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Chair

Mr. Steven Blaney

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (0910)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Allow me to welcome you to the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a study of the official languages policy of the Canada Border Services Agency,

[Translation]

we have the pleasure of welcoming this morning the Vice-President of the Human Resources Branch, Ms. Camille Therriault-Power, as well as Mr. Pierre Paquet, Director, Learning Delivery, both of whom are from the Canada Border Services Agency.

Welcome to the committee and thank you for having accepted our invitation. Without further ado, I would call upon you to make your opening statement.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power (Vice-President, Human Resources Branch, Canada Border Services Agency): Good morning everyone.

I would like to thank the chair and the committee for giving me the opportunity to describe the approach of the Canada Border Services Agency with respect to Canada's official languages policy.

In all that it does, the CBSA champions values of integrity, professionalism and respect. These are the principles that focus our work as we protect Canadians from threats at the border and facilitate legitimate travel and travel.

These values are particularly evident in the character of more than 13,000 officers and staff, many of whom operate in both official languages throughout every working day.

[English]

The CBSA is Canada's first face in greeting visitors and returning Canadians alike. We recognize the importance of offering services in both official languages, not only as a representation of our national character, but also as an acknowledgement of the right of all Canadians to use the official language of their choice.

[Translation]

Each year, 95 million travellers cross our borders. Of these, roughly 20 file a formal official languages complaint for lack of greeting or service in both official languages.

In proportion to the whole of the traveller experience, this rate of complaint is not large. However, individually, each of these complaints is cause for concern and swift address. But more to the point, we are constantly striving to mitigate such incidents, and keep the number of complaints to a minimum.

How we manage it is through a combination of training, policy and oversight that encourages a strong culture of bilingual service at ports across the country. As we prepare for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the issue of language of service is understandably prominent and the CBSA takes its responsibilities very seriously.

With respect to training and HR, the process begins early, in training at our facility in Rigaud, Quebec. Training is offered in English and French. Sessions are organized in the preferred language of the candidates, according to the agency's needs for bilingual border services officers.

[English]

The Rigaud facility instills a natural sense of linguistic balance in our recruits. All candidates train and test in the language of their choice, and all learning tools and reference materials are available in both official languages.

[Translation]

It is worth noting that the CBSA has received only one complaint related to the Port Of Entry Recruit Training Program or POERT as we like to call it. The ensuing investigation by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that a choice had been denied with respect to the language of training and the complaint was closed.

From the formative experience of our training facility, our recruits go on to postings across the country and the importance of language of service quickly becomes a practical matter.

We have raised the linguistic requirements for BSOs and superintendents across Canada. Our BSOs now need to have a BBB profile on appointments, while the profile of bilingual superintendents has recently been raised to the CBC level in bilingual regions.

[English]

In the case of our existing border services officer workforce, a learning plan has been developed region by region in order to ensure that all officers have an opportunity to reach this new level.

Given the number of officers working continuously across the country—as you know, the border doesn't close, so we have a shift operation that operates 24/7—not to mention the sheer volume of traffic at the border, occasional lapses in delivery of services in both official languages may occur. However, I think the key is to ensure that service is available in the language of choice of the traveller.

[*Translation*]

CBSA staff at airports and border crossings take their obligations under the Official Languages Act very seriously. We are committed to ensuring that travellers can communicate with our staff and obtain services in the official language of their choice.

The Canada Border Services Agency has 159 offices designated bilingual for communications with the public, from a total of 264 offices. At our designated offices we ensure service in both official languages is offered through signage as well as bilingual communication with travellers. Since we are a 24/7 operation, services must be available at all times.

To further guarantee that bilingualism and CBSA values are reflected in Canada's border services officers many initiatives have recently been implemented.

The CBSA regularly distributes reminders regarding our official language obligations. We have French-language instructors on site at several locations, for example, at Lester B. Pearson International Airport, as well as at the Vancouver Airport and at the Rigaud Learning Centre providing telephone language tutoring across the country.

In 2008-2009, more than 75 awareness sessions on our official language obligations were delivered across the country.

Pocket translators have been distributed in all regions.

Software and online courses have been developed and are available to all regions.

We have put procedural measures in place to ensure official language service is readily available—for example, a unilingual officer will contact a bilingual officer or bring the traveller to the bilingual officer.

● (0915)

[*English*]

As noted, the service provided by our officers at the border constitutes the first moment of the Canadian experience. Whether it involves a returning Canadian or a first-time visitor, it is essential that this activity reflect our linguistic identity.

The upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games are sure to be a test of this requirement as never before. The games are expected to attract more than 6,500 athletes and officials from over 80 countries, 1,700 Paralympic athletes and officials from over 40 countries, 80,000 volunteers and members of the paid workforce, 10,000 media, and over 260,000 visitors.

[*Translation*]

Throughout the 2010 Games, the CBSA will ensure that it is able to deliver its current level of integrated border services and continue to balance its mandate of facilitation and security.

Behind the scenes, the CBSA has created the Olympic and Paralympic Task Force, which is working closely with all key stakeholders to ensure that bilingualism will form an integral part of the service provided. For example, CBSA has partnered with Western Economic Diversification Canada and the Société de développement économique de la Colombie-Britannique to present all visitors going through British Columbia's CBSA main points of services with a bilingual brochure promoting cultural events in the francophone community, as well as a map of the downtown core and Olympic Games venues.

To make certain that we are able to meet our obligations under the act, the agency has assigned more than 30 bilingual border services officers to points-of-entry in British Columbia, while 10 will be assigned to the greater Toronto region.

[*English*]

Our preparation for the games has been thorough in every respect. This event is an opportunity to demonstrate the best of Canada's public service to a global audience. The importance of doing this in accordance with the provisions of the Official Languages Act cannot be overstated.

On September 15, 2009, the Commissioner of Official Languages presented a follow-up report to his study, entitled "Raising our Game for Vancouver 2010: Towards a Canadian Model of Linguistic Duality in International Sport", which was first released in December 2008.

[*Translation*]

The CBSA has welcomed the commissioner's report, which provides insightful information on our accomplishments and efforts to provide services to the public in their official language of choice during this important event.

Furthermore, the CBSA is committed to implementing the recommendation made by the OCOL regarding the creation of a partnership with the other institutions involved. To wit, the CBSA recently hosted a conference call with CATSA, Air Canada and the airport authorities to share our respective best practices.

A second meeting will be held in mid-November to pursue the implementation of this recommendation.

● (0920)

[*English*]

While I'm proud of the agency's record on official languages, we will always strive for greater success. There is always room for improvement, and opportunities like this allow us to gain a renewed appreciation for the importance of official languages in the delivery of our services.

[*Translation*]

I look forward to the questions and input of the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Therriault-Power.

Mr. Paquet, are you ready to take questions?

Mr. Pierre Paquet (Director, Learning Delivery, Canada Border Services Agency): Absolutely.

The Chair: Very well then.

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

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

This morning, I want to focus on the single and only complaint that you claim was received. We will see as time goes on if it remains the only one.

One of my constituents, among many, experienced some difficulties with the CBSA Learning Centre located in Rigaud. I will describe the issue and see how you react to it. The commissioner may have done some work, and I do mean "some work"—because it appears that the staff was changed. We will see how these things are treated in the future.

When a complaint was lodged, a woman, Ms. Allison Rodriguez, an employee from the Psychology Section in Fredericton, New Brunswick, called her with respect to a psychological assessment that had to be carried out before going to Rigaud. I believe that this is the norm. My constituent asked why she was not able to take the test and do the course in French, because she is from a francophone region. She was told that the results from the test would take too much time to obtain, and in any case, she is able to speak English.

New Brunswick is not an anglophone province, but a bilingual one. Edmundston is even more French-speaking than many other regions in the province. Perhaps there are more francophones in certain regions located in my colleague's, Mr. Godin's riding, but I can guarantee you that there are many francophones in my constituency.

I, for one, have had problems in Canadian airports; even after having specifically requested French-language services, even after I spoke French more than once. I was forced to specifically ask for services in French, whereas I was only speaking in French.

This is a similar case. This citizen had to take the test and ask if she could do so in French; but she was told that it would take too long, and that she spoke English anyway. I also speak English, but I have rights, and if I request to be served in French, that should be provided automatically.

I would like to hear your comments on this matter.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: In my opinion, you are raising two issues. The first pertains to the complaint involving the Learning Centre in Rigaud, and the other concerns the active offer of bilingual services at points of entry.

I will ask Mr. Paquet to answer the first question, and then I will address the second one.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: Thank you for your question.

Indeed, in 2008, we received a complaint from a participant of the Point Of Entry Recruit Training Program. As Ms. Therriault-Power

explained, the recruitment program is comprised of two parts. There is the hiring phase which takes place in the region. In this particular case, we are talking about the Atlantic region. Once the candidate qualifies, he or she is transferred to the Learning Centre of the CBSA in Rigaud to take part in a 10-week training program.

We worked in concert with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages on this particular complaint, and he concluded that, from a recruitment perspective, the CBSA had not committed an error, and had made the active offer to provide training in one or the other official language.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Paquet, do you think it is normal for a French-speaking Canadian citizen to be told that French-language results would take too long to obtain, and that she should take the test in English so as to expedite things? Set aside the complaint and let us talk about these comments. Do you think such comments are acceptable?

● (0925)

Mr. Pierre Paquet: I do not want to make any comments on those specific remarks. It is obvious that the allegations of the complainant are such that, to her mind, she was not given the chance to receive training in either French or English.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Let us begin at the beginning on day 1. We are not in Rigaud yet, we are far from being in Rigaud. I gave you an example of what I had to go through at Ottawa airport when I spoke in French twice after which I had to demand services in French from a supervisor. He asked me if I had requested service in French. When I speak out in French twice in a row, it is quite clear that I would like to receive service in French.

The official languages commissioner said that service should be offered proactively and not in a reactive way. If someone asks why he cannot take tests in French, do you think that he should normally get the answer that his tests will go more quickly, and because he speaks English, he should continue in English?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: First, let us get one thing straight. You are telling me very generally that our commitments are fairly clear. Any person who wants to be hired by the Canada Border Services Agency as a border agent can choose the language of his or her training, be it English or French. In Rigaud, we give courses in both languages. Training is given either in French or in English, following an established schedule. The possibility of having access to training in French is always available in Rigaud at different times of the year.

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

Now we will continue with Mr. Nadeau.

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

Ms. Therriault-Power, Mr. Paquet, good morning.

I would like to read out to you a letter addressed to the official languages commissioner:

Mr. Commissioner, through this letter, I wish to file a complaint against the Canadian Transport Security Authority Agency (CATSA) at the Macdonald-Cartier airport in Ottawa, pursuant to section 58 of the Official Languages Act.

On Friday, October 9, 2009, around 4 p.m., at the Macdonald-Cartier airport in Ottawa, I was walking toward the boarding gates before going through security. Both of the employees who were there told me that they did not speak French "We don't speak French", after I had asked for service in French. Both employees were looking down on me, as they immediately took me for someone who wants to assert himself and to give them trouble. I need not tell you that I was not happy, I was furious, all the more so because I had before me a little poster telling me that I can ask for service in French. Neither of the two employees even deigned to offer me to go get someone who spoke French to serve me. I felt like a second-class citizen.

It is already frustrating enough that I should have to request service in my language, which is French, an official language in our country Canada, but in addition to that, two employees who were not bilingual made things even worse by their arrogant attitude. I do not accept that. There are some limits. Suddenly, at the very end of the process, another employee came up to me and offered me French service.

This situation is unacceptable [...]

I filed this complaint. In fact, on last October 9, I was going to Vancouver to look into the state of French language services for the Olympic Games. The adventure began in Ottawa. Can you explain to me how come employees in Ottawa tell me: "We don't speak French"?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: A fair percentage of our employees at Ottawa airport are bilingual. I have not yet seen the letter, but we will investigate to see what happened and we will correct this.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You must note that we have only five minutes and that that includes my question and your answers.

I was expecting more problems in Vancouver, thinking that it's less francophone there, but that was not the case. As soon as I asked to be served in French, the process was triggered, in other words someone went to enquire and another person arrived to serve me, all in the space of a minute. But in this case I, of course, did not make a step forward until I had obtained the service and that delayed a number of people. I can manage, I can endure this type of stress, but if someone were unwilling, I could imagine how they would feel.

These were young staff members who, I would imagine, probably did not have much seniority and must have received their training relatively recently. I did not ask them how old they were. Why do we have to be subjected to this type of thing?

There is also the case of Mr. Lauzière, last spring. Returning from Las Vegas, arriving at border services at the Macdonald-Cartier airport in Ottawa, he could not get service in French. That was also the subject of a complaint. Is it simply a coincidence that people from Gatineau are experiencing these situations, or are the cracks in the floor so big we can't even see them anymore?

• (0930)

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I think Mr. Paquet will have some comments to make as far as the training in Rigaud is concerned, the language training and the importance of the active offer of bilingual services.

First of all, I want to apologize on behalf of the Canada Border Services Agency about your bad experience. We feel it is

unacceptable. We will follow up on the matter and correct the situation as soon as possible.

Through signage, the way in which our officers speak to clients, we endeavour to offer bilingual services to Canadians and travellers at all ports of entry. However, it would seem that is not always the case.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: What does active offer mean to you?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: It means speaking to people in both official languages, in other words "Hello, *bonjour*". If the person is unilingual and requires French services, the officer has two options. First of all, if the person is at a small port of entry, alone or where there are not many officers on duty at that moment, they may call another port of entry offering bilingual services where another officer would be able to provide the services in French. Second, if it happens, say, at the Macdonald-Cartier airport, the officer must leave his station and bring the traveller to a bilingual officer who will serve him as soon as he's finished serving the client he's currently with. That is the process that we use.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: It's going to need to be implemented—

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Thank you, and my apologies for your experience.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

We will now continue with Mr. Godin.

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

There's no problem if you're travelling by car through the U.S. border, but by plane, people may be in a rush, the fact is that they may have to change planes, that a change may have to be made over the phone, trying to clarify the situation; it's all the more complicated. How do we manage this? Either the service is bilingual or it is not.

I would like you to explain the issue of using the phone. Clearly, in Canada, there are two official languages, although it doesn't seem to be upheld. I don't believe there is a single place between Newfoundland and Labrador and Vancouver where employees only speak French and anglophones cannot receive services in English. Among the 20 complaints you've received, how many come from anglophones?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I can inquire, I do not have the information with me at the moment.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I'd like an answer on this point. Air Canada has received 120 or 125 complaints. They all come from francophones; none from anglophones. The only complaint received from an anglophone had to do with the fact that people did not like to hear French on board, it was a verbal complaint. So, I'd like an answer as to the 20 complaints.

Regarding the complaint filed with the Commissioner of Official Languages, and determined to be unfounded, can you explain why that is? I believe Mr. D'Amours has not received the response to his question. You've told him what you do, what is available, but he was asking whether it was normal for a person to be told that it would be quicker for a person to sit an exam in English. That part of the question remains unanswered.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: The unit I work for is responsible for training. However, we were involved in the investigation. We supported the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages during the investigation.

When an individual is recruiting in a bilingual region, the aptitude test for Canada Border Services Agency officers, the interview and the psychological test are all instruments that are available in both languages. We make sure that we offer each recruit the choice of English or French during recruitment and training.

I know that we were involved in the complaint because the allegations also had to do with the fact that the person had not been given the opportunity to take training in French in Rigaud.

If, at some point, trainers or the management team, whose members are all bilingual, realize that a recruit who has chosen to receive training in English may have overestimated his or her ability to learn in the second language, there are mechanisms in place to transfer the recruit. That could also be the case for a recruit we consider francophone, who has chosen to take training in French, in a French class. My team is responsible for that.

● (0935)

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, that is not my question, sir. I've understood that.

My colleague Jean-Claude D'Amours' question had to do with the fact that someone said to the complainant that if she chose to take the test in English, it would go quicker. It wasn't about knowing whether or not she had a choice. There is the issue of choice, but there is also the issue of speed.

Let's just say that I have the choice to either take a car or to walk to get to a movie. If I take my car, I'll get there quickly, but if I walk, I may not make it. A choice was given to her.

I don't know if you're aware, but these days, when you call an agency—it seems to be quite common—you press 1 for service in English and 2 for service in French. If you press 2, you wait half an hour, and if you press 1, you will speak to someone within five minutes. Is that the type of problem we are dealing with here?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: I understand.

I can tell you that the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages' investigation dealt with both components, in other words training and recruitment. The office clearly ruled that active offer had been provided during recruitment, in the Atlantic region. In terms of commenting on the complainant's allegations, as to whether that was done or not, or if she was forced to proceed in that way, I cannot say.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You don't have an answer to that.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: We have an answer which is based on the conclusion of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The commissioner said that the complaint was unfounded. It is not the first time I hear this. I am only referring to the complaint itself.

Someone conducted an investigation. Is it true that she was told that if she passed her exam in English, things would move more quickly? It's easy to answer that question.

I am not here to hear what the official languages commissioner may or may not have said. Was this woman told that if she passed her English exam, things would move more quickly, yes or no?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: What I can say is that we have a predetermined schedule based on the needs of each administrative region and on the chosen language of the participants. This year, for example, we have 23 openings in our schedule.

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, you are not answering my question. It's simple, it's a yes or a no, or an "I don't know".

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Godin, We will come back to that issue.

We will continue with another member, Mr. Petit.

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

Good morning, Mr. Paquet. Good morning, Ms. Power.

My first question is a technical one. When you go to the airport, regardless of which one it is, you know that your luggage will be checked before you enter, even if you are on a domestic flight, and you can see the acronym CATSA or ACSTA.

Is CATSA accountable to you or is it a completely independent agency?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: It is completely independent.

Mr. Daniel Petit: That's not you.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: No.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Fine.

At what point do your employees enter the picture compared to CATSA employees? Do they enter the picture before or after CATSA employees?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: CATSA employees are the last ones you deal with before leaving and the first ones you deal with when you arrive.

Mr. Daniel Petit: When I enter the country, the first people I deal with are your employees. Is that correct?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: That's correct.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Fine.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): What exactly is CATSA?

[English]

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: CATSA is the Canadian air traffic safety association.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Petit: CATSA employees check our luggage, our computers and so on.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes.

Mr. Daniel Petit: My second question is directed at you, Mr. Paquet.

What exactly is your position within this agency? Are you its director general?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: Not at all. Under the organization hierarchy, Ms. Therriault-Power is responsible for the general management of human resources. I am accountable to the director of training. As for me, I am responsible for training recruits, be they cadets or recruits, otherwise known as Canada's Border Services agents.

Mr. Daniel Petit: My question is for you, Mr. Paquet, and perhaps also for Ms. Power. I'm not sure.

Did you know that the Bloc Québécois tabled a bill which would force your agencies, when they operate in Quebec, to function in one language only? Have you thought about how this law would be enforced? Perhaps Mr. Paquet...

• (0940)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Chairman, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau has a point of order.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: This has happened for the second time. The matter involved the Bloc Québécois and the NDP. But there was never any talk about unilingualism.

Mr. Petit, if you have anything to say, please stick to the facts or hold your peace. Your ignorance is detracting from...

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau...

Mr. Richard Nadeau: ... the facts of the case. It's true.

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau, that is not...

Mr. Richard Nadeau: The issue is not unilingualism, but respecting French in Quebec.

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau, that is not a point of order.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: But the issue was raised.

The Chair: You will not raise points of order to control our discussion. You will have your five minutes later. You can use your time any way you wish.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Yes, but Mr. Chairman, if falsehoods are uttered, someone has to object. That should be your job, but if you don't do it, I will. Indeed, in this case, members of Parliament are being attacked and the true intent of the bill is being distorted. In fact, this has happened twice already.

The Chair: Sir, that is not a point of order.

Mr. Petit, I just want to reassure you that you will not lose any of your time. That was not a point of order.

If you wish to raise a point, you can do so during your five minutes. You can discuss your points any way you wish. This is a political arena, but the fact remains that you did not raise a point of order.

Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Thank you.

Mr. Paquet, you heard the issue which was just raised.

Are you aware of this bill, which would apply to your organization and its Quebec operations? I am talking about the application of the French Language Charter, which we call Bill 101. This bill would apply to every employee of your agency working in Quebec.

Since you work in the area of training, I was wondering whether you had considered this possibility.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: Sir, I do not have an opinion on that. That issue is just not part of my mandate. Consequently, I cannot respond to that type of question.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I think I can answer that. As an agency of the Public Service of Canada, we are subject to the laws of the Government of Canada. Therefore, if the bill is adopted, we would have to comply. But for now, we are subject to the Official Languages Act and to the policies of the Treasury Board, which we apply.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Ms. Power, I imagine that you are in the business of hiring people. Generally speaking, you target bilingual regions.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes, bilingual regions.

Mr. Daniel Petit: In New Brunswick, based on the information we regularly receive from Mr. Godin and Mr. D'Amours, there is a bilingual population. Is that correct?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes.

Mr. Daniel Petit: How do you designate Quebec? Is it considered to be a bilingual or unilingual province, based on your criteria?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We consider Quebec to be bilingual.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Are all of Quebec's border entry points bilingual, or are some unilingual?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I would have to send you the relevant information. Of course, many of the positions in our border offices are designated bilingual. That is the case at our ports of entry and also in our airports. I will look into the matter and provide you with that information.

Mr. Daniel Petit: Can you send that to the committee?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes, absolutely.

In short, you would like to know how many bilingual positions, or bilingual agents, there are in the Quebec region.

Mr. Daniel Petit: There are crossing points at Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle and Jackman, that is, Armstrong. These are the two main crossing points and there is a third one, which I cannot think of right now. These entry points are considered as being bilingual. Therefore, as far as the services we provide, our region is considered as being bilingual.

You talked about unilingual regions. Which regions would you consider as being unilingual?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: In several regions in Ontario, we have many employees. On the other hand, some regions of Ontario are bilingual. The Atlantic region and the Quebec region are bilingual. The Prairies region, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta, is unilingual. In these regions, we make an assessment during each period to take into account the minority language community in the region. Moreover, the Treasury Board and the Public Service Commission issue policies that tell us, for instance, that from a certain moment on, an office must be considered bilingual. Then we must assign bilingual employees to these offices who can offer bilingual service to travellers.

● (0945)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Petit.

Ms. Glover.

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

I do not want to interrupt the discussion, because time is short. However, with all due respect for Mr. Nadeau, I find that his last statement is not parliamentary. He accused Mr. Petit of telling lies. This is against our Standing Orders. I am asking Mr. Nadeau to apologize to Mr. Petit.

The Chair: I already made a finding regarding the call to order. However, in this case, I think that this is an issue with the debate. It is normal that there should be different points of view, different interpretations among the various political parties. Hence, this is not subject to a call to order pursuant to the rules that we follow.

Therefore, we will continue with the second round.

Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I need a quick and brief answer from both of you. You keep on using the term "an active offer". Could you explain in 10 or 15 seconds what an active offer is?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: An active offer consists in saying to someone who comes up to our officers: "Hello, *bonjour*."

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Perhaps the commissioner said that an active offer was all right.

However, just now, I mentioned my fellow citizen who asked Ms. Rodriguez why she could not pass the test in French, since she came from a francophone region. They answered that it would take too long to get the results.

You understand that this is not an active offer. It has nothing to do with the issue of active offers. This is my first point.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes, I agree.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Let me continue.

On April 27, this person came to Rigaud and, once she got there, she learned that the course in French was being offered at the same time. Then, she was told that the class in French was mainly reserved for Quebeckers.

Let me continue, and you will have an opportunity to reply.

On another occasion, during a session regarding firearms, she made a request to the teacher. Because she had taken her firearms courses in French, she did not know the English terms. She asked to be given the French notes, and they answered that because she was taking the course in English, these would be the only notes that she would be given, and that she should make do with them.

You seem to be trying to be vague in your answers, when I put specific questions. It never seems to make sense. However, I have to agree with my colleague Mr. Godin, when he says that we hear many times that everything is fine with the government services, whereas things are not going well in reality.

You said that there does not seem to be a large number of complaints. I have already mentioned, here at the Standing Committee on Official Languages, my experience at Winnipeg airport. I spoke in French twice in a row and I never got service in French. Finally, they wanted to search me manually. They could not find anyone who spoke French. You may think that this is funny, but it should make you think. I did not file a complaint, although I should have, and should file one today. I tried to make my request in French, but it was impossible. Before going through the search, I wanted to hear what I was being told in French. Finally, they found someone within the entire group of employees. The gentleman, very kindly asked me "would it be all right with you if we gave you a massage?" I knew that this would make you smile. But you do understand that there was a big difference between what I should have gotten as a result and what was being offered to me.

After looking at the series of events, we are told that there is no problem. Nevertheless, in practice, there is a problem. When a problem comes up like the one that came up during the firearms course, why are people told that these are the only notes that they will get, and that they should make do with them?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We would rather not receive any complaints. We would rather there be no problems and that no mistakes were ever made with regard to service to employees, candidates, Canadians and travellers. That being said, perfection is unattainable.

In the cases you mentioned, mistakes were made. The behaviours involved go against our policies, as well as what we teach in Rigaud, and also against the policies we promote within our organization.

● (0950)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: If you're telling me that it was a mistake and that you don't promote that kind of behaviour, are you willing, today, to immediately re-register that person into the next French class in Rigaud? You've just confirmed everything I said, namely that mistakes were made. If indeed that is the case, are you willing to immediately re-register that person into a French class?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: No, not in light of the facts as they were presented here this morning. We need to investigate the case. If you would like to raise this matter in particular with me, I would be pleased to hear you out. However, in this context, your request is not a reasonable one.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Unless I'm mistaken, the official languages commissioner checked to see whether an active offer had been made: "*Oui, yes, bonjour, hello*".

However, everything else—that is, the training in Rigaud and, previous to that, the pre-training in Fredericton—was not evaluated.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: If I may respond to that: No.

The Office of the Commissioner conducted a fairly in-depth investigation. We held three telephone conferences. The investigator went to Rigaud for a visit. I can say that we spent perhaps 10 hours being questioned by the investigator, and he asked the same questions you raised.

As for the francophone recruit who chose to register for an English class, if that person had asked for training materials in French, we would have given her a complete series of training materials.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Can you explain why—

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

We will continue with Ms. Guay.

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): I hope we can all calm down, Mr. Chairman.

A little earlier, you said that in some parts of Canada, service was provided in English only, whereas it should be provided in both languages everywhere.

I personally travel a lot. I've been a member of Parliament for 16 years. I've been everywhere. I've transited through many of Canada's airports. I've always been well served in Quebec and Montreal, because that's where most of the staff is bilingual. However, in Ottawa, it has happened that I've come back from a trip, on which there were ministers as well, and I could not be served in French, even though Ottawa is the seat of Parliament. That is unacceptable.

In Toronto, it's the same thing. In Toronto, I was treated like a pariah or, as we like to say in Quebec, like a dog in a bowling alley, just because there was no bilingual service. So, there are still serious and deep-seated problems.

You said that 20 complaints had been made. If we dug a little deeper, if we scratch the surface, I am sure that we would see that the number of complaints is 100 times higher. Some people don't complain because they are afraid to do so, don't have time or don't know it's even an option. There might be several reasons why people don't complain, but, in my view, this is unacceptable.

I would even say that Mr. Fraser is very concerned about your work with VANOC to ensure that during the Olympic Games—at which time you will welcome many, many people—services will be available in both languages 24 hours a day. Flights will be taking off and landing day and night. If you provide bilingual services during the day and in the evening, but if there are none available at night, what will you do with those travellers—send them home again? Either that, or they will be in for an unpleasant surprise when they arrive.

In my view, you have a huge task before you. Further, there's no way that services will be provided in English only, as is the case in Alberta. I don't really understand. There are francophone tourists in every Canadian province; they will come from everywhere, and they must have the option to be served in either official language.

It's not normal, and I would like some answers.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: As for planning the Olympic Games, we are addressing the issue on several fronts. We will post 43 bilingual officers in the Pacific region at entry points along the border and in our airports.

Ms. Monique Guay: Will they be on duty 24 hours a day?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes. Travellers will always have access to bilingual services during the Olympic Games in Vancouver.

Further, many flights from abroad will go through Toronto. We are working closely with our Toronto airport employees. We even have a language training officer on site to help train our officers.

Ms. Monique Guay: How many bilingual officers will be on duty in Toronto?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I can get that information for you, since I don't have it with me now.

Ms. Monique Guay: That would be important to know because Toronto is a hub. Many flights coming in from Europe, Asia or elsewhere land in Toronto, and travellers have to pass customs and security. That's where you have to focus your efforts, where you need additional staff because people won't necessarily be flying directly into Vancouver.

• (0955)

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: That's what we intend to do. I think we will have 10 officers in Toronto.

Ms. Monique Guay: That's not enough.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We already have bilingual staff on the ground.

Ms. Monique Guay: That's not enough.

If you have 43 officers in Vancouver, that's because you believe that many travellers will be arriving at that airport. But imagine what it will be like in Toronto. I'm not worried as far as Montreal is concerned. However, you only have 10 officers in Toronto for a service which will be offered 24 hours a day. It won't work.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We already have several bilingual agents on the ground, and we are trying to add more staff.

Ms. Monique Guay: We need to know how many people will be on duty. I think we will need more than 43, even in Toronto. We will need more than in Vancouver because Lester B. Pearson International Airport is huge.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: In Vancouver, we will continue to provide on-site training to our officers, because, as you know, there are also quiet periods when no flights are coming in. When it's quiet, our on-site language training officers provide training to our Vancouver personnel. Further, we will add another 43 officers.

Ms. Monique Guay: Very well, but there are other airports involved as well, Ms. Therriault-Power, and that's very worrisome. I'm referring to Toronto. Montreal certainly is a hub as well, but I'm not worried about Montreal because it already provides a bilingual service. We are all francophones and we are learning English. I don't know of anyone who was not been served in his or her language in Montreal.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Guay.

[English]

We will now move on with Madame O'Neill-Gordon.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And welcome. It certainly is great to have you with us today.

It is obvious that the CBSA provides a high level of expectation for their officers in serving the crossing public. Coming from New Brunswick, a bilingual province, I realize the importance of this when crossing borders.

My question is this. When you are hiring staff now, or officers, do you hire them if they have only one language, or do they have to be bilingual?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: It depends on the region. Normally, we make every effort to recruit people who have the language capacity on recruitment. Training people is an expensive undertaking, obviously, as you can imagine. We're an operational organization, so if you're getting language training, you're not on the job. So when we recruit, we do.... But if for some reason we're not able to recruit a sufficient number of bilingual people, then we will look at recruiting on a non-imperative basis—that's what we like to call it in public service language—and train them. We offer language training.

Because we're such an operational organization and so geographically dispersed, we use a lot of online training. We also use models whereby trainers go to the work site and work with staff when there is not a lot of travelling public coming in. That appears to be the best approach.

We have two full-time language training officers at the Rigaud learning centre doing telephone tutoring for officers across the country as well.

So what we do is try to recruit meeting language requirements. If for some reason that's not a possibility due to the labour market, then we recruit unilingual people with a view to training in the bilingual regions.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: If a unilingual officer is on at the greeting spot, is there also a person available nearby who speaks another language?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes. We work in a shift operation environment. It's the manager's objective to offer bilingual service on a 24-hour basis. When your bilingual officer or officers call in sick, what you need to do is make arrangements, either through another port of entry or by bringing in someone with bilingual capacity to work that shift, so that at all times there is a bilingual officer or officers available at the port of entry.

Some ports of entry are very small; they have a very small travelling public coming through. Others are huge, like Windsor and others or Lacolle at the end of a long weekend in Quebec. So we work very hard to have bilingual capacity available. Sometimes, as we've seen evidence of today, we fall down on the job. But it's our objective and we try very hard, through shift scheduling and managers knowing the language capability of staff, to ensure we have bilingual capacity on the shift at all times.

● (1000)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: As well, are French training and English training offered at the same time? If you go to university, sometimes you have a choice—the French course is offered in one semester and the English course is offered later. But in your case, are both courses offered around the same time or at the same time? This is in regard to the lady wanting to be served in French when she was in the English class.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: The answer is yes.

Like many government departments today, the agency faces a lot of financial pressures as well. And there's an enormous cost associated with quality language training. So what we try to do.... Taking a person away from a port of entry and into a formal classroom setting creates such a financial pressure for us that one could then excuse away our official language obligations, and that's not something we want to do. So we're trying to be very creative and use virtual and web approaches to learning and have a lot of online language training ability. We also bring language trainers to the site. And we do telephone tutoring as well as classroom training. Those are all the options we use.

I would say that in the province of Quebec the language profile of our positions is at the BBB level and has been for a long time. There's always, perhaps, more of a demand in Quebec for English language training, and we work very hard to meet that demand.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

We'll now move on to Monsieur Godin.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I will take two minutes of my time to speak about the point of order. With all due respect, Mr. Petit said that people would be served in only one language, that is, French. But that is not what the bill says. The bill says that francophones and anglophones will be able to address their employer in their mother tongue. There is no reference to customer service. There is a difference between those two things. I would like that to be clear, because Mr. Petit brought that up twice.

Mr. Petit, the bill refers to customer service in both official languages if that is what is requested. The bill also states that in the workplace, employees should be able to address their employers in the language of their choice. But these two situations must not be confused. I hope that this point will not be raised again at the next meeting.

You said earlier that in Toronto and British Columbia, you add staff. Are Toronto and Vancouver considered bilingual?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I should have that information. I would prefer to check the facts before answering your question.

However, given the itineraries and our forecasts concerning the travel plans of people who will be coming to the Olympic Games, we know that there will be a great many visitors from francophone countries. We must thus be able to offer this service to travellers.

Mr. Yvon Godin: What concerns me is that the Olympic Games will eventually end. I didn't think that you had been invited here solely to talk about the Olympic Games. The important thing is to find out what happens, on a daily basis, in a country that is officially bilingual. It's a shame, but if I fly in from France, I can land at the Toronto or Montreal airport, but not at the Bathurst airport. We are a bilingual country, but in the case of people who land in Toronto from France, Africa or countries such as Sweden, what is our policy?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: For our travellers—

Mr. Yvon Godin: You're not telling me that you assign 46 people to Toronto just because an airplane is landing?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We put up posters advertising bilingual service—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, but a poster doesn't talk.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: No, but we have officers serving our customers who speak French. That is the case at each counter, in general.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Imagine that an airplane is coming in from France and that all the passengers must go through customs. Holy smoke! If there is only one officer to look after the entire group, that will take a long time.

I am wondering what the policy is in Toronto. Is it designated bilingual? Are the customs officers working there bilingual?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: A considerable percentage of the officers are able to speak—

• (1005)

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like you to tell the committee what that percentage is.

The same applies to Vancouver. What is Vancouver's designation? In Alberta, the percentage of francophones was less than 5% in certain areas, and so it is not necessary to offer bilingual services there. I can tell you that things are easier in that direction.

For example, in Lamèque, New Brunswick, 100% of the population is francophone. However, Canada Post decided to designate its Lamèque office bilingual. But this designation doesn't seem to cause problems. People seem to think that customers need service in both official languages in order to go and pick up letters.

However, in Toronto, where people come from all over the world speaking different languages, in a bilingual country—

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: In answer to your question, I would like to say that we are already offering a service. Some people think that it could be better. We know that with the Olympic Games in February of next year, there will be an increase in the number of travellers coming from francophone countries. This is why we are trying to plan ahead and to train our officers so that we can offer the service.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I do not really care to discuss the Olympic Games.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Our officers will not leave after the Games. They will keep their jobs and continue offering the service. They will be better trained. This legacy of the Olympic Games will be good for the agency and for Canadian travellers.

Mr. Yvon Godin: These things must be said. The Olympic Games will come and will go. We want to know what kind of service will be offered afterward. Thus, you could give us the current percentage, the future percentage and the percentage in Vancouver.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

With regard to another issue, I forgot to tell you that Mr. Chong's absence seems to be justified because his spouse gave birth to a third child last night. Maybe we could congratulate him. It is a boy.

We hear a lot about body searches. Let us imagine that as I leave the Quebec airport, I go through a search and I put my BlackBerry in a basket. If I understand correctly, CATSA is in charge of this. Have you anything to do with CATSA?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: No.

The Chair: If the person who gives me a basket addresses me in English while I want to be served in French, it is...

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I think that it has to do, very indirectly, with the Department of Transportation, because this involves a private company.

The Chair: Nevertheless, it is a part of the offer. Someone who is going to the Olympic Games does not know whether it has to do with you or with CATSA, and little do they care. If the committee is concerned with French-language service as a whole, this could be an avenue. Thus, you are not the one...

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We are working with CATSA, Air Canada and others as we plan for the Olympic Games. Upon arrival at the airport, CATSA is in charge of security and of searching the luggage. However, travellers who arrive in Canada see us first.

The Chair: Very well.

Let us begin our third round with Mr. D'Amours. You are lucky, a second is never without a third.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Paquet, earlier you said that the documents were available in French. I wanted to intervene, and you will see what I am driving at. Let me come back to the same case. A citizen from my riding asked the lady who was supervising the test if she could have a copy of the test in French. The lady refused under the pretext that if she had the French version, it would amount to discrimination against the anglophones. You said that it was available. They put a French version on a corner of the supervisor's desk during the test and she was told not to move around too often to consult the contents of the French exam so as not to disturb the others.

Could you explain why they cannot offer the test in French if someone requests it? If they take the trouble of putting a test in French on a corner of the supervisor's desk during the exam, why can they not distribute the same exam in French to those who want it even if the course is in English?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: You make an excellent point. The practice you're describing was the one in effect at the time the individual from your riding wrote that test in Rigaud. That took place before the official languages commissioner's investigation. We changed our practices following that investigation. Now, if a francophone individual taking a course in English requests the test in French, then a copy is made and that individual is provided with their own exam in French on their own desk. People can now choose to write the exam in French, in English, or partly in French and partly in English. All choices are accepted.

• (1010)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: In the end, my constituent was let go for no reason.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: No.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I speak English better than I write it. Let us imagine that I take the test, that I have an English version, that I'm able to read the questions in French but I have to respond in English. Obviously I won't do as well. The best way to fire me is to give me a test in English and make me respond in English even if I do have the questions in French.

Let's go even further. What about those comments to the effect that people shouldn't come to look at the test too often, once or twice at the most, because it might disturb others, or because it would constitute discrimination towards the other students? I was very angry when I became aware of this.

Let us also recall some of the other statements that the official languages commissioner made. Perhaps you have made some improvements, but if you did make those improvements, it was only because a problem was raised. If that problem took place once, I can't believe it was the only time. Furthermore, you have corroborated this by saying that that was the practice.

I am certain that over the next 24 hours, I will be receiving a tonne of emails at my office, accusing me of having over-defended the francophones. It doesn't matter, because this simply makes no sense.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: Mr. Chairman, what I can tell the member is that he is clearly dealing with two diametrically opposed positions: the plaintiff's version and that of the program I represent.

I can assure you that I am a francophone and I am very sensitive to these issues, and the management team in Rigaud is made up, in part, of bilingual francophones and bilingual anglophones. We have nothing to gain from refusing access to material in the second language, whether that be French towards English or English towards French. The material has already been drafted and is available.

I can understand that in this specific case, because the exam was not directly provided on the desk of the individual taking the test, it became evident that the process could be improved, and we did that. That was an issue of exam monitoring.

However, we felt that... The statement made by the official languages commissioner was not a recommendation, but rather a comment to the effect that an extra copy—

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Paquet, allow me to continue because my time is precious.

If one of the problems was the result obtained by this woman, who was told that it was over, then she should have been allowed to continue or to take the course again, given that there were discriminatory elements involved. She should have been treated fairly in light of the final results that determine whether a person is capable of continuing or not.

I know that my time is almost up, but I have other issues I would like to raise. With respect to this one, you said you agree. I could continue with many other questions.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: When we were examining this case we did look at this situation very closely in order to determine whether there had been prejudice with respect to this participant and her result, given the fact that the exam had not been put directly on her desk. With the assistance of the commissioner, we concluded that this was not the case, that there had been no prejudice with respect to the result or performance of that individual.

The Chair: Thank you very much Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: If all the other aspects that I raised previously were considered, they may show that this woman could have continued the course and succeeded.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you Mr. D'Amours.

You are right about the available time.

Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you very much Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Therriault-Power, Mr. Paquet, thank you very much for testifying before us today.

Please excuse me if I don't plan to be hostile while asking you these questions.

Over the long Labour Day weekend, my family and I came back to Canada at around one o'clock on Tuesday at the Thousand Islands. There was only one border officer there. I thought that the Thousand Islands border crossing was an important one, but there was only one officer there and he was a bilingual anglophone. My son was driving our car and therefore he was the one who answered the questions. He thought he would answer in French in order to move things along faster because the bilingual anglophone—who was a little round—might feel like simplifying his life. Perhaps the best advice is to always address border officers in French in anglophone regions.

I listened very closely to the claims that Mr. D'Amours made and I felt his passion. However I did not appreciate the hostile tone of his questions. If there were any truth in the complaint that he raised, then this has to do with a behavioural problem on the part of at least one of your employees, and this is rather serious. We are there to help people, not to make their lives more difficult.

I listened closely to Ms. Guay's questions, that were asked not in the least bit angrily or confrontationally. However, even though these were quite reasonable questions, no replies were forthcoming.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: She asked for figures and numbers.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Yes, but these were very straightforward numbers that you should have had on the tips of your fingers for your own purposes.

I will now ask my question.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: What I will do, Mr. Galipeau, is to find them in order to be accurate. I wrote to the committee, and I will provide this information as soon as possible.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you.

What I'm interested in hearing, for the good of the cause before us today, is a description of the learning plans that border officers use to further their skills.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: I apologize to the member. Are you talking about learning plans for a specific topic, or—

Mr. Royal Galipeau: What I'm trying to understand is how these problems related to attitude can be avoided in the future.

I have also asked to be provided with service in my own language by a border officer who ended up rolling his eyes and making me feel like I was a trouble-maker, simply because I'm someone who understands his rights and attempts to affirm them, regularly, but with no hostility.

I still recall my friend, Michel Thibodeau, from Orleans, who asked for a 7UP in an airplane and was characterized as a trouble-maker because he asked for it in French. I know you were not personally involved, but this happens often.

How can we train our employees in order to avoid these types of situations?

Mr. Pierre Paquet: I will talk to you about the theoretical aspect. To put you in context, the Port of Entry Recruit Training Program is divided into two main phases. Distance learning is offered online for a four-week period, 40 hours per week. Already at this phase, the Official Languages Act is explained. The concept of language and the values underpinning the act, that is respect, fairness and diversity, are introduced.

When the recruits complete the online training and go to the CBSA Learning Centre in Rigaud, the question of official languages is dealt with horizontally, that is, through different modules, officers are encouraged and taught to appreciate linguistic duality. One of the modules deals with how to treat travellers on the primary inspection line, like when you were questioned with your family at Landsdowne. This is active offer. We ask officers to make an active offer without waiting to find out whether the people are francophone or not. The service must be offered actively and French must be spoken if the officer is bilingual. We teach the officers what to do and what not to do. For example, they must never say, "Sorry I don't speak French." In theory, these are things that should never be done.

In Rigaud, we have classes in French and in English. There is thus a spirit of togetherness that develops between the francophone and anglophone classes. The communities appreciate one another in terms of language, culture, etc. So these are methods we use to educate our officers and train them to give good customer service.

•(1020)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

We will now go to Mr. Nadeau.

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

I'm going to read you an article by Paul Gaboury from the newspaper *Le Droit*. I don't know whether you've read it.

A group of five French-speaking travellers from the National Capital Region feels that they were treated like second-class citizens when they were dealt with by CBSA customs officers, who were unable to serve them in their mother tongue upon their return to Canada. Pierre Lauzière of Gatineau arrived at the Ottawa airport on December 1, 2008, after a visit to Las Vegas with his wife and son, as well as with a couple of friends. But to their great astonishment, none of the customs officers present at the three customs counters who were working at around noon that day were able to serve them in French.

"The customs officers on duty were all unilingual anglophones. They asked me whether there was a problem if they served me in English. We replied that it was not ideal, but that we did not feel like waiting to obtain French services," says Mr. Lauzière.

Another member of the group went to a counter where the sign stated that bilingual service was available. After having been greeted by a customs officer who wished him "Bienvenue au Canada", he was surprised to find out that this officer did not understand anything he said in French. He was certainly not bilingual to the extent that the sign posted would seem to indicate. Considering this situation "absurd, disrespectful and contemptuous," Mr. Lauzière decided to file a complaint with the official languages commissioner, even though he was sure that he would become just another statistic. But he did not stop there. And that is why he decided to go public with his mishap.

"Why did the other anglophone Canadian citizens, who were on the same flight as us, receive service in their mother tongue whereas we did not? I felt like a second-class citizen. Isn't it only normal that we receive service in our mother tongue? We live in a bilingual country and we should be entitled to such service especially in the airport of our national capital. It is a very embarrassing and degrading situation," he pointed out. "It's extremely unpleasant to come back to Canada and to be greeted in this fashion. I felt more at home when I arrived in the United States. We were treated better as tourists."

This article is dated December 16, 2008.

I know you have a job to do, that you represent an agency and so forth, but all is not well. I understand the theory, but in practice, there are problems. Whether there is one complaint submitted to you or 10, that doesn't change the fact that there are problems. I have serious doubts about your ability, as an agency representing Canada, to ensure that a foreigner, a Quebecker or a Canadian who arrives at the airport or at a border crossing feels at home or feels that he is coming to a country where French has the same value as English.

You answered several questions a bit earlier, but there is much to be done, and I hope that when it comes time to offer your courses, whether it be in Rigaud or elsewhere, you will not announce that "This bilingual course will be given in English," which is something that I have already heard.

•(1025)

When a doctor needs to be called, we ensure that he has the required training, but the same is not true for people who are responsible for greeting people who come from abroad or from another region of the country. These people should be able to answer travellers in both official languages and know what to do if they have difficulty understanding the language used by the people addressing them. You tell us that good work is being done, but I would like to know whether these problem situations can be avoided and whether there are improvements that will be made.

The Chair: I would ask that you answer fairly briefly. Mr. Nadeau's preamble was quite long and he used up all his time. We are now coming to the end of the three rounds of questions. Perhaps Ms. Glover would like to say something.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: I would just like to say that I take your comments and concerns very seriously. I will follow up on this, especially with regard to the Ottawa airport and its management to try and determine if there are problems with the inspection and control measures. I want to ensure that the situation gets better. We do a great deal of training and promotion. I'm not here to make excuses, but I can tell you that we will follow up these questions that concern you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau and Mr. Godin.

Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome.

[English]

I'm going to speak English so that we can celebrate that we have two official languages. I have just a comment and then I have a question.

My comment would be that I know what the investigations are about, and I know that you do as well. I appreciate that when we're in a setting such as this, and we only have five minutes, it's very hard to do an investigation. I see here today that it appears that some of our MPs are trying to do investigations and aren't quite letting you finish your responses. So I would hope that you don't leave this place thinking we have a full picture, because we're not going to have a full picture here—and the MPs realize that as well.

I do want to comment that I have total respect for the Commissioner of Official Languages. I find it odd to hear other MPs who are criticizing the investigation that was done, because he has the benefit of a team of investigators; he has the benefit of being able to hear your answers, hear the answers of any of the witnesses involved. I place great faith in his office, and I'm sure the investigation that was done by his office was thorough and was not interrupted every two seconds, in the same way as we see happening here today. I hope we continue to respect his authority.

I just want to comment that any time we have a complaint with regard to official languages, it is under his authority that we must seek redress. So I would suggest to Monsieur D'Amours—and I don't think this is the first time I've suggested this—that if he believes he has a complaint, to do the right thing, to make a complaint.

I live in the city of Winnipeg. Since you brought up the message... many, many months ago I purposely went through our airport and spoke French every single time. There has never been a single offer of a massage, nor has there been a single moment where I didn't get service in French within 30 to 60 seconds. So I would encourage Mr. D'Amours to stop complaining. If it's really taken seriously, use the redress that we have, use the powers that we have in place, and don't mock them.

Those are my comments.

I do have a question. We received a document from the Vancouver Airport Authority that highlights the CBSA's plans to offer services to francophones. Some of the things include recurring training for all front-line staff, pocket cards with phonetic translations, mousepads with phonetic translations. I think these are wonderful initiatives, which we haven't heard about. Perhaps you could address those a little bit.

I'd also like to know why we don't implement those post the Olympics and Paralympics as well. I think they would serve us well in a continued effort.

•(1030)

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes. I think they are already being utilized. What we're doing is bringing an intensity to training to ensure that we're in a position to offer service in an increased traveller capacity situation, which we'll find ourselves in with the Olympics. That's what we're doing in ensuring that this is occurring. The pocket translators are distributed to our front-line officers across the country today.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Today?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes, and the mousepads as well.

In terms of the training, the telephone training continues to happen. We have language trainers on-site at Vancouver airport as well, working with the front-line staff, and they are there to help staff who are already bilingual to retain and improve in anticipation of the Olympics. Obviously, what will happen after that is those skills will remain with these officers. There's a legacy to the Olympics that is wonderful for all of us.

We also have a lot of online training that is available and is well marketed to staff.

So I think those are the key areas that we're looking at right now to increase training.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Will you continue these after the Olympics, though, because I think that would be beneficial?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: That's fantastic. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Godin, and then I think Mr. D'Amours wants to add something.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, when the official government starts giving credit to the official languages commissioner, I get worried. I'm not saying that he doesn't do a good job, but it seems to me that everything is fine and dandy in his reports, whereas people who land at the airport can't even get service in their own language. And then this lady uses her time to commend people on the work being done. In any case, people will be able to judge for themselves.

Concerning the inspection process, do you have a program that allows you to determine what service ordinary travellers receive, or do you rely solely on complaints? Do you check the customs counters yourselves?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: There is some self-evaluation, and the commissioner visits our arrival gates quite regularly.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Which commissioner?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: The Commissioner of Official Languages. Mr. Fraser and his employees come to our sites and look for bilingual services. An evaluation of our services versus our obligations is then done.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We should ask him to report the results to us.

You said that it took 40 hours to learn another language. At least I thought that was what I heard. Could you give us some further explanations? When I was 16 years old, I was living in Ontario and I can tell you that when I was 20 years old, I did not speak much English. Perhaps I do not speak it any better today.

Mr. Pierre Paquet: Thank you for the question. I must say that the first part of our Recruits Training Program is distance training. The training takes 40 hours over a period of four weeks. A part of this training is aimed at instructing the recruits about the Official Languages Act and about questions such as the primary examination and service to clients. This is not a 40-hour language course; a small part of this period of time deals with the Official Languages Act.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Ms. Therriault-Power, let me say in passing that Power is a beautiful name because my mother's maiden name is Power—she comes from Ireland.

•(1035)

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: This is a part of the French-Irish mafia in Quebec.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It also exists in Acadia.

You said that there was a problem with the budget for training. Does the federal government not invest enough money in the agency so that it can give training? You did say that there was a lack of money. We should look at the blues, but I am sure that you made that comment.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do not try to wiggle out of it, that is what you said.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Many kinds of financial pressure are brought to bear on the agency. Some are due to a collective agreement that was negotiated last year and that made us increase our budget for wages. However, this does not mean that we must not meet our legal commitments.

Mr. Yvon Godin: This does not mean that because of part VII of the Official Languages Act, the government cannot make further investments, especially in official languages. Pursuant to section 43, it is in charge of promoting both languages in Canada. This could be distinct from your operating budget. You do not have enough money to do what you would really like to do.

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: It is always good to have more resources available for our official languages program.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Is there a lack of money?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: We could always use more of it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Could you do better if you were given money to promote bilingualism?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

To conclude, we will actually continue with a fourth round.

Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It will likely be brief. I will not refer to the matter I raised during the first three rounds.

Ms. Glover may not like my comments, but sometimes in life, we need to be able to repeat what we say in order to make things better. If we can only say something once and people are not listening carefully, maybe it needs to be repeated two, three or twenty more times.

An inquiry by the official languages commissioner is one thing, but we also need to find ways for it to resonate, for others to hear it and say to themselves, we also need to speak out about what is happening.

People are saying that I am trying to conduct an investigation, Mr. Chair. I am sorry to hear such comments because when our constituents give us files that are important to us, it is also our responsibility as parliamentarians to be able to defend and promote them. If we cannot promote them, what is the point of being a parliamentarian? There is not one.

We are considering important issues. Having to repeat myself two or three times does not mean my comments are irrelevant. That was my final comment, Mr. Chair.

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

I think that Mr. Nadeau would also like to comment.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: I have a question. I do not know whether you can answer it, but I am going to ask it nonetheless.

Would it not be easier for the agency to ensure that bilingualism, French and English, is an essential requirement when recruiting new staff?

Ms. Camille Therriault-Power: With regard to bilingual regions where bilingual services are provided, this is clearly our goal, and that is what we try to do. If at any time, there are no bilingual individuals available on the labour market, we hire unilinguals, on a non-imperative basis, and we train those individuals over a two-year period, if the position is a bilingual one.

However, clearly, our objective is to hire individuals who are already bilingual so that we do not have to spend money training them. These individuals are already bilingual at the time they are hired. Our goal and our hope is to reach that point.

The Chair: Before we thank the witnesses, I want to give the final word to our analyst, who is neutral.

• (1040)

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher): I would like to clarify a few things, since the commissioner will be here Thursday.

The official languages regulations set out the obligations concerning services to the travelling public, at airports, train stations, etc.

With regard to major airports, if we add the number of passengers arriving and departing, and it equals one million or more, services

must be provided in both languages. For smaller airports, it depends on whether demand for services in the second official language represent 5% of the overall demand.

At border crossings, it depends. In New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario, it depends on demand for services at each crossing. If demand reaches or exceeds 5% of overall demand, services must be provided in both official languages.

So, the criteria are quite easy to identify. In airports, services are offered in both official languages when there are one million or more passengers or when demand represents 5% of overall demand by travellers.

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

Now I want to thank Mr. Paquet and Ms. Therriault-Power. Thank you for coming to meet with the committee. Thank you for your efforts in the area of linguistic duality, particularly with regard to the Vancouver Olympics.

Thank you everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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