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Chair

Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Good morning, everybody.

[Translation]

Welcome to the 36th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

It is our pleasure, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), to be hearing from representatives of Air Canada concerning Air Canada's compliance with the Official Languages Act. First, I would like to thank them for coming to appear before our committee on such short notice.

We have Ms. Louise McEvoy, General Manager, Official Languages and Diversity, and

[English]

Mr. Joseph Galimberti, director of government and community relations.

Welcome to the committee.

[Translation]

We also have Ms. Priscille LeBlanc, Vice-President, Corporate Communications. Welcome to our committee, Ms. LeBlanc. This is a first for you.

Before starting, I would like to take the opportunity to offer my birthday wishes to Ms. Guay, whose birthday it is today.

Ms. McEvoy will be reading us the text that is being distributed right now.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy (General Manager, Official Languages and Diversity, Air Canada): Good morning and thank you.

Honourable Members of Parliament, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear today. As Mr. Blaney said, my name is Louise McEvoy and I am the General Manager of Languages and Diversity at Air Canada. I am joined today by my colleagues Priscille LeBlanc, Vice-President, Corporate Communications and Official Languages Champion, and by Joseph Galimberti, Director of Government and Community Relations.

Our commitment to offering our customers service in the official language of their choice is a fundamental and unwavering priority for Air Canada. This commitment is embedded in all our corporate programs throughout the airline, including but not limited to recruiting, hiring, and training. Regardless of economic circum-

stance, we continue to invest considerable financial and human resources in programs intended to enhance bilingual capacity across the Air Canada network.

And Air Canada does meet this language commitment thousands of times on a daily basis and without any fanfare as we transport over 34 million customers a year on thousands of flights and through dozens of airports, with relatively few complaints. The trend in 2009 is very encouraging in this regard. Clearly no airline in this country, and few others worldwide, provide bilingual service as consistently as Air Canada does.

[English]

In this pre-Olympic year, Air Canada has stepped up our efforts to further bilingual capacity at the airline by multiplying staff awareness sessions and increasing our internal ability to develop and train truly bilingual employees. We've sought to move beyond teaching simply the language of work, instead training our employees in the basics of the French language.

We continue to face an uphill battle in seeking to increase bilingual capacity through recruitment, as we have mentioned in previous appearances before this committee and before the Senate committee on official languages. It is an unfortunate reality that we simply cannot hire 100% bilingual candidates outside Quebec.

As a direct result, and despite sincere efforts throughout the organization, our bilingual ratio has not moved since the merger with Canadian Airlines, which, due to that airline's largely unilingual and western-based workforce, decreased our ratio from 60% to 40%.

In 2009 we sought to hire airport agents for the summer period and had difficulty finding bilingual candidates even with publicity campaigns in each hiring station. Our objective for the new hires was 100% bilingual capacity, and we have been able to hire only 67% bilingual agents.

[Translation]

To further put this challenge into perspective, for years now we have hired flight attendants in Montreal and transferred them to operating centres like Toronto and Vancouver to start their careers—because of the lack of qualified bilingual applicants in those cities. Over 575 flight attendants have been transferred.

Our operating challenges are such that we must provide service in both languages on more routes than would be strictly necessary according to the obligation to provide service in both languages only where numbers warrant.

Why is that you may ask?

A flight attendant, on any given day, can start their day on a route where language obligations would not apply because of this provision, then spend the rest of their day working on routes which have a requirement for bilingual service. As a result we have been forced to take the position that all of our routes must have bilingual capabilities regardless of the "where numbers warrant" provision.

This operational constraint, common to all airlines, actually serves to diminish our ability to provide better service in both languages on those routes where we have an obligation to provide service in French and English.

Each year we provide French language training to hundreds of frontline employees and, as importantly, in maintaining their skills.

But in 2009 we have decided, in a more concentrated effort than ever before and despite the substantial cost of doing so, to pull employees from operations and enrol them in language classes in order to improve their language skills and increase Air Canada's bilingual capacity.

For instance, we have held mandatory sessions for employees not qualified in French in Vancouver, where all airport agents have attended the "Un moment s'il vous plaît!" workshops. Further Air Canada employees from other cities will also attend this course in the coming weeks.

Our objective through these sessions is not only to reiterate to our employees our customers' right to be addressed in the official language of their choice, but to give them tips and tools on how to do so, even if they are not officially qualified.

● (0910)

[English]

A few weeks ago, we met with our counterparts from other federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act that will deal with the travelling public during the upcoming Olympic Games, such as Canada Border Services Agency, CATSA, and the Vancouver and Toronto airport authorities. We met to discuss and exchange best practices and to work towards the goal of offering travellers a consistent experience when they visit Vancouver this February.

For most of our customers, the service from our ground and cabin crews is what is most apparent from a language service-delivery perspective. However, the most crucial instances in which consistent bilingual service must be provided are those related to the safety and security of our passengers. As such, not only are Transport Canada language regulations applied through initial and annual recurrent training on safety direction, but our pilots and flight attendants continually train on how to react in an emergency situation.

To ensure, as best we can, consistency on each flight, before each takeoff we inform and remind passengers of safety procedures in both official languages. Bilingual briefings are given to passengers with special needs and to passengers seated in emergency exit rows. Passenger announcements, whether service- or safety-related, are always done in both official languages. The safety videos now have captions in both official languages.

It is a fact that not all passengers, however, pay attention to these briefings. Employees have been asked, through a corporate message, to ensure, when they travel for business or pleasure, that they

actively follow the flight attendant or safety video instructions to set an example for other passengers.

[Translation]

Since our last appearance before this Committee, we have modified our invitations for customer feedback on Official Languages. We have replaced the comment card previously found in seat pockets with a standing column in the enRoute magazine as we believe this will ensure the message is more consistently available to the travelling public. The article informs passengers of their Official Languages rights, invites comment on the level of service received and provides passengers with the opportunity to nominate employees who demonstrate our commitment to serve them in their official language of choice for the Linguistic Dialogue Award, which Air Canada also launched in 2009. Our customers' feedback has increased since we made these adjustments, and I am happy to report that several of our employees have been nominated by customers for the award.

As we close our remarks, we would like to acknowledge that Air Canada is by no means perfect from a bilingual service delivery standpoint. We are certainly aware that, like all federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act—including the Government of Canada—we are far from perfect, and that we can and must do better. We've always acknowledged this point. We've routinely asked the government for assistance in improving our linguistic capabilities, but, unfortunately, we have been consistently denied. We only ask that Parliamentarians compare us to our peers and not to perfection.

Here are some facts for your consideration. Despite a unanimous recommendation by the Standing Joint Committee on Official Languages from their report of 2002, we did not receive any support from government as we integrated the 87% English-unilingual workforce of the former Canadian Airlines into our own, at a cost of roughly \$140 million which Air Canada absorbed exclusively.

The situation defies logic at times. In 2003 and 2005, we were invited to and did apply for language training funds through a Treasury Board program called the "Official Languages Innovation Fund." We were rejected, in writing, by the then Vice President of the Public Service Agency of Canada because although we have the same language obligations as other "federal institutions" or agencies, Treasury Board considered us not to be a "federal institution", but rather a private corporation. We were also advised that Air Canada should request that these invitations to file applications no longer be sent to us, given that our applications would never be accepted.

•(0915)

[English]

Although parliamentarians and senators have in the past recommended otherwise, it has been the position of Government of Canada officials that although Air Canada has the obligations of a federal institution, we will not have access to the language training funding opportunities afforded those same institutions.

Since the government wants to achieve a public policy objective by imposing official languages obligations on a private corporation such as Air Canada, it is only reasonable and fair that Parliament also ensure that this private corporation has access to the same public financial support to which federal institutions with similar obligations have access.

We believe the government must make a choice. It must either create a level playing field in which Air Canada is treated like all other federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act—which means making Air Canada and its subsidiaries eligible to apply for federal programs—or it must treat Air Canada like all other airlines that are not subject to the Official Languages Act.

[Translation]

In closing, allow me to re-state our commitment as a corporation to meeting our current official language obligations. We do take our responsibility seriously and have a proven track record of taking steps to correct deficiencies in the measure we can when these are identified. We will continue to serve, and improve our ability to serve, our customers in the language of their choice, wherever we fly. For us, this simply makes good business sense.

Thank you for your time today; we are now willing to take any questions you might have.

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

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

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

I'm pleased to be here before you this morning to personally ask you some questions and also to hear some criticisms that are reported to me when I'm absent.

First, thanks to the three of you for being here today. It's strange but when we receive representatives from Air Canada, we often hear the same rhetoric, that it is a private company that shouldn't be treated differently from its competitors in the same field in the world. However, one thing should nevertheless not be forgotten: someone somewhere decided at some point that a merger between the two companies was desirable. There were rules and conditions that had to be met, that were required by the Government of Canada at that time

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): It was required by Parliament, not just by the government.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That's even better, Mr. Galipeau; it was required by Parliament.

I didn't sign that agreement; it was the airlines that accepted those rules. Once the rules were accepted, you're saying we should

discharge you from that responsibility. I'm sorry, but that's part of the initial rules.

I nevertheless want to make a positive comment, Ms. McEvoy: the flight attendants are making increasing efforts. I can't deny that and I can say nothing negative on that subject.

You continued your presentation and I said to myself that things were still the same, that we were hearing from the Air Canada people and we were still getting the same comments.

You said a little earlier, talking about service: “[...] offering our customers service in the official language of their choice is a fundamental and unwavering priority for Air Canada.” You understand that service is one thing, a face-to-face contact, but you also have to consider what we have in front of us. In the seat pockets where the magazine is inserted—

•(0920)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's enRoute magazine.

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

enRoute magazine contains information for people who would like to complain and information on the Dialogue Award.

I'm going to relate an experience that I've had a number of times. Today I've brought a little more information. Even though I'm repeating myself, no one ever listens to me. I hope that today I have the right representatives of official languages, government relations and corporate communications in front of me.

I'll tell you the facts. I took flight 8767 from Quebec City to Ottawa on Sunday, October 18, departing at 9:15 p.m. The aircraft was a DASH-1. This is probably the third time I've told this story. The government people are probably tired of hearing it, but we're in committee and I'm telling you the exact facts. When the door to the flight deck is shut, there is a small sign there that reads, in English: “Do not smoke in lavatory.” I wanted to photograph that sign, but you know we can't use our cellphones on board an aircraft. So I wasn't able to do that, but you can check for yourself.

In French, the sign reads “Ne pas fumer les toilettes.” This is probably at least the third time I've reported this situation to various stakeholders, whether it be the Commissioner of Official Languages or Air Canada representatives. The sign reads: “Ne pas fumer les toilettes.” Either I need new contact lenses or someone will be replacing that sign at some point.

Ms. McEvoy, this is an example of what you call customer service. Yes, personal contact between the flight attendant and the customer is important, but I have reported this situation this many times—and I've done it before Air Canada representatives who have appeared here—and nothing has changed. Perhaps it's unfortunate that I'm the one who travels on board that aircraft every time—the future will tell—but, as a francophone, I'm not tempted to smoke the toilets. What a nice translation! I can't believe someone can't remove that sticker from the door and put up one that's in proper French. You could say that an effort had been made, at least, that it was translated by an automated service.

I'm making that comment and, if you wish, I can give you my boarding pass, which will enable you to do the necessary search.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: All right.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I know time is passing quickly.

The Chair: You have about a minute left, Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: You say you receive relatively few complaints. I'm not asking you to comment on what I've just told you, but simply to correct the situation.

As regards the complaint form that was replaced by a questionnaire in the enRoute magazine, have you seen any changes since then? Have there been any positive or negative changes?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: There's been more feedback in general, and fewer complaints this year than last year. In general, the trend is downward this year. We've received roughly half as many complaints as last year through the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That's perhaps, among other things, because if you don't consult the magazine, you don't see the card. Your flight attendants used to draw people's attention to the seat pocket in front of them. People used it, could take the complaint card and write their comments on it, whereas now they don't have the choice: they have to go through the entire magazine to find the little section of the article that talks about official languages. It's much harder.

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

Ms. McEvoy?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: The situation is more the reverse for us: customer feedback is on the rise. Employees have also been nominated for the Dialogue Award.

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

Now we'll go to Mr. Nadeau.

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

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

For me and, I would say, for a number of other parliamentarians, Air Canada is an official languages offender. I heard what you said, but that justifies nothing. You have the audacity to tell us this: "We only ask that parliamentarians compare us to our peers and not to perfection." But there's no one else with whom we can compare you. You are required under the Official Languages Act to meet the needs of Quebec and Canadian citizens who use your services.

In the second round, I'll talk to you about a complaint I recently filed concerning Air Canada, when I travelled on the Ottawa-Vancouver route. It concerns French-language services, which were in fact non-existent on that route the day I took the plane.

The Linguistic Action Plan 2001-2010 was written at Air Canada. But you've stopped updating your results since 2007. Why?

• (0925)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's a very good question. The plan has not been updated since 2007, but action is being implemented under the plan.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Why haven't you updated the plan?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's an oversight.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: An oversight, when we're talking about an obligation? That's not very good. You're telling us that the number of complaints has declined, but don't take that for a guarantee. You only have to read the reports of the Commissioners of Official Languages. For too long, they've shown that you aren't doing your job adequately with regard to the service that must be provided in French on board your aircraft.

What recruitment incentives are you offering in order to hire bilingual people?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: The incentives are better positions, better flight choices for people who use both official languages. In any case, we don't hire people who aren't bilingual to the extent that's possible. Obviously, as I said earlier, that was very difficult again this year, although we've had a little more success than last year with regard to our positions in the airports. Whatever the case may be, for a bilingual person, compared to a unilingual person, the incentive is to be hired at Air Canada.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You're telling us that Canadian was 86% or 87% unilingual English, but that goes back some time now. An additional effort has to be made when you are responsible for providing service in French. You have that responsibility under the act, and blaming the other company for the fact that you aren't performing that task shows very considerable weakness, in my opinion, non-compliance with the act and a lack of respect for the citizens of Canada and Quebec.

As to the quality of service in French, I see that the rate is 89% in Montreal. And yet, that's your best score. In Montreal, the result should be 100%. We can understand that it's 70% in Ottawa, 58% in Toronto, 55% in Halifax and 33% in Vancouver, but if it isn't 100% in Montreal, I think that means efforts are inadequate. Furthermore, you don't offer any solutions; you're simply saying there's a lack of federal funding.

There's also a legislative aspect, but if you agree that the federal government has an act, you can show your will by doing what you have to do to respond to people who want service in French. The complaints don't come from anglophones, but rather francophones. So you know where your problem is.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: May I answer?

Yes, we obviously could do much more if we had the financial assistance we talk about every time, but we're already doing that. That's why some of you are seeing a difference now. We're giving awareness courses to people who aren't bilingual. We're not going to make totally unilingual people bilingual during their careers at Air Canada, unless there's a lot of will on their part. Because we're giving courses to beginners; we're teaching them the language.

However, what we are giving everyone is awareness. All of Vancouver has had its awareness courses, which employees used to attend on a voluntary basis, whereas it's now mandatory.

• (0930)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Look, I'm going—

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

Mr. Richard Nadeau: The Olympic Games will be held in Vancouver. The act has been in existence since 1969!

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

Now we're going to Mr. Godin.

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

I'd like to welcome you. Hearing you speak from the start, it's as though there were no more problems at Air Canada. There are a million travellers in Toronto.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: And more.

Mr. Yvon Godin: There are still problems, and not just a few. There's something that I'm finding hard to accept this morning. I've been sitting on this committee since 1998. I am one of those people who recommended that the government should help Air Canada as a result of the transaction that was conducted between it and Canadian Airlines. However, today I can't accept the fact, for example, that Air Canada comes here and tells us that it would like to be viewed in the same way as other carriers.

When the private sector decided to buy Air Canada, which is a Crown corporation, it knew very well that it was subject to an act. When you buy the pig, the little pig is in the bag. Don't come and cry on our shoulder today. You're not moving us at all. You knew very well that Air Canada was subject to the Official Languages Act because it's a national carrier which has a mandate to cover the entire country. The private sector said it could carry out that mandate, that it was able to comply with the Official Languages Act, that it was going to make profits, that it was going to take care of Air Canada and Canadians, and today you've come to cry on our shoulders. I don't accept that at all. That excuse doesn't work with me, in any case, and I really want you to know it.

With respect to the card, the only people who can answer you are perhaps those leaving Halifax for Vancouver and who have read enRoute magazine. Although we look for it, we can't find it; we have trouble finding it. I made a recommendation in the letter I sent to Air Canada: why not insert it at the page of the president's report? That way, we would stop having to look for it everywhere in the magazine. We can't even find it. It used to be that, when you opened the pocket, there it was. Today it's hidden in enRoute magazine.

Even though you want congratulations from me, madam, you won't get any. I think the card has been hidden in a magazine that not everyone reads. As Mr. Nadeau was saying, when the flight attendant pointed out the seat pocket during the safety demonstration, at least the card was there and people saw it.

In St. John's, Newfoundland, I believe there are now a million passengers, but no service in French. Last weekend, I met with the francophone community in Labrador City—Mr. Nadeau was there as well. There was the parents committee, the arts committee and the artists. The entire francophone community had its annual meeting, and the answer to the question whether St. John's had had any service in French was no.

How can you tell us today that you are improving, whereas we know it's hard to get service in French even in Ottawa, the National Capital?

A few weeks ago, we congratulated VIA Rail. Why can that corporation find bilingual people to work for it? You said earlier, madam, that Air Canada only had Quebec to find those people? Have you tried looking in New Brunswick? One-third of the population there is francophone. What are you doing for promotion? I mean individually; I never heard you say anything about promotion in New Brunswick. What promotion are you doing in the communities—perhaps booths or something like that—to encourage young people to go to work for Air Canada? I'd like to know your point of view on that subject.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Thank you. I'm taking note of everything you said.

To go back to the moment when the corporation was privatized or merged, I can't go back in time and tell you what happened. However, I think that, by being subject to the Official Languages Act, I imagine the business thought it was entitled to the same thing as all the other businesses that were subject to that act. That's what I can imagine happened at the time.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's what you can imagine, but—

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I want to talk about financial assistance. As I said, although we did not receive that assistance, we are offering an enormous number of awareness courses and sessions to our employees. As we saw that the bilingualism ratio had stopped rising and we had lost those 20 percentage points since our merger with Canadian, we decided to give courses to people who had a base but who were not completely qualified.

We have to increase our capacity. We are completely aware of this major problem. We're trying to find solutions for these employees whom we want to keep, even though they are not bilingual. We have to help them serve clients in both official languages. We have programs and projects to enable employees to find an interpreter, in one way or another, to assist customers. We can't replace all unilingual employees overnight. That's also the problem in St. John's.

We are doing promotion at the hiring stage. All we need to do is post the position on our website. That attracts a lot of people. However, to attract francophones, we are engaging in promotion with them in the francophone newspapers and media.

• (0935)

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

Thank you, Ms. McEvoy.

Now we'll go to Ms. Glover.

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

I would like to welcome all our witnesses.

I was really pleased to read your Linguistic Action Plan 2001-2010. However, as we just heard, you forgot to review it. That troubles me a little. All parliamentarians here are obviously somewhat surprised. I hope you'll be able to review your plan and that you'll continue using the scales you've put in place.

The next time you publish a report, I would really like to see it. I'm sure there have been advances in the past two years. In your plan, you talk about your progress and accomplishments. That's quite encouraging. I hope that information will be reviewed soon.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Thank you for pointing out that situation. It was an administrative oversight that will be corrected. The fact that we haven't done an update does not mean that we haven't accomplished much. Moreover, every time we submit our annual official languages plan, we report all the measures we've taken.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Then what have you done in the past two years to increase service in French at Air Canada?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: As I said a little earlier, we are offering courses to our employees who are not bilingual or who have a base.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: But you've been doing that for a long time. What's new?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: But we can't stop doing it. We're training employees and we have to maintain their knowledge. So we're offering them courses that enable them to maintain what they've learned. We have to administer tests to them to ensure they haven't lost their knowledge.

Obviously, we saw that our ratio of bilingual employees wasn't increasing, that we had a serious capacity problem and that it was not being corrected with time. We decided to provide language courses, not work-based language courses, which concern how to serve a customer, but basic courses, the ABCs of French. We're offering those courses to flight attendants and airport agents. In this way, we'll gradually increase our capacity since we can't do it through recruitment.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: You mentioned the unions in your report. I know you have a relationship with a union that is quite strong. In fact, all your employees who are in contact with the public are members of it. Is the union helping you? I would like to know what your relations with it are like. Are you encountering any obstacles in those relations? I'd like to know a little more on that subject.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: With respect to languages, training and language tests, we don't have any problems. We're obviously providing courses based on seniority because that's the normal way of doing things on the union side. We keep the unions up to date on what we want to do and we have a very good understanding with them in that regard. Obviously, and this is a subject that we've often raised with the unions, in the event of staff cuts, we would want to keep people who have linguistic qualifications. That's one thing the unions don't tolerate, or the umpires either, when cases go to arbitration. To date, we haven't had that kind of agreement or partnership with our unions.

• (0940)

Mrs. Shelly Glover: All right, thank you.

Yesterday, I took a flight from Montreal and was completely satisfied: all employees spoke French. One thing surprised me

somewhat, however—and this is a suggestion on my part—and that is that I wanted to see a movie. I usually do it in English because I'm more comfortable in that language, but I know that you offer a choice, French, Spanish, and so on. So I decided to watch it in French. I pressed the button to select French for each of the movies offered, but none was available in French. That's not an essential service, but it's really something that could improve the perception of your francophone customers. I wonder whether that's normal. That was the first time I had tried, but is that the way it is on all flights?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: No, no, it's no doubt a technical problem that has to be reported, obviously. I always watch movies in French, I listen to francophones songs, and I've never had a problem.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I'll try again.

Thank you very much.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I encourage you to do so.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Glover.

We'll begin our second round with Ms. Zarac.

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

Good morning, and thank you for being here.

You mentioned language training sessions and, among other things, a mandatory session called “Un moment s'il vous plaît”. I don't know when it was offered to Vancouver employees. I went to Vancouver in July. I took a plane back to Montreal, which must be a bilingual route, I imagine. I didn't experience this personally. A number of people—I say “a number” because it happened more than once—went to see the flight attendant and asked for information in French. I heard the attendant answer: “I don't speak French.” I didn't hear, “Un moment, s'il vous plaît.” I don't know whether the training hadn't yet been given at that point or whether it's a mandatory session.

Is it mandatory because there is a reluctance on the part of flight attendants to improve their knowledge of their second language?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: The reason why it's mandatory is that flight attendants have very different and varied schedules. Both flight attendants and passenger service agents in the airports are never in offices. They are either on board an airplane or at a counter. So time has to be set aside during work hours so that they can take this kind of course, particularly since it's a course designed to increase the awareness of people who are not bilingual. Indeed, there isn't necessarily very great interest. Once they've taken the class, we get a lot of positive comments because we've just demystified bilingualism for a lot of employees, even if we communicate a lot about language issues. That's a fact.

In Vancouver, for example, in September, all non-bilingual airport employees went to this course. There were two courses a day, half-day sessions, for all airport employees. Not all the flight attendants necessarily attended the course, but we communicate with them regularly concerning the obligation. You said you heard: “Sorry, I don't speak French.” I'd be pleased to know when, on what flight, because that the basis for a complaint—

Mrs. Lise Zarac: As my colleague did, I'll send you the information, the date and flight number.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Yes, because every time we receive a complaint, that gives us the opportunity—even if it's not something necessarily positive for you who've taken the plane—to give the employee a reminder. In general, employees tell us they don't remember answering in that way, but that's what happened.

• (0945)

Mrs. Lise Zarac: It happened a number of times on that occasion.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I see.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: I'd like to go back to complaints. I agree with what has been said thus far; you really have to look. I wasn't really looking in the magazine and I didn't find it until the end. If our flight is too short, we haven't had the time to get to the end. That's the problem. You say there have been more comments, but there has been an additional campaign, and that probably explains that increase. I don't think it's clear that you can complain; that leaves something to be desired. The little card that we used to have was more effective. It's not just a matter of service; it's also a matter of safety. It's all well and good to have bilingual videos, but I think all passengers have to follow employees' instructions when there's an incident.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: You mentioned costs. Of course, training costs money. I'm well aware that good training is costly. I understand you've taken steps to hire bilingual employees, but don't you believe the solution to your problem would be to put more effort into finding bilingual employees from the outset? You'll save on current expenses. I'm not saying you won't have to do that later.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I agree with you. So this year, our objective was to hire 100% bilingual personnel for the summer at the airports. In some cities, the rate was 100% or 90%. In others, however, in the west for example, despite the fact that we placed a lot of ads, we found only 30%. This is nevertheless definitely a way to increase our capacity.

I entirely agree with you with regard to the courses. We're currently allocating approximately \$1.5 million a year to language training. That's an amount that we think we can—

Mrs. Lise Zarac: We met with VIA Rail representatives last week, and I can tell you they are an example to follow.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I wouldn't want to start making comparisons, because VIA Rail has 3,000 employees, whereas we have 10,000 who are in contact with the public.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that clarification.

We'll now go to Ms. Guay.

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

Thank you, ladies, sir.

I've been a member for 16 years. I've taken Air Canada flights many times and have filed a lot of complaints. I don't have enough fingers to count them.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: You probably don't have enough toes either.

Ms. Monique Guay: No, probably not.

It's really insulting to have someone answer you with: "I don't speak French." Particularly when it's said rudely, thank you. It's nearly impolite. And they don't tell us they're going to get someone who speaks French. We wait 20 or even 25 minutes before someone comes and sees us. But this is an essential service for Air Canada. I don't understand why you haven't yet solved this problem.

You'll have to find a much easier method of access so that people can file complaints and you can get an accurate picture. Most people don't even open your magazine; forget that. In addition, you're doing a best employee promotion. So everyone's mixed up. People don't know whether it's for a complaint or to promote the best bilingual employee.

I think this is a somewhat roundabout way of doing things. I think it's unhealthy to enable people to file complaints this way; it doesn't work. There are people who come and see me at my riding office to tell me that it makes no sense, that they took the plane and that they couldn't even get service in French. They ask me how they should react. Your little folder doesn't work. You'll have to find another way that is less costly, very effective and that you offer people when they enter the plane. Then you'll get the real picture. For the moment, you don't have it.

I often travel with Air Transat, which offers me completely bilingual service, from the pilot to the flight attendant. Everyone speaks English and French. The trip is much more pleasant.

There's a lot of work for you to do. I understand that you bought another company that wasn't necessarily as bilingual as Air Canada and that you have to make an effort, but I believe you're a for-profit company and that you can put measures in place that are not necessarily costly. You have to do recruitment. I've never seen French-language recruiting ads in the newspaper. But I'm in Quebec. And if there aren't any in Quebec or New Brunswick, there's a serious problem somewhere. When you have employees leaving, make an effort to replace them with bilingual people. They aren't just in Quebec; they're everywhere, New Brunswick and Ontario. So ask around to get bilingual people; in that way you'll avoid additional costs and you'll have qualified people.

Personally, I don't want to travel with Air Canada and be told: "I don't speak French." This is 2009, and that's become unacceptable. It isn't simply up to the government to pay for that; you're making money, so invest part of that money in this.

• (0950)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's what we're doing. We've invested in a course entitled, "Un moment s'il vous plaît." The title of the course says it: if employees can't serve a customer, that's what they have to say, not: "Sorry, I don't speak French." That's the basis of the "Un moment s'il vous plaît" course. We've offered it in Vancouver, where there are major needs. It's going to be given right across the country, for every person who is not bilingual.

In Quebec, we don't have any problem hiring bilingual people. Outside the province, we have some problems. In the Maritimes, we have far fewer problems than in the west, of course, but training is the secret to increasing our capacity.

Ms. Monique Guay: You have to force the training, not just offer it.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's what's being done.

Ms. Monique Guay: If you just offer it, people can say yes or no, whereas if you tell them they have to have a minimum knowledge of French...

This also affects the entire matter of safety, which is a major concern to me. I've seen flight attendants going quickly down the rows and telling people to buckle their seat belts in English, but the person seated next to me asked me what the flight attendant had said.

This is extremely dangerous from a safety standpoint. Work really has to be done because you could have serious problems at Air Canada as a result of communication. You don't always have time to switch on the little bilingual recording when things start to shake in the aircraft. Sometimes it doesn't even work. So if your staff isn't perfectly bilingual and can't speak to people quickly—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Monique Guay: —you don't look too good. I think this is an essential service.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Guay. You've had a 19-year career in politics. I was going to ask you whether you were a minor when you were elected for the first time.

Ms. Monique Guay: I was elected 16 years ago, Mr. Chairman. I was very young.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Ms. Boucher.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Good morning and welcome.

Everyone around the table is always surprised to see that sometimes, even in 2009, there are still failures, even though you've made a lot of effort. We've talked about complaints and other things. What bothers me is that you said you were having trouble finding bilingual people. There are at least one million francophones outside Quebec, across the country.

Are you doing a promotion with the linguistic minorities? In Manitoba, for example, are you advertising to recruit francophones, who are necessarily bilingual, since they live in anglophone environments, unlike the people who live in Quebec?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Absolutely.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Since there are one million francophones outside Quebec, I'll never believe that you can't find someone who can work for you.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We're doing targeted advertising, whereas we generally don't need to do so. We're doing it with the francophone communities. We also advertise when we recruit and we are a partner in francophone events, not only when we want to recruit, but also to mark our presence in Canada with the francophone minorities. Yes, we are present.

• (0955)

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: A number of parliamentarians come from other provinces than Quebec and haven't seen that advertising, in Manitoba or New Brunswick, or in Ontario.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Last year, for example, when we posted positions to recruit 100% bilingual airport agents, our recruitment advertising agency really found us the sites, since it's not always newspapers now; there are also sites, depending on the public, where you can find the candidates you're seeking. We placed some advertisements in the cities where we were hiring, since that was the only condition. We knew that hadn't worked in the past. However, it worked a little better this year than last year, but we haven't yet achieved our 100% objective. Ultimately, something like 35% of applicants were bilingual.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: As regards complaints, I'm going to tell you a little story, and you'll tell me what you think of it. I was in Quebec City and I was going to the Magdalen Islands. So I was in Quebec and I was going to Quebec. The person behind me couldn't speak a word of English. She asked an employee for a coffee and was told: "I don't speak French." And yet the words "café" and "coffee" are similar. As I was a member of Parliament at the time, I pulled out my member's card. I don't know why, but, in the space of a minute, she started speaking French and English.

Is there any bad will on the part of certain people?

Mr. Royal Galipeau: You gave her a dictionary.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: No, but it's true. She saw my name and... Sometimes people who work, even if they're perfectly bilingual, are embarrassed at speaking French.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Yes.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Why? How can you go about telling those people that this is an essential need for francophones?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Precisely. That's not just part of the "Un moment s'il vous plaît" course, which is intended for non-bilingual people, but a number of bilingual people who have learned the language since they've been working with us attend our courses to maintain what they've learned. That's what we're trying to do with these employees: we're trying to break down this kind of bubble. They're obviously afraid; they're not comfortable.

We're also trying to correct something else, the attitude of employees when they have to manage a situation in which they're not comfortable. We're trying to show them how to adopt a positive attitude and, with the few words they know, in certain cases, or despite their accent—

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: You follow up on the complaints filed with the Commissioner of Official Languages, but we get the impression that it's always the same things that come up again. Are you doing that kind of follow-up?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Yes, in general, we follow up with the Office of the Commissioner and the employee. Since the Office of the Commissioner was established, we receive complaints very quickly. We manage to reach the manager responsible for an employee concerned by a complaint. Very often, we are able to determine who the employee concerned was, even in the case of a crew of four or five or more persons. Employees are contacted by their managers and have to report on what happened, to the best of their knowledge, especially if a situation has occurred recently.

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

We're going to complete our second round with Mr. Godin.

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

You said you had placed advertisements in newspapers to recruit people. Honestly, I haven't seen any in the papers back home. *L'Acadie Nouvelle* is a provincial French-language paper.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's the one that's used most of the time.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Let's go a little further. Is any recruitment or promotion done in the schools? For example, when CIBC opened its call centre in Fredericton, it immediately entered the Bathurst region. It placed advertisements in the newspapers and on radio to tell the public that it had jobs to offer. It did a big advertising campaign and received applications. The Acadian Peninsula is moving to Moncton because bilingual people are going to work in bilingual positions. It's things like this that can be done. Not everything necessarily has to be done in Quebec.

You said you were dealing with a collective agreement. It should be clearly stated in writing that you can't negotiate a collective agreement that contravenes the law of Canada.

● (1000)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's an excuse; it's not true. VIA Rail took its case to court and won. I was the union representative and I know you can't negotiate something that contravenes the law. It's not true that the umpire wins his case with the employees. The act is very clear and has to be obeyed.

Do you agree with me?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right.

Concerning the sign, complaints have declined because it's hidden somewhere in the magazine. You know that and I won't go back over it. I didn't get an answer from you on that, but I would ask you to look into it again.

You said it was costly. Are you required to spend money to take a case to court when a francophone wants to be respected? You're quite familiar with the case of Mr. Thibeault.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Mr. Thibodeau.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The Thibodeau case. You even brought an appeal concerning the can of 7UP. Air Canada showed that it was not

prepared to respect the languages. Rather than apologize to Mr. Thibodeau and say he was right, you fought until the judge found that Air Canada it wasn't right. I have another case to present to you. I'm going to do it very quickly.

I'm going to read this because I put it in writing. I have a new story to tell you about Mr. Thibodeau. From January 23 to February 1, 2009, Mr. Thibodeau was on a trip to Atlanta, Georgia, on Air Canada Jazz. Allow me to give you a list of all the problems Mr. Thibodeau and his family encountered at that time. On the Toronto-Atlanta flight, he received no active offer of service in French. When he asked the flight attendant whether he spoke French, the latter answered: "A little." Despite that, however, the attendant still served Mr. Thibodeau in English, whereas Mr. Thibodeau had spoken to him in French.

The announcement given by the pilot before take-off was in English only. After asking the flight attendant whether the announcement was going to be made in French as well, he was told that it would not, since the pilot did not speak French and was not required to make the announcement in French in any case, as it was a flight leaving for the United States.

For the Atlanta-Toronto return flight, Mr. Thibodeau was unable to receive service in French at the Air Canada check-in counter. He was not even greeted in French, whereas he spoke that language when he stepped up to the counter.

What is worse, when Mr. Thibodeau asked the counter agent in English whether someone spoke French, she told him: "My boyfriend does." Not only did he not obtain service in French, they also made fun of him. He obviously asked the question in order to be served in French, not simply to determine whether that agent knew someone who spoke French.

The same thing happened at the gate: no service in French, and no boarding announcements were made in French.

Lastly, when they landed in Ottawa, our national capital—the capital of an officially bilingual country, I remind you—the saga continued. While waiting for his bags at the carousel indicated, passengers were told in an announcement in English only that the baggage would be arriving on another carousel as a result of a mechanical breakdown. Mr. Thibodeau then went to the counter to ask that an announcement be made in French. There was indeed an agent who spoke French, who told him that he was going to make the announcement in French, and he ultimately did not do so.

In your 2008 annual report, you said:

For Air Canada, offering service in the language chosen by its customers is essential. Verbal exchanges with clients, public-address announcements at the airport and on board, briefing of passengers with special needs all constitute the very heart of customer service and call upon our employees' linguistic skills at all times. Our consideration to bilingualism not only makes good sense customer-wise, but also supports our legal obligations to serve the public in the two official languages of Canada.

Trick question: when are you going to serve customers in both languages?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Every time a case like the one you're reporting now is reported to us, we follow up with the employees.

•(1005)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do they take you to court afterwards?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We hope not, no.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You've done it.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We hope to settle that in another way.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We're going to start the third round with Mr. D'Amours.

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

Ms. McEvoy, allow me to doubt one point you've just made, that you follow up with the employees.

I just want to take 15 seconds to remind you that, when I spoke to you about the sign earlier, I haven't repeated that story once or twice, but probably three or four times. I've repeated it every time there have been Air Canada people here, and nothing has changed. Perhaps it's because I didn't provide the flight number, and so on. Perhaps I should have done so. I don't know how many planes there are in the fleet, when it's a [*Inaudible - Editor*], there are even fewer, that's limited. This is just to tell you that, if there is follow-up... In my case—I'll give you my sheets later—every time I've mentioned that, there's been no follow-up, since it's still posted.

That was a comment on what you mentioned.

Mrs. Priscille Leblanc (Vice-President, Corporate Communications, Air Canada): Mr. D'Amours, I'm going to call Mr. Randall, the President and CEO of Air Canada Jazz, this afternoon. I'll take note of the flight number. We're going to ensure that there is a campaign and we'll come back and tell you when it has been done.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you very much; that's appreciated. That's being proactive. I appreciate that.

Mrs. Priscille Leblanc: We thought that was settled, but it's going to be settled; I give you my word on that.

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

A little earlier, my colleague Ms. Zarac referred to VIA Rail. I know we can't draw any comparisons since they perhaps have fewer employees, but this is an observation we are forced to make. When the VIA representatives came to testify before the committee, a few weeks ago, their position was unequivocal: everyone hired and assigned to customer service was bilingual from the outset. I understand that they have 3,000 employees and you have 10,000, but, if they can do that, others must be able to do it as well. This definitely isn't an exception to the rule.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I don't know the railway industry that well and I don't know whether it's gone through as many cycles as we have. Without looking for excuses, we're recruiting bilingual people as much as possible. We're managing to find more bilingual personnel among flight attendants and airport passenger agents. However, we haven't seen our figures stagnating because we're forced to lay people off very regularly in the airline industry. So we readjust our work force. There are temporary positions and that's why the ratio doesn't change. So we've decided to do training. Even though we've managed to put only six classes together per year, with 20 students per class, that means that 120 persons will be able to

speak to customers in French with greater ease. We obviously won't drop the recruitment aspect.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Let's talk about the people who have been recruited. Mr. Godin, Ms. O'Neill-Gordon and I are members from northern New Brunswick. In those francophone regions, not everyone has access to high-speed Internet; that's a fact. They don't live in major centres and our region is very big.

Furthermore, not everyone has access to the Internet, even where there is access to high-speed Internet.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I believe our advertising people are very much aware of that, much more than I am, and I believe I understood that the newspapers are used in certain regions, not the Internet. *L'Acadie Nouvelle* is still what is most widely read in Maritime provinces.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That's New Brunswick's provincial newspaper. There is another one as well, *L'Étoile*, if you want options for communicating with people.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's true.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: It has to be done with the known information media.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: That's correct.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: The chances for success are greater. Otherwise, there's a better chance of failure.

•(1010)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We do have to ensure we have every chance of success.

Mrs. Priscille Leblanc: The recruitment question is an issue for you. I therefore suggest that we invite our person responsible for that to a future meeting. That person won't be here to serve up excuses because you don't want any and I understand you, but to answer your questions. I must say that we had no problem recruiting bilingual employees at our Saint John call centre. It's very easy to recruit bilingual employees across the province.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You're emptying the Peninsula.

Mrs. Priscille Leblanc: They're ready to work in Saint John; there's no problem about that. It's harder to recruit people from New Brunswick who are ready to move to Toronto or Vancouver to become flight attendants. The problem is a little more acute.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chairman?

Mrs. Priscille Leblanc: I'm sure we can discuss the measures we're taking to encourage them to do so.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours. Your time is up.

We'll continue with Mr. Chong.

[*English*]

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

I thank Air Canada for appearing in front of us today to talk about their official language policies.

I have two points to make. The first point is that the reason we're here today is that the Canadian education system isn't producing bilingual graduates. It's interesting for me to note this from your opening remarks: to paraphrase what you stated, it's an unfortunate reality that you can't hire 100% bilingual graduates. Last summer, in the height of a recession, you could not find bilingual candidates, even despite publicity campaigns to hire those bilingual candidates. Your target was 100% bilingual capacity, and you could only hire 67% bilingual capacity. You had to transfer 575 flight attendants from Montreal to centres like Toronto and Vancouver because of a lack of qualified applicants in those two cities.

I think this all supports a long-standing point that I've been making at this committee. The Canadian education system is failing us in not producing the kinds of bilingual graduates that we need, not just to staff federal institutions but also to staff federally regulated private sector companies like Air Canada.

Unless governments are willing to address this fundamental problem, my view is that it's only going to get worse. Demographics is destiny. The rapidly changing demographic makeup of Canada is going to exacerbate this problem unless the Government of Canada, the federal government, using its powers, encourages provinces to produce more bilingual graduates. Until that happens, the long-term trend in this regard is not good, despite your efforts.

That's the first point I wanted to make. The second point I wanted to make is that in your February 2007 linguistic action plan, you have a mistake in the second paragraph of your introduction. You state that Canada is a bilingual and bicultural country. It is not. It is a bilingual and multicultural country, as protected by the Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

As you state later in your plan, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects English and French as Canada's official languages and they have equality of status. The charter also protects the multicultural nature of the country, and it mandates the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.

So I would suggest that when you're rewriting this plan, you remove the word "bicultural" and replace it with the word "multicultural".

Thank you very much for your testimony today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

Anything to add, members?

[*Translation*]

Do you have anything to add?

Mr. Galipeau, you have two minutes left.

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

First of all, I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

We operate, in society in general and in this Parliament in particular, on the presumption of good faith. Mr. Chairman, I must admit to you that, in Air Canada's case, that presumption is very much in doubt.

The Official Languages Act has been in existence for more than 40 years and, for more than 40 years, Air Canada has been subject to the Official Languages Act. That obligation was continued when it was privatized. Hearing a litany of excuses from year to year to explain why the carrier can't comply with the act, an act that it accepted at the time of privatization, I admit to you makes me very impatient. Blaming the government doesn't work. It's not the fault of the governments of Trudeau, Clark, Turner, Mulroney, Campbell, Chrétien, Martin or Harper that Air Canada doesn't comply with the act; it's Air Canada's fault.

There is a man in Orleans named Michel Thibodeau, to whom Mr. Godin referred. Mr. Thibodeau simply requested a 7UP in French and he was told in a haughty manner, "I don't speak French." It was not enough just to answer, "I don't speak French," but it was done in a haughty manner. He won his case with... I know Michel Thibodeau, and he's an aggressive guy, an intimidating guy, but police officers were called because he had dared to assert his rights.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Mr. Chairman, I would like to request the unanimous consent of the committee to be able to continue speaking.

The Chair: Do we have unanimous consent?

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I'll give Mr. Galipeau the five minutes of speaking time allocated to me.

The Chair: If there is unanimous consent, that won't be necessary, Mr. D'Amours.

Go ahead, Mr. Galipeau; you have the consent of committee members.

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

The case of Mr. Thibodeau is particularly flagrant. First, Mr. Thibodeau won all down the line. Second, Air Canada dragged him into court so it would not have to admit its responsibility. This morning, Air Canada has come crying, saying that the company doesn't have enough money. However, it has enough money to pay lawyers to interfere with the language rights of its own customers.

I want to be able to restore that presumption of good faith in Air Canada's case. I will do so when it stops interfering with the rights of Michel Thibodeau. There is a court case going on right now, and it must be settled without creating others. Every year, as is provided by the act, the Commissioner of Official Languages reports to Parliament on the complaints he has received. Air Canada always wins that contest and responds that things will be better next year. We hope it will disappear from the rankings.

With respect to recruitment, there are more francophones in Toronto than in Ottawa. In percentage terms, there are not as many, but in absolute terms, there are more than in Ottawa. If you want, I'll send you statistics on the number of bilingual anglophones and francophones in Vancouver.

Let's talk about the card for complaining about service in either language. Mr. Godin was here when Robert Milton, the former president of Air Canada, appeared before this committee in 2002. I still remember that Mr. Milton said he had come of his own free will. And yet the sheriff was just two steps behind him. The card was a good instrument. That initiative was presented to our committee by a former MP, the lamented Benoît Sauvageau. Personally, I'll never forget Benoît Sauvageau or his card. It might be a good idea for you not to forget it either.

I think I've said enough. Take Mr. Godin's remarks about Michel Thibodeau to heart because they were presented by an opposition member and they are now approved by a member from the government party.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

• (1020)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I must say that every complaint is taken very seriously. I'm not aware of that complaint. If Mr. Thibodeau filed it, I don't think we've received it at our office. However, we're going to investigate.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: He isn't an aggressive man.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I know him, I've crossed paths with him, and what you say is true.

The Chair: It's the committee members who must be thanked, Mr. Galipeau.

We'll now go to Mr. Nadeau.

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

You should meet the Commissioner of Official Languages one day to learn the extent of the complaints filed against Air Canada. I'm troubled to learn that you aren't aware of Mr. Thibodeau's complaint, and I wonder if you're aware of the other complaints.

You said in your introduction that the situation was improving and that there were fewer and fewer complaints, but you still have to know about the ones there are. You know as well as I do that, for a person who complains, there are perhaps 10 more who don't. That results in stress and a process.

It's unacceptable to come here boasting in this matter. It's worth the trouble to read the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages because there is a section devoted to Air Canada; there's one in every report. As Mr. Galipeau said, it would be nice if we no longer saw you there, but you are at the top of the list; you're offender number one. Active offer by an employee is when he says: "Hello, bonjour." I know that's complicated and it takes a Ph.D. thesis, but everyone should pass the thesis and say the word.

At Robert L. Stanfield International Airport in Halifax, it's 0%, none from Air Canada. And I'm not talking about the other offender, CATSA; I'm talking about Air Canada. In Montreal, it's 46%. I won't say everything I think about Canada when these kinds of things occur, but I will say that it's 4.7% in Ottawa, which is the federal capital of Canada; 4% in Toronto and a big 0% in Vancouver. That's here at home. Don't come and tell me things are going well and that there are fewer complaints. There should have been a complaint every time. People are so used to hearing the same old unacceptable things from Air Canada.

In 2007 and 2009, which is recent, only 41% of employees in bilingual positions met the language requirements of their positions. You see the extent of the situation. You give them a bilingual position, and only 41% meet the job criteria. Only 39% of Air Canada's francophone employees said they were satisfied with the opportunity to work in their language in the National Capital Region, in New Brunswick and in the designated bilingual regions of Ontario. That's in the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages. You should read a little bit of it every evening before you go to bed, if only to remind yourself that there are things that have to be improved.

I have a letter here dated October 26, 2006. That too is recent in the history of humanity. It talks about a situation that occurred on October 9, 2009 on board Air Canada flight 189 that left Ottawa at 5:30 p.m. and landed in Vancouver at 7:45 p.m., local time. A passenger asked the flight attendant for earphones to watch a movie. She answered him: "I don't speak French," and went away without even offering to go find a co-worker who spoke French. That leads me to say that there were probably no flight attendants on board who spoke French. This is particularly unusual since, on a route, you can read that the service is to be provided in French. I was the complainant, and I'm going to give you a copy of the letter.

It's these kinds of situations that lead me to say that you've come here to put on a masquerade today, instead of presenting us with an action plan to improve the situation. I didn't have to dig for long to find those figures. You should have them on your desk every year and know where improvements have to be made. It's your job.

It's insidious that parliamentarians should be told to stop complaining because your company has improved. In a classroom, you'd be given detention every evening and you'd hear me repeat to you that you have homework and you have to do your work. This is the school teacher talking to you.

• (1025)

The Chair: The Chair reminds Mr. Nadeau that his time is up.

Ms. McEvoy.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I simply wanted to go back to this. Active officer and "Sorry, I don't speak French," are the two departure points of the Air Canada course designed for its employees. The course is called, "Un moment s'il vous plaît."

We read the Commissioner's report. They may not be on our bedside tables, but we definitely read them at the office. We take this very seriously. We see that the challenge is very great, but, one day at a time, we're managing to convince a number of employees, through that course, that they should do what's necessary to honour Canadians' rights.

Some employees haven't taken the course yet, but once our 10,000 employees have taken it, I dare hope you'll no longer see this kind of behaviour.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to go to the committee members who asked to speak in the fourth round.

[English]

We'll go on right away with Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

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

Welcome, witnesses. It's nice to have you here this morning.

As we all know, the games are going to be here in the wintertime. I wonder if you can explain what you consider to be your responsibility in getting us ready so that both languages will be available.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Thank you.

This is why we started to give this course, called "*Un moment, s'il vous plaît!*", to our Vancouver airport employees. We wanted to give it early enough. In September, all the employees went to that workshop, and we will do reminders until the games.

We have also published a new edition of a booklet called "The Aero-Vocabularies". It's English-French vocabulary for our employees, with a cheat sheet to help them immediately address the clients in the language of their choice.

In Vancouver, as well as in Toronto where many passengers will connect for Vancouver, we have a class for airport employees and also two or three classes this fall for flight attendants to qualify; they have a basis in French, and they will qualify.

We are also working with our call centres to put in place a kind of interpreter by phone. The employee who has taken all those courses and still cannot help the client can have an interpreter within a few minutes. We're working also with the airport authorities, who offer similar services, but we want to make sure that we can offer it ourselves as well.

So we are communicating with employees on a daily and weekly basis through all the different bulletins we have in place.

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

It's nice to see all that you are putting forth in a great effort to make it possible for our visitors.

When we spoke to VIA Rail the other day, they said something about giving promotions to employees who are bilingual. Is that one of your policies as well?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Some positions are bilingual, so they will only be given to bilingual employees—that's for sure.

• (1030)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Is there any other incentive for your employees?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: The incentive is to be eligible for that position. That's the main incentive.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Yes, before they get there.

Can you give us an outline as to what cost Air Canada incurs in order to maintain bilingualism under the Official Languages Act?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Well, I'm not talking about translation, but for language training it's \$1.5 million per year. That's not only the cost of the teachers but also the cost of taking someone from

operations and putting them in class for half a day, a day, a month, and so on.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: So there would be a cost to replace that person, to hire someone else while that person is at the course.

How does Air Canada ensure that their contractors, such as Jazz, provide official languages?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We have service agreements with our third parties, such as Jazz, whereby the service they offer on our behalf must be equal to the service we offer.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: I want to reiterate what Mr. Chong said. I know you people are doing as much as you possibly can, but really we need to look at our education system.

Coming from a classroom, I certainly see that all the way. It's by starting these children off. If we're a bilingual country, we should start our children off in that, and it's very sad to see some governments withdraw those services.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Dhaliwal, welcome to the committee. I understand that you will be splitting your time.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the panel members for coming here.

I'll carry on with the issue that the Honourable Mr. Chong raised about multiculturalism.

As I recall, I came to this country in 1984, around the same year that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was brought in. The report that Mr. Chong mentioned was written in 2001. That means it took Air Canada 17 years to even recognize Canada as a multicultural nation.

It is now eight years later. What have you done to rectify that situation?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: To reflect the multiculturalism of the country, we recruit people who not only speak the two official languages of Canada; they also speak the languages of our destinations, reflecting also the people of Canada.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: It's not about the destination. I'm talking about that particular report, that it took you 17 full years to recognize multiculturalism, and now it's been 7 years. Have you rectified that situation in principle?

Ms. Priscille LeBlanc: I suppose there are different approaches to answering your question. Air Canada last year or the year before was recognized as the number one diverse employer in terms of diversity. This was in Montreal. We were recognized for the different programs that we have to promote diversity in the workplace. That would certainly include the multicultural aspect.

So it is inherent in the culture of the corporation to the degree that we can make it. In terms of our obligations in serving the public, as we've said before, we make a great attempt to provide the travelling public originating in Canada with services in the language of their choice.

At our call centres, for example, our employees speak probably 20 languages. It is quite possible to transact your reservation in Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and a number of languages.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I was travelling recently to small countries like Hungary, Belgium, Italy, and many others. Here we're talking here about two official languages; we have difficulties here in such a vast country with such a vast terrain. But when I was out there, those airline employees were speaking more than even three languages. In Belgium there's French, Dutch, English, and then in Hungary there's Hungarian, English, Dutch, and the same in many other countries.

How do you compare those private airlines with Air Canada, the efforts that they have made, being small nations, compared to us as a bilingual nation?

• (1035)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: I would say that the employees of an airline are not too different from the population of a country, and the population of those countries speak many more languages than the population of Canada does.

We have often been at meetings with other airlines who offer linguistic products to their employees. We have noticed that the airlines from Europe are more linguistically diverse than any North American airline, for sure. Air Canada speaks more languages than other North American airlines, but the Europeans are at another place totally.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Can I pass my time to my colleague?

The Chair: Well, you took all the time you were given.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: When we talk about languages, it's always interesting and time passes quickly.

Are you going to take a serious look at the question of the card on board the aircraft?

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Yes, we're going to try to—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Sauvageau proved that it didn't cost that much. He even had some made. There's a whole story behind that. Perhaps it should be called the "Sauvageau card".

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Indeed.

Mr. Yvon Godin: He was committed to this issue. We said there should perhaps be contraventions in the event the act is violated, as is done elsewhere. I don't know whether we'll have to wait for your next appearance or whether we can have you appear again to discuss this subject at greater length, but this is a problem that you must try to solve one way or another. There's also the recruitment issue.

I've been a member of the Official Languages Committee since 1998. A few years ago, we conducted a national tour and discovered that there were francophone communities across the country. I'm going to make some suggestions to you. Do you meet with the francophone associations in the regions? There's a big one in Edmonton. Through their network and the people they meet, these people can help you do promotion. In the case of Toronto, I don't have the figures in hand, but someone could bring them later.

It isn't necessary to talk just about Quebec. I talked about New Brunswick because I come from that region, but I know there are 250,000 francophones there. One of the problems, it seems, is that we don't speak English well enough. We Acadians mix up our words and say things like: "Prends le broom et ramasse la dust dans le corner." That definitely wouldn't work at Air Canada, but, back home, we say that's bilingual.

There are a large number of francophones in Toronto. In British Columbia, we have to tip our hat to the Chinese community. These people come to Canada, and the first thing they want to do is learn the country's two official languages. They even complain that there aren't enough immersion schools. They're ready to say "Hello, how are you?" rather than "I don't speak French." There are also francophones in Manitoba, in Saint-Boniface. I don't know how many there are in the Winnipeg region. We were surprised to see how many there were in Newfoundland as well.

It isn't up to us to tell you how to do your recruitment, but we can suggest some ideas. I don't know whether you already have something to propose to us, but I'm going to wait and see what you do concerning the card. You say that the number of complaints has declined since last year, but it's also since last year that the card has been in the enRoute magazine.

• (1040)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We hope this is also because our service has improved. With regard to the card, we're making a commitment to see what can be done to raise its profile. Absolutely.

As for recruitment, we regularly meet with members of the minority francophone communities at job fairs and parent meetings, such as those of Parents for French. We also meet with young people. I don't remember what the Edmonton group is called, but we are there because we think it's important to meet with young people at the high school level. Our positions, particularly those involving contact with the public, don't necessarily require university training. In Toronto, we have a fair every year for young people at the high school level studying in French. These aren't necessarily young people whose mother tongue is French, but they're studying in French and are perfectly bilingual.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right, but back home, in Bathurst, approximately 350 young people from the comprehensive school graduate every year. I don't think Air Canada has come to our schools. In Caraquet, there are 150 or more, and the same is true in Shippagan. There's also the southern part of the province. These are suggestions. I think the recruitment effort can be improved.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We'll conclude with Ms. Guay.

Ms. Monique Guay: What a nice birthday present! Thank you very much.

Earlier my colleague talked about figures for New Brunswick and other provinces. Personally, I have the figures concerning the city of Toronto. According to the 2006 statistics, 229,280 persons there are bilingual. In greater Toronto, the number is 418,505. I will never believe you can't recruit bilingual people in that community. That's just Toronto. That doesn't include New Brunswick, Manitoba, Quebec... It's almost incredible that Air Canada doesn't offer—I said this earlier, but I'm repeating it—bilingual services today, in 2009, at airport facilities.

I'm going to tell you a little horror story that I experienced on an Air Canada flight. A unilingual French woman seated next to me needed an extension for her seat belt. She spoke to the flight attendant, who didn't speak French and who simply told her: "I don't speak French." To help her, since the plane was taking off, and since I'm bilingual and felt this was an emergency, I spoke to the flight attendant and asked him for an extension. I won't tell you the nasty comments I heard coming out of his mouth.

Since the woman didn't understand, he probably felt free to say: what a fat woman, it's incredible, or something like that. It wasn't really gratifying. The woman was panicking because she must have thought the plane was taking off and she wasn't belted in yet.

These kinds of things shouldn't happen. It's happened to me once, but it was extremely unpleasant. The woman asked me what the attendant had just said, and I didn't repeat it to her. It wasn't worth the trouble because I would have stressed her for no reason. It was also a long trip; we were going to Vancouver.

Earlier I talked to you about safety. This is part of safety. If a flight attendant isn't even able to understand that a person needs an extension for her seat belt—and this happens regularly, if not often—that's serious. It's unacceptable.

You say it, but you don't even have any figures to give us today. You're telling us that there were 86 admissible complaints. I'm convinced, madam, that there are 10 times more, even 100 times more. However, people don't necessarily know where they can complain to. I know that, at my office, we receive complaints of this kind because people think they'll go see their member. You'll have to make an effort on this matter and present us with some real figures because we don't have any, any figures, on bilingualism.

By how much has bilingualism increased or decreased among your employees? We have absolutely nothing here that tells us exactly where you stand. And you're asking the government to help you! And yet we have no information, no indication, no figures. You'll have to do your homework in certain areas.

• (1045)

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: In our annual report, we have all those figures, and we can provide them to you. As I said, our bilingual ratio has stagnated at 40% for about nine years, and we can provide you with all the details you want.

Ms. Monique Guay: Give us the information. That's what I expected in your speech this morning. I expected much more technical information where I would find those figures.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Yes.

Ms. Monique Guay: Ms. McEvoy, I'm asking you to give the committee those figures so that we can really observe this, and I'm also asking you to really make an extra effort. You see that the people are there. You can very well find bilingual personnel, and it will be quite a bit more pleasant for travellers. Otherwise, you'll lose customers. That goes together.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: Absolutely, yes.

Ms. Monique Guay: People will say they no longer choose Air Canada; that's clear. I'm inviting you to make a very big effort in that direction. I know you are, but perhaps you're not doing enough. That's why I'm asking you to do more.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have 10 seconds left, Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Earlier you said that there was trouble with the union over bilingualism. VIA Rail and its union went to court because the corporation said that services had to be offered in both languages, and VIA Rail won. The unions now accept that.

If Air Canada wants bilingualism, it will do what it has to do to tell its employees that this is an obligation under the act and that the corporation is bilingual and that, if necessary, it will go to court, which will say more on that subject.

Please pull up your socks and do what you have to do for bilingualism because that's not what you're doing now.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I refer you to page 2 of the Library of Parliament document, which mentions a judgment in 2005 following the merger, Mr. Nadeau. It refers to a decision rendered concerning the Official Languages Act.

There, we've completed our speeches.

Ms. Glover, I believe you had a request to make to Air Canada.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I'll briefly make a request. I entirely agree with all the members that there is a problem because we haven't seen the advertisements placed for the purpose of recruiting bilingual persons in our own communities. I'm asking Air Canada please to provide us with the details on the advertisements that were placed. We will definitely help you. Mr. Godin has made some good suggestions concerning places where advertisements should be placed, etc. I know that Air Canada was a sponsor of Winnipeg's Festival du Voyageur, but there was no recruitment.

Mrs. Louise McEvoy: We'll provide you with the advertisements we placed this year and perhaps involve you to a greater degree. I know that, at our last appearance, in 2006, we had started informing you every time we had to recruit. I don't know whether that has continued or not, but we're going to restore the communication.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: In my community, immigrants often complain that they can't find jobs in French. These are immigrants from francophone countries. So we could help you as well.

Thank you very much.

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

To borrow the title of the award you give your employees for service in the official languages, I would like to thank you this morning for starting this "dialogue" with committee members and I am confident it will continue in a constructive manner.

We are going to suspend the proceedings for a few minutes before moving on to examine current committee business, which will be done in camera.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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