in which they behave, and rather than waiting to get a complaint before we act, we have chosen to go beyond the complaint process. Often, complaints are not the only indication of problems. People become disillusioned and stop making complaints, because they think there is no point in doing so.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

We will suspend the meeting for one minute to give your officials time to take their seats.

• (1025)

(Pause)

• (1030)

The Chair: We are now beginning the second part of our meeting. We will be hearing from Mr. Fraser once again, but this time he will be speaking about the federal government's support for post-secondary institutions and their efforts in promoting bilingualism in Canada.

You will be presenting the results of your work, Mr. Fraser. Without further ado, I will now give you the floor for your second presentation.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to present the preliminary results of our study on second-language learning opportunities in Canada's universities. This issue has long held great interest for me, and I believe that it is an important question for Canadians.

I am accompanied today by Carsten Quell, Director, Policy and Research; Mylène Thériault, Team Leader, Policy and Research, and Mark Goldenberg, the consultant who is working closely with members of my office on this study.

[English]

While we have extensive knowledge and information about second-language learning at the elementary and secondary levels, I believe this additional piece is essential in order for Canadians to have a complete continuum in second-language learning. In fact, one of the recommendations included in my annual report is that the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages quickly implement the commitments announced in the "Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality" to support second-language learning by bringing together all partners involved in this issue.

Knowledge of our two official languages is important for our young people's development, especially considering increased international competition and the global knowledge economy. Knowledge of both English and French by more Canadians is also important as part of Canada's commitment to linguistic duality and for the effective functioning of our country in many different sectors. And in the context of the renewal of the public service, it's important for a national government to have access to a larger pool of bilingual recruits.

[Translation]

Today, I have provided you with the preliminary findings of this major study that we are undertaking. As part of our study, an extensive survey was conducted of second-language programs and courses currently offered at Canada's universities.

Access to second-language courses at universities is generally good. However, opportunities for students to study in their second language are quite limited.

We found that there is generally good access to "regular" programs and courses for students to learn their second language, but that there are relatively few opportunities to do so more intensively, such as taking academic subjects taught in the second language. Only a very limited number of courses and a very narrow range of subjects are being offered in the second language.

[English]

Very few universities have any second-language policies or requirements. Those that exist are rather minimal and usually apply to only a few courses in a language other than French in Quebec and other than English throughout the rest of Canada.

There is little formal collaboration between English- and French-language institutions in Canada that would give students greater second-language exposure. While many Canadian universities offer or facilitate exchange opportunities with other countries, exchange opportunities between institutions within Canada are quite limited.

One finding that might interest you is that only a handful of public administration programs in Canada offer courses in the other language, have language requirements, or offer exchange-type activities.

[Translation]

What works? How can we improve second-language learning in university?

Students said that the professor is the most important factor and that smaller classes provide for greater interaction in the second language. They find that content-rich second-language courses—including more cultural and targeted subject-matter content—makes the experience more stimulating. They believe that they would benefit from taking at least some subject-matter courses in the second language to deepen their knowledge of it.

Language-learning experts agree on the effectiveness of content-based learning, and that a range of learning supports has to be available and tailored to the particular situations and needs of institutions and students. They told us that recognition and accreditation are important motivators for students, and that language-learning opportunities should be provided early at the university level.

• (1035)

[English]

Professors and university administrators involved in second-language programs say that leadership and commitment from the top are critical and that the university has to signal that it values second-language learning. This requires planning, coordinating, organizing, and negotiating with other faculties and institutions. It also means additional costs to universities and faculties, costs that are not adequately recognized by the usual per capita funding formula. And students, professors, administrators, experts, and government officials all agree that real-life opportunities to use and practise the second language, exchanges, and other opportunities for interaction with people who speak the other language are vital. You cannot fully learn another language simply by taking a course.

Finally, we know of some interesting initiatives and good practices out there, as well as possible models and approaches that are effective and that can point the way. These include the expertise and experience of bilingual institutions like the University of Ottawa, and York's Glendon College; the efforts by Campus Saint-Jean and the Collège universitaire Saint-Boniface to attract English-language students and offer an immersion-type learning experience; initiatives to offer second-language courses tailored to specific disciplines such as business English at the Université de Montréal and French for business or law at the University of Western Ontario; Simon Fraser University's Office of Francophone and Francophile Affairs; Memorial University's one-semester immersion program in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon; and others.

So where do we go from here?

[Translation]

We know that more and better second-language learning opportunities at university are important—for young people and for Canada. We know that opportunities for intensive exposure to the second language are limited. We know that there's a growing need and demand. And we know what works to make students more proficient.

Our study points to a number of potential broad directions for intervention: we need to offer more intensive second-language learning opportunities; we need to make better use of the potential of institutions that teach in the other official language, through collaboration and partnerships and the use of technology; we need

to offer students more exchanges and real life opportunities to use their second language in Canada; and we need to look again at second-language policies and requirements and how they can be used to improve second-language learning at university.

[English]

The final report, including recommendations, will be available in the fall. Moving forward in these and other areas will require the commitment and collaboration of all interested parties—universities, educational organizations, government, and others.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Commissioner.

I would also like to thank you for making your preliminary report available, as we ourselves are into our own report on the same topic. We'll be reviewing it next week, so we'll be able to include your analysis and great work in our own report. We want to thank you for that.

Also, thank you for raising this issue in your report, which you presented earlier.

Without any delay, we'll start with the four-minute round so we can be on time.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Commissioner.

You stated in your opening remarks that, and I quote:

Professors and university administrators involved in second-language programs say that leadership and commitment from the top are critical...

"Leadership" is the key word. This applies to both universities and post-secondary learning institutions. Furthermore, I feel that the federal government should also set the tone. Universities can't be the only leader, the federal government has to be a leader as well. If the federal government sets the tone through its public service programs, for example, there will automatically be movement in the universities.

You stated that additional costs could be involved but this could also be a business opportunity for these universities. If there were some measure of obligation or if the federal government were to assume clear leadership by stating that bilingualism is the order of the day... Some universities or post-secondary learning institutions have already gone ahead and are already offering training in a second language.

If these institutions are already in that position, they will certainly see increasing opportunities, business opportunities, that is, the ability to attract more students. That being said, it is a good thing to state that leadership from the top in colleges and universities is important. If the federal government were to take leadership in this area, do you not think that this would provide a good part of the leadership required to provide the tools, or some degree of motivation that the universities need to offer more proactive learning in a second language?

• (1040)

Mr. Graham Fraser: The federal government is certainly playing a more and more important role. With public service renewal, in the future, 20,000 positions will be available in the public service every year. I know that this message was strongly communicated by the Clerk of the Privy Council, Kevin Lynch, who met with the university presidents and gave them a very clear message.

However, I also absolutely agree with you that the federal government should send more messages to university presidents, to universities, to students, to parents, to the effect that linguistic duality is an important value in Canada and that in uncertain times for employment, bilingualism is essential to advance in Canada's public service. The Government of Canada is increasingly becoming an employer of choice at a time when the sector of high finance no longer has the status it held three years ago as an employer.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Nadeau, you have the floor.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Fraser, I'd like to discuss three subjects with you.

First of all, would you agree to say that learning a second language should be encouraged at the elementary and secondary levels first and foremost? With regard to the question before us right now, that is requiring bilingualism in the public service, as soon as people are hired, shouldn't we be offering more substantial training than the forced core French program?

We know that this comes under provincial and school board jurisdiction. The latter are abolishing programs and creating others. Sometimes, provincial authorities let them be. I'm speaking primarily of anglophone provinces.

Now let me throw out a question to you here. Would you agree when I say that students who have English as a first language should register for programs offered in French as a first language through universities in primarily francophone milieux, in order to learn French, improve and work in that language?

Finally, if perfect bilingualism were a criterion for employment in the federal public service, wouldn't that be an incentive for universities? They could require that students who want to work in the public service follow English and French programs in order to be able to function in this system.

You have the floor.

• (1045)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I will start by answering your last question. I'm not prepared to make bilingualism an essential criterion for employment in the public service without having some guarantee

that every Canadian could have fair access to high-quality training in a second language.

I'm not talking only about anglophone provinces. According to the Public Service Commission of Canada, for the first time, there is now an increase in the need for English-language training for new francophone public servants who are entering the public service and who do not have the English-language skills they need. So this is valid for both sides of the linguistic divide.

Learning a language at an early age is certainly easier. However, this requires a series of incentives. I think that the federal government can be an incentive-maker for universities and it can communicate that message. If second-language learning is valued by universities, that will encourage high school students to learn it too.

I would have something else to add. I often talk about inconsistencies. The fact that universities often don't make a distinction between students who've gone through a basic French program and those who've been in immersion, with exceptions such as the specific programs discussed here, there is some inconsistency; they only take into account the grades. I've talked to high school students whose teachers had encouraged them to choose the core French program exam rather than the immersion because it was easier.

[English]

You'll ace it.

[Translation]

So universities that don't make a distinction between a high-quality program and a less demanding program are thus encouraging mediocrity.

The Chair: Thank you, Commissioner.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor.

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

We are doing a study on bilingualism at the post-secondary level. The comment that we hear from representatives of universities is that for all intents and purposes, it is already too late when students reach that level. Unless I misunderstood them—and we will see when the report is drafted—my impression is that second language learning has to start earlier. We are not prepared to say to someone that he has to be bilingual overnight otherwise he will not get a job, because we have to give people a chance to learn. You talked about encouragement.

Secondly, could the government not offer to pay part of university tuition in return for a student learning another language? That would be an incentive.

Secondly, if students do take a university language course, they would have to obtain credits. If the credits count toward their degree, it would be a plus for them to register for a language course, but if the language course is not credited, it is not worth it.

Thirdly, the government should promote bilingualism and tell people who intend to work for the public service that that is the way to go and that is the way things work.

I was very disappointed in a decision by the New Brunswick government. You may say that this is provincial jurisdiction, but you took the trouble to include this in your report, so it stands to reason that you are interested in this. This is the first time that I saw such a reaction in my province or elsewhere in the country. Three hundred and fifty anglophones demonstrated in front of the legislature in Fredericton to say that their rights were violated and that they wanted their children to learn a second language. There are countries where people learn up to six languages, where this is not an obstacle at all. Learning three or four languages is something beautiful, it is a benefit, a gift. I am happy to speak two languages even though I don't speak either one perfectly, Commissioner, but that does not bother me because I am able to communicate with people.

So the New Brunswick government took a big step backward. I am completely against this decision—I have said so publicly—to eliminate early immersion and offer it starting in grade 6 only. I think that the government does not understand the importance of bilingualism among the largest employers in the country. And I think that people should not be learning a second language on the job; they should be learning it in school. We have schools and universities where we should be learning. That is where learning takes place, not after you have gotten a job.

●(1050)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, the member's suggestions seem very interesting to me.

I am reluctant to say one size fits all. I think there are all kinds of ways to learn a second language. I learned French during my summer jobs when I was in university, and that changed my life. It is as simple as that. I was finished high school and immersion did not exist in those days. So I hesitate to say that there is only one way to learn other languages. What is important is to have the largest possible number of options. I have noted that in Europe, they have the Erasmus program through which the European Community provides bursaries to the university students so that they can spend a year or more in another institution in order to learn another European language.

I would ask Mr. Goldenberg to describe briefly what we discovered regarding the number of programs that already exist here.

Mr. Mark Goldenberg (Consultant, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Commissioner.

Very briefly, there are various ways of offering second language learning at the university level. We have bilingual institutions as the commissioner mentioned. Some offer a whole range of programs in those languages while others offer certain programs in certain disciplines. There are universities that have started to offer second language training courses related to the content and vocabulary of the students' academic discipline and career choice. Students like that better. There are universities that have started to offer some courses in the students' second language, more or less to continue to offer the experience of immersion that they had at the elementary and secondary level.

The Chair: Thank you for that listing.

I give the floor to Mr. Chong.

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

Thank you for your preliminary report, Mr. Fraser.

[English]

Thank you very much for this. I have a suggestion and then a question.

My suggestion is that one of the things you might include in your final report is a greater elucidation of the need for the Government of Canada to have bilingual graduates from Canadian universities. It's not something that I see in this report. You have a section titled "Need and Demand", so it might be a good area in which to slot the fact that we have a huge need for bilingual graduates from Canadian universities. It's not just a stick issue; it's also a carrot issue.

We are the largest employer in the country. We directly employ 260,000 public servants, and if you include the armed forces and crown corporations and federal agencies, that number is well into the 400,000 range. We are the largest hirer. We hire 10,000 people into the public service alone, every year, the equivalent of a General Motors every single year. In fact, we hire more than the payroll of all the employees of General Motors every year. In fact, in the next decade we are going to likely hire close to 100,000 new public servants. These are great jobs. They're well-paying jobs that provide the stability that only a government can, and they include defined benefit pensions, which obviously is a big issue right now. Yet we're not getting the university graduates we need from Canadian universities. So I think this is certainly an area that needs to be really emphasized in the final report because I think it will highlight to universities and to younger Canadians that there is this employer that needs them to come out of university with the knowledge of both official languages.

That's my comment.

My question is at this stage—I know you haven't finished your report—can you tell us the top one or two things that our government could do to get universities in Canada, get colleges, to produce a greater number of bilingual graduates? What are the number one or two things that we as a government can do to encourage that?

●(1055)

Mr. Graham Fraser: First of all, let me reinforce what you said in your preliminary remarks. I think we will definitely take note of your suggestion to spell out the importance of the federal government as an employer of choice. The federal government is going to be ever more an employer of choice in the current economic context, where all of a sudden being a policy analyst for the federal government may acquire a certain appeal that being a hedge fund manager no longer has. So there is going to be a continuing demand, as you say, for people who master both official languages.

In terms of concrete things that the federal government can do, one of them is to much more clearly deliver that message to universities, to students, to parents, to secondary schools. One of the things that I think people tend to neglect, and certainly I don't, is that often the key decision-making period is when adolescents are 14. That's when they are looking at what courses they need for high school, what is the university looking for, so that's when they are deciding whether they should keep studying French or take something else. What's the value added for the student who is 14? That message should not be limited to the Clerk of the Privy Council going and speaking to what's called the G13, the thirteen major research universities. It has got to be a message that is delivered in as accessible a way as possible to families and students in grade 9 or 10.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Commissioner. We can certainly work in conjunction toward promoting a leadership role for the federal government in the second-language continuum.

[*Translation*]

That brings to an end our work here this morning.

Thank you for your presence, Commissioner. It is always greatly appreciated.

We will see you again next week for the consideration of the report.

The meeting is adjourned.

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