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Chair

Mr. Steven Blaney

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• (0905)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the 37th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This morning, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the impacts of the delays in providing funding to recipient organizations from the Department of Canadian Heritage.

It is our pleasure to have the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages as well as representatives of the department.

In the first hour, the minister will appear, and he is accompanied by Ms. LaRocque, Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage, and Thomas Scrimger, Assistant Deputy Minister. We also welcome Mr. Lussier, who is a committee regular.

At the end of the first hour, we'll suspend for a few minutes for the time it takes to change witnesses.

Without further ado, I invite you, minister, to make your address. I take the opportunity to welcome you to the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages): Mr. Chair, I thank you for your invitation to speak before this committee.

You, as members of the Committee on Official Languages, and I, as minister responsible for official languages, are committed to protecting and promoting our two official languages. We are working to ensure that the Government of Canada serves our community partners as effectively as possible.

As Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, I am pleased to underline that we have just celebrated the 40th anniversary of the implementation of the Official Languages Act.

This act gave the French and English languages equal status in the federal public service, requiring the government to better serve Canadians in the official language of their choice.

[English]

As you know, Treasury Board's full diligence framework is an important component in ensuring that taxpayers' money is used wisely. As you can imagine, this level of diligence takes time.

We are providing leadership on official languages, and we rely on our valuable partners active within the communities to make our commitments possible.

[Translation]

Although I realize that not everything is to the satisfaction of everyone, I can assure you that, in meeting many groups across the country during my round tables, and especially representatives of the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadiennes, there is a good working relationship between the government and these groups.

However, I would like to underline that despite this good relationship, there are situations that make the work of the community groups difficult. When I visited the francophone community of Prince Edward Island, I heard their grievances, and I can tell you that their complaints were not ignored. It was the first time that a federal minister of official languages visited this community and I was pleased to see for myself their passion and devotion. I was particularly touched by that.

We have paid particular attention to the communities' concerns about delays in processing applications and the weight of administrative processes. And we are committed to addressing these concerns.

These issues have had repercussions on community organizations in terms of human resources management and access to credit. They have also led to uncertainty in the planning process.

It is our partners who make our two official languages a living reality. We are convinced that, among them, low-risk clients such as some communities with which we have worked for many years should be subject to a less demanding process that would suit them better.

Treasury Board recently approved Official Languages Support Programs procedures. This will allow reductions in payment frequency and in the number of reports to be submitted by recipients to receive funding. We believe that this is a positive step toward lightening the administrative burden of our community partners.

[English]

This means that as a result of the actions taken by our government, community groups are now receiving stability and certainty, and they are faced with less red tape in the funding process.

[Translation]

It is now possible within the Official Languages Support Programs to choose to provide a grant, rather than a contribution, if funding for an organization is less than \$50,000. Previously, the threshold was \$30,000. In receiving a grant rather than a contribution, the organization avoids certain administrative requirements.

Further, I have asked my officials to make other improvements to address the problem. In a few moments they will give you more details, but here is a summary.

[English]

We are continuing to encourage our official languages community partners to submit multi-year funding applications. Next year a number of contribution agreements will be in place, which means that the volume of recommendations will be reduced. This will allow better planning by the organizations and will lighten their administrative burden.

[Translation]

In addition, all procedures have been examined to shorten the time needed for processing applications and issuing payments to recipients.

New service standards will be implemented, starting April 1, 2010.

We will be establishing a single deadline for all provinces and territories for 2011-2012.

And the 25% for groups will be distributed earlier, so they should receive their funding by the beginning of April.

[English]

This means that the application process from beginning to end will be simplified and streamlined for the recipients.

[Translation]

We are firmly committed to addressing recipients' concerns, effectively and efficiently carrying out programs for Canadians and finding a proper balance between due diligence and administrative burden.

We are already taking steps to address these concerns. I would also like to take this opportunity to remind the committee about some of our achievements that show our commitment to official languages throughout Canada.

The year 2009-10 was a year full of achievements. Our Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality is providing an unprecedented \$1.1 billion over five years to the priority sectors of health, justice, immigration, economic development, culture and education.

Many components of the Roadmap have already been announced. Last month, I announced the signing of an education protocol of more than \$1 billion over four years between our government and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). The protocol sets aside funds for teaching in the minority language and second language teaching, as well as national bursary and language monitor programs.

This protocol will enable thousands of students living in minority communities across the country, about 106,000 anglophones in Quebec and 142,000 francophones outside Quebec, to study in the language of their choice, in the school of their choice. These are young anglophones in Quebec City and Saguenay and young francophones in Vancouver and Winnipeg.

Furthermore, within the framework of federal-provincial agreements, our government gives its support to provinces and territories to offer second language teaching programs, including immersion programs.

In September, our government announced a \$10 million initiative to increase francophone immigration to New Brunswick in the Atlantic region.

This month marked the launch of the Language Portal of Canada, with access to Termium Plus. The aim of this effective work tool, developed in Canada, is to give all Canadians access to expertise.

● (0910)

[English]

We've also launched the Canada School of Public Service's second language pilot project, designed to give Canadian universities greater access to language learning products. That does not include our continued support announced last July in the form of university scholarships in translation, and initiatives for strengthening Canada's language profession sector.

In arts and culture, official language minority communities now have access to works of art and performances in their own language and can raise the profile of their artists thanks to new programs established by our government last spring. Examples include Music Showcase, the national translation program for book publishing, and the cultural development fund. In September, my colleague Shelley Glover announced an investment of more than \$2 million in support of this fund.

[Translation]

Our government is proud of what has been done in the past 40 years. I am thinking of the establishment of my province's first French-language high school, École Jules-Verne in Vancouver. You will agree with me when I say that we have come a long way!

From the outset, we have been committed to fully integrating both our official languages in the planning, organization and operation of the 2010 Winter Games.

Our additional investment of \$7.7 million, announced in September, is proof of this commitment.

[English]

Graham Fraser himself has said, "I'm very pleased to see that government has delivered with regard to the 2010 games. I'm very happy. This is good news."

[Translation]

The funds will be used for translation and interpretation services, installation of bilingual signs in competition centres, and the inclusion of the French culture and language in the daily medal presentation ceremonies organized by each province and territory.

I also announced that our government is providing \$1.7 million for the creation of Place de la francophonie on Granville Island. In this facility, visitors will be able to meet and explore our francophone culture in all its diversity.

Since the start of Canada's Olympic adventure, our government has undertaken to ensure the presence and promotion of French and English during the games. We are continuing in this direction, and we are going to remain vigilant so that the 2010 Winter Games are Canada's games, for all Canadians.

A few weeks ago, I had the honour of co-chairing the 14th Ministerial Conference on the Canadian Francophonie in Vancouver. This conference took place in the Vancouver Convention Centre, which will be the official site of the Main Media Centre for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

[English]

We had the pleasure of having Jacques Gauthier from VANOC as a guest speaker, and we are now confident that the games will be bilingual. That includes the broadcasting issue that I know has been raised in this committee.

[Translation]

In closing, I must also note the announcement of the establishment of the Language Rights Support Program (LRSP). The University of Ottawa was chosen to manage the program and I have just named the members of the panel of experts required for delivery of the program.

Let me quote Allan Rock on this program: "I would like to thank the government for continuing to lead in the field of language rights in Canada."

This project is entirely consistent with the university mission regarding official languages and ever further crystallizes the institution's leadership role by including a key support program for the language rights of the official language minority communities.

I must not forget to tell you about the Congrès mondial acadien, which took place this past summer, and which I had the privilege to attend. Our government invested \$1,750,000 in this grand event, which was a major success. It was a pleasure to share that precious moment with the Acadian communities.

Last, allow me to remind you that we are determined to maintain a positive dialogue with our partners. We will also continue to exercise our leadership in official languages.

I am ready to answer your questions, and my officials will be at your disposal to provide you with further details on the initiatives my department intends to take in this area. Thank you.

• (0915)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Moore.

We'll start our first round with Mr. Rodriguez.

[Translation]

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

Good morning, minister, how are you?

Hon. James Moore: I'm always well.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I'm pleased you're here because this is an important subject. However, there are serious problems on the ground. You mentioned the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act, the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality, the Music Showcases Program and the Olympics. We're here to talk about cash disbursement problems. You read some quotations; I'll do so as well.

The President of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, Marie-France Kenny, told us this when she testified before the committee:

In total, 72% of respondents had to use a line of credit or a loan, and, since April, at least 14 of these organizations incurred \$500 in interest on those lines of credit. We're talking about at least \$7,000 going to banks and not to developing services in French for our communities.

She also said this:

I am also thinking about the long-term impact on human resources. In some cases, employees had to use their personal credit cards to pay for expenditures or give up their salary or their expense account. Furthermore, 37.5% of respondents were unable to renew an employee's contract, while 19% said that they had to let permanent staff go.

So there's a structural problem.

I'm also interested in what you have to say about everything else, but what are you going to change in this regard?

Hon. James Moore: We're going to change a number of things, as I said in my speech. It's because of these experiences and because of the frustration, which is real, that we've made decisions designed to change the situation on the ground. This is my first year as Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages. I've taken part in round tables across Canada. I've checked with a number of organizations operating in the field, and a number of them have talked to you about existing problems regarding the manner in which they receive grants. We're going to change the situation.

We've emphasized a number of things that we're going to change. If what we've changed wasn't clear in my speech, the deputy minister can explain it to you in detail. However, if you're not interested in that—

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: On the contrary, I'm very interested. That's why I'm here and I hope the same is true for you.

I've toured across Canada and met with organizations virtually everywhere. On my last trip to Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, the director general of the Fédération des francophones de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador told me that he was the only employee and that, as he wasn't receiving any money, he would have to lay himself off the next week. That's a flagrant problem. You and I can talk about beautiful showcases and nice buildings or a long time, but these people have a serious problem on the ground; there are enormous delays.

What happens between the moment the organizations submit their projects in November, the deadline, and the moment they receive money? What happens during all those months?

Hon. James Moore: My deputy minister can answer you in detail concerning the process and the changes we are making. On my visits across the country, we've spoken with the communities on the ground and we've listened to their concerns. We've made some changes, and I'm here to talk about them. I agree with them that this is unacceptable and I want to see changes. I was appointed Minister of Official Languages 10 months ago, and the changes will be made.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque (Deputy Minister, Department of Canadian Heritage): Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Hubert can also talk to you in detail about the procedures regarding grants and contributions.

• (0920)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: We don't have a lot of time. Perhaps you could tell us about the eternity that elapses between the filing of the application and receipt of the money.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: We can answer you in detail. The answer to the question lies in the multi-year agreements. Those agreements will permit stable planning and everything else. The unusual problem this year is that we had to renew the programs. The Treasury Board doesn't allow us to enter into multi-year agreements when we're renewing the programs. That's understandable because we don't know whether the programs will be renewed or not.

This year, the situation was completely different from that of other years. We really like the multi-year agreements, we encourage them, and they cost taxpayers less money; this is good planning. However, in the year when we renew programs, the Treasury Board does not allow us to enter into multi-year agreements. That has caused a lot of problems on the ground; I'm entirely aware of that. We weren't even allowed to send out the 25% we usually send out on April 1.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: From what we've been told, the 25% arrives in June.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: The 25% usually arrives in early April.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: We've been told it arrives in June, three months late.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: We've been told there have been changes, but that the situation is worse because a lot more projects are going up to the minister's office.

The Chair: We'll come back to that, Mr. Rodriguez.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: In previous years, I signed the first 25% instalment in early March so that it could be sent out on April 1. Of course, that's not what happened this year because we were not allowed to do so. We asked Treasury Board to renew our programs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Nadeau.

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

Good morning to you all.

I'll speak to you, minister. We'll meet with the officials, the people who work in the machinery of government, in the second part.

I want to make you aware of the situation. Let's just say it's not good. On the weekend, with my colleague Mr. Godin, I attended the general meeting of the Fédération des francophones de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador and other organizations such as the newspaper, *Le Gaboteur*, and the parents association, which were also holding a meeting in Labrador City.

The youth association was to receive \$86,000 on April 1 for the current year. However, that money has not yet arrived. It has been granted, but it hasn't yet arrived. That's a problem.

You'll tell me that's just one example, but Cyrida Poirier, who is director general of the federation, was forced at one point to use her credit card to pay employees because the money had been promised but had not yet arrived. You can understand the problem. These are the people on the ground. They're not doing this to cause problems, but you have to know this because these situations have been going on for a long time.

I don't want to look at the political stripe or the colour of the tie of the politician opposite me. When I was at the Fédération des francophones de Saskatoon, we had this problem as well. At the time, it was even more difficult because the Liberal government wanted to cut our funding by 53% in order to reduce the deficit. Ultimately, the cut was 37%. We had this heavy weight on our shoulders, but, in addition, the promised funding didn't come.

I would like to hear what you have to say about the following. We're talking here about the minority social fabric. Whether in Quebec or in the rest of Canada, these programs directly affect the community. If there was a delegation of signing authority—I don't know what you call that in legal terms—as a result of which the number of signatures that you have to put on a sheet of paper is shared by a larger number of individuals... I'm not saying there wouldn't be accountability; I'm not talking about a free-for-all. But if the work was done in the regions, since you have officers in the regions, or in Ottawa, for the so-called national agencies, do you think that lightening the load in this way would be desirable? We think that approximately 70% of the agreements are for less than \$1 million. It seems to me, in the circumstances, that that would be a possible solution.

I would like to hear what you have to say on that.

Hon. James Moore: That's not a bad suggestion at all. I'm talking to the organizations as well, the one in Newfoundland and those in the other regions. I spoke with them when I did my tour and I went to visit them and heard their concerns and frustrations at that time.

When we talk about very small organizations, the amounts are \$10,000 or \$15,000. You have to do a lot of work simply to keep alive a small organization whose purpose is to help francophones in a very small community. And the services that are created to help Canadians are very important; I understand that.

I did my tour, we listened to the concerns, like those you have here in the committee, and we made a number of changes. I completely agree with the idea of eliminating administrative barriers and the idea of having people in the regions who can say yes or no to investments more quickly.

●(0925)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You agree, but is there any movement toward that situation? Are you, as minister or as a member of the federal Cabinet, where decisions are made, actually considering lightening this burden? When do you think that will be possible?

Hon. James Moore: A number of things that I have spoken about here, such as the multi-year agreements and the 25%, will arrive sooner next year, starting on April 1, etc.

I want to improve the situation significantly, but there are also standards that must be met as well as Treasury Board responsibilities.

Tom, I don't know whether you want to talk about that.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: We'll hear from him later.

Hon. James Moore: This is directly related to your question. We want to improve the situation, but the government also has to protect the interests of all taxpayers.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left, Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: In the remaining 20 seconds, there's one thing that's important, and that's the sequence question. We'll talk about that later. When the associations ask Canadian Heritage how far along it is in evaluating their application, or signing the cheque, they aren't given an answer; they're left in the fog, nowhere.

I would ask you to ensure, under your authority, that, when the federations or partner associations in projects telephone to request that kind of information, they can be told the actual situation regarding the stage the analysis of their application has reached, as well as when the cheque enabling them to operate their organization will be arriving.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

Hon. James Moore: I agree. I think it should be as simple as the following.

[*English*]

If you're shipping a package across Canada by FedEx, you can call the number and find out where your package is in the process. It should be that simple for these organizations as well.

[*Translation*]

So I agree that it should be simple. With all the digital technologies at our disposal, that should be possible. We're doing everything we can to improve the situation, to use technology and to work with the organizations. In addition, a lot of this money is approved in the regions, and we want that information to be more available to people sooner.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: May I add something?

We'll have very specific service standards by April 1. That's now a requirement of the Treasury Board's Blue Ribbon Panel. We were one of the departments that was there at the start to try to establish service standards so that the application of the entire process would be more transparent.

So this is underway for April 1. These service standards will be published on our website. The communities will be able to rely on

them and to follow the process of their application. This is a major step forward. Getting there has been difficult—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: —but it will be in place starting on April 1, 2010.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

Mr. Godin.

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

Welcome to the minister, deputy ministers and those who are perhaps guarding the communities' money, I don't know. Welcome to Mr. Lussier and all those nice people.

Minister, you say you agree. I'm pleased that someone has finally said he agrees, but now we have to see the product. You said in your speech that you were the only minister who went to Prince Edward Island to visit the community. Congratulations!

If you went to Prince Edward Island, here and there, you saw on the ground that things are not working. I don't want to repeat everything my colleagues have said, but they mentioned, for example, that the money arrived in July or August. As for the 25% in April, some of it arrived in June.

Do you really believe in these organizations, like the FCFA, the Fédération des francophones de Terre-Neuve et du Labrador, and the one in Prince Edward Island? Personally, do you think, as minister, that those organizations are really on the ground, that they are doing a good job and that they are needed?

●(0930)

Hon. James Moore: Obviously, yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you. I asked you only one question. You answered, yes; I'm satisfied.

Hon. James Moore: Absolutely, yes. They're necessary.

Personally, I used those organizations when I learned French in British Columbia, in a community that was 96% anglophone. I used those organizations myself. That's why our government has increased funding to those organizations.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Bravo! I heard about all the increases. I thank you for that.

Now we're going to talk about the problem on the ground. People tell us that, after receiving all those thousands or millions of dollars, because of the delay and the fact they have had to use lines of credit, this costs them up to \$1,000 in interest.

Is your government prepared to return to those communities the money they've actually lost because of the delays caused by the Treasury Board and the new regulations? They've lost that money. That's money that the community can't use. Are you prepared to reimburse them for that interest?

Hon. James Moore: My deputy minister tells me that, even if everyone was in the same situation, the Treasury Board rules do not permit it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: These are minor things, minister. For example, you'll remember talking about the Congrès mondial acadien. A week before that event, the political parties were forced to intervene so that Newfoundland could get money to send delegates to the Congrès mondial acadien. Does that make any sense?

Minister, your intentions are good. However, someone in the hierarchy is keeping the documents on his desk and not doing his job. It makes no sense. As you said, FedEx can leave Ottawa and get to Newfoundland in the same day. It's senseless that a document should take two to three months to get to its destination. Your intentions are good, you say you agree. I'm sure that, if the document appears before you, you'll sign it, but someone somewhere isn't doing his job at Canadian Heritage.

And I don't think it's someone in Moncton, Newfoundland or in those places. I think that it's here in Ottawa, that there are too many offices receiving documents, which go from one place to another but don't go directly to you.

Hon. James Moore: There isn't any crisis as such in all the regions of Canada, but there are clearly problems in the process. I've heard the same thing as you on that point. We're making changes. This is the first opportunity I've had as minister to make those changes for next year. The situation will clearly be improved for people on the ground.

Everything you've heard, I heard as well in my first year as minister responsible for official languages. Changes will be made, and the situation will be better next year.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The FCFA people told us this morning that they were about to apply for a line of credit to help the communities in Canada. We're coming to the end of October, and this situation is still unresolved. Unless you can explain to me things that neither the communities nor I understand, I don't see how, in the circumstances, the communities could do what they have to do, develop and shoulder their responsibilities.

Hon. James Moore: There was clearly a problem in a number of departments in the past. The former government threw money out the window.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I don't accept that argument, minister. You've been here since 2006, so the time to put the blame on the other government is over.

Hon. James Moore: Let me finish—

Mr. Yvon Godin: You've been around since 2006, and it's now 2009—

The Chair: Mr. Godin, your time is up.

Hon. James Moore: There was a problem in the past as a result of the fact that the government distributed unlimited amounts of taxpayer money to the organizations.

Let me finish—

The Chair: Pardon me, but we're going to come back to your exchange later.

Allow me to move on—

• (0935)

Hon. James Moore: I'd like to finish what I wanted to say.

The Chair: You'll have enough time to do that because Mr. Godin is going to speak again.

We'll move on to Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): I want to give you the chance to finish, minister.

Hon. James Moore: Thank you, Ms. Glover.

I wanted to emphasize that, in the past, there weren't enough procedures within government in general to protect taxpayers' money. There are examples on the ground. Small organizations are now faced with procedures that are too complex. That's what's happening with regard to official languages for certain organizations. However, that shouldn't happen. If you had wanted to listen, you would have understood that that was the point I wanted to make.

My responsibility as minister is to make changes that will improve the situation of those organizations on the ground. That's my responsibility, and I take it very seriously.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Thank you, minister.

I would like to welcome all the witnesses and give them a warm reception.

Minister, there is a minority community where I'm from. Stakeholders in my riding have talked to me about the 25% measure. Everything we talk about here is very important, but I would like to know whether that measure will be maintained or whether it will eventually no longer be necessary.

Hon. James Moore: I think it's a good measure, a responsible measure. Some organizations receive \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$15,000 for very important services intended for very small communities in Canada where there is no radio or television broadcasting or French-language newspapers and where French is entirely absent from the schools. In those conditions, that immediate payment is really important. Consequently, the 25% measure will remain government policy until we are entirely convinced that all funding problems for those organizations have been solved.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Thank you. That responds to the concerns I had.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: I would like to add that the percentage could even be greater than 25%. We're wondering whether it would be good to offer a larger amount at the start. It should always be borne in mind that we engage in risk management, but that the communities we work with are some of our oldest clients. We know them. In their case, the risk is much lower than that of an organization we're dealing with for the first time or that has only been in existence for a number of years. We can check their cash position and so on. I think that, in addition to what the minister mentioned, there are solutions that could make life easier for the communities.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Perfect, thank you for acknowledging that.

In my riding, people often talk about new funding included in the Roadmap. That's been well received. Recently I had the pleasure of announcing the program on culture.

Today, I would like to give you the opportunity, minister, to explain that program in a little more detail.

Hon. James Moore: [*Inaudible — Editor*]

Ms. Shelly Glover: No, no, the culture program, funding for culture.

Hon. James Moore: The funding for culture is a new component of the Roadmap, a new way to fund the arts and culture. We're investing \$14 million in it. It's very important for the cultural community.

As I say in every one of my speeches, culture is very important, not only for the quality of people's lives, but also for our economy. For our economy it's very important, it represents 650,000 jobs in Canada and \$46 billion. That's twice the size of our forest industry in Canada, three times greater than our insurance industry. Our cultural community is very important for Canada economically.

It's also very important for people in the official language minority to protect and to promote their culture on the ground. That's why we've invested new funding in the Place de la francophonie at the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, as I said in my speech.

• (0940)

[*English*]

There are two athletes' villages for the 2010 Olympic Games, one in Whistler and one in Vancouver. The Vancouver athletes' village is in walking distance of the Place de la Francophonie on Granville Island. So what will happen is that a lot of athletes will come, and while their sports may happen in the first few days of the Olympics, they may have made a commitment with their families to be in Vancouver for the entire two and half or three weeks of the games, and they'll be in and around the athletes' villages. The Place de la Francophonie is within walking distance.

[*Translation*]

Our artists and musicians will be there. The event will respect the very broad diversity of artists from the francophone communities. This is a very important thing. It's the kind of change that we, as a government, want to make in our investments in official languages. The idea isn't just to protect the French fact in Canada; it's also to protect it in specific cases. The point is not simply to maintain the French fact in Canada, but to seize every opportunity to—

The Chair: Thank you, minister.

Hon. James Moore: —celebrate the French fact in Canada.

The Chair: Indeed.

Ms. Shelly Glover: To live in French. That's good.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Glover.

We'll now begin our second round. Mr. D'Amours, I believe you are going to share your time with a colleague.

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

Thank you, minister, for being here—as well as the representatives of your department.

To begin with, Ms. LaRocque, you mentioned earlier that you had previously signed the 25% cheques that were delivered in early April to ensure that the organizations received them on time. Can you tell me who signed the cheques this year?

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: It was the minister who signed them. The constraint this year had nothing to do with who signed what. This year, the constraint was due to the fact that we were in the midst of renewing programs with Treasury Board. Treasury Board does not allow us to pay a cent before it's been approved.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I understand, Ms. LaRocque.

When you say renewal, pardon me, but the programs were already renewed because people filed their applications in October and November. When we say renewal, we're talking about the future. People filed their applications in October and November because the program was in place for next year. If it was in place for next year, that means that the 25% was eligible.

Minister, seeing that, I wonder whether you have too many files on your desk, which may have delayed the disbursement or the signing for disbursement purposes.

Hon. James Moore: We signed the cheques for the 25% as soon as we were able, as soon as possible taking into account Treasury Board regulations.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Is it possible that certain organizations have not received their 25% as of today? A few weeks ago, there were still some organizations that had received nothing, both anglophones in Quebec and francophones outside Quebec.

Perhaps you don't want to help them; perhaps you don't want to allocate any funding to them.

Hon. James Moore: No.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: At some point, these people need to know. If they didn't receive the 25% a week or two ago, what does that mean? This is the month of November.

Hon. James Moore: Let's make it clear. I'm going to answer in English; it's easier.

[*English*]

You can shelve the conspiracy theories, okay? We're investing more money in official languages than any government in Canadian history. We want to help organizations on the ground deliver official languages services as effectively and quickly as possible. The 25% was delivered as quickly as we possibly could this year given Treasury Board guidelines. Now, it doesn't mean there weren't problems, but it also doesn't mean that in exceptional circumstances where there are problems you should elevate those and say they are the rule for all organizations. That's also unfair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Minister, the fact nevertheless remains that these organizations had a right to file an application, which means that the money was available for the following year.

I'd like to go back to another point. You say that the multi-year agreements are a good thing and that you have to give them priority. How can you explain, then, the problems of the organizations that have multi-year agreements? A few weeks ago, one organization met with us. It had a three-year agreement, two years fixed, plus an option year.

Why was the third year hell for them and why was everything delayed? If they had a multi-year agreement, why wasn't it simply complied with?

Mr. Hubert Lussier (Director General, Official Languages Support Programs, Department of Canadian Heritage): I want to tell you that there wasn't any multi-year agreement that overlapped with the new year. I know exactly the situation you're referring to.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: We'll send you that information.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: In actual fact, the 25% has all been paid out. If there are any situations where organizations have not received the payments they were expecting, I'm prepared to check, but I'm virtually certain that this is an incomplete file problem. If you're thinking of the same organization as I am, I know it was late in providing the documents.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Lussier, I'm not thinking of any organization in particular, but the majority of these people are volunteers.

Ms. Zarac, I'll leave you the few remaining moments.

• (0945)

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Minister, when I heard your speech, I wondered whether you had been informed of the agenda, which concerned the delays. You talked to us about the Olympics and new programs.

Talking about the Olympics, I'm going to take this opportunity. You said that Mr. Fraser was quite pleased with the funding received in September. He told us that as well here.

However, we're talking about delays, and this is a good example of a delay. Mr. Fraser is pleased with the amount received, yes, but he requested additional funding in his January report. This is another example of Canadian Heritage's slow pace. I'm pleased you mentioned it.

I congratulate you for taking part in round tables. You're the first minister to do so. On October 1, Marie-France Kenny, president of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, appeared before the committee. She said that the organizations receiving funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage could not carry out their missions and that the government was therefore unable to meet its obligations toward francophone citizens.

I'd like to have your comments on that.

The Chair: Unfortunately, Ms. Zarac, all the time has been used up.

Hon. James Moore: My comment on that is simply that I don't agree.

However, on your first point on the Olympic Games, the reason...

That will remain a mystery.

The Chair: We'll move on to Ms. Guay.

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

I was thinking she hadn't spoken for five minutes, but they shared their time. I understand.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to make a suggestion. You check the time. Perhaps it would be important for you to warn us a few seconds before we finish so we have the chance to hear the answer. That would be important for us because we don't see the time pass. That's just a suggestion.

Ms. Monique Guay: I hope that won't be part of my time. We're restarting the clock.

Minister, I'm pleased to meet you for the first time in committee.

This situation has considerable impact on the organizations. We know it, we feel it and we see it everywhere on the ground. People come to see me at my riding office. We often receive people who come to see us directly so that we can pass on their complaints about the lack of funding, in particular. I've seen lay-offs and I've seen people use their credit cards. It makes no sense; it's unacceptable.

Some way should also be found to reimburse them for the interest they have had to pay out of their pockets. You'll have to take an in-depth look at that. I don't know how you'll do it, but find a way. This isn't a new problem. It's been going on since 1973-1975. We're talking about 30 or 35 years that these organizations have been fighting for funding. It makes no sense.

I'm pleased to hear that there will be multi-year agreements. However, something troubles me a great deal. Some organizations file applications for \$10,000, \$15,000 or \$20,000, and others request \$500,000.

Is there any difference between the two from a red tape standpoint? Can you answer briefly because I don't have a lot of time.

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: There are grants and contributions. The grants involve tonnes of paperwork; it's extensive, it's complex and it represents large amounts.

As the minister said earlier, we're going to increase the threshold from \$30,000 to \$50,000 for grants. Grants represent 70% of applications and require very little paperwork.

Ms. Monique Guay: That answers my question.

This is important because the organizations tell us they spend an enormous amount of time on paperwork and often don't have the staff to do it or sometimes aren't able to complete the documents. In fact, we very often help them complete the forms ourselves.

You talked about the Olympic Games. I'm very pleased that you've invested \$1.7 million, except that, minister, we're barely 100 days away from the Olympic Games, and it's not true that it's going to take place perfectly in both official languages. We see how things are going in certain small towns around Vancouver. I'm not talking about Whistler, where it's been bilingual for a very long time; young Quebeckers go there to work during the winter. What's happening in the neighbouring villages is different, and the people don't all live in Vancouver. That won't be the case for the athletes, perhaps, but visitors will wind up more outside the city.

First, this matter isn't resolved. What are you going to do to advance this issue much more quickly? Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages, is concerned. VANOC also has concerns. What will we look like on the international stage if we, in Canada, a supposedly bilingual country, can't offer services in both official languages at the Olympic Games?

• (0950)

Hon. James Moore: I want to tell you that the Olympic and Paralympic Games will be absolutely respectful of the two official languages. We wouldn't want there to be any situations in which French is not completely respected outside Quebec.

In response to Ms. Zarac's question, we've made investments to that end. The reason why we've made additional investments is that Graham Fraser himself was conducting his investigation into this and he gave us some information. It's also because Ms. LaRocque and other officials work on a team with representatives of all levels of government, and they wanted to get information. We didn't want to wind up in a situation where we made... additional this month—

Ms. Monique Guay: Thank you, Mr. Moore.

Even this \$1.7 million won't be enough.

I'm going to leave you on a final note. One resident of the municipality where I live, who is francophone and whose second language is English, was denied work at the Olympic Games because she wasn't bilingual enough. You're going to be hearing about her because she's going to file a complaint.

Hon. James Moore: Work as a volunteer?

Ms. Monique Guay: Yes, as a volunteer.

It's utterly unacceptable, when there's a big shortage of volunteers, that a person who offers her services on a volunteer basis and wants to travel to the Olympic Games at her own expense, is denied work because they don't think her English is good enough. She still speaks both languages.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. James Moore: I want to answer that important question. The way VANOC chooses volunteers is not our business. We want everyone who wishes to take part as a volunteer in the Olympic Games—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. James Moore: Let me finish, Mr. Chairman.

We've heard all the concerns that were expressed by this committee, by the Standing Senate Committee, by VANOC, by Graham Fraser and by individuals. We did our homework on each of those concerns. We put a price on those concerns and we "delivered the goods", the necessary funding to resolve these situations, in the best possible way.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Merci, Madame.

We will now turn to Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

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

And thank you, Minister, for being with us this morning—and a special welcome to all the officials.

We know the Department of Canadian Heritage has taken steps to change things, for example, to have more multi-year agreements, and I say that Canadians really appreciate this.

Do you think enough efforts have been made over the last year to change this situation?

Hon. James Moore: The concerns that have been raised in the media, that have been brought forward to this committee, to the Senate committee, directly to our department, directly to me as I've done round tables across the country, have all been listened to very carefully by our government. We've put in place a number of reforms that we think will ensure the situation will improve.

There's no one approach, where you can come in as a government or as a minister and say you have the absolute solution, this will be put in place, and you can guarantee that there will not be any extreme circumstances in which somebody will be disappointed with how the process works. The process of government is a constant process of trial and error. You do your best to make sure the situation improves. Listening to Treasury Board, listening to people on the ground, listening to this committee, listening to Graham Fraser—that's my job.

I was appointed Minister of Official Languages a year ago, and in the process of doing the round tables, going around the country, we listened to people, we heard their concerns, and we've put in place a number of reforms that we think will improve the situation, including guaranteeing the 25%, putting cash up front so that those organizations that have a track record of being accountable and effective in providing services to Canadians will have that money advanced more quickly next year than it has been in the past. That money will be approved. We're streamlining the processes.

Often the case in government is that there have been abuses in government departments in the past, in previous governments, and you learn from that. Often you put in place processes that don't fit certain organizations, that don't fit certain portfolios as well as they might fit others. So you learn from that; you recognize the errors of the past and you improve the situation.

One thing I want to make sure that Canadians don't take away from this committee meeting as they're watching or listening on television, and perhaps reading the transcripts, is to think that because there are some circumstances where some groups have had a very tough time because of the lag time between application and receiving money, there's a pan-Canadian crisis of funding for official languages. Our government has increased funding for official languages by 20%—\$1.1 billion over five years. We're spending more money than any government in Canadian history to protect, promote, and celebrate Canada's official languages. It's more money than ever before, and more money is going to more organizations than ever before.

We need to make sure the money is being spent efficiently and effectively. We don't want to have delays in the process that cause organizations to suffer, and we're trying to fix it as best we can.

• (0955)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: I know that when you were in my riding and had the round table, those people were very appreciative and were so happy to know that you were there and took the time to meet with them. I appreciate that too, Mr. Minister.

Can you explain how the recommendation panel works and how it is appointed?

Hon. James Moore: Judith, do you want to say what the recommendation panel is about, the process as it goes forward? And Hubert wants to talk about that, as the architect.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: Quite briefly, I can say there are three phases. There are the applications where the agent, the analyst on the ground, helps the organization finalize the proposal, the application. Sometimes it takes a while, because there are some *perfections* to be done. Then the second phase is evaluation and recommendation. I must point out that with the official languages program we're talking about today, there's a special step that involves the community and takes a few weeks, which doesn't happen in other programs in the department.

There's an evaluation by the analyst. It goes to the community table, which makes a recommendation to the department, and then the recommendation is finalized by the department.

In the third phase it goes to the headquarters, and there's a final quality check, if you want, by our *centre d'expertise* before it goes to the deputy and the minister.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Do you believe these panels should stay?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The communities like these panels. It is at their request that they exist, and 12 out of 13 provincial and territorial communities have these panels.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: I know you explained the extra steps that are taken. Why are these extra steps taken in setting up the panels?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: Are you talking about the extra step involving the community itself?

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Yes.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The communities want to have a say in what goes to the minister in terms of priority of projects. They hold that principle very dearly. One community has decided not to get into that detailed analysis, but 12 others have.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. O'Neill-Gordon.

[Translation]

We'll finish with Mr. Godin.

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

Now that the minister has calmed down a little, I would like to ask him an important question and to get an answer, or else the officials can answer me.

I'm going to talk about the delays that the communities tell us about. If they receive the money too late, they don't have time to carry out the projects they had planned and they have to return that money to the government.

Minister, you said that funding was allocated, but how much money goes back to the government because people didn't have the time to carry out the projects they had planned? How much time did they have to return it? Is there a deadline?

This is a source of major concern for the communities. It's all well and good to give the communities money, but they are required to return it because the project couldn't be carried out because they didn't receive the money on time. All too often, they have to carry out their projects too quickly and they lose their manpower.

Hon. James Moore: That's a very good question, and we're prepared to give you some figures.

• (1000)

Mr. Tom Scrimger (Assistant Deputy Minister, Citizenship and Heritage, Department of Canadian Heritage): From April 1, 2003 to March 31, 2009, the ministers signed contribution agreements worth \$260 million. At the same time, we received repayments of \$190,000, which represents approximately one-tenth of 1% of the total contributions made by the department.

We have submitted the answer to the committee's motion on the same subject, with the requested details, to the clerk.

Mr. Yvon Godin: As regards the new way of proceeding, the multi-year agreements, what will make a difference?

If you enter into a three-year agreement, that means that you know the groups. Will the people receive all the money, and not just the 25%, on April 1, after the budgets have been adopted? These are three-year agreements. Will the next agreement, perhaps for the next three years, start early enough so that what happened this year won't reoccur?

Hon. James Moore: It's automatic and it gives the organizations certainty.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When will people receive the money, if there is a multi-year agreement?

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: In the first year, they'll start by receiving the 25%.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In April?

Mrs. Judith LaRocque: Yes. Then the payments would be well established in the contribution agreement signed with those people. The payment would be made automatically. Depending on the speed with which they renewed the agreement, three years later, it would probably be the same thing. It would be 25% or 30%.

We're seeing whether we could increase the first payment. Subsequently, we would make regular payments.

Hon. James Moore: Your question is very relevant. When I held my round tables, the first thing all the organizations asked was for multi-year agreements to be established. We're going to deliver—

Mr. Yvon Godin: You're going to “deliver the goods”.

Hon. James Moore: We're going to “deliver the goods”.

In closing, I would like to mention to committee members that, after consulting the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, the Quebec Community Groups Network and the Canadian Bar Association, we appointed the members of the Panel of Experts of the Language Rights Support Program, the LRSP. I want to give you the names of the members of that panel because you know a number of them.

The committee consists of: Johanne Dumas, from British Columbia; Neil Turcotte, from Saskatchewan; David Dandeneau, from Manitoba; Gilles LeVasseur and Michelle Vaillancourt, from Ontario; Richard McConomy and Brad McDonald, from Quebec; Maurice Bourque, from New Brunswick; and Ali Chiasson, from Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That completes this first part of our meeting.

Minister, thank you for telling us about some concrete solutions with regard to the multi-year agreements.

Hon. James Moore: The threshold has been increased from \$30,000 to \$50,000, the 25% policy will remain in place, and we now have multi-year agreements.

The Chair: We'll now suspend proceedings. Then we'll continue with the department's representatives.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1005)

The Chair: We'll now resume without further delay because our second hour is packed.

We'll now hear from two stakeholders from Canadian Heritage who were here during the first part of the meeting. They are Mr. Scrimger, who is Assistant Deputy Minister for Citizenship and Heritage, and Mr. Lussier, who is Director General, Official Languages Support Programs. He is accompanied by Regional Executive Director of the Prairies and Northern Region, Mr. Louis Chagnon. Welcome to the committee, gentlemen. I believe you would like to say a few words to the committee before we move on to questions.

Mr. Scrimger.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Mr. Chairman, we are at your disposal. We can make a brief presentation, which would perhaps enable committee members to become acquainted with certain details. However, we can also go directly to questions. I'll let you make the decision.

As I previously mentioned, we submitted the answer to the committee's motion on the repayment of unexpended amounts to the clerk. The question that Mr. Godin asked at the end of the last meeting concerned that subject.

How do you want to proceed?

- (1010)

The Chair: I'll ask you to take a few moments to provide an introduction.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Mr. Chairman, to save a little time, we could start on page 4 of the presentation, where we talk about the comprehensive approach to grants and contribution management.

We really want to emphasize the federal government's accountability or diligence framework and certain aspects of that framework, such as the Federal Accountability Act, the Financial Administration Act and the Auditor General Act. The department is a vanguard department committed to implementing the recommendations of the independent Blue Ribbon Panel for improving contributions management.

A balance must be struck between due diligence and reasonable service standards for our recipients. The cycle is clearly not working well enough and we have not satisfied everyone. However, I want to say that we have a quite full diligence framework and that we must always be ready to show, to the satisfaction of the Treasury and the Auditor General, that we are managing public funds as prescribed by law and in accordance with Treasury Board policies.

On the next page of the presentation, we talk about PCH's approach to the Blue Ribbon Panel. In their report, these experts emphasize the need to manage the concept of risk management with regard to the sound management of public funds. Diligence is absolutely necessary, but there are still some sectors where, with a knowledge of risk, we can obtain more skilful, more agile practices in the administration of public funds. The department is fully committed to this approach. We have some 20 different projects within the department that are a complete renewal of our grants and contributions management practices.

An important element that was mentioned by the minister and by Ms. LaRocque is that, starting on April 1, 2010, we will be establishing and publishing the service standards for our grants and contributions programs, including the official languages programs.

On page 6—if you wish, I can ask my two colleagues to give you more details on our grants and contributions procedures—we give you the main process components, from the recipient's application to approval and, lastly, the release of funds.

On the following page, we present certain contexts specific to our programs. Mr. Lussier has already discussed the question concerning our regional review committees in the communities. We think it is an essential aspect of our obligations under Part VII of the Act to have these round tables with the communities to ensure they have a good opportunity to exercise an influence and to tell us what they think the priorities are. That doesn't mean we couldn't make the consultation process more effective, and we definitely want to see whether there are any more effective ways to do so. However, we don't want to lose the essential aspects of these tables and the advantages that the department still enjoys as a result of our partners' advice.

In 2009-2010, the average processing time for files was approximately 30 weeks. I use the average time, but I know there are cases where it was longer than 30 weeks. There were also some that took less than 30 weeks. The previous year, the average was 27 weeks. A difference of three weeks is significant.

•(1015)

On the last page, we wanted to very specifically share the analysis of our action plan. I'm going to do that briefly because the minister has already talked about certain aspects.

It is true that the program renewal issue is restricted to certain practices, such as the signing of multi-year agreements. We have had a higher volume of applications than in previous years. In some cases, there is a shortage of staff, which doesn't help the cause.

I'll continue the analytical work. There is a lack of standardization among the regions with regard to file processing. With a little work, we think we can resolve certain situations.

We clearly acknowledge that there has been an unacceptable delay in the issuing of interim funding, which is done between May and July rather than in the second week of April.

Our action plan definitely aims to promote the signing of multi-year agreements. Ms. LaRocque said it: we almost need to be able to approve a payment schedule over a period of a number of years, and those payments will definitely continue if all diligence reports are provided by recipients.

We have increased the subsidy thresholds from \$30,000 to \$50,000. I believe that next year, 88% to 90% of our funding will consist of grants under \$50,000, which will help us enormously.

We discussed this with our regional representatives, and the staffing of key positions is a priority.

As Ms. LaRocque said, with regard to interim funding, we are going to start the process sooner so that the money is paid out in April. If necessary, we will exceed the current 25% of funding to reach the amount required to ensure that we have a good payment schedule for our recipients.

Mr. Chairman, we are prepared to answer your questions. I hope this presentation gives you an idea of our action plan and of the work we are currently doing.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Scrimger, for this introduction to the administrative process.

We're going to begin our first round of the second question period with Mr. Rodriguez.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being here.

Let's do a review. Let's start at the beginning. Let's dig a little because, during my tour of the country, I saw an enormous number of problems. I didn't perceive the same sense of urgency from the minister. And there are a lot of aspects that come into play: disbursements, multi-year agreements, etc. I simply want us to have a basic discussion.

Are the agreements generally multi-year agreements?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Over the years, I believe that between 10% and 12% of our recipients have signed multi-year agreements.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Recently? When? In recent years?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: We've been encouraging the signing of multi-year agreements since 2005-2006.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You say you encourage it. I'm sure recipients prefer it as well.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: It must be understood that the multi-year agreements make a major positive difference. However, they require that the organizations engage in more ambitious planning: a two-year agreement is more difficult to prepare than a one-year agreement; a three-year agreement, when you're a small organization, is as well.

So not everyone went along with it immediately.

•(1020)

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: But ultimately there are advantages. Perhaps it takes longer at the start, but, later on, there are fewer reports, less paperwork, less management, and so on.

When you sign a multi-year agreement with an organization, because there is mutual trust, recognition of the organization's work, expertise and sound management, isn't there some way to disperse funds faster or to issue funding at the start simply because you know it?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: Once a multi-year agreement is in place and the first year has elapsed, the two following years go exactly the same way, that is to say that there will be regular payments based on a report schedule that is not too demanding, cash flow and interim results reports. Once the multi-year contribution agreement has been signed, there should be no more problems with regard to payments.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: But there are some. You currently have multi-year agreements, and there are payment problems. That's a fact.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The problem was the introduction of the start-up contribution agreements. Once that's in place, small grains of sand can get into the gears.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What you're asking us then is to trust in the future and not to consider the past. It's an act of faith that you're asking us to make, Mr. Lussier.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: I wouldn't put it that way. I think the groups that currently lend themselves to multi-year agreements see a positive difference, and we know that vastly improves the relationship with the groups and the payment schedule.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Personally, I sensed a lot of concern and frustration and, without being alarmist, it was quite widespread. I didn't go anywhere where people told me that everything was working very well, that they were very pleased and that they were receiving money on time. On the contrary, instead I heard about people using credit cards, personal lines of credit, temporary lay-offs and loss of employees.

Once again I'm going to ask the question I put to the minister because I didn't get an answer.

The applications are filed no later than November. Is that indeed correct? Then all the analysis process kicks in. A recommendation is made in February, if I'm not mistaken. Then, normally, there should be a first payment of 25% of the grant in April, but it's made in June.

Explain to me what happens between the moment when an application is filed in November and the month of June. A lot of time elapses. Can you tell me what happens in the meantime?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: In response to a question earlier, I explained the generic process, that is to say the analysis conducted of the application and then the evaluation by the communities, which itself takes four to six weeks, finalization of the recommendation and final quality control, which takes place at the centre.

I want to draw your attention to the fact that the program we're talking about today is a program for which each of the 13 provinces and territories has a defined amount of money to share among the client groups. It's the same thing for the national groups.

It isn't as though the first organization to come could be the first served, as is the case with certain programs such as employment insurance.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: I have 20 seconds left and I would like a quick answer to another question.

Did you consult recipients about the 25% payment? Do you think this is an initiative they appreciate?

Mr. Louis Chagnon (Regional Executive Director, Prairies and Northern Region, Department of Canadian Heritage): Given that the process was slow this year, that may not reflect the facts well, but the 25% interim funding normally would definitely make it possible to pay out the funds at the start of the fiscal year. That's something the groups appreciate, in fact, because they need money to operate from the start of the new fiscal year.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: You're quite certain they appreciate it?

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

We'll continue with Mr. Nadeau.

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

Good morning, gentlemen.

In light of the remarks made, and of the complaints you've probably received—the minister said he had received a certain number of them and we've received some as well—we're engaging in an exercise for the purpose of improving the situation of community organizations and, in this case, official language minority organizations. These are organizations that do an enormous job with limited budgets. Our committee has asked in previous reports and studies that the interim funding be increased to 50%.

We should eventually be able to meet with the minister and to tell him that the organizations are receiving their money on time. It's as simple as that: the organizations should be able to receive the money in the spring in order to start up their activities so that, in the summer, for example, when those activities reach their target publics, young people or whatever, they can operate.

In this committee, we adopted a recommendation in June 2008, which stated: "That Canadian Heritage commit to delivering funding within 30 days following the date of the funding response [...] [otherwise] the department be required to reimburse interest charges incurred as a result of the delay."

Have you begun to study that recommendation, which comes from the Standing Committee on Official Languages, which our colleague Mr. Blaney chairs and chaired at the time, the purpose of which is precisely to assist the organizations that have to pay interest? Have you considered reimbursing the interest that they have paid out of their own funds because the entire grant was not remitted to them?

• (1025)

Mr. Tom Scrimger: In fact, I think you're asking two questions.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Then I'm going to ask just one.

Are you prepared to reimburse the interest that the organizations have to pay because the funding was paid out late?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: We don't have the authority to reimburse the organizations for interest they have accumulated as a result of funding delays.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Scrimger, did you receive the committee's recommendations on this point, which date back to June 2008?

Mr. Lussier said so, but what's your answer?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: You're asking me if I've received them?

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Yes, it was a report. I can give you a copy of it.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: I received a copy of the report, but the rules of public finance and the Treasury Board's public finance rules do not allow us to reimburse interest in the case of an application to which no response was received after 30 days.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: You'll understand that it was more than 30 days. We're asking that it be done within 30 days following the department's response.

We're conducting this exercise, and we're suggesting potential solutions to you. I realize that it's all well and good to work on these files—Mr. Petit was in committee when we talked about it; he even took part in the discussions—but that the proposals we submit don't even make you think that you are indeed hurting the organizations simply because the money is sent late.

You're telling us that the problem won't arise this year, but the report dates back to June 2008. So we're talking about applications that were filed in 2006-2007 for 2008. So this hasn't been going on for just one year.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: We're taking the committee's recommendations into account in developing our service standards. We don't have authority to pay interest expenses. In my opinion, the solution is to ensure that, in the next contribution cycles, we don't have any recipients who suffer unreasonable delays. We've already said that we're prepared to ensure that interim funding arrives on time.

In addition, if interim funding has to be increased to guarantee that recipients' activities can take place, we'll do that. To what extent can we increase interim funding? That will be decided following an analysis by our agents in the regions, who will help us make that decision.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Canadian Heritage has already had some experience with the organizations. I'll make a friendly suggestion to you. I advise you to study the recommendations that we submit so that you don't seem surprised when you appear here, as though we were talking about that for the first time.

The Chair: Mr.—

Mr. Richard Nadeau: The organizations have been talking about this for decades.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nadeau.

I may have an answer for you on the report on the contribution agreements.

Mr. Paré, what's the explanation?

Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher): The government hasn't responded to that report. It died on the Order Paper when the House adjourned. That's why there was no official government response to those recommendations. The committee could very well decide to restate them in the next report on the subject to see what the government's response would be. At that point, we would have the written explanation on the Treasury Board policies concerning—

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau, this is a topic that you could raise in the context of future business.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: We're in the middle of business. We'll prepare a report and we'll restate the recommendations; that's all.

• (1030)

The Chair: Mr. Godin, go ahead please.

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

Earlier you talked about the Auditor General, who made her comments like everyone else. Didn't the Auditor General say that it was money poorly spent, that because it was late, the organizations had to spend it all at once and that was not a way to manage government money?

If an organization has a year to carry out a project, receives the money at the end of the year and spends it all at once, that's not money well spent. I remember clearly that the Auditor General said that wasn't a way of doing things. This year was the worst year. I believe it passed in a manner contrary to what the Auditor General wanted.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: I agree with you, Mr. Godin. If there is an unacceptable delay in the funding of a project—if we're talking about projects instead of programs—that can have a negative impact on the project. We definitely don't want any situations in which project funding is provided in the last three or four months of the year. That's a situation that must be corrected. I believe we indicated the immediate actions we can take to ensure that funding is delivered on time next year. We'll continue to improve our practices to ensure that funding reaches the recipients on time for them to carry out their projects.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You'll agree with me: it's counterproductive. The government can be sure of the manner in which the funding will be allocated. If it takes five, seven or eight months to get approval and then there are only five months left to carry out the project,

there's not much point in taking all that time to pay the same amount of money if the organization can't use it properly.

Earlier I asked how much money had been returned by the organizations. You answered \$190,000, but that amount only concerns Canadian Heritage. Perhaps I should have asked how much money the minority communities have to return under all the programs offered, by Health Canada and other departments.

The minister has toured the regions. I've gone there as well. People tell me that the situation is the same with other programs. People in the regions tell us, for example, that they file applications with Health Canada and it's the same story: the money doesn't come. At one time, Canadian Heritage monitored the government's other grant programs.

The problem isn't just at Canadian Heritage. I don't just want to paint a poor picture of Canadian Heritage. In Newfoundland last weekend, we were told that, to obtain money from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the francophone community in Newfoundland had to draft its application, and ACOA answered that it would take time because the document had to be translated. Furthermore, there was no one in Newfoundland, in St. John's, who could handle the file: it was sent to Moncton. Then, before Moncton answered Newfoundland, time had passed. This is widespread.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Mr. Godin, for Canadian Heritage to be efficient, we obviously have no desire to disburse the funds at the end of the fiscal year if recipients can't use the funds for common objectives.

As I said, we're going to work hard on our action plan to ensure that the funding arrives on time for the official language projects and programs.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Some organizations receive applicable budget funding during a certain period of the year, the funds reach them late, and they feel they have to hurry to spend them so as not to lose them. It's that situation that isn't efficient.

We should congratulate our communities that tell us they misspend the money they get. We should tell them “thank you” and work together.

People are also wondering how many stages you have to go through to reach the goal. Back home, for example, the applications are sent to Moncton, which sends them to Ottawa. To how many offices does that have to be sent, how many studies have to be conducted by various departments before the minister signs? Can't this process be streamlined as well?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: I'm sure that, in the departments in Ottawa, there are a host of studies on issues related to business efficiency and practices. I'm going to talk more particularly about Canadian Heritage. With regard to our programs, we're examining our business practices, and we want to have processes for grant and contribution applications that are efficient and that ensure, once the minister accepts the application, that recipients receive their money in time to achieve their common objectives.

I now know that there are approximately 20 departments involved in the Blue Ribbon Panel's big project, that is most of the departments that give out grants and contributions.

The purpose of the Blue Ribbon Panel's work is to arrive at an efficient business process and to reduce the amount of work by recipients who are applying for grants and contributions, who write the follow-up reports and so on.

•(1035)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Lussier.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: I would like to clarify one point. To correct the problem Mr. Godin refers to, and in the wake of the Blue Ribbon Panel's report that my colleague Mr. Scrimger mentioned, there is a new provision in the transfer payment policy that will now make it possible to carry over to a subsequent fiscal year a percentage of expenditures that were planned for the previous year.

An hon. member: What percentage?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: I don't remember the exact percentage, but I could provide you with that figure. That would help solve the problem you mention, if it occurs.

The Chair: So that makes it possible to take funding that is not used during the year and to carry it over to the following year.

Do you know the percentage, Mr. Lussier?

Can you tell the members?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: My colleague says a "reasonable amount".

The Chair: I see, all right.

That's excellent.

Now we'll go to Ms. Boucher.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Thank you for being here today. It's always pleasant to meet with you. My colleagues opposite talk about government red tape that is sometimes appalling; one might think they would like to shrink that government. That leads me to ask you the following question.

Approximately how many official languages files do you study every year?

Mr. Louis Chagnon: With regard to files coming from the regions, that is to say programming and project files that are submitted and must be analyzed, the number is on average between 800 and 900 a year. Incidentally, they all arrive at the same time, like a wave at the start of the fiscal year. Approximately 602 files have been approved this year. The number of files approved from year to year varies with the quality of the files presented, the priorities of the communities and the status of the previous files.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: So it's a good average. I see that 602 out of 900 files have been approved. So there are about 200 left that have not been—

Mr. Louis Chagnon: They were rejected.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: All right.

I would like to know what percentage of the money received by the organizations comes from Canadian Heritage as opposed to other funding sources.

Mr. Louis Chagnon: In this case as well, that varies considerably. It depends on the communities. Some, which are better off or better established, receive less money from Canadian Heritage but more from other sources because they are better connected and have more experience and presence on the ground, in various fields. They receive money from other federal departments, the provinces or, in some instances, even private sector funding agencies, depending on the nature of their activities.

In general, the funding provided by Canadian Heritage represents between 25% and 60%. For the small groups, which have less access to funding, the percentage is around 60%.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: So the more remote groups, which have less opportunity than the better off groups of obtaining funding from other institutions, receive more funding from Canadian Heritage. That's what I understand.

Mr. Louis Chagnon: In general, the smallest groups, such as those in remote northern communities, receive more funding from Canadian Heritage than from other departments. It's between 30% and 60%.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Last week, Ms. Kenny appeared before this committee and talked a number of times about those binders. Is it true that those organizations have to send you big binders?

•(1040)

Mr. Louis Chagnon: In the context of the community consultation process, the communities have established recommendation committees, essentially review committees that re-examine all the applications for their communities. These are people who have declared that they are not in a situation of conflict of interest with respect to the proposals submitted by the groups seeking funding. These people have to review all the funding proposals, whether it be for operating funding or for project funding.

All the funding applications are forwarded to the Department of Canadian Heritage. The officers then prepare the binders which include all the applications and preliminary analyses designed to help the committees do their work. They are indeed quite large binders. Sometimes there are three or four binders of funding proposals, but they nevertheless contain information that helps committee members make recommendations on the priorities and projects that are accepted.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: All the organizations wind up in these binders.

Mr. Louis Chagnon: It's all the proposals that are submitted to us. The binders are used for the operation of committees. They are submitted to Canadian Heritage and subsequently destroyed.

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

Mr. D'Amours.

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

From the answers the minister gave, it appears that the Treasury Board is responsible for the delays. Did you know in advance that there might be delays as a result of the re-evaluations, as was mentioned?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: There are requirements that come from the Treasury Board. The minister said—and I believe we accept that completely—that the onus is on us to improve our process while taking into account the parameters that are given to us by the Treasury Board, and we're going to do that.

What happened last year was particular. The volume of applications was much greater than usual, for two reasons. First of all, the end of the program terms and conditions on March 31 required all applicants to file new applications. Second, the arrival of new programs increased the volume of applications. For example, the Cultural Development Fund added some 100 new files.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: That means that things went much better in 2007. And yet we nevertheless had similar programs.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: There was essentially a three-week difference between the year just ended and the previous years, but the preceding 27 weeks—

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: I understand the example regarding the three weeks, but the first 25% instalment took more than three weeks. We're not talking about mid-April.

Mr. Scrimger, you mentioned June, but it was more like July, August, September and October.

Were the organizations informed of what was going to happen this year so that they could prepare for the government's rules? Answer with a yes or no.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: There was no formal communication to tell them that we were going to be late this year.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: All right.

Mr. Scrimger, you mentioned that, once Treasury Board said that you could go ahead, the disbursements started and people received them between May and July.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: I think it was Ms. LaRocque who said that approval for the program renewal was unusual this year. For example, there weren't any multi-year agreements or we hadn't approved the 25% payment in advance. However, that won't be the case next year. We'll be able to obtain a signature and to authorize payments in advance to ensure the payments are made in April.

• (1045)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Once the problems were solved with Treasury Board, the process was able to go ahead.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Yes.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: So can you explain to me why they waited until May, June, July, August, September, October and even November to make the first 25% instalment? Once that was approved, why didn't all the organizations simply receive their 25%?

I know you want to involve Treasury Board in this affair. Is the delay attributable to the fact that the files simply were not all evaluated and that they were lying around on the minister's desk? When Treasury Board gave its approval, why weren't the first cheques sent to all the organizations? Why didn't they all receive their 25% in May?

You said that it's the minister who decides what organizations receive money. We can look at the blues to ensure that's really what

you said. Does that mean that, from now on, you'll be evaluating the files, but that the minister will decide who receives money and who doesn't, even if a recommendation has been made on that point?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Your question includes three items to which I'm going to try to respond.

First, the minister gives final approval for grants on contributions. It's not an authority that's delegated to departmental officials.

Second, our files indicate that the last advance payments to eligible organizations were made in July. There are no more organizations awaiting a 25% advance payment. I don't mean at all that all the contributions were signed in July. I know that contributions were signed later in the summer and even, in the case of certain projects, in September or early October.

The Chair: Mr. Scrimger, time is passing. Have you finished?

Thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

We'll continue with Mr. Nadeau.

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

A little earlier, I was talking about items of information that did not reach the organizations that knew that their application had been accepted. For example, that's the 602 organizations that we were talking about for the previous year...

Why can't they get a succinct answer when they ask where their file stands, if only during the week when they call?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Until the official decision has been made, all the organizations can be told is that their application is still being processed. From the moment we know the decision, we can communicate it to the organization. We can also begin the necessary procedures to start payments. I can't give any other answer.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: So you're telling me that the organization that filed an application can't know how far it's gone, even if the delay is extending and even if you know that certain factors cannot be considered, for example, because the implementation date has passed or because it's too late to hire the necessary people so that the activity can take place.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Of course, our officers were able to explain that there would be a delay. I'm not saying that we told them absolutely nothing, but they perhaps can't say how far the file has gotten and why there was a delay. I think the solution will be to publish our service standards, which is planned for April 1, 2010. They will be available to all recipients, who will be able to take our service standards into consideration—

• (1050)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Scrimger, —

The Chair: Mr. Nadeau, I must inform you that we have to leave at 11 o'clock because another committee needs the room. There are three speakers in the second round. You may continue, but I wanted to inform you of that fact.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you.

Let's take the example of a francophone community organization that files an application and is told that its programming is accepted. The application is then processed, to see whether it works well, etc. If representatives of that association call you in mid-process, you can't tell them the date when they'll be receiving the money, even if this is a group that you've been doing business with for a long time.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: If we've told an organization that its grant was approved, we can tell it, most of the time, that it will be receiving payment within 30 days. Approval has to be official before we can provide an exact answer. As officials, we don't say whether something is approved before the minister has approved it.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Thank you.

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

We'll continue with Ms. Glover, who will be sharing her time with Mr. Petit.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, this is the second hour because we started at nine o'clock.

The Chair: As we changed witnesses, I took back the question list, which works to your advantage, Mr. Godin, because otherwise you wouldn't have spoken in the first round.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Why?

The Chair: You don't speak in the third round.

Mr. Yvon Godin: There's no third round, if—

The Chair: You come out a winner, but if you talk too much now, you'll have less time later.

Ms. Glover, go ahead please.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I simply wanted to clarify something. Mr. Scrimger, let's talk about the analysis of the delays related to the funding process. This week, during the briefing on the delays issue, you told me that there were other reasons, that don't appear in your analysis. I was told that the quality of the brief was one of the reasons that explained the delays. I was told that documents were missing, and so on. I'm surprised that this doesn't appear in your analysis. Furthermore, Mr. Lussier said that the consultations with the committees caused delays because there are often problems when you have to meet with everyone.

I wonder why that doesn't appear in the analysis. Do those two reasons also explain the delays?

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Obviously, if the grant application isn't complete, that causes a delay and that can delay the final decision.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: But I would like to know whether those two specific factors caused delays.

Mr. Tom Scrimger: Yes, that's definite. That has an impact on the process.

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Is it because they're recurrent that they're not in your analysis? I just want the public and the committee to see that there are a number of reasons there are delays. To not include them leaves not a full picture. I understand their recurrence, and they've been happening over years and years in different governments, etc., but from what I was told this week, by people in this room, there are

in fact reasons there are delays. I just want to make sure we have a clear picture. Is that a clear picture, sir?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tom Scrimger: The ability of certain groups that submit applications may cause delays in the processing of grants. If an application is incomplete, the officer definitely has to work with the organization for a number of weeks or months to ensure the application is complete. That also causes a delay.

• (1055)

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Okay, so we need to help them.

I'm going to share my time with Monsieur Petit.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tom Scrimger: This is a recurring issue.

The Chair: You have about one minute left, Mr. Petit.

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): My question is for Mr. Lussier, Mr. Scrimger or Mr. Chagnon.

The organizations have to complete forms to obtain multi-year funding, grants, and so on. It's like an income tax return. You know that's hard to do. Does the department offer information or courses to help these people properly complete these formalities and not to make too many mistakes?

Mr. Louis Chagnon: The officers in the regions are responsible for helping the communities as much as possible to understand the process and the requirements of an application, whether it's for multi-year funding or recurrent project funding. It's not equal from region to region; it depends on the ability of the communities. Whatever the case may be, there are indeed training sessions. There are even officers who go on site to speak with the applicants about application form content and the information that is required.

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

Mr. Godin, you may ask a brief question.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

Earlier we talked about delays and the fact that you hadn't informed the associations, organizations and federations. Is there a reason for that? You already knew that there would be delays and that they wouldn't be the same as in previous years.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The groups were informed individually. I think Louis could attest to the fact that they were called and that they were told what the situation was. There wasn't any official statement announcing the delays. We hoped that, despite the particularly high volume of applications, there would be a way to resolve the bottleneck that appeared faster than usual, on time. However, as a result of the volume, that bottleneck was worse than we had anticipated. That's our mistake, and I accept part of that responsibility. We want to correct that situation.

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

That's all the time we have. We're going to see each other again next week. I want to thank our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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