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—
Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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• (0845)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.)): Ladies and gentlemen, since it is 8:45 a.m. and we have a quorum, we will begin the meeting and continue with our work.

Ms. Michaud now has the floor.

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

Good morning everyone.

I want to quickly remind you of what the motion we will be debating today is about. As you heard at the public meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages last week, we will debate the motion moved by the Conservative member representing Richmond Hill, who is asking that all committee business be conducted in camera.

We, the NDP members, feel that such a motion seriously infringes on the democratic rights of parliamentarians and Canadians. Therefore, we ask that the Conservative government withdraw the motion immediately. Of course, the person who moved the motion is not here today. However, I don't think that should prevent our government colleagues from coming to that conclusion.

This morning, our debate will more specifically focus on my colleague Dan Harris' amendment, to the effect that we should never go in camera without the consent of at least one member of the opposition. This amendment is very important for us. We think that it should be supported by all the members of this committee. The purpose of the amendment is to ensure the transparency of the work done by this committee. Even though the majority of the 39% of Canadians who decided to vote on May 2 elected a majority Conservative government—as we are reminded time and time again—that does not mean that Canadians have given the government carte blanche. We live in a democracy, and Canadians expect government accountability and public debates on issues that matter to them.

There are some specific rules that govern the system we use, the British parliamentary system. It can be very easy for a majority government to overuse traditional or simply written rules to try to muzzle the opposition and, sometimes, to hide information that is of the utmost importance to Canadians. We feel that we must equip ourselves with mechanisms that would guarantee that our committee will keep operating in a democratic and open manner. That is the objective of my colleague Mr. Harris' amendment.

We feel that in camera proceedings with the potential to hide all our work from Canadians would be disastrous for the country's linguistic communities. Those communities expect the committee to produce concrete and visible results that will have a positive impact on their development and vitality. We are talking about taxpayers' money, money that comes from the communities we must represent. It is important that the work we do for those people be visible and very tangible.

Since September, the government has had full control of the committee's agenda and has totally refused to discuss issues raised by members of the opposition. We raise various issues that very often come from official language minority communities that contact our offices to discuss matters that affect them, and their concerns over certain actions and decisions. They ask us to talk about those issues here, in committee. However, in camera meetings are clearly being overused, and we cannot have those discussions amongst us, even though that is our role. As parliamentarians, we must take the time to discuss things amongst ourselves and try to reach consensus that will enhance the common good of the linguistic communities we are trying to represent.

As of now, the fact of the matter is that only meetings where we hear from witnesses are public. That is the only time left to us to raise issues we would like to discuss amongst ourselves urgently.

• (0850)

It has been tremendously difficult for us to get our messages across since we have been here. Like my colleague Mr. Harris, I think it is very important to stop meetings from being held in camera without the consent of at least one member of the opposition. In camera meetings do not allow Canadians to see that the government is failing to do its job in terms of official languages.

In addition, the government has still not responded to the recommendations made in the annual report produced by the Commissioner of Official Languages. That's despite the fact that the recommendations are not very complicated and would improve the situation of official language minority communities. We are currently still studying the roadmap, and that's taking forever. The mid-term report will be submitted in a few weeks, but we still have witnesses to hear from and we have still not had the opportunity to look into the issues raised by past witnesses.

The roadmap is important, but allow me first to digress briefly. New colleagues joined our committee just recently. So I think it would be important to get them up to speed on the issues that will be addressed here, so that they have the information they need to follow our discussions.

I would like to quickly remind you of what exactly the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2008-2013 is. The roadmap succeeded the 2003-2008 Action Plan for Official Languages, which had been implemented by the government. That initiative was implemented to confirm the government's support of Canada's linguistic duality. This major strategy, which we feel is rather important, outlines the government's major policy directions in terms of official languages. The roadmap for Canada's linguistic duality is the newest addition to existing measures, under such pieces of legislation as the Official Languages Act.

The roadmap encompasses various programs and initiatives that fall under the five main areas of focus: emphasizing the value of linguistic duality among all Canadians; building the future by investing in youth; improving access to services for official language minority communities; capitalizing on economic benefits; and ensuring efficient governance to better serve Canadians. You can see that, overall, the goal is to help official language minority communities develop.

That's all we have been doing since September. We have heard from witnesses who told us how the roadmap has benefited them. We must recognize the fact that this program has enhanced community development and that a number of projects have been completed. However, the witnesses did express some concerns and talked about needs that deserve to be debated in this committee. Yet we have still not really looked into those issues. I think that we should do so as soon as possible, as the mid-term report is due soon and these kinds of issues are likely to be raised. In addition, the roadmap will end in 2013.

Most, if not all, official language minority communities have called for the roadmap to be renewed, albeit with some improvements. One particular issue was raised on a number of occasions and by many community organizations. They said they were concerned by the fact that the government's priorities in the roadmap were not always in line with the communities' priorities.

● (0855)

Several groups have testified before the committee and submitted strategic action plans developed by their communities. However, a number of those plans were not taken into account at the various roadmap development stages. However, that would have been an important thing to do, since the programs implemented under the roadmap are intended to directly help those communities. Therefore, we feel it is very important for those needs to be included in the strategic considerations involved in developing future roadmaps.

The same goes for the targets that were supposed to be met through roadmap actions and tracking indicators, which show the progress and the tangible impact of the roadmap for official language minority communities.

Another element mentioned by many community groups was the lack of transparency and accountability in roadmap-related programs. We asked the witnesses many questions about that, since the issue is extremely worrisome. The government has supposedly invested \$1.1 billion in the francophonie. However, when community organizations are directly asked to talk about the source of the money they receive, many of them are completely unable to say

exactly where it comes from. Does it come from the roadmap or the official languages support program? It's very hard to say.

In order to ensure sound taxation and public funds management, it is important to know exactly where the money under this government strategy is being invested and to see the tangible impact those investments have on the communities. That should be a priority in developing the actions and strategies included in the next roadmap, which will begin in 2013.

Maybe a better job needs to be done of explaining the roadmap to organizations. For instance, various operating methods and goals could be discussed with them. That could help improve people's understanding of those issues and lead to the better use of the money the government invests in promoting bilingualism and developing our official language minority communities.

In addition, a number of organizations have said they were worried by the fact that much of the money from the roadmap is used by the organizations to pay for programs that will be ongoing. According to different witnesses who have appeared before us, the roadmap funds allocated to the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer are used to pay the employees' wages. The office, which has taken over the mandate of the former Canada Public Service Agency, carries out the required duties. We should also look into these kinds of issues and ensure that the funding is predictable and permanent for groups representing official language minority communities.

Another matter that was brought up was the need for more consultations in the beginning, during the development stage, in an attempt to target the priorities mentioned by different groups. Those groups should also be consulted during the various steps of the roadmap implementation process, so as to ensure that all the money is spent within the communities and that the actions taken and strategies put forward will really meet community needs.

● (0900)

A number of other issues were raised by various groups that appeared before the committee, but I think that some of my colleagues will be able to talk at more length about that over the next few meetings. I think that accountability will be one of the elements discussed further. I think that is one of the sources of the problems noted in the current Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality.

In their various appearances before the committee, witnesses have also told us about certain concerns over issues that are not directly related to the study of the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. They directly asked members of the committee to look into some of the government's decisions and actions that seemed to have a negative impact on official language minority communities, which are very often francophone communities. We feel that the requests made by those groups warrant our immediate action.

Over the past few months, the members of the opposition have tried to highlight certain issues and have them officially placed on this committee's agenda. Unfortunately, our Conservative colleagues are preventing us from discussing issues that matter to us, as they often hurry to move motions to hold in camera debates on the issues we highlight.

Today's meeting is public. I want those listening to us to really understand why the consent of at least one member of the opposition should be a requirement for in camera proceedings. Therefore, I will read a few of the motions that the New Democratic Party has put forward before the committee since the beginning of this parliamentary session. There have been many of them. I think that it is very important for Canadians to know about the kinds of issues that worry us and merit public discussion.

The first motion calls for the committee to undertake a study on the Conservative government's strategic and operational review set out in "The Next Phase of Canada's Economic Action Plan—A Low-Tax Plan for Jobs and Growth" by December 15, 2011.

I have to ask my colleagues to help me out if ever I speak too quickly for the interpreters, as I tend to talk fast. I am trying to keep myself in check, but let me know if I go too fast, and I would be happy to slow down.

The second motion calls for the committee to ask the Treasury Board Sub-Committee on the Strategic and Operating Review to provide, before March 1, 2012, a report on the state of the integration of official languages into the strategic and operating review, and a final assessment on official languages at the end of the review.

We also suggested that the committee invite all the members of the Treasury Board Sub-Committee on the Strategic and Operating Review provided for in "The Next Phase of Canada's Economic Plan—A Low-Tax Plan for Jobs and Growth" to appear as soon as possible for two hours, by November 22, 2011, to report on official languages in their proceedings.

You can see that some things could unfortunately not be done. Nevertheless, they could be done very quickly over the next few meetings if we can agree on in camera rules and if, ideally, we ensure the opposition's significant participation in decisions to proceed in camera.

• (0905)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mauril Bélanger): Ms. Michaud, I just want to make sure that you do not discuss any motions that may have been moved in camera.

Ms. Éline Michaud: That's a challenge. Things are somewhat complicated in our committee.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mauril Bélanger): But did you take that into consideration?

Ms. Éline Michaud: Of course.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mauril Bélanger): Thank you.

Ms. Éline Michaud: However, if you notice any mistakes on my part, I invite you to—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mauril Bélanger): We will keep our ears open and, if you do make a mistake, we will let you know. However, do make sure that you do not disclose anything done in camera.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Of course.

So, I will continue. It is important to have guidelines about in camera meetings. As I just said, there is occasionally some confusion about that. In camera proceedings have been used so often that it's becoming difficult to keep track. We no longer know when exactly we are allowed to inform Canadians and when we need to remain silent. I hope I do not infringe upon anyone's parliamentary privilege. I will tread very carefully.

The next motion calls for the Treasury Board Sub-Committee on the Strategic and Operating Review provided for in "The Next Phase of Canada's Economic Plan—A Low-Tax Plan for Jobs and Growth" to provide the committee as soon as possible but no later than noon on October 11, 2011, with a copy of the working document which states how the official languages are being incorporated into the review.

Once again, that was something that should have been done more urgently by the committee and that has now become outdated, unfortunately.

The next motion I want to bring to your attention concerns an issue that has been raised many times at committee meetings. The study on the north is a topic that has given rise to much passionate debate within this committee and will continue doing so until we can agree on what needs to be done so that this situation can be properly resolved. The motion calls for the committee to resume its study of the development of linguistic duality in northern Canada initiated during the 40th Parliament, 3rd Session, and that the evidence and documents it received in the course of this study be taken into account during the current session.

I have another motion, which is also about the study on the north. That study has cost Canadian taxpayers a lot of money, and I think they deserve an explanation on how the money was spent and what results the study yielded. The motion calls for the committee to publicly justify before January 30, 2012, the reasons for which it spent \$109,621.18 to conduct a still-incomplete study on the development of linguistic duality in northern Canada.

Regarding the last two motions I just read, I want to repeat how important they are for the members of the committee, at least as far as the NDP is concerned. I also think that Mr. Bélanger mentioned several times how important that study was to him. We even received a letter from the Association franco-yukonnaise, the Yukon francophone association, and the Yukon francophone school boards asking the committee to quickly consider that matter.

Another issue should normally be part of a study on a government initiative as important as the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. I am talking about hearing from the Department of Canadian Heritage minister and senior officials. The committee has not yet taken that step even though, as we mentioned, the mid-term report is due soon. We, the NDP, have asked the committee to invite the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the deputy minister and the appropriate senior officials to discuss the mid-term report for the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2008-2013 by February 23, 2012. As you can see, it's still not too late to do that. If we can manage to conduct more open discussions and agree on the rules regarding in camera proceedings, we could hear from those witnesses and ask them questions that come directly from members of official language minority communities.

● (0910)

Several other motions we have moved have nothing to do with the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality, but are still related to a number of issues that are at the heart of concerns raised by witnesses representing official language minority communities.

One of the things we have mentioned several times in this committee is CBC/Radio-Canada's place in communities' cultural lives and the key role that institution plays in disseminating information and news within those communities. Official language minority communities are very concerned by the cuts currently planned at CBC/Radio-Canada. In an attempt to shed some light on that situation, we asked the committee to invite the president and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada, Hubert T. Lacroix, to attend a two-hour public and televised meeting before February 15, 2012, given how important CBC/Radio-Canada is for the vitality of official language minority communities. Once again, it's not too late to act. I think it would be important to hear what he has to say before the new budget is tabled. That would help us properly address the concerns voiced by members of official language minority communities.

Another motion we moved is more related to the closure of the Canadian Coast Guard's coordination centres for search and rescue operations, in Quebec and elsewhere. A number of questions were asked in the House with regard to that. Several civil society groups have expressed strong disagreement with those closures for various reasons. Some of the reasons have to do with security considerations, but many of them go straight to the heart of the official languages issue and the need to provide equivalent services to official language minority communities.

With that in mind, and to address those concerns, we asked that the committee undertake a study of the closure of the Canadian Coast Guard's coordination centres for search and rescue operations in Quebec City and St. John's by December 15, 2011. Unfortunately, we are already past that date, despite the fact that this issue is extremely urgent, since the closures are planned for spring 2012. Despite that, I think the members of this committee still have time to do something about this issue and to publicly examine it.

Another worrisome event took place in the House in June 2011. Mostly untranslated documents on the transfer of Afghan detainees were submitted in the House of Commons. We feel that is a major failure to meet the obligations parliamentary institutions have. With that in mind, we asked that the committee study the submission of

documents regarding Afghanistan in the House of Commons on June 22, 2011, hear witness testimony and report to the House by October 27, 2011.

● (0915)

I will now tell you about another motion on a different topic. We asked that the committee resume its study of the 2009-2010 Annual Report (Volume II) of the Commissioner of Official Languages initiated during the 40th Parliament, 3rd Session, that the evidence and documents it received in the course of that study be taken into account during the current session, and that it reissue during this session any requests for information that were sent to federal institutions as part of the study but that went unanswered.

Further to that, we also put forward a motion asking the committee to find the institutions that have not acted on the requests made by the committee during the 3rd Session of the 40th Parliament and make the names of those institutions public by October 11, 2011.

Lastly, our final motion calls for all committee business to be conducted publicly, unless the committee has the consent of at least one member of the opposition to conduct the meeting in camera. The rules very clearly state that we cannot tell you what happened in camera. That is the real problem behind our discussions today. We can, however, tell you that we moved all those motions. Furthermore, it is a matter of public record that the Standing Committee on Official Languages has been bogged down by the roadmap study for months.

The Conservatives have asked that the committee proceed in camera for 6 of 21 meetings. That is huge. Given the fact that neither I nor my colleagues have been able to contribute directly to the committee's agenda and given the government party's lack of openness toward our motions, we have had to find other ways of making ourselves heard and making Canadians aware of the issues related to official languages, issues that are of great concern to us. One of the key measures we have had to resort to is asking the official languages commissioner to examine what we believe to be blatant violations by this government of its constitutional obligations to official language minority communities.

I will now take advantage of the fact that this meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages is taking place in public to read some of the letters we have sent to the commissioner. These letters clearly state all our concerns and all the reasons we believe these issues should be discussed by the committee in public proceedings. That makes the amendment put forward by Dan Harris all the more relevant, so as to ensure that whenever the committee decides to proceed in camera, it will have obtained the prior consent of at least one member of the opposition to do so.

As you will see, in one of our first letters, we raise many issues that had already been the subject of some of our motions. The first deals with the closure of the coast guard's search and rescue coordination centre in Quebec City. The letter was sent to the commissioner on October 3, 2011:

● (0920)

Dear Commissioner:

On July 19, 2011, an analyst at the commissioner's office refused to investigate a complaint regarding the closure of the coast guard's search and rescue coordination centre in Quebec City, on the grounds that the complaint did not satisfy one of the conditions required to conduct an investigation, the condition being that the complaint must result from a specific incident.

We do not agree with that analysis. To begin with, stakeholders in the search and rescue field do not wait for an incident to occur before they think about what should have been done; such an approach could have fatal consequences. Prevention must also apply to the field of official languages. Every effort must be made to ensure that rights are not denied.

We are well aware that, from an operations standpoint, it is appropriate to ensure that a case under review meets the established criteria before a decision to launch an investigation can be made. We also believe, however, that it is appropriate to challenge the criteria in question when circumstances warrant.

It is important to ensure that bilingual staff are on hand, but by no means does that guarantee that language problems will not arise, problems that could have fatal consequences, as mentioned earlier.

How can organizations guarantee bilingual service at all times, for instance, when bilingual employees are sick or on break? Have the key stakeholders been consulted on the repercussions of such a decision and the appropriate measures taken?

It is necessary to consider the bigger picture. Although francophones are not the minority in Quebec, they are the minority in the country. The closure of the search and rescue coordination centre in Quebec City and the transfer of its responsibilities to an anglophone region will have an impact on the vitality of the language communities.

For these reasons, please accept this letter as a formal complaint.

In the event that you still deem this complaint to be inadmissible, we would ask that you kindly provide us with the exact reasons for such a determination.

The letter was signed by the four NDP members who sit on the Standing Committee on Official Languages, as well as by Annick Papillon, the member for Québec, and Philip Toone, the member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

As I mentioned, in addition to the safety issue related to the necessary knowledge of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River, one of the most difficult areas to navigate, is the considerable concern over the ability of bilingual staff in Halifax to provide equally effective service in French.

In this case, the ability to obtain French-language service is more than just a right; it is often a matter of life and death. For the sake of numerous Canadians, this issue warrants a public debate by the Standing Committee on Official Languages. The subject has been raised over and over again by members of the opposition, and it is precisely in cases such as this when it should be necessary to obtain the consent of at least one member of the opposition before a debate is allowed to proceed in camera.

The second letter, sent to Graham Fraser on October 4, 2011, concerns documents that were tabled in the House of Commons. Of course, the letter pertains specifically to the tabling of documents regarding the transfer of Afghan detainees, documents that were not translated. Certain documents are available in French only, but

clearly not many. The majority of the documents are available solely in English.

● (0925)

I will begin by reading you the letter. I feel obliged to stress the importance of this complaint, especially as it relates to our responsibilities as members of a parliamentary institution with a duty to respect the principles of bilingualism. The letter reads:

Dear Commissioner:

On June 22, 2011, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Baird, tabled, in the House of Commons, documents pertaining to the transfer of Afghan detainees by Canada, as well as a report by a panel of arbiters (parliamentary document 8530-411-3). We believe the tabling of these documents constitutes a violation of the Official Languages Act.

On the one hand, the act stipulates that "any document made by or under the authority of a federal institution that is tabled in the Senate or the House of Commons by the Government of Canada shall be tabled in both official languages". That section of the act was not respected.

On the other hand, the act also stipulates that "the journals and other records of Parliament shall be made and kept, and shall be printed and published, in both official languages". As of today, we are still being told that the records of those tabled documents have yet to be made available in both official languages and that Parliament has made no attempt to have them translated.

Out of respect for the [official language] communities and the act, we ask that you conduct an investigation into the tabling of these documents and that you accept this letter as a formal complaint.

The letter was signed by the four NDP members who sit on the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

The Official Languages Act very clearly states that the government and all government institutions are required to produce documents in both official languages. That did not happen in this case. As a result, the ability of parliamentarians to do their jobs effectively was undermined. Although some parliamentarians are fortunate enough to be bilingual, others have yet to be so fortunate. Right now, those parliamentarians are not able to analyze all the available documents for themselves. This issue sparked considerable debate in the House of Commons and was of the utmost importance to a number of members. We would have liked to read for ourselves all the documentation produced by the panel of arbiters and by the government.

That is why we asked the commissioner to investigate the situation. In our view, it never should have happened, regardless of whether time or budget restrictions were to blame. There is no valid reason that would justify the failure of a parliamentary body to honour its legal and constitutional obligations. Once again, in light of our responsibilities as parliamentarians, we believe that a public debate should have taken place in this committee at the time and is still warranted today. For that reason, we filed a complaint.

We hope that, once the roadmap study is complete, we will be able to hold these debates in committee in an open and public manner. To that end, it is imperative to support my colleague's amendment requiring the prior consent of one member of the opposition anytime the committee wishes to proceed in camera.

● (0930)

We sent another letter to the commissioner on October 25, 2011. In that letter, the complaint had to do with the business cards used by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The issue was raised in the House of Commons, and official language minority communities, specifically French-speaking ones, found it quite offensive—to put it mildly. That is why we felt the need to raise this tremendously problematic issue directly with the commissioner in the following letter:

Dear Commissioner:

As you are well aware, the Minister of Foreign Affairs used public funds to purchase English-only business cards for himself. That action would appear to be a clear violation of the Federal Identity Program (FIP) requirements set out by the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) and of the spirit of the Official Languages Act. It would also appear from newspaper reports that the President of the Treasury Board approved the exemption from TBS directives.

It should be noted that, according to the FIP Manual, business cards must present both official languages side by side, or they must present English on one side of the card and French on the other.

The NDP finds it unacceptable for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, supported by the President of the Treasury Board, to exclude one of the nation's official languages from a promotional item used by the Government of Canada, thereby discrediting the principles of a longstanding policy.

The minister defended himself in the House of Commons by saying that he had bilingual business cards. It is clear that if he does keep them in his pockets, he does not use them for much.

Therefore, out of respect for official language communities, I would ask that you launch a formal investigation into this matter.

The letter was signed by Yvon Godin, the member for Acadie—Bathurst. Of course, the letter is endorsed by all of my colleagues. We fully agree with the content of the letter I just read.

It is incumbent on all parliamentarians to show leadership when it comes to official languages and their promotion in communities, through both our actions and our contact with people. It is all the more incumbent on ministers.

It is unthinkable that a situation such as this would occur, regardless of how it may have been explained by the minister. For that reason, we decided to call on Graham Fraser and on his office's ability to investigate and scrutinize the matter.

● (0935)

Yet again on October 25, we were faced with another decision by this government that we could neither understand nor explain. It is our view, and likely that of other opposition members as well, the decision in question should have been debated immediately and publicly by the committee. I am referring to the appointment of the Auditor General of Canada. It is quite easy to sweep a decision of this nature under the rug, a decision that quite frankly puts the government in a rather uncomfortable position.

The amendment proposed by my colleague is absolutely critical to ensure that an open discussion would be possible in cases such as this, where decisions spark off considerable controversy and debate, among parliamentarians and Canadians alike, and not just within official language minority communities.

Of course, I will discuss this controversy in more detail in a minute. I believe it is important to bring up some of the facts involved and some of the statements made when the debate became more visible in the public eye.

But first, I want to read the following letter:

Dear Commissioner:

We learned that Mike Ferguson of New Brunswick would be named Auditor General of Canada. Mr. Ferguson is unilingual. However, according to the notice of vacancy that appeared in the *Canada Gazette* [...], "proficiency in both official languages is essential".

I wish to point out that the government is, as a result of this appointment, breaking its own rules. The slew of unilingual appointments to key positions by the Conservative government does not bode well for Canada's linguistic duality.

Therefore, I would ask that you, the protector of language rights, step in to investigate the matter and make a decision on this appointment.

That complaint was signed by Yvon Godin, the member for Acadie—Bathurst. Once again, however, its content is endorsed by the entire New Democratic caucus and by the opposition members on this committee. I am taking the liberty of assuming here that Mr. Bélanger is in agreement. I would be greatly surprised if I were mistaken. I will ask him when he returns.

As I mentioned, this decision provoked significant debate and controversy, given the importance of the responsibilities placed upon the Auditor General, responsibilities we feel require a good understanding of both of Canada's official languages if they are to be discharged in an effective and efficient manner.

In Quebec, of course, as well as elsewhere in the country, numerous people were very unhappy with this decision. They would have liked to see the committee study the matter publicly and seek out further justification for the government's decision, anything that might explain its choice. This decision is unacceptable, in our opinion.

Furthermore, I remember the appeal made by the member for Ottawa—Orléans, who unfortunately no longer sits on this committee but who I feel would have found these comments rather interesting to say the least. His remarks were made quite voluntarily when the issue was raised a few months ago during the committee's various discussions on the matter. He made it perfectly clear to the committee that he was, and I quote, "among the most disappointed of MPs when we learned of the appointment of a non-bilingual auditor general". He went on to say that, when the appointment was announced, he reacted strongly, wanting to know where the mistake had been made.

● (0940)

I would say that the point here is crystal clear. Even certain members of the government could not understand the appointment of a unilingual English-speaking auditor general and felt that it should have been the focus of a public debate by the committee. Had the committee already accepted an amendment such as the one moved by Mr. Harris, we could have, in my opinion, had the necessary discussions and perhaps gained a better understanding of all the factors that contributed to a choice seen by many Canadians and parliamentarians alike as wholly inappropriate.

If this appointment stirred such strong emotions within the Conservatives' own caucus, the need to question the true importance of bilingualism to this government is unmistakable. We must hold these discussions openly because Canadians have the exact same questions.

I want to get back to the letters sent to the commissioner, as there are a few more. Another issue we wanted to raise, given what a blatant violation of official languages obligations it appeared to be, was the configuration of the voicemail systems at Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the House of Commons. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Commissioner:

First, we wish to draw your attention to a fact we learned about from newspaper reports. English is the default language for the configuration of the new voicemail solution provided by Bell Canada and chosen by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

The CIC's decision to use this solution violates the Official Languages Act because it deprives employees across the department of their right to work in the language of their choice.

It is all the more concerning given that CIC management knowingly informed staff that their first interaction with the new system would not take place in French, an infringement of employees' language rights by management.

Second, we learned that the default configuration language for the House of Commons voicemail system is also available only in English [...].

Not only must these situations be rectified immediately, but they must also be avoided in all federal institutions. It is a matter of respect for the language rights of public servants and the employees concerned.

Therefore, please accept this letter as a formal complaint against the CIC and the House of Commons.

This particular complaint was signed by Robert Aubin, the member for Trois-Rivières, and by Yvon Godin, the member for Acadie—Bathurst. Yet again, we fully support its content.

● (0945)

Decisions of this kind may seem harmless enough to some people. But they have a real impact on the work done by public servants, members of Parliament and their teams. We must make sure that everyone who is part of the government apparatus can have direct access, right from the outset, to any service in their mother tongue, be it English or French.

This is the committee with the responsibility to handle these types of questions. They go to the heart of the matter of compliance with the official language obligations of the government, the House and the various departments. This is why we submitted this complaint. It is also why we feel that we should have had an open debate at this committee.

On November 29, 2011, we also considered the auditor general's report entitled "Yukon Health Services and Programs". The people in northern Canada have a significant place in our debates because they play a major role in French-speaking Canada. For us, it is important that this kind of debate take place in this committee, and, of course, in a public session. This is the issue that makes our amendment so relevant. Once again, I repeat my wish to see the Conservative members withdraw the original motion that precedes my colleague's amendment. At very least, I invite each of you to support the amendment.

I will now read the letter:

Sir,

As a follow-up to the complaint about the former auditor general, Ms. Sheila Fraser, dated November 1, 2011 and submitted by Yvon Godin MP, we hereby submit a second formal complaint.

At the meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, held on November 22, 2011, we found out, from the Association franco-yukonnaise (AFY), that, on February 25, 2011, the auditor general issued a report entitled "Yukon Health

Services and Programs—Department of Health and Social Services" that made no references to services in French, nor to official languages.

This failure to mention and evaluate services in French and the official languages in this territory is unacceptable, given the intent of the study:

The Yukon Department of Health and Social Services is responsible for delivering health and social programs and services to people in Yukon. In 2009-2010, the Department spent \$148 million on health services and \$109 million on social services, continuing care and corporate services.

We examined the Department's planning processes and the way it manages its health programs and services. We specifically focused on the diabetes and alcohol and drug services programs as examples.

How is it possible that Ms. Fraser examined the Department's planning processes and the way it manages its health programs and services without considering official languages, which are an integral part of the Yukon health services and programs? What about her responsibilities in official languages matters?

The answer is simple. As you know, Ms. Fraser has stated: "The fact remains that Parliament has entrusted the responsibility for all matters dealing with official languages to the Commissioner of Official Languages."

This statement from Ms. Fraser goes against the Official Languages Act but it has defined the direction of all the activities of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada for the last 10 years, to the considerable displeasure of our official language minority communities.

Instead of standing with those communities by making official languages a part of audit exercises, Ms. Fraser has turned a blind eye to the poor management of the funds that should be set aside for official languages. The development of [official language] communities demands a genuine appreciation for their needs in all areas [of activity]. To evaluate program efficiency while neglecting language matters is to ignore the communities' specific needs and challenges.

The auditor general's report on Yukon health services and programs is a concrete example of an incident that gives you grounds to formally investigate Ms. Fraser's conduct during her mandate, as we are asking.

● (0950)

This letter was signed by the four New Democrat members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

A little earlier, I mentioned the matter of accountability problems. This is another glaring example of a frankly unacceptable situation that could well be the subject of a discussion at the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

As I mentioned during the study on the Roadmap, a number of witnesses told us about their difficulty in determining the exact source of the funding they receive. I feel that our complaint addresses these extremely important concerns that should be taken seriously by a government that especially prides itself on its skill in financial matters and the management of public funds. We do not know how these funds are spent, where the money is invested, or whether official language minority communities are well-served by the programs that the government has put in place and by the various sums of money set aside for them.

In my view, this situation must be corrected as quickly as possible. A public debate must take place. We feel that it would make no sense at all to hold a discussion of that kind behind closed doors. Why? Mainly because official language minority communities have asked us directly to solve this problem and have raised a number of concerns about it. I believe that this also shows the relevance of the amendment that my colleague Mr. Harris has made.

As I have pointed out to you, we NDP members feel that most, if not all, of these issues should have been discussed by the committee in public. The discussions must be held and Canadians must have access to what is said. Canadians are concerned about these issues too.

● (0955)

We have heard their concerns expressed in a number of ways, such as the letters and emails sent directly to our offices. They have expressed their concerns in open letters to newspapers, or in the testimony we have heard here as we studied the Roadmap. Canadians do not want these debates held in secret, behind closed doors as the government chooses, especially when our discussions here could be embarrassing for its members.

As parliamentarians, we are all responsible to the Canadians who have given us the mandate to represent them and to defend their interests. All of us also have the moral obligation, to say nothing of the legal obligation, to be publicly accountable for our decisions.

That is why we feel that it is essential for us to have tools such as the one proposed in my colleague's amendment. The amendment seeks to make sure that discussions at this committee are never held secretly, that information will never be hidden from Canadians without a consensus among members of this committee that some discussions must occasionally be held in camera. We must make sure that the opposition can always have its say when the committee decides to take a step like that.

We feel that it is essential that the work of this committee is open to Canadians because the debates we have often deal with their concerns. The Official Languages Act imposes a responsibility on us. Canadians have a right to be informed about the discussions we engage in, because they deal directly with matters that are close to their hearts.

Sitting in camera will not let us tell Canadians that the Treasury Board Secretariat has quashed the official languages requirement in one of its policies without regard for the implications. Sitting in camera will not let us tell Canadians that the Treasury Board has decided to require less reporting from federal agencies, even though the Official Languages Act is thereby contravened.

Sitting in camera will not let us tell Canadians that the government has introduced a bill affecting Air Canada in a way that gives the impression that official languages are being respected when in fact the bill in question puts Canadians' language rights further in peril.

Sitting in camera will not let us tell Canadians about the consequences of eliminating the language teaching positions at the School of Public Service.

And sitting in camera will certainly not let us tell Canadians that the Conservatives want to continue making unilingual appointments to positions for which bilingualism should be an essential requirement. We have mentioned the auditor general on a number of occasions. But let us not forget the judges of the Supreme Court.

Our responsibility is to raise questions about government decisions or actions that may seem to fly in the face of the Official Languages Act, or even merely of its spirit. We must do that in public. Canadians expect that we will effectively fulfill that part of

our mandate. The debates that form an integral part of this committee's work must be held in public unless there is consensus for the committee to sit in camera.

● (1000)

We are under an obligation to discuss this matter. It is neither just nor responsible to entrust the decision to sit in camera entirely to the government members who could well—as they have already done—make a decision to their advantage in order to hide certain debates and controversies from Canadians. Yet it is clear that those hidden questions are likely to affect the sensitivities of the very people who deserve to have quick answers to the questions raised.

In addition to the constitutional and legal obligations we have, I feel that it is extremely important that all parliamentarians, especially those on this committee, promote bilingualism in everything they do and in everything they say. For example, we must make sure that debates on urgent matters of concern to Canadians are done in public in order to demonstrate the government's commitment to promoting bilingualism.

On a number of occasions, I have had the misfortune to hear that bilingualism is something that costs our society too much; that it is considered more an obligation for those who want to aspire to the highest offices, to the best jobs, in our public service than one of our society's values in its own right. That is in part our responsibility, because we are members of Parliament. It is for us to ensure this promotion, this celebration of bilingualism. One of the ways to do that, I feel, is to engage in public debates on the issues that are crucial for official language minority communities.

In support of my position on the matter, allow me to read you an article from the *Globe and Mail*. The item is dated January 23, 2012 and sets out the reasons why it is important for Canadians, and in their interests, to be able to speak both official languages. I feel that this short item will once more help to show the great importance of the amendment made by my colleague, an amendment that will allow us to hold all important debates in public, though the topics may sometimes be controversial. In that way, Canadians will be able to understand our concerns as parliamentarians, concerns that very often correspond to their own.

As I mentioned, this is an item from the *Globe and Mail* of January 23, 2012 entitled "Linguistic versatility is undervalued":

[English]

Canada, an officially bilingual country, is a leader in the promotion of second-language knowledge. Ottawa and the provinces together spend more than \$2 billion a year offering government services in both French and English. Yet the actual ability of the population to speak both French and English remains stubbornly low. While 35 per cent of francophones in Quebec speak English, only 7.4 per cent of anglophones outside Quebec speak French.

In the U.S., 9 per cent of the population speaks two languages—to say nothing of the European Union, where 56 per cent of citizens can hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue and nearly one-third have mastered a third language, according to a new study by the Association for Canadian Studies.

There are complex reasons for English Canada's ambivalence toward French, among them the regional concentration of francophones, and the rising importance of Asia in the global economy, especially in Western Canada. One-third of people from British Columbia and Alberta think Spanish and Mandarin might be better choices as a second language than French.

And yet the challenges of Canadian bilingualism may also stem from its association with government legislation. Mastering both of Canada's official languages may be wrongly perceived as an historical anomaly, or an expensive government-imposed obligation. (In fact, there is no official requirement to learn French and English, except for public servants.)

Instead, learning a second language should be viewed as a gift to society that confers significant global advantages, and bridges cultural divides. "In other countries and regions such as Latin America and Europe, multilingualism is embraced by the majority, especially for young people, and seen as a way to advance," notes Jack Jedwab, the study's author.

Most Canadians receive second-language instruction in school, but many then lack an opportunity to use it. Through creating more opportunities—and incentives—to speak French, this trend could be reversed. Bilingual employees are more likely to be better paid, especially in Quebec, and in the public sector.

The ability to speak French, English—as well as Spanish or Mandarin—should be seen as a source of pride and as an investment in the future that will yield dividends over a person's lifetime. Canadians should feel blessed—not cursed—to be home to two of the world's great languages.

● (1005)

[*Translation*]

I feel that a reading of that item clearly sets out the kind of attitude we should have as parliamentarians. More specifically, I feel that this kind of attitude should be reflected in all the government's actions and decisions. Recently, that has not always been the case.

I will not recite the list of motions that the opposition has made, or the list of complaints that we have had to submit to the Commissioner of Official Languages, because it has become impossible to raise even extremely important issues at this committee.

In my view, we must make sure that this open attitude and this approach of considering bilingualism an asset, as a positive feature for Canadian society and for every member of it, is also reflected in the procedures in effect at this committee. One of the ways of doing that is to hold debates in public and not behind closed doors. We must continue to make it possible for Canadians to be informed about decisions that sometimes, not to say frequently, cause problems for official language minority communities.

Once again, I insist on the significance of the amendment that seeks to ensure that the consent of at least one opposition member is required if and when this committee's work needs to be taken in camera.

We have to show leadership. For Canadians to appreciate that leadership, people must be able to be aware of the work the committee is undertaking as well as the discussions and debates that we hold. That will also help to give them confidence in our ability, as members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, to defend the interests of official language minority communities. Canadians must be able to fully understand that we are working to enhance the vitality and to support the development of those communities. As members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, it is a matter of concern to us to promote their mother tongue in communities where that language is less widely spoken. I feel that my position on that matter is clearly understood.

Given everything I have just said, and given the fact that Canadians have access to much more information on matters that this committee could have, but has not yet, discussed, they better understand the objections of opposition members to the possibility of having all the committee's work done in camera.

Now we likely understand a little better the Conservatives' thinking in replacing a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages who had in-depth experience of official languages matters. Despite our occasional differences of opinion, the member for Ottawa—Orleans had raised questions about the fact that the auditor general, and the headhunters who were hired to research the applications, were unilingual English. Unfortunately, Mr. Galipeau will not be able to vote on the motion. Will he come back to us, I wonder? If he does, and if the matter remains relevant, we could bring it up again.

Yet we question the government's desire to work with official language minority communities and to help them in their development. We do so because some of the Conservative caucus' expertise has been removed from this committee and because of the desire to hide all the work the committee does.

● (1010)

Unfortunately, the Conservatives no longer have any need to show us that they are opposed to the spirit and the letter of the Official Languages Act. Every day, every week, brings us new evidence of that. We feel that it is important for Canadians to be aware of these circumstances that are for the most part detrimental to official language minority communities. Canadians need to know these things. They have the right to all the information they need in order to judge our actions, the way in which we fulfill our mandate in the next four years, and the way in which we have defended the interests of official language minority communities. It is dishonest to sit behind closed doors and to pretend to support improvements in official language communities. Canadians must be aware of the discussions that go on here.

Even among Canadians who are not members of official language minority communities, there are many who celebrate bilingualism and have an interest in the status of French or English in the rest of the country.

For example, we have heard from people in British Columbia, members of Canadian Parents for French, who have spoken to us about the importance of French in their children's educational path and in their future. They have said that they are very much in favour of the teaching of French, which gives the children a better chance to see doors open for them in the future. I believe that those Canadians, exactly like many members of official language minority communities, want to know the status of the discussions we have, the topics we deal with and the decisions we make, whether they result in action or in no action at all on certain issues.

In that regard, sitting in camera is a problem. It does not let us inform Canadians about the decisions that are made, whether to simply ignore an issue, to not undertake a study, to not produce a report or to not make recommendations to the government. These too are elements of the information that is essential for Canadians if they want to form an impression and get a real sense of what goes on in this committee, if they want to know how French-speakers will be treated by this government and if they want to become familiar with the issues raised by official language minority communities that will simply be ignored or forgotten. There is even no way of knowing when those issues could come back on the table because, at the moment, setting the agenda is out of our hands.

I believe that I have clearly shown the importance of the amendment for all opposition members of the committee. Once again, I am taking the liberty of speaking for you, Mr. Bélanger. I think that I managed to grasp a good measure of your intentions and your views when you explained to us the Official Languages Act, and other related matters, in a little more detail.

I am now going to pass the floor to Robert Aubin, who will continue the discussion.

•(1015)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP)): Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Yvon Godin): We now move to Mr. Robert Aubin.

Let me just thank Mauril Bélanger for replacing me this morning.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

I hope Mr. Gourde realizes that his shirt is out of order. Everyone but him is wearing a blue shirt.

Some hon. members: Ha, ha!

Mr. Yvon Godin: I don't really think that is a point of order, Mr. Bélanger.

Go ahead, Mr. Aubin.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I would like to bid a warm welcome to all the members of the public and all the representatives of the media who are here this morning. What a breath of fresh air you are! It has been so long since we have seen you. It is a pleasure to see you back. We sincerely hope that we will be able to give you cause for reflection in the best way possible.

In that regard, I would also like to pay tribute to Ms. Michaud, but I will wait for her to come back so that she can hear me thank her in person. My thanks also go to Mr. Bélanger, who unfortunately had to leave the meeting because of a scheduling conflict. I have to say that he left me and a number of others here hungering for more.

Mr. Mauril Bélanger: My name is on the list of people wanting to speak.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Yes, I know. But I am afraid that other things might happen before you get your turn again.

But I really appreciated your presentation, setting the Official Languages Act in a historical context. If we became afraid that you might not be able to finish your historical overview, which seems to me to be really essential, we should perhaps think of some other solution that would allow you to do it. I would willingly agree to read for you and you could then add your pertinent comments.

When Ms. Michaud comes back, I will offer her my thanks.

I am going to start with a little story this morning. You probably know that, before being elected, I taught for 25 years. When I am back in my riding, scarcely a weekend goes by without someone asking me if I miss teaching. I give more or less the same answer each time: I don't miss teaching, at least not yet, but I often think of teaching fondly.

In my last four years of teaching in Quebec, I taught a course called *Monde contemporain - our world today*. It had a lot to do with politics.

When I was teaching music, which was for 21 years before that, a music teaching job became available at one point. I called a musician buddy and asked him if he wanted to teach with me. I offered him the vacant position. He asked me to give him a few hours to think about it. He called me back the next day and told me that he was going to decline the offer. He said that he felt there were two types of musicians; the ones who talk about it and the ones who do it. I understood that he was coming down on the side of those that do it, because he had been a pianist all his life. But his answer hurt me a little because it was as if he was telling me that I was not a real musician, just one of those who talks about it. I rationalized it all by telling myself that I was teaching and having a parallel career as a musician at the same time.

A few years later, when I was teaching the *Monde contemporain* course, I said to myself: "Damn it, here I am in exactly the same situation." There are politicians who talk about it and those who do it. There I was again, one of the ones who talk about it. I had been intrigued about going into politics since I was a teenager. I told myself that maybe the time had come to at least give it a shot. The stars aligned themselves, with the result that, last May 2, I found myself one of you.

This morning, I get the curious feeling that this debate is taking me back to square one and that I need my teaching skills again. For the next few minutes, the next few hours, or maybe the next few days, I need to teach Politics 101, about the basic right of politicians in this House, on these committees and in this Parliament. That is the right to speak.

Clearly, in part, the situation is a little unique. When I was teaching, the challenge was always to keep the students' interest. Everyone who has taught knows that it is not easy. In a school setting, we had tools and methods of keeping their attention. For example, cell phones were not allowed in class, meaning that people basically had the choice of sleeping—and I confess that did happen in some of my classes—or of following what was being said. Most people have trouble doing three things at the same time, although I am beginning to have my doubts about that. In fact, since I got into politics, I have realized that it is not only possible, it is necessary to be able to do more than one thing at the same time here on the Hill.

● (1020)

But I will try to be as pertinent as possible in order to keep you all interested in this debate. That is not always easy, I am sure that you will agree; the length of the presentations often means people get worn out. But I will try to keep things moving along in order to rally the troops and so that we do not lose sight of our objective, which is to try and understand this motion.

I know we first have to debate the amendment to the motion; I accept that, but we cannot really debate the amendment if we do not recall the essential nature of what led us to this point.

Let me say again that this motion, moved by a member of the government party, proposes: “that all committee business of the committee be conducted in camera”. If we analyze the grammar of the sentence, we see that the key word is “all”. The word “all” tells us exactly what is meant. It means that there can be no exceptions. Given that there can be no exceptions, it means that we might get into difficult situations. Our situation is doubly difficult because sitting in camera, though it is desirable and unanimously agreed to on occasion, must not become the general rule. Sitting in camera must be the exception, an exception that is necessary under certain circumstances.

But the motion proposes exactly the opposite. It proposes a 180-degree turn after which the exception would be not sitting in camera. In fact, the wording of the motion would no longer even permit that: “that all committee business of the committee be conducted in camera”. How can we go back once a motion like that is passed? It seems problematic to me to say the least.

It seems quite clear that the central elements of the committee's work should be conducted in public and that, if some circumstances require it, we can ask to sit in camera. This corresponds to the spirit of the amendment proposed by my colleague, Mr. Harris. It asks 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...” That starts to make things clear. It has already been said on many occasions, and I am repeating it here: the opposition has no wish to systematically oppose all requests to sit in camera. But there should be at least an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of a request of that nature.

I know that, when motions are introduced, they cannot be debated. I do not want to rewrite the book on procedure; that would be a long and tedious job and I am probably not up to the task. But I have wondered for many a long minute about the reason behind a motion like this. Why come to the committee one fine morning and introduce a motion of such a categorical nature when nothing

seemed to be of any particular concern? I came up with two possible answers. They remain hypotheses because, of course, I am not inside the head of the person who made the motion.

The first hypothesis suggests that the motion may be the result of a particular ideology holding that all the work of Parliament should be done in secret from now on. I have to say that, if that were the case, I would have a serious problem. It would be serious enough to justify the filibuster we are now engaged in, because it is an affront, to say the least, to our entire democratic system.

Excuse this aside. But I think I am going to become bilingual by speaking and listening to the interpretation at the same time.

The second hypothesis that may justify a motion like this is perhaps that, in the mind of the person that made it, there is something irritating in the way the committee does its work. His solution to end the irritation is to introduce a motion as dogmatic as this one. I also have a serious problem with that.

● (1025)

I know that we do not have to explain the motions that are presented. But, again, it seems to me that, if it were the case—it was one of the hypotheses, remember—it would, in my opinion, be more important for us to talk about those irritants around the table in order to find solutions. If there is no desire to discuss them in public, perhaps we could do so at the steering committee, or perhaps in separate discussions altogether. We could perhaps ask to suspend. If our committee's way of working really does cause a problem, it would seem to be more important to discuss it thoroughly, rather than to lock ourselves into our positions so much that the committee becomes dysfunctional, that parliamentary institutions go out the window and that the Canadians who elect and pay us are no longer well-served. That is quite a problem.

I would like to refer back to my former career as a teacher, because it seems to me that it offers an interesting parallel. We had 20 professional development days per year. The school year in Quebec is 20 professional development days and 180 days in the classroom with the students. It's the shortest school year in the world, I would say, but that is a debate for another parliament. So let's not get into that this morning.

That said, some of those professional development days were absolutely exciting and I followed them with great attention. I have to say that others were longer, tougher to handle and less interesting. Each time, I found myself automatically counting heads. Then I multiplied that number by the average salary. I found out that the professional development day was costing so many thousands of dollars per hour with not a lot to show for it. Honestly, in the last few weeks, I have found myself compelled to do exactly the same calculation: I count the number of members around the table and multiply it by the average salary. Clearly, that calculation would be much lower than the real one. What if you added in all the staff around us, the clerks, the interpreters and so on...?

Do you have any idea how much this committee costs per hour? I won't even dare to say because the number I calculated really threw me for a loop. Anyway, I could be forgetting things because there are a lot of functions that I don't know about, having only been in politics for a short time. Let's just say that it costs several hundred thousand dollars per hour, maybe more. It might even get up to a million dollars, but let's not put a figure to it this morning. I just wanted us to be aware of it.

We are wasting money at the moment. I hesitate to use the word "waste" because, as long as I am part of this filibuster, I really do not feel that I am wasting the salary that voters are paying me as I defend the most rigorous and basic fundamentals of democracy. But I am sad, because I was under the impression that we in Canada had settled that debate a long time ago and that democracy prevails everywhere. But I have to face the fact that, with motions like this one, we may be slipping away from that. It is not just our duty to stop the slide as quickly as possible, it is something we all must do.

• (1030)

If you find anything I say during this filibuster to be at all intelligent, so much the better. You can even tell me so afterwards. The most significant thing that could be said around this table cannot, unfortunately come out of my mouth. So I invite each of the members of the government party to interrupt me whenever they like. All you have to say is that you want to withdraw your motion, to move on, to solve the problem in our way of working if there is one, or maybe to look for a solution at the steering committee. I do not know the solution, but I know that one exists and that solution is probably not to dig in our heels. But that, unfortunately, is how we have to operate.

Democratic rights are fundamental. At a time when we are seeing people around the world paying for the defence of democracy with their lives, I feel that the least I can do is to defend it with my words. I will talk as much and for as long as it is necessary, you may be sure of that.

This systematic obstruction—which has regrettably been going on for weeks, if not months—is not unique to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. It really is a concern. We have seen, for example, a greater proliferation of time allocation motions in the House than probably at any time in the history of British parliamentary tradition. I am not old enough to have seen it all, but, in all the many years I have been interested in politics, I have never seen any such report. We are creating a first which is far from a shining moment for Canadian democracy.

We have seen a proliferation of requests for in camera sessions in committee after committee. Can I say that the Standing Committee on Official Languages is the worst? I do not know. I do not sit on other committees. But, having discussed it with my colleagues, I know that we are certainly not the best.

To make matters worse, I now see bills on the way that seek to restrict the right of Canadians to speak at environmental assessments dealing with major urban development projects. Sadly, I have to acknowledge that, of the two hypotheses I proposed earlier, perhaps the more plausible is the first, at the end of the day. Perhaps Canadians are being gagged from all sides by an ideological approach that I clearly do not share. I repeat that I sincerely hope that

the first hypothesis is not the real one and that the second one is more likely. My hope is that we can resolve our differences about the way in which the committee operates.

Who else is being gagged? The media is being gagged, the fourth estate, the one after the legislative, executive and judicial sources of power. When the voice of the media is silenced, how will Canadians across the country get their information? I have to say that my concern in this regard is a major one. The media report the work of Parliament. We know that not everyone is interested in our society, for their own reasons. But if the information is not even available any more, democracy is in serious peril.

Now that Ms. Michaud has returned, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate her for her masterful role in the debate that is occupying our attention. Be assured that I carefully followed, perhaps not every single word, but certainly every single subject you touched on during your remarks. I did not keep exact track, but I know that you certainly held the floor for more than two hours. Perhaps I may find myself picking up on some of your topics, but I will try to give them my own "Robert Aubin from Trois-Rivières" flavour. Everything you said could not have been more pertinent, and I hope that our accumulated contributions will cause someone to raise the white flag and ask to move on to something else. After that parenthesis, back to my argument.

• (1035)

So I was going to say this morning that I am adding my voice to this chorus of outrage. That is what we have been doing since this filibuster started. I am actually inclined to suggest the phrase marathon of outrage, given that the word "chorus" implies something nicer. Maybe even telethon of outrage. Now that would be really extraordinary. It seems to me that, if we had organized a real telethon of outrage during this filibuster, we could well have raised enough money to clear up the Conservatives' deficit, and Canada's. Then we could move on to more positive things. It's not a bad idea, I tell you.

Our telethon of outrage would also let us take calls directly from Canadians everywhere. In both official languages, they would tell us how deplorable they find the idea of conducting all committee business in camera without the consent of at least one opposition member. How much is that to ask? So there you have it. I am adding my voice to the others who are asking.

As parliamentarians, we must also be very conscious of what we are doing at the moment. Whether to solve an operational problem, or to promote an ideology or to defend democracy, we are now—in a wrong-headed way, but what else can we do?—feeding what we should be doing our best to combat in politics, voter cynicism. My impression is that we should not be talking about players from the Canadians who have not scored a goal in a year; the only goals we are scoring are into our own nets, and that goes for all political parties. We are not going to improve citizen involvement in politics with the matter we are dealing with now. This situation must come to an end as quickly as possible.

My constituency office in Trois-Rivières is next door to the one that Maurice Duplessis occupied until his death. That got me thinking. Is his ghost haunting me? I didn't used to believe in ghosts, but when I see a motion like this, I wonder whether I should start to be scared. I seem to be seeing pretty clearly a kind of return to the time of the Great Darkness, to which I would not like us to return and from which we in Quebec have emerged relatively well. I thought that we were going to be able to talk about it in terms of a time in history, a stage on the path of a people and a nation. Not as a cyclical event that we may see again if we are not careful.

Systematically conducting all committee business in camera is going back to the Great Darkness. How many writers, sociologists and philosophers have written that the best way to govern a country is to keep people in the dark? Those days are behind us—at least I thought so—and, as a consequence, our obligation is now to hold our discussions in public, except for reasonable exceptions on which all members of the committee agree. Those are situations when, not only do we want to hold our discussions in camera, but it is also important to do so.

I left teaching on May 2 last year in order to become a politician. I would say that the period of two months preceding my departure from teaching was the most vibrant and interesting of my teaching career. The teacher standing in front of the class was no longer a teacher; he had become a real politician. No one knew at the time whether he would be elected, but he was already a politician in the sense that he was involved in a campaign. I have always said that this political career, this opportunity I have been given for at least four years, came at an extraordinary point in my life. I do not seek a career in politics for its own sake; I want to serve the people. Heaven alone knows what will happen in four years, whether I will still be a member of Parliament, whether I will be re-elected, or whether I will go back to teaching. That is of little importance because all those

opportunities are inherently interesting. Doing the work of a politician is extremely exciting and I want to continue doing it to the extent I can for as long as I can. But going back to teaching would not be a step down. I would go back to teaching after an exceptional experience that few teachers are privileged to have.

● (1040)

When I see what we have been doing for several weeks—this all started before Christmas—I can tell you that I am seriously concerned. For weeks, months and years, I have tried to make young people aware of the importance of becoming involved in civil society, the importance of becoming involved in politics regardless of one's political allegiance, the importance of getting out to vote, the importance of playing a role in our society and our democracy. If I go back to teaching, what are you going let me tell them? I was teaching 15- to 17-year-old high-school students who are developing their own ideas about the society and the world in which they live. A lot of what they hear comes from the mouths of the adults around them. Sometimes it strikes a chord, sometimes it does not.

I have struggled for years to tell them that they have real power to determine what their society becomes. If, as an elected MP, I no longer find any power on Parliament Hill, how do you want me to go back to teaching one day and carry on talking about our political world with any credibility and while providing any support for their young careers? You're really pulling that rug out from under me and I have difficulty...

● (1045)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Yvon Godin): Excuse me, Mr. Aubin, but it is now 10:45 a.m. I am going to suspend the session until 8:45 on Thursday morning.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

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