



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Official Languages

LANG • NUMBER 022 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, February 2, 2012

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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (0930)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): [*Public proceedings resume*]

We are in public session, so we're on the public record. If people come, they are allowed to enter the room to listen to the debate. Just to clarify, we are....

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): My motion that I made in camera is now.... Can you clarify what that is?

The Chair: We are in public session right now. A motion to go in camera or in public is—

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I would like to continue—

[English]

The Chair: Yes, just let me explain. A motion to go in camera or to go in public can be moved at any time. There is no limit on the number of times that such a motion can be moved. It's not debatable and it's put to an immediate vote, which just took place, so we're now in public.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: If I interpret what you're saying correctly, I can now move to go back in camera.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Well, I have the right to speak. I have the floor.

The Chair: The floor is Mr. Bélanger's.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: You said we can do it at any time, so can I now...? Who made that previous motion?

The Chair: Mr. Bélanger did, because he had the floor.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I still have the floor.

The Chair: Yes. I'm just clarifying what the situation is. I'm going to pass the floor back to Mr.—

Mr. Costas Menegakis: I'm sorry, but I want to understand what's going on.

The Chair: Okay, what happened was that Mr. Bélanger was interrupted by M. Godin, who called a point of order. In that point of order, he moved a motion; I ruled it out of order because it's not a point of order to move a motion. I gave the floor back to Mr. Bélanger, and he moved the motion to go in public. When I started to call the vote, somebody requested a formal recorded division. I passed the floor to the clerk, and the clerk recorded that division. The motion was adopted five to four. Only four members voted against the motion.

Now I'm going to pass the floor back to Mr. Bélanger, because it is his floor right now and he has not—

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Okay, but at what point are we allowed to make a motion again?

The Chair: When Mr. Bélanger has exhausted his debate and—

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Oh, it's when he's exhausted his debate.

A voice: Or whoever else is on the list.

The Chair: The next person on the list is—

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): On a point of order, who remains on the list of speakers, please?

The Chair: The next person on the list is Mme Michaud. Then we have M. Aubin, then M. Harris, and then M. Godin.

Just to be clear, we're actually not on the main motion. We're on the amendment moved by Mr. Harris on that main motion. We're still on the amendment. We're not on the main motion.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Can you read me...?

The Chair: I can read the amendment. The amendment moved in the last meeting was:

That the motion be amended by adding after the words “in camera” the following: “with the consent of at least one member of the opposition or a vote by committee at the start of any sitting of the permanent committee on official languages where committee business is to be discussed”

That's what we're on.

I'll pass the floor back to M. Bélanger.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We should perhaps provide some background for the people joining us now. We are debating a motion and an amendment to that motion. The motion asks that all committee business be conducted in camera. This motion comes from the government side. One of the official opposition members moved an amendment so that the motion asks for the consent of at least one member of the opposition at the start of a meeting, I believe.

Mr. Chair, I am going to take advantage of the fact that we are in public session and repeat some of the arguments I have been making for some time now. I have to be careful because we cannot repeat everything that is said in camera. But I will still speak publicly. This way, if I am going to be accused of something, I will be accused of speaking publicly, which seems to be the current trend.

Mr. Chair, I have said, and I am going to say it again, that it is simply inconceivable for all committee business to be conducted in camera. A motion like this one, asking that all committee business be conducted in camera, is unconstitutional and anti-democratic. This is not the way to do things. The committee must reject a motion like that.

This is the Parliament of Canada and we are accountable to Canadians. As parliamentarians, we have rights that enable us to communicate with our constituents. In fact, we have a duty to communicate with our constituents. We have a duty to be accountable. So asking that everything be conducted in camera is simply mind-boggling. I strongly object to this, Mr. Chair.

● (0935)

The Chair: Mr. Trottier, the floor is yours.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): I rise on a point of order.

Mr. Bélanger is talking about a motion. I think we have to set the record straight. He has just said that the motion asks that all committee business be conducted in camera. Actually, the motion says all committee business of the committee. That is not exactly the same thing. Let us be clear.

It is the committee business of the committee. Accuracy is in order.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, I accept Mr. Trottier's point of order.

The Chair: One moment, please.

Thank you for your point of order, Mr. Trottier. It is in order.

Mr. Bélanger, you have the floor.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Thank you.

If we want to be splitting hairs, we can do that, Mr. Chair. What does "That all committee business of the committee" mean? When we say the committee business of the committee, are we talking about our discussions on drafting a report? In that case, I wouldn't object. In the Canadian Parliament, we have always done that type of work in camera. Setting up the committee's schedule can be done in camera or not, depending on the will of the committee.

However, major topics, such as Radio-Canada, cannot be discussed in camera, Mr. Chair. In a broad sense, what Mr. Menegakis is proposing means that everything we do is going to be in camera. He actually uses the word "all"; he talks about all committee business of the committee. That makes no sense.

We will have to hear from witnesses in camera; we will have to receive ministers in camera; it will all have to be done in camera. All committee business of the committee will have to be in camera. That's unacceptable, Mr. Chair. It is unheard of. That's abuse on the government's part.

And as a member of a democratic Parliament, I cannot accept such a thing. That is why I have promised my colleagues to go ahead with a filibuster, Mr. Chair. It is the only tool I have. The only tool I have is to say that, as long as I have the right to speak, I will not let this be forced upon a Canadian parliamentary committee. This is my duty as a democrat. Any other member of the committee would do the same if they had the floor. I actually have to leave in a few minutes because I was asked to be somewhere else at 10 a.m. But I have made arrangements for a colleague from the official opposition to continue the work that I am doing right now. She will have the floor next. We cannot be forced to work in camera, the way the government wants us to work. It is unacceptable.

Since the government is keen on shutting us up and forcing us to go in camera, we are going to use the tools that are available to us. In this instance, the only tool we have left is a filibuster to help us expose the abuse that they are trying to commit. I say "trying" because, for as long as I am a member on this committee, they will not succeed, Mr. Chair. If we have to spend the next few months studying and reading the Official Languages Act so that my colleagues opposite get to know the reality of official language communities across the country, then so be it. It is unacceptable to shut us up, to shut us down, by forcing us to do everything in camera; it is unacceptable, Mr. Chair.

Now that some of my colleagues had to apologize or might have to apologize to their powers that be, because they left the chamber and allowed us to have a public sitting, I hope they will be so embarrassed that they will accept the suggestion I made to the colleague opposite who moved the motion. Withdraw it.

My NDP colleagues—I think—and I, from the third party, have clearly said that we agree that some of the committee business can be conducted in camera. That's normal. We want our work to be progressive and constructive. We want to cooperate. We are ready to do so. But telling us that everything has to be done in camera will not fly.

My colleague Mr. Menegakis is hot under the collar because, every time I had the floor in a public meeting, I said what would be done in camera, so that the public is aware of what this Canadian parliamentary committee does for them. The committee is made up of representatives elected and sent to the Parliament of Canada by the people. I think it is the least we can do to be accountable to our voters, Mr. Chair.

That is why I am going to continue to do this. I sincerely hope that we find a solution.

● (0940)

[*English*]

It is not appropriate for a committee to be jammed the way we're now being jammed.

This committee, throughout its history, whether as a House of Commons committee or as a joint committee with the Senate, has always done great work for the betterment of our linguistic minorities throughout the country. We have been able to do so, Mr. Chairman, because we worked collaboratively, we worked constructively, and we relied on and trusted each other.

We are now told by the government party that all future work—I'll say this in English to make sure Monsieur Trottier is satisfied—and all business of the committee will be conducted in camera is unacceptable. You can't function that way in a democracy. You have to function in a manner that is appropriate, and this is not.

I've now had the pleasure of entertaining my colleagues this morning, as I did in the previous meeting, but because I have a meeting I've agreed to attend at 10 o'clock, I'm going to leave. I hope that Madame Michaud, who is going to have the floor next, will carry on in the same vein, Mr. Chairman, because our colleagues across the way, with whom we've done good work in the past, should realize our willingness on this side to continue doing good work for our communities and should not impose *le bâillon*.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Dan Harris: I have a point of clarification.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Harris, on a point of clarification.

Mr. Dan Harris: My apologies. The meeting has gone in public, but when I stepped outside, I noticed that the signs outside still say we're in camera.

The Chair: Thank you. I will instruct the clerk to have those signs changed.

Mr. Dan Harris: Thank you. We'll let the Canadian public know we're open for business.

The Chair: Continuing debate, we will go to Madame Michaud. [Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank my colleague Mr. Bélanger for his comments this morning. Whatever he was able to say publicly was very informative for Canadians. They did not have access to this information. Mr. Bélanger has put his finger on many of the problems in this motion, which asks us to go in camera for all committee business. He was not able to say as much as he would have liked. As requested, I will continue the discussion along the same lines, because I do share many of his convictions in terms of this motion.

I'll be honest with you. I am very disappointed about having to debate this type of motion. Right from the start of the committee business, we have had a great deal of trouble moving forward. We feel that openness and transparency are sorely lacking, and the motion is a clear indication of that.

It is often very difficult for us, as the opposition, to bring our views forward through motions. The amendment proposed by my colleague Mr. Harris, seeking the consent of at least one member of the opposition or at least a vote at the start of any sitting, provides some sort of solution. But we should not even be having this discussion right now. I find it extremely unfortunate.

The work we accomplish here is of great importance to all Canadians, whether they are members of minority language communities or not. Many Canadians are not in this situation, but

they recognize the importance of bilingualism in Canada and they value it highly.

Let us remember that we would not have the country we have today without francophones. One of the reasons why our federation exists is the hard work of minority language communities.

I am honestly learning a lot. I am a young parliamentarian. I have less experience than many of you when it comes to the conduct of previous committees or the parliamentary system in general. However, I have a background in political science. So I have studied the parliamentary process in great detail, and never have I heard of what we are seeing now in this committee.

I was also a parliamentary guide in 2007. I spent an entire summer helping people discover Parliament, the parliamentary system, history, architecture and culture associated with the Canadian parliamentary system and our institution. I actually organized the visits around the parliamentary system as such. That's what I have been passionate about. I have been passionate about the way the House of Commons works, and even the way the Senate works. The Senate is still part of our institution, although we agree that it is a bit dysfunctional right now.

One of the stops the guides had for visitors was the Railway Room. As you know, a lot of committee meetings are held in that room. That is where we could explain to people exactly what was going on in committees. At that time, I told them it was one of the places where the real work got done.

In the House, we see a lot of partisanship. Question period is quite special. As for committees, the general message I was giving people was the message that I had received, meaning that partisanship was set aside in committees, that serious and sensible work was done to improve bills and that it was done by parties working together. The same goes for the study of the various reports and for the issues that we tackle.

It is a place where we slightly distance ourselves from our ties with the parties in order to try to really focus on the well-being and vitality of communities. In our case, we are talking about minority language communities. If I had to organize the same visit for the public, I would not be able to tell them the same thing now. I would not be able to tell them that there is a co-operative effort to reach a compromise in order to accomplish something substantial for language minority communities. I would have to tell them that it's a bit like question period, but without all the bells and whistles. And, as I said earlier, this is really unfortunate and it really hinders our work.

As Mr. Bélanger mentioned earlier, we have a major responsibility to minority communities. They rely on us to protect their interests, to speak on their behalf and to give them what they need to develop and grow, in order to be able to safeguard bilingualism, which is so dear to many Canadians and which is a central feature of our country.

● (0945)

I don't think we have any valid reason to hide the work of this committee. The thoughts expressed here are extremely important for Canadians. The committee deals with priority issues, and its decisions have a direct impact on them.

The communities we have met with and the various groups who gave testimony talked about the Roadmap and a number of other issues. They are counting on us to continue to defend them. They are counting on our work to improve businesses in their communities. If they are not in the loop about what parliamentarians intend to do and about the work being done here, it will be very difficult for them to continue their efforts and to really thrive.

I think I have already mentioned that I had the opportunity to attend the annual general meeting of the Association franco-yukonnaise in November. I think we were all invited. I was the only representative from the committee, but those people were very happy to meet with a member of Parliament who cared about the vitality of their community, the demographics and their projects. But they were also feeling very frustrated. The meeting that I attended focused on a strategic plan for the development of their community. I believe they mentioned it to us when they appeared before the committee a few months ago. The strategic plan was centred on their needs and was designed to ensure the sustainability of the Yukon. It is quite difficult for this community, consisting of some 1,000 members only, to sustain itself, to grow and to have the institutions it needs. One of the objectives of the strategic plan was to slightly improve the government action already in place, under the legislation and constitutional obligations we have.

During the meeting, I felt the members of the community were quite disappointed and frustrated with the progress made—or rather the lack of progress—among other things, in the study on the north. André Boursier, the chair of the Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon, told me that he had met with members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages and that he sat down with them and talked. He took the time to prepare a brief describing the situation. So some committee members, who are no longer here today, took the time to listen and to gather all this information so that the committee could study the situation as part of its work. But this is all going down the drain now.

Mr. Boursier was quite upset, and I can understand why. Communities are making tremendous efforts to give us the information we need to better equip them later through transfers and programs that we implement. For these people, the fact that we did not continue the study shows the lack of consideration on the government's part for the francophone situation in the Yukon. They also see that this attitude applies not only to the other northern territories, but also to the rest of Canada. Those who gave testimony told me that they saw this almost as a lack of respect for their work. They have once again expressed their concerns in the letter that the committee received by urging us to continue this work.

Mr. Bélanger has already brought this up, and I am glad that he opened the door for me. When I went to visit those people in the Yukon, I was very moved. When you go to the north, you can see all the effects of the programs, of government action. So I think it is crucial that we continue the study. If we discuss the issue in camera, it will then be very difficult to properly inform the francophone community in the Yukon. The members of that community need that information.

●(0950)

In addition, I believe that the current situation in the Yukon is the same as that in many other communities. A number of the groups who came to meet us have shared their many needs with us. They said they were happy with the Roadmap and the way it could help them, but they had trouble finding out where the province was investing funds. They have trouble figuring out the real impact of the Roadmap. If those discussions are included in the committee business mentioned in the motion, we as parliamentarians will have our hands tied. We will not be able to communicate with the people who need information. We will not be able to talk about our problems, their problems and the solutions we can offer. We will no longer have that opportunity if we have to conduct all our meetings behind closed doors.

One way for us to be able to really do our job well as parliamentarians is to be directly accountable to the people. It is up to them to judge us and to give us the mandate to represent them here. What we are really asking them is to trust us. But we have to earn their trust. We cannot simply have it by winning an election. We have to work and be there to represent their interests. One way of doing it is showing them the outcome of our work and the action that we take. They won't be able to really assess our work and determine whether we truly deserve their trust through programs or decisions agreed on by the committee and released here and there. That is not enough information. I think it is extremely important to be able to broadcast our proceedings so that the work of parliamentarians and the mandate entrusted to them by the people are respected.

As members of the opposition, we are considered to be spokespeople by a number of groups. We are considered to be people who can sometimes make ourselves heard more directly and more easily by government members. The people want to see that we pass their messages along and they also need to hear the government's response. If we are not able to raise those issues and get an answer publicly, communities will have no way of judging our work and the initiatives taken here. We must bear this in mind when we take this type of action. This would completely change how the committee works.

As I said earlier, because of my training and my job as a guide, I have closely followed the work of various committees. And I have always been passionate about the work of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. NDP members of Parliament are not generally perceived to be very familiar with the military setting and the various things that go with it. But I personally come from a military family. We had to travel. Some members of my family who are francophone had to live in several anglophone provinces here in Canada and they had to use services in French because they wanted to continue living in French. So that included education. Some of my family members live in the riding of Ottawa—Orléans. It is too bad that Mr. Galipeau is no longer here; we might have been able to have an interesting discussion about his riding and the issues specific to many of the francophones living in Orléans, among other things.

Let us go back to my family members who are francophones and live in Ontario. They need to have access to various services for the education of their children and a number of other federal services in French, given that it is their mother tongue. So it is extremely important to continue the work that we are doing now so that they can continue to benefit from it, but also because of the investments that will be made based on our recommendations.

As my colleagues have said in the discussions about the committee and as Mr. Bélanger pointed out earlier, as members of the opposition we are muzzled by this type of motion. It becomes extremely difficult for us to move the work forward. It is impossible for us to bring up our issues and we get the feeling that this type of motion is somehow an attempt to muzzle us. Without wanting to accuse anyone of malice, let me stress that this is still the feeling—and it is a very strong one—that we as parliamentarians and the public will get from this type of motion.

• (0955)

This issue is starting to take up more and more of our time. We are talking about the fact that our floor time is limited, just like the number of opposition members who can express their thoughts on various bills. In some committees, it can go that far, depending on the scheduled sequence of speakers.

This issue has a major impact on the constituents we represent, and on all Canadians. When we are elected, we have a mandate to represent a certain number of voters living in a given area. However, we also have the responsibility to think about every Canadian, not just our constituents.

For example, when I attend a committee meeting, I have to think about francophones outside Quebec. I am obviously representing a constituency in Quebec. So I cannot act directly on behalf of the constituents I don't represent. But I still have a mandate to think about all the other francophones who live in other provinces and who don't necessarily have easy access to all the services they might need in French. The same goes for all parliamentarians on this committee.

Without wanting to question the good will of our two new members or the work that they can do, I think it is a bit disturbing that the government no longer has any members representing minority communities. I think there are ways to be sensitive to the needs of communities outside—

• (1000)

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Chair, as a representative of a minority language community, I resent Ms. Michaud's comment.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Perhaps I can rephrase that.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: She is saying that there are no members representing minority language communities.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Actually, there are no representatives from an area outside Quebec with a large francophone population.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's not a point of order.

Please direct your remarks to the chair, and let's focus on the amendment at hand.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, the floor is yours.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Let us go back to the amendment that was asking, among other things, that the opposition participate in the decision to go in camera. That goes back to what I was saying earlier. The opinions of the opposition members are just as important as the thoughts from my colleagues opposite.

We have to be able to have the same privileges and to be able to express the needs of our constituents and of the various communities that get in touch with us. Adopting the amended motion would be a solution giving us a little more flexibility and allowing the members of the opposition to be more involved in committee business.

In this motion, when we talk about committee business, I think we have to really ask ourselves what it entails, as mentioned earlier. Committee business includes a lot of stuff. We may think that it only has to do with determining the sequence of speakers and those sorts of things, but it can also go as far as the comprehensive study of bills, as mentioned a little earlier. It can also include choosing the issues that we are going to tackle and the type of study that the committee wants to carry out. That could all fall under this very broad definition.

I think we have to ask ourselves questions before making that decision. I have never seen a committee work this way. Before coming to Parliament, when I needed information on committee proceedings, I could very easily access that information. But it is less and less the case for the public, and more and more people are opposing this way of doing things. They too want to be able to see for themselves the work that is done in committee, not just receive the information we want to release through decisions or whatnot. It is very important that all the groups make up their own minds and form their own opinions.

The Standing Committee on Official Languages has a major responsibility to minority language communities. Earlier we have started to read the Official Languages Act, but I think it is very important to recall one of the responsibilities set out in the preamble of the act, which we have read just now. I think it is worth reading it again.

In the preamble, on page 1, in the last paragraphs, it says—

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Harris: I have a point of information.

[*Translation*]

I am sorry to interrupt you.

[*English*]

The physical in camera sign outside was taken down, but the computer screen still says that we're in camera.

The Chair: Okay. I will ask the clerk to change that.

Go ahead, Madame Michaud.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Éloise Michaud: Yes, I will continue, Mr. Chair. There were discussions outside and I wanted to be sure that everything was being done properly and that everyone was fully aware that we are finally in a public session. That is a relief, I have to say, and I hope it will not be temporary. I hope we are going to be able to continue in the same way. We all feel a little freer to act and no one feels that their parliamentary privilege is under attack.

I was about to read you a passage from the Act about the status and the use of official languages in Canada. The preamble states that the federal government:

...is committed to enhancing the vitality and supporting the development of English and French linguistic minority communities, as an integral part of the two official language communities of Canada, and to fostering full recognition and use of English and French in Canadian society...

I feel that that clearly demonstrates the responsibility we have as parliamentarians. As the preamble mentions, we should support the communities and help them to promote their official language. That includes French, of course, which unfortunately is more and more neglected. The work that the committee undertakes contributes greatly to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Official Languages Act. We gather information through the various studies we decide to conduct. It may be as a result of the contributions of the witness whom we invite to appear. It may be from other topics we want to look at. All our discussions serve to support the development of our communities.

That is one of the reasons why we are asking to be able to continue to make public the decisions that we make here, be they positive or negative. In fact, we must make all our discussions public. The final decision is not the only thing that is important; all the consideration we give, all the points we bring up and the different perspectives that we share also often lead us to a new way of thinking. Canadians also need that information to open their eyes to ways of thinking that they may not have had the opportunity to consider. They want to see all the work we do and to look at various solutions that may be proposed so that they can continue to develop fully and to exist in Canada.

It is extremely difficult for our communities to keep their young people, to continue to have the right to education of an equivalent quality that is really going to meet the needs of the young people, families and the workforce. What we do here contributes greatly to the structures that they want for themselves.

Most of the time, our discussions here directly affect the sensitive issues in the communities. They deal with the topics and the questions that the people are asking themselves as well and they want to see our reports and a new way of looking at things.

As I briefly mentioned—and I will come back to the subject at a little greater length—during the various consultations we held on the subject of the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality, groups raised various issues including receiving stable and ongoing funding for their various programs. It all came back to the various initiatives in the Roadmap. It is an important matter and one we must deal with. We must spend time on the problems that have been raised by the communities, including the problem of funding. Once we have finished consulting witnesses and hearing all the information they

have to offer us, the discussions we will have on the issue will be very important.

• (1005)

According to the motion, even if amended, the other discussions that we might have on ways to ensure ongoing funding or on the recommendations that we might make to the government could be held in camera. If that were the case, communities would not be informed about the various discussions and would not even know that we are dealing with the problems that they have raised. We have to keep that in mind, because it will directly affect members of minority communities.

As you know, despite the fact that I have been on this committee only for a short time, I can understand that some discussions have to take place in camera. I am well aware that some things cannot be made public. Some things should be discussed among ourselves, like the selection of witness, for example. I cannot have any objection to our doing those things at the steering committee or among ourselves behind closed doors. We must spend a little time before we hold a meeting in public. We have to give ourselves some latitude and to have the possibility of being very upfront with each other.

But I do not believe that this secret way of operating should apply to all situations where witnesses are not involved. All our discussions on the subjects we want to study concern Canadians directly and should be held openly. We are simply their representatives who have the power to discuss and implement measures that will support the development of the communities. All that involves consultations with the public, informing the public of our position on initiatives that will soon be undertaken. Working behind closed doors will damage our relations with Canadians, with those who elect us.

As I said at the start of my remarks, I am really disappointed to have to discuss this motion, especially because the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality is an important initiative, as I agree it is.

• (1010)

The Chair: Mr. Gourde is raising a point of order.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Ms. Michaud.

Mr. Chair, we are discussing Mr. Harris' amendment. We only have the English version of the amendment. Since we are the Standing Committee on Official Languages and Mr. Harris has circulated the amendment, I feel that we are going a little against our mission of defending...

Mr. Bernard Trottier: I have a motion, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No, this is not the time to introduce a motion. Ms. Michaud has the floor, but Mr. Gourde is raising a valid point of order.

My apologies; the error is mine. The clerk circulated the amendment and the motion in English. The amendment is in order. Mr. Harris spoke to us about his amendment in the last session. The amendment is in order, but the documents that the clerk circulated are not, and I apologize.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Chair, I would like to comment on the point of order...

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I feel that a mistake has been made. We should give the document back to the clerk and have it circulated again when it has been translated. I think it is important that both documents be translated. As you said, the motion has previously been presented orally.

[English]

The Chair: Yes. The motion should not have been distributed in English only, and for that I apologize, but the motion and amendment are in form because they were given to us orally and because we have simultaneous translation here. The amendment is in order, it is in front of us, and it is live.

Go ahead, Monsieur Trottier.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Chair, I would like to make a motion to sit in camera.

[English]

The Chair: I'm not going to allow that, because you cannot move a motion on a point of order. In other words, the floor is Madame Michaud's. Her time can be interrupted if there is a legitimate point of order, and there is, and I thank Monsieur Gourde for bringing it to the chair's attention.

Go ahead, Madame Michaud.

• (1015)

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We may have gone a little off track. Let's recall my argument so far. I was saying that the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality is a rather major initiative. The work that members of the committee are doing to evaluate it is as important for us as parliamentarians as it is for the communities we represent.

We are coming up to the mid-term evaluation. We should be receiving the documents in March, if I am not mistaken. We do not have a lot of time in which to meet with the witnesses we have to hear from. To date, we have seen no representative from the department, no minister, no deputy minister. The Commissioner of Official Languages has not yet had the chance to come before us to express his views on the current Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality.

At the moment, we have to spend all our time debating the amended motion, because the substance of the motion itself remains unacceptable. As members of the opposition, we absolutely cannot agree to working with our hands tied, with no ability to speak to anyone about the work the committee is doing, whether to Canadians or to the media.

We are being forced to use the speaking time made available to us under the House Standing Orders on committee proceedings to try to convince you of the importance of working in public, and to leave you room to withdraw the original motion. Nor would we need to discuss the amendment made by my colleague Mr. Harris if the

original motion were withdrawn. We have to take this committee time. We are being prevented from continuing our study on the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality and from doing various other tasks because we have to defend the privilege we have as parliamentarians, the privilege of representing Canadians to the best of our ability and then providing them with information. I find it unfortunate that we have to use a number of committee meetings in this way.

On several occasions, we have been unable to explain the committee's work. Today, we have the opportunity to explain that work to Canadians. I did not believe that we would have that opportunity so soon but, now we do, we must seize it. I believe that this is the best opportunity we have to openly discuss the situation we are experiencing in the committee. We have to realize how important public sessions are. In this committee, we deal, as I mentioned, with issues that directly affect official language minority communities.

Before leaving the session, Mr. Bélanger spoke about CBC/Radio-Canada and about the importance of this institution for official language minority communities. This is an issue that we cannot allow to be discussed behind closed doors. The communities themselves have raised their concerns publicly. They have a perfectly legitimate right to see and to hear our discussions in order to be informed about our intentions as parliamentarians and about those of the members of the government party. That is also part of our responsibility as members of this committee.

A little earlier, we began reading the Official Languages Act. I invite you to read page 35 of the document you received little earlier, particularly section 88 of the Act, which deals specifically with the makeup of our committee. As I do not see anyone reading the document, let me quote section 88.

88. The administration of this Act, any regulations and directives made under this Act and the reports of the Commissioner, the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Canadian Heritage made under this Act shall be reviewed on a permanent basis by such committee of the Senate, of the House of Commons or both Houses of Parliament as may be designated or established for that purpose.

• (1020)

This very specific section of the Official Languages Act entrusts us directly with the mandate of ensuring that the Act is complied with in various bills, as well as in the operations of various institutions and in our committee.

A short while ago, quite a major objection was raised because some documents were not provided in both official languages. That is very relevant. It is one of our obligations in that we must keep Canadians, specifically francophones outside Quebec and anglophones in Quebec, informed about the work the committee is doing and the plans it has. It is one of the obligations that comes to us directly from section 88 of the Act, the section that deals with the creation of our committee.

So our responsibilities are very broad and extremely important. When it comes to all the work of the committee, we cannot allow any restriction here of the privilege of those parliamentarians whose mandate is to defend francophones outside Quebec and anglophones in Quebec. We must give ourselves some latitude and we must show some respect to the Canadians who also have demands and expectations.

In our work, we must constantly keep those expectations in mind. Canadians expect to see the work that their representatives in Parliament are doing and to receive the information they need from us, information that is complete and faithful and that allows them to judge our actions and the various measures we are going to put in place.

It is inconceivable to me, and to the people I represent, that Canadians not be informed of what goes on here. We cannot allow opposition views to be completely forgotten, to have our opinions disregarded and, in a word, to be constantly hiding behind closed doors when it suits the government party. The opposition must be heard. We all believe in our colleagues' good faith.

Mr. Harris' amendments here states that, if there is no vote at the start of the meeting, opposition members' opinions must absolutely be heard. This is an extremely significant amendment. It makes the concept of in camera precise. If we have to move in that direction, we must also make sure that we have a role to play in the decision to move in camera.

We are in a parliamentary system. As opposition members, our role is in a way to provide checks and balances, to take a second look at matters and to provide an opposing view. But our role is also to make proposals. Going behind closed doors without our opinion being asked, and simply disregarding our view that we consider it essential to discuss certain issues in public, is a long way from the parliamentary system of which we are currently a part. There must be some balance. The amendment before us offers a solution that would make sure that we can operate with that balance.

Discussions with colleagues tell us that committees are now making their work public to an ever-increasing extent. We have heard on a number of occasions that in-camera work is needed for greater efficiency and the committees have always worked that way. But if we look at what goes on in Parliament, and what has gone on throughout the history of the Canadian Parliament, we see that that is not the case and that it has not previously worked that way. It can also not work that way perfectly well now.

More and more, committees are deciding to hold their discussions openly and to make them accessible to all. I do not see why our committee should operate differently.

• (1025)

If we look at the way in which committees operate as it was explained to me, I think we are capable of doing honourable work that can accommodate slightly dissenting opinions that we may express among ourselves. With each one of us contributing our different ideas, we may reach a compromise or two. We may reach a result that is much more representative of what Canadians want.

Members of the government party often talk about the strong mandate, the clear mandate, with which Canadians have entrusted

them. I will not deny that, in some quarters, that can elicit applause. But we must remember that a large number of Canadians voted for other parties that do not share the governing party's ideals. Those people also deserve to be considered in the discussions we have here, and their positions also deserve to be presented and heard by all Canadians.

If Mr. Harris' amendment is rejected, if we have to vote on other motions and if the motions impose in-camera sessions without any possibility of preventing that on our part, we are, at the same time, muzzling the voices coming from all groups, all the different parts of the country, that may not support the government party and the various initiatives that it may want to undertake in the future.

I feel that some of the things we are discussing here, some of the government party's positions, are basically good and could be made better by possibly adding contributions from the opposition. Some ideas come from the Canadians that we represent and the groups we meet all over the country. Those ideas also deserve to be considered, and considered in public.

If we look at the demographic composition of our committee and at how things generally work in camera, we can see that the only things that could be said publicly will be those things that the committee has voted on. The government party has a majority. That is how our system works. Unless members decide to make a concession or two, all the decisions that are communicated in public will come solely from the government party. A significant part of public opinion will simply not be represented in our positions and our discussions.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Seventy-eight per cent, actually.

Ms. Éline Michaud: I don't think it's that high. In any event, a large number of Canadians who got out and voted, that's 61% of those who did, will not have their positions represented if there is no way to include opposition views or to present opposing views.

Excuse me, let me get the figures right. I meant to say 60.1%, not 61%. In any event, it is higher than 50%, and therefore the majority of Canadians. It will be hard for them to feel represented. In my opinion, we have to make sure...

The Chair: Ms. Michaud, Mr. Godin is raising a point of order.

Mr. Yvon Godin: The exact figure is 38% of the 61% of people who voted. That gives 22%, which is really low.

The Chair: Okay, but that was not a point of order.

So back to you, Ms. Michaud.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you for letting me continue. It looks like we are getting into a little mathematical minefield.

So let me go back to the subject I first brought up, the need to value the opinion of all Canadians, regardless of whom they voted for. We must make sure that approach prevails in any public forum.

As I said earlier, we must be given the benefit of the doubt. We will not abuse our right to decline to hold sessions in camera if Mr. Harris' amendment is passed. As we said, as members of the opposition, we are aware that it is absolutely necessary to sit in camera at times, and we will be very happy to cooperate when the situation demands. But it is also important to make sure that there is no corresponding abuse, that the discourse can be free and open and it is reflected in public opinion, among Canadians.

As I see it personally, Canadians can communicate their message to me in the following way. They become aware of what goes on in the House, of the work we do and the topics we consider. Very often, they have concerns, they get worried. Others are satisfied with what goes on here. So that we can reflect what Canadians are thinking, we must make sure that they have access to information that allows them to make informed decisions and frame their thoughts in order to move things forward. We must make sure that our committee reflects our desire as parliamentarians for Canadians to participate and to be certain that their opinions are effectively and clearly represented.

As to the changes that could be made to ways of operating that have been in effect for so long, I feel that we are on a slippery slope. We have to be extremely careful about the rules we give ourselves. Respect for parliamentary privilege is one thing. I do not think that we have got to the point of doing away with this privilege completely, but we have to be careful. When we talk about restricting the time for discussion, or simply restricting what can be said publicly, I think that we are very close to the limit. At that point, things are hard to change. I would not like to see that becoming a tradition in this Parliament.

When I speak to my constituents about what is happening and about the situation that we have to work in here at this committee, a number of them are very concerned. A large number of people from francophone communities who have come to talk to us have been concerned about what is going on at the committee. They are concerned about the lack of information with which they are sometimes faced, and about the general situation of French in Canada. It is not just in Quebec that disturbances have occurred when decisions relegate French to second-rate status. We hear similar reactions all across the country.

People are concerned about how little room some institutions make for French. In this committee, questions have frequently been raised by witnesses, or by members of the opposition in our remarks. I mentioned Radio-Canada funding a little earlier, but there are plenty of other examples. We heard serious dissatisfaction and concern about the appointment of a unilingual judge to the Supreme Court and about the appointment of a unilingual Auditor General. People see things like that happening and wonder about the choices that members of the government party are making, as well as the degree of compliance with the Official Languages Act. As was mentioned earlier, one of the obligations of federal institutions and of parliamentarians is to encourage the development of both official languages and to promote their use everywhere.

• (1030)

The various groups are raising questions about the various subjects I just mentioned. Some of them simply want to know

whether we are going to focus more on the concrete and technical aspects relating to Roadmap investments. Others want to know how the funds are going to be allocated by the provinces when federal transfers take place under the constitutional obligations of the Official Languages Act. All of that will directly affect francophones outside Quebec. They want to hear about it and have access to that information. They also want explanations and answers. It's sometimes difficult to get access to all the information that people ask us for. But I think that our discussions in committee contribute greatly to this dissemination of information and this exchange with Canadians.

Furthermore, along the same lines, the study of bills that we must do in committee will also directly affect Canadians. They want to know exactly what the amendments presented are, how they are presented, what considerations are going to support the steps the committee is going to take, what changes it will make or, conversely, the reasons why certain amendments won't be approved when they might be very important or, in other cases, a little less so.

So people will not be able to determine it on their own. They need to consult the committee's work. This comes under our responsibilities. Simply stated, studying bills can only benefit from the support of members of the public, in response to their thoughts after they have had access to the committee's work, to the information that we give them and to the problems we raise. I think it becomes very difficult to have this privileged dialogue with Canadians when everything absolutely must be done in secret. I don't think that is how this committee should operate. We need to favour the approach where members of the opposition can also weigh in on the soundness of holding meetings in camera.

Every one of us has responsibilities that must be taken very seriously. One of those responsibilities, as has been mentioned more than once, is to effectively and, in my opinion, publicly defend the issues closely affecting official language minority communities. These people have entrusted us with a very important mandate. The legislation gives them rights, and we have obligations toward them. We must take our responsibilities very much to heart and ensure that the various steps that we are going to take in committee are truly going to contribute to the development and growth of those communities. I come back to—

• (1035)

Mr. Dan Harris: I'm sorry, but I'd like to raise a point of information.

Since Mr. Gourde just mentioned that the amendment was drafted in one language only, I'd simply like to take a few moments to write it in French as well. We should have it in both languages. I would simply like to reiterate that the amendment sets out that it would be with the consent of at least one member of the opposition or by a committee vote at the start of a meeting where committee work is to be discussed.

I'd like to make sure that everyone has the document in both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you very much.

Mr. Harris, thank you for that clarification and for that very clear sign of respect for the spirit of the Official Languages Act.

I was discussing our responsibilities as parliamentarians. As I said, we must make sure that we carry out our role as openly as possible. The problems that this situation poses can in part be resolved by Mr. Harris' amendment.

If I have the time, we need to look at that again. The fact that we vote at the start of the meeting makes it possible to avoid delays. But given the current demographic make-up, there may still be some problems.

However, the true meaning is very important. Actually, we are including at least one member of the opposition in the decision-making process. It's that absence that we deplore the most within this committee. The fact is that the various steps we are trying to take and the various things we are trying to propose as official opposition, together with Mr. Bélanger who is very often here, frequently take a back seat. It becomes very difficult to discuss it.

If we want to be able to come forward with a certain opinion or a certain issue, we must make sure to have witnesses and to be able to talk with them. If we can't do that type of thing, we end up in camera. It's even more the case if we adopt a motion that forces us to go in camera as soon as we need to focus on committee work.

I realize that I wasn't very polite. I didn't welcome our Liberal colleague Mr. Pacetti, who is replacing Mr. Bélanger. You're arriving here on the Standing Committee on Official Languages at a very interesting point. This is a discussion that has very serious repercussions.

The meeting is currently taking place publicly. Unless things change, you will be able to keep up to date on the various decisions that we'll make. I hope that we will be able to continue openly with the discussion we're having. I think we're all feeling much more comfortable. We are according much more respect to the spirit of Canadian parliamentarism and our role as opposition. I hope that we will be able to continue this way and accomplish our work.

The official language minority communities have great expectations of us. The various witnesses that have come to see us in the past few months have very clearly expressed the importance of the work that we are doing here, of the direct influence that we can have on their community through our recommendations, the studies we undertake and the reports we produce. All of these actions and

measures that we can adopt can really help them to realize their full potential.

In the study that was done on the north, among others, we were told repeatedly to what extent these people had been pleased with the visit by parliamentarians and truly hoped to see direct positive results from that visit. The committee would certainly be able to continue that study and really be able to produce a report.

• (1040)

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have a question of information, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: There isn't a question of information, but you have the floor anyway, Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I simply want to know how much the trip to Canada's High Arctic cost taxpayers. Perhaps the clerk has that information.

The Chair: Fine, thank you.

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Thank you.

Aside from that issue, another study has been done and the committee hasn't looked into. We haven't made any recommendations. We haven't presented it to the government. It's the study on integrating newcomers in the various minority language communities. It's an extremely important study. There are a lot of new workers in various regions, particularly in western Canada. They are often part of minority language communities, and that has major repercussions on those communities.

It's very important that the committee be able to continue its work, that we make recommendations and that we also hear the government's position. If discussions on a particular topic take place in camera, we will never be able to meet the needs that the communities have expressed. A number of people who came here wanted to hear much more on this study. They were very curious to know the results. They wanted to see what type of actions could be taken or what measures could be put in place to truly promote the implementation of the committee's recommendations.

Actually, since our meeting is over, I'll come back to it next time.

• (1045)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

The meeting is adjourned.

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