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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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•(0845)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 42nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages on this Thursday, May 10, 2012. We are here pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) to study the Main Estimates 2012-13. I call vote 20 under Privy Council.

We have with us this morning the Commissioner of Official Languages, whom I welcome. I now invite him to make his opening statement.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I would like to thank your committee for its interest in the operations of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The relationship between Parliament and my office is of the utmost importance.

I am accompanied today by Lise Cloutier, Assistant Commissioner, Corporate Management; Ghislaine Charlebois, Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance; Sylvain Giguère, Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications; and Colette Lagacé, Director, Finance.

[English]

The Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages has a budget of \$21.9 million, including \$2.3 million in benefits, for 2012-13 to support it in its mandate. Our workforce is 163 full-time equivalents.

Those of you who have been sitting on this committee for some time know that our operations are divided into three program activities: protection of Canadians' language rights; promotion of linguistic duality; and internal services. This categorization of activities has not changed. However, due to financial pressures, we must re-evaluate the allocation of our resources. Some components of these activities could be modified.

[Translation]

The federal budget released on March 29 indicated that our organization will not be directly affected by the deficit reduction exercise, but that "The Commissioner of Official Languages will contribute to the Government's expenditure restraint efforts by reallocating operating savings towards necessary information technology investments." In other words, our Treasury Board submission for \$6.4 million over four years to modernize our

information technology and information management systems has been refused. This amount represents 7.8% of the Office of the Commissioner's budget for this period. All the data I am presenting today, as well as the recently tabled Report on Plans and Priorities, take into account this major investment, which we have to make.

[English]

Every sector of my organization must contribute. The office of the commissioner will continue to carry out all of its functions, but some activities may be reduced or postponed. Rest assured that handling complaints remains my priority, and investigations will be conducted as usual. Eventually, a new case management system will help us become even more efficient in our work.

To implement our first program activity, protecting the language rights of Canadians, the office of the commissioner intervenes, in various ways, with organizations that are subject to the Official Languages Act. Its key tools are complaint resolution through investigations, audits, performance evaluations of federal institutions, and court remedies.

My staff and I regularly intervene with many federal institutions to prevent violations of the act, rather than waiting until they occur.

[Translation]

The expenditures planned for this activity are \$7.1 million, which is 32% of the budget. To assume this additional financial burden, my three-year audit plan will be revised. In 2012-2013, we will be publishing last year's audits of Industry Canada and Parks Canada.

•(0850)

[English]

To improve services to both the travelling public and the general public, we will continue to focus on institutions that are present in airports. The legal actions against Air Canada and CBC/Radio-Canada are proceeding normally, and decisions should be rendered by the end of the year in both cases.

The transfer of federal funds for official languages to the provinces and territories is very important, so I am planning to conduct an audit to examine the situation. This audit will not extend beyond my mandate or the resources I have at my disposal. It will be a horizontal audit of a limited number of federal institutions. It will not be a financial audit; rather, it will be a review of the accountability process.

[Translation]

Then, with respect to our second program activity, promotion of linguistic duality, the Office of the Commissioner communicates regularly with parliamentarians, official language minority communities, federal institutions and the Canadian public.

Canadians enjoy the full benefits of a country where two major language communities live side by side, thanks to our research, studies, communications products, and discussions with many key people.

[English]

The expenditures related to the promotion of linguistic duality are \$7.2 million, which accounts for 33% of the total budget. Again, this budget must absorb part of the costs of modernizing our information technology.

In the March 29 budget document, the government announced that funding for the road map for Canada's linguistic duality will continue until it expires in 2013. Those responsible for turning the various components of this initiative into concrete results welcome this news. However, I remain vigilant about the cost cutting undertaken by the federal administration as a whole. Federal institutions must evaluate the impact of their cutbacks on official language communities and on their own capacity to incorporate Canada's linguistic duality into their operations.

[Translation]

Among other initiatives, we will be concluding a study on federal institutions are that managing language training, and we will be publishing a new publication entitled "Linguistic Rights 2009-2011" which will summarize and analyze recent legal judgments involving official languages. We are also organizing a fourth forum on the relationship between cultural diversity and linguistic duality, which will be held in Montreal.

We will continue to promote three very useful tools created in recent years: the leadership competencies profile for official languages for public service managers, the practical guide to promoting official languages when organizing a major cultural or sporting event in Canada or abroad, and the map of second-language learning opportunities in Canadian universities.

[English]

The office of the commissioner's 2011-12 annual report, which will be published in October, will look at how Canada's two official language communities are open to linguistic duality. In the fall we will launch Facebook and Twitter accounts, which will allow me to communicate directly with Canadians. I hope you will follow me.

Our third program activity, internal services, allows the office of the commissioner to bring together resources that support our organization as a whole, including asset management, finance, and human resources management. They are essential to any organization and ensure that taxpayers' dollars are used efficiently and transparently.

[Translation]

This activity is allocated a budget of \$7.6 million, which is 35% of our total budget. To modernize the information technology and

information management system that makes up part of this activity, internal services is reviewing how it delivers a number of its services.

Specifically, we will implement an action plan in keeping with the A-base review conducted last year, and look at the shared services model for the internal services to officers of Parliament.

A new videoconference system will help reduce travel expenses for me and my staff.

● (0855)

[English]

In addition, the office of the commissioner will continue to apply accountability mechanisms, particularly the performance measurement framework. We are also in the process of completing an internal audit on investigation practices, to which we will respond to the recommendations.

We are also following up on the 2011 public service employee survey. The office of the commissioner's results are very encouraging. Not only are they quite positive compared to the results for the public service as a whole, but our employees' satisfaction level has increased significantly since the last survey in 2008.

[Translation]

I am very pleased to report that the Office of the Commissioner's employees enjoy their work and recognize excellence in their workplace.

Parliamentarians are rightfully interested in the activities that officers of Parliament undertake to fulfill their mandate and how they manage the public funds that are entrusted to them.

[English]

Like the other agents of Parliament, I continue to advocate for a permanent parliamentary funding and monitoring mechanism regarding the role of Parliament and the independence and distinct nature of the mandates of its officers. This would show the government's commitment to the sound management of public resources.

Thank you for your attention.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

It would be my pleasure to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your opening remarks, Mr. Fraser.

If members desire, we'll have almost two hours for questions and commentary from members of this committee, beginning with Monsieur Godin.

[Translation]

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

To start off, I would like to welcome Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages, and his team, and to thank them for the work they do.

Today I am pleased to tell the team here that I have brought along my grandson with me. I'm getting him ready to take over. This is a student program in which a student can spend a day with an adult at his place of work. It has given Jonathan the chance to come here.

I just want to tell a little story briefly. Before he was born, on February 28, I made a speech in the House of Commons and I announced his birth to the nation two hours ahead of time. Today I am pleased that he is with me here.

Commissioner, I would like to go directly to the issue that concerns me.

With regard to information technology, you are concerned because you have an obsolete system. You need a new system to perform even better. I believe you had requested a budget of \$6.4 million. You sent a letter to the Prime Minister requesting that the government add \$6.4 million to your budget so that you could take action on the matter. Now the government has announced that the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages has suffered no budget cuts but that it will not have any additional money to update its IT system and that it will have to find the money necessary for that purpose in its own budget.

Can you explain to us briefly what effect that will have on your budget? I find it hard to believe this will not compromise your investigations or something else. There will be a shortage of money somewhere. You thought you needed the \$6.4 million for your IT system, and now you are going to be affected. I would like to hear you comment on that.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Thank you for that question, Mr. Godin.

In preparing our Treasury Board submission, we requested an A-base review. We analyzed our organization and made some recommendations. In that analysis, we calculated that we needed \$6.4 million over four years.

We monitored the recommendations, which were that cuts be made to certain sectors that, in IBM's opinion, were a little too costly for an organization of our size. In addition to the mandatory retirements, we cut vacant positions and some other positions in order to make a change to what can be called the organizational profile.

IBM also recommended that we reinforce certain parts of the organization, such as regional staff in order to do promotion. We accepted the recommendations regarding a reduction of the size of the organization, but we did not act on the recommendations that we increase staff in the regions, for example. In addition, as I mentioned in my statement, we decided to defer or postpone some activities. We are lowering the number of audits; we are—

• (0900)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Commissioner, do you need to spend the \$6.4 million in the next few years?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But here you say that you're going to cut down what? Audits?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Instead of conducting the same number of audits every year, we are lowering the frequency of those audits. We are still conducting audits. We are not cutting the number of auditors; we will continue, but we are more strategic in our analysis.

Mr. Yvon Godin: They say the government's budget cuts won't affect official languages, the roadmap and things like that, and yet the government is shutting down the Bathurst recruitment centre.

National Defence has four recruitment centres in New Brunswick: in Moncton, Fredericton, Saint John and Bathurst. There are three recruitment centres located less than an hour from one another and one bilingual centre in Bathurst, which serves the Acadian Peninsula and Edmundston, in the Madawaska region. However, the government is closing the Bathurst centre, as a result of which people must now go to Fredericton, where there is already a problem with service, as you know.

You are conducting audits in Fredericton and Gagetown. You are not too pleased about the bilingualism situation in Gagetown and so on, and that is where all the francophones are going to be put. That will be addressed in your audits because I have already filed a complaint. The government is also closing down the navy cadet summer camp in Bécancour, Quebec, the only francophone summer camp in Canada. That was the only camp where francophone navy cadets from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, for example, could go, and it is being shut down. Your work is not finished, commissioner.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I never thought the work would finish with the last budget.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Commissioner, don't you think you will increasingly have more responsibility and that your IT budget should have been increased, without affecting the rest? There were cutbacks in all the departments, and it's not true that the official language minority communities will not be affected. I believe you will have more work than you have ever had, if only as a result of the budget cuts, as I just mentioned to you. For example, the Quebec City rescue centre will be relocated to Halifax, and you will have to continue conducting all those audits.

Yesterday, the CBC network informed us that people aboard a boat at sea had called Halifax for medical assistance but that they were put in touch with someone in Rome, Italy. Did you see that? I would like to hear what you have to say about that. You're trying to be polite by saying that you are going to make every effort for this to work, but do you think it will work?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Since the start of this fiscal year, I have been afraid that the budget cuts might have unanticipated effects. The example I have always cited is what happened in 1995 when the Royal Military College Saint-Jean was shut down, the effect of which has been felt for decades.

To answer your question, I must say I am definitely concerned. And that is why, knowing that budget cuts would be announced, I submitted a brief to Treasury Board. The argument advanced in that brief is still valid. We have been quite responsible in hiring an IBM expert to conduct an A-base review. We are a federal institution and we have to discharge our responsibilities like all the other institutions. I hope we will be able to preserve all our institution's activities over the long term. One of my predecessors, after the 1995 cuts, virtually had to stop research activities, but I am determined to retain all our organization's activities.

•(0905)

Le président: Thank you.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to Mr. Fraser and all his team for being here this morning.

Your statement contains a paragraph concerning the transfer of federal funds for official languages to the provinces and territories. A number of witnesses from various organizations told our committee that they were receiving funds. However, that funding came from the province under certain programs, but they were not sure whether it was transferred under the roadmap or whether the organizations had received all transfers to the provinces for new initiatives or for initiatives already in place. It was quite unclear. We also find it hard to monitor the money. And I believe you are concerned about what is happening. Can you do a check, perhaps in cooperation with the provinces, and get more information? How will you do that?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We are taking a first step toward deciding on the scope of that audit. It would be a horizontal audit. First we are going to look at the federal institutions taking part in the roadmap.

An article on this subject appeared in *Le Droit* this morning. I have received emails from my counterparts in Ontario and New Brunswick, and they say they are interested in cooperating in that evaluation. I told them that I was delighted they were interested and that we would take a look at how we could cooperate.

My mandate is quite limited with regard to where the money goes and what the accountability mechanisms of the federal institutions receiving funds are. We are entirely prepared to discuss the possibility of cooperating with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of New Brunswick and Ontario's Commissioner of French Language Services. However, as I said, we are at an exploratory stage. We haven't made a final decision, but we have a draft plan.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Are the provinces already aware of that? Will they be made aware this morning perhaps?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is not yet the case. As I told you, we received a request from a member to whom we responded that we would conduct an audit, but we are just at the first stage.

Ms. Charlebois could perhaps give you more details.

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): As the commissioner indicated, my mandate will have to be limited to the commissioner's powers. As the audit must be

conducted within the framework of the act, we have not yet determined the extent to which we will be able to examine the question of the provinces. We will try to see whether we can work in partnership with the other commissioners of official languages, even though this plan is at the exploratory stage.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

In a completely different connection, this committee intends to begin a study on the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017.

What particular point regarding linguistic duality in the organizations in Canada do you think we should focus on to involve all the country's minorities? What vision should we adopt if we conduct that study?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I believe there are a number of success stories, but there have also been mistakes that could be corrected.

I believe the Olympic flame relay provided some good examples of participation by the minority communities, but some mistakes were made along the way.

I have always thought that Expo 67 was a striking example of linguistic duality in the time before the Official Languages Act was passed. I believe the general acceptance of the Official Languages Act at the time was due in large part to the success of Expo 67 and to the recognition that it was an instance of linguistic duality. I therefore believe that, from a symbolic standpoint, it will be extremely important for both official languages to be part of all the major events during the celebrations. That must be planned from the outset.

When mistakes were made or matters overlooked in the planning of the major events, it was mainly because the necessary aspects of that kind of celebration had not been not anticipated.

•(0910)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Fraser, I have another question for you, and I have only one minute left.

Would our committee be derelict in its duty if it did not conduct that study? If we, as a committee, had the choice to do it or not to do it, and we decided not to do it, would we be failing in our duty as the Standing Committee on Official Languages?

Mr. Graham Fraser: The committee is master of its own decisions. I would not dare tell the committee how to determine its duty. As I said, this is an important question, and there are many other important questions. It is up to the committee to decide on its priorities, on its timetable, and the appropriate time to conduct a study.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So it would be a priority that could be considered seriously by our committee.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I said it was an important subject, and I have never concealed by interest in the matter. I had a conversation with the minister following his appearance before the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. So my interest is clear, but it is up to the committee to decide on the appropriate time and its priorities. It is not up to me to determine the committee's priorities.

The Chair: All right.

Thank you.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the commissioner and his team for being with us today.

When did you make that submission to modernize the office's IT system?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That was in July 2011.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: When you made that submission, were you going fishing or did you have serious reasons to believe that it was normal, that it was according to procedure and that you had a chance of succeeding with the Treasury Board?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We made a long-term effort to work with all the institutions that are part of the Treasury Board submission process. There was quite an intense consultation of people at all levels of the Treasury Board, and our arguments were favourably received. Ultimately, all that was lacking were the necessary signatures of the ministers so that it could be discussed by the Treasury Board people.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Did you rely on precedents and other organizations that had obtained Treasury Board funding that way to modernize their IT systems?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We had initially hoped to make that presentation before the parliamentary group that had been introduced as a pilot project at the time. The pilot project ended and, even after an extension, it was not transformed into a permanent accountable institution for officers of Parliament.

So at that point, we decided to proceed with a Treasury Board submission. For nearly three years, every time an officer of Parliament made a submission for supplementary funding, we did it before the parliamentary group. That's what we intended to do, but we realized that we could not wait indefinitely, even though, in principle, all officers of Parliament acknowledged the importance of a parliamentary group. So we decided to make the submission to the Treasury Board.

• (0915)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I understand from your answer that all the steps had been taken, that you had hoped to get a positive response and that all that was left to do was to obtain the ministers' signatures.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is correct.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So can we call the present situation a disguised 7.8% budget cut, since that is what this represents in your budget?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is the interpretation that I tried to explain in my statement.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: All right. I wanted to get you to say that.

So we have a 7.8% cut at the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. I believe that everyone has to interpret it that way. You have to call a spade a spade.

In your budget, you say—

Mr. Graham Fraser: There is only one distinction, if I may: when we have finished paying, our core budget will be the same.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: That is what you are promised. In the meantime, you are facing a budget cut. In your budget, we note, in particular, the headings "Promotion of linguistic duality", "Protection of language rights" and "Internal services". Internal services represent one-third of the budget. I would like to understand something. Here we are talking solely about the internal services of the office of the commissioner, aren't we? So one-third of the budget goes to internal services. At first glance, that seems enormous.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Two points must be understood. First, we are a small organization. We have to use services that may seem insignificant, but that are very important for our operation. That is why we began talks with the officers of Parliament. We want to be able to use shared services to reduce that amount.

Second, unlike what is being done in other organizations, this amount includes the costs of the office of the commissioner, my travel and my work. Third, it also includes the cost of \$6.4 million intended for the transformation of the IT system, which is being prepared.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Commissioner, I don't doubt that everyone works hard, but we are all in a difficult situation.

I'm going to read a passage from your last report, if I have enough time. It shows what a tough situation people are in. When I say "people", I mean the people we serve, Canadians, who want their two official languages and their communities to advance. And I quote:

It is even more unfortunate that budget constraints too often prompt the government and federal institutions to make decisions that, under the pretext of improving or trying to improve efficiency or effectiveness, may have long-term negative effects on all aspects of federal language policy.

In the present circumstances, the communities have virtually no flexibility and cannot achieve economies of scale, since they are in the minority. However, you say your solution to this 7.8% cut will be to conduct fewer audits, whereas you should in fact conduct a lot more.

Is there some way to focus your efforts on internal services and to continue your audits?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We hope that modernizing our IT system will enable us to cut some internal costs. We officers of Parliament are discussing the possibility of using shared services, which would also reduce the burden of some internal services.

I am going to ask Ms. Cloutier whether there are any other factors that we can consider.

• (0920)

Ms. Lise Cloutier (Assistant Commissioner, Corporate Management Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): We conducted an exhaustive analysis of all organizational management costs. For example, by implementing a videoconference system, we will considerably cut travel costs. We are lowering a lot of discretionary spending, hospitality and training expenses. We are trying to maximize shared solutions, particularly as regards software, and we are trying to cut project costs as much as possible, while maintaining the protection of language rights and the promotion of linguistic duality.

In short, we are monitoring internal service costs very closely.

The Chair: Thank you.

From what I heard, a cost of \$6.4 million will be associated with the IT system. So that means that, in view of the fact that there are 163 employees, this represents nearly \$40,000 per employee.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We are not just talking about computers here, but about the entire information management system. When we decided to modernize our approach to handling complaints, we discovered that our old system prevented appropriate information sharing. Its a system that operates in silos. Once the transformation is complete, we will have a genuine information management system. It will enable us to manage complaints in a more flexible and more effective manner and to reduce the number of steps that we must currently take as a result of our old system.

Le président: Thank you.

I believe Mr. Trottier has worked for IBM.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Yes, and I appreciate your efforts.

Thank you for being here today. I know that the office of the commissioner is doing a good job with regard to the protection and promotion of linguistic duality in Canada.

I have a few questions about the main estimates of the commissioner's office. Then I would like to ask a few specific questions about my city, Toronto.

With regard to your budget, the allocation between internal services, promotion and protection is approximately one-third for each of those three parts. Has that been the trend for a number of years? Is that changing? What are the projections in that regard?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Once this considerable four-year investment is complete, I hope the internal services percentage will be reduced.

Once again, I'm going to ask Ms. Cloutier to answer your question in greater detail.

Ms. Lise Cloutier: The part of the budget allocated to internal services, which you see in the Report on Plans and Priorities, includes an additional amount of \$1.2 million, which was added to fund our integrated information management solutions project this year. Obviously, once we have completed the investments in the shared services optimization initiatives and all the other initiatives that we are pursuing, the cost of internal services will be proportionately lower than the cost of the other two activities.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: That's what we expect; we find ways to work more intelligently. That's one theme that we note in all the departments, when we ask them about their efforts in this new environment.

Mr. Fraser, in your presentation, you talked about a new framework, or efforts to establish a performance measurement framework. It's one thing to talk about costs, investments, if you will, but performance measurements are something else. Could you give us an overview of how you measure your efforts to see whether you are succeeding in what you do?

• (0925)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I believe so. We introduced service standards in the Compliance Assurance Branch a few years ago, establishing the ideal time required to complete an investigation, based on its complexity. We are increasingly successful in completing our investigations within those service standards.

We also have a performance evaluation system that applies to employees and managers. I believe it is a very useful tool, a way to set objectives, to conduct an evaluation during the year and to see whether managers have achieved the objectives established at the start of the year.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Especially in case management.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's correct.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: An important event, the Pan American Games, will be taking place in Toronto. It is very important for the city. I know that the commissioner's office was involved in the Vancouver Olympic Games. Some questions were raised. For example, people wondered whether linguistic duality had really been reflected at those Olympic Games. I am involved with the city and province in ensuring that the games are a major success. I recently received trilingual communications from the games' organization. Bravo! However, they were in English, Spanish and Portuguese. The francophone fact was absent from those communications.

How are you going to get involved in planning to ensure that we can really say we are a bilingual country when we present ourselves to the hemisphere that embraces the countries of both Americas?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's a very interesting question. I frankly didn't know that kind of failure had occurred. I have met members of the Pan American Games executive committee a number of times, and I was very impressed with their openness to the language issue and the French fact. I made a few suggestions at the first meeting, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that they had already accepted some of those suggested.

They made the person responsible for the language issue a member of the executive committee, an initiative that the Vancouver Olympic Games organizing committee did not take. We made sure those people received our events guide. Our Toronto office is monitoring their work very closely. We are preparing to cooperate with them in the same way as we did during the Olympic Games.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: For several weeks now, we have been conducting a study on the performance of the roadmap. Could you comment on the success of the roadmap and make any recommendations for the next version of the roadmap?

Mr. Graham Fraser: First, I was relieved to see that the budget would not have any impact on the programs of the current roadmap. In the evaluation of the roadmap components for the purpose of establishing the program that will succeed it, it would be very important to consider the vitality of the communities. We must know which programs have a direct impact on the vitality of the official language minority communities and those that might have an impact on visibility.

One of the major challenges for the official language minority communities is the lack of visibility. There are also some challenges with regard to the majority institutions or communities, but I can give you more details by answering another question.

• (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Williamson, you have the floor.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you, Mr. Fraser and your team, for being here today. I appreciate your efforts and the work you are doing for us and for all Canadians.

I would like to go back for a few moments to expenditures and the budget that was tabled on March 29.

[*English*]

As the budget outlined, your budget was not terribly impacted by the deficit elimination measures that are in place, but the modernization of your IT was rejected.

I guess my first question is, do you think you're capable of finding those savings within the department? Are you comfortable with this reallocation—recognizing that it's not a perfect world, but we don't live in a perfect world.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I've never seen my own personal comfort as one of the issues that should be discussed.

I think we can do it. We went through a process of quite carefully analyzing our expenditures. As part of the Treasury Board submission, we did an A-base review. We followed the advice of the A-base review, which suggested some areas in which we had some elements that were a bit rich for an organization our size. We followed the advice in trimming those, using attrition to reduce the number of positions. We didn't follow their advice in terms of adding positions, for example, in the regions.

We went through a separate process of reassessing the role of our representatives in the regions. Our plan had been—and the recommendation had been from the consultants who did that study—to strengthen the number of personnel in the regions with promotional responsibilities. So we haven't done that.

We're readjusting. I'm confident that we will be able to finance the changes necessary.

Mr. John Williamson: It sounds like you're having to make the same decisions that, frankly, a lot of people throughout this country are having to make. You're having to prioritize decisions. I see nothing wrong with that, and I applaud you for your efforts on that and your willingness to accept that.

I have a quick comment in response to Mr. Dion. I don't think it's accurate to call this a 7.8% cut. That might be called a cut in Ottawa, but that is not a cut. No taxpayer across the country would see a request that was denied as a cut in budget.

You don't need to respond to that unless you want to. That was more of a statement to get that on the record.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fraser, I would like to ask you a question that does not concern the budget. Do you believe that a unilingual Canadian has a place in the public affairs of our country, here in Canada?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, I believe so. For individuals who work in public life, be they elected members, civil servants or government appointees, language policy depends on citizens' right to receive services from the government. Canada's language policy has never been to demand that every Canadian be bilingual or that electors be restricted in their choice of representatives.

However, what is important is citizens' right to receive equal service from their government. Consequently, the question is whether an anglophone citizen from Quebec receives the same government services as a francophone outside Quebec, whether Quebec francophones receive the same services from the federal government as anglophones from Quebec or the rest of Canada. The citizen's right is all that is important.

Sometimes in this debate there is a tendency to personalize the issue by saying that we are stigmatizing individuals. I make a special effort not to personalize the debate. I make sure the debate focuses on citizens' rights.

• (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

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

Thank you for being here.

First of all, I would like to apologize for being late. It was as a result of events beyond my control; I apologize for that.

Thank you for your testimony. I read it. It was very interesting and it clarifies matters for us.

Before asking my questions, I would like to comment on the study on the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation, to which you referred earlier. You mentioned one very important point. You say the committee is master of its decisions and that, if we consider this a priority, we should study it.

However, the moment when we conduct that study also has to be considered. I believe the committee should consider that point. Many other, much more urgent issues could be studied now. I am thinking, for example, of the Quebec City Marine Rescue Centre. Since I come from that region, this is of particular concern to me. So my colleagues and I have sent the commissioner's office a lot of complaints which we should examine here. Thank you for bringing this point to our committee's attention.

Now I come to my questions. You mentioned research in your presentation. This is one aspect of government work that is of great interest to me. I believe it is very important for our communities. However, seeing the various measures contained in the budget, we may well wonder whether the government is actually interested in research. We can look at what is happening at Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. There appears to be less and less research on official languages, whereas the communities consider this issue essential.

I had a chance to speak briefly with the people from the Quebec Community Groups Network, who told me about the importance of research for that community. You yourself say you want to retain your entire research capability. Do you have a long-term plan to do that despite the budget cuts you are facing?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We are carrying out two extensive research projects. I consider them very important. The first concerns language training. We are currently dealing with a system that has changed. The Canada School of Public Service no longer offers language training, and institutions thus have a responsibility to provide that training for their employees by bringing in private sector institutions. I decided that we had to determine whether language training was just as effective following those changes. I admit to a certain prejudice. I still think that some people pass their exams without being able to communicate, whereas others who are capable of communicating are unable to pass their exams. I would like to know whether there is a basis for that prejudice.

As for the second study, we are in the initial stages. It concerns the language skills of judges across the country, access to justice in both official languages. We had previously begun to establish a partnership with my two counterparts from Ontario and New Brunswick. This will be an extensive study for which there will be an advisory committee. However, the process of consulting the judiciary is just starting.

● (0940)

Ms. Éline Michaud: I hope you can complete those studies. Those are topics that I would have liked the committee to examine. I hope you can find the answers you are looking for on those issues.

Several times during your appearances, you have expressed concern about the changes made to official languages governance within the machinery of government. In your 2009-2010 report, you said it was too soon to evaluate the impact of those changes, particularly the elimination of the Canada Public Service Agency and the transfer of its powers to the Treasury Board Secretariat.

Now, in 2012, can you briefly tell us what the impact of those changes has been? Are you in a position to do that?

Mr. Graham Fraser: The changes are continuing. At the Department of Canadian Heritage, for example, some consolidation of responsibility for official languages is under way.

I'm going to ask Sylvain Giguère to give you more details on the impact the governance changes have had to date.

Mr. Sylvain Giguère (Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): In fact, it is really too soon to quantify it. We are playing a monitoring role for the moment. In six months to a year,

we may be in a position to give you a proper answer, but it is still too soon to do so now.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Mr. Boughen, it's your turn.

[*English*]

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Graham, let me add my voice to my colleagues' voices in welcoming you and your staff here this morning.

I listened to your presentation. I heard words like "Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia". I didn't hear words like "Saskatchewan, Manitoba, or Alberta". Could you share with us what's happening with the language programs in those provinces at the school level, as well as at the community level?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chairman, one thing that I can say about Saskatchewan is that I went out to Saskatchewan in February and had meetings with members of the Saskatchewan government, with the University of Regina, with the University of Saskatchewan, and with l'Association communautaire francosaskoise, which was having its centenary.

Partly as a result of those conversations, one of the things we have decided to do is have a round table discussion in the fall about post-secondary learning opportunities, which would be a follow-up to the study we did a couple of years ago on post-secondary learning. We've had previous follow-up round tables in Atlantic Canada and in Manitoba.

What we're hoping to do is bring together representatives from all the various elements of the education system—from school boards, from Canadian Parents for French, from the universities, from the francophone community—and have a wide-ranging discussion about what the needs are and what the priorities should be.

This is *l'Année des Fransaskois* in Saskatchewan. I was quite impressed by the support that was given by the Saskatchewan government in making this a publicly recognized year, if you like, that was in itself a tribute to the centenary of the francophone organization in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Good.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you.

I offer my apologies for my tardiness as well.

It's good to see you again. I remember meeting you, I think for the first time, at the QCGN awards evening in Montreal.

I have a whole whack of questions, but no time to ask them. I'm going to start with this statement. For me—and my colleagues here have heard this many times—language is inextricably linked to culture. I don't think you can really promote one without the other.

My first question is this. There are some 15 departments in the road map that are involved in official languages or have official language priorities. How integrated, if at all, is your office with the various departments and the programs they have regarding official languages?

• (0945)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Well, I am an agent of Parliament, so my fundamental responsibility is to report to you on what they are doing. I wouldn't say we are integrated at all.

What I have tried to do, in a proactive way, is have meetings with departments, talking to them about their responsibilities and about the nature of issues relating to language of service and language of work.

There are times that informal conversations take place between analysts and people in departments. There is a network of champions of official languages. Sylvain Giguère is our champion of official languages within the organization, which means that he is then part of that network of communication.

In order to protect our independence as agents of Parliament, we try not to be integrated into government institutions, but it's a fine line to walk. Our employees are public servants, but we try to keep our distance so that we can give a fair and detached analysis of institutions when they succeed or fail in living up to their obligations.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Taking that a step further, the NDP just recently tabled a bill that would require at least the senior agents of appointees of the government to be proficient in both official languages. I'm new to this committee, but it seems to me there is a sense of separating again that culture from the actual practice of official languages. Although an individual—a unilingual anglophone or francophone—might be proficient in their tasks, when you bring in the cultural aspect, the sense of representation of both cultures in the leadership of any department is something that is lacking when a person is effectively unilingual francophone or anglophone. What would you say about that aspect of the importance of having a bilingual Auditor General?

Mr. Graham Fraser: There are two things. One is that our interpretation of article 24 (3) the Official Languages Act, which lists the offices of the agents of Parliament, is that the titular head of that organization is so much a personal representation of that role that the obligations apply to the individual. That's a rather technical answer.

One of the things we have done during my mandate is to spend quite a bit of time looking at and promoting language skill as a leadership competency. That, I think, speaks to the culture of the workplace, if I could say so. Public servants have language obligations on the one hand to serve the public, but on the other hand to manage people who have a right to work in the language of their choice. It is very difficult to feel that your work is valued or that it is being properly considered or that you have a true voice in an organization if your manager doesn't understand you.

In fact, that element of leadership is inherent in the way the Public Service Commission does language evaluations. To get your C level in oral interaction, I was told, they are looking for somebody who can explain something in detail, persuade colleagues, a minister, or employees of something, and give advice. Those actually aren't

language criteria; they are leadership criteria. So it is difficult, you would say, to separate language and culture. I would say in the context of the workplace it is difficult to separate language mastery and leadership skill, which I think speaks to the same point but in a different environment.

• (0950)

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

We will take a brief health break.

• (0950)

(Pause)

• (0955)

[Translation]

The Chair: We'll resume the 42nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to go back to the question from my colleague opposite concerning the skills of officers of the House of Commons at the time of their appointment. Could a longer or better planned appointment process solve certain problems? In the case of an auditor general, for example, the position requires specific skills that are acquired over the years through training and work experience. Sooner or later, we wind up with a limited number of Canadians who can take up those positions.

In the case of positions with 10-year terms, if the person were appointed 1 year before actually taking up the position, that person would have the time to acquire the necessary language skills or to improve his or her skills. We know that four months of immersion considerably improves people's language skills, when they can devote all their time to it. In the recruitment process, could we allow for a longer period of time between the moment a person is appointed and when that person actually takes on the new role? That might let the individual get organized, relocate and acquire those skills.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's a very interesting idea. I'm thinking of another possibility. Over the long term, the universities and professional associations should view proficiency in both official languages as an important skill. Judges have had access to a very sophisticated language training system for quite some time now. Some judges have taken advantage of it. A few members of the Supreme Court have taken those courses during their career to become bilingual.

It is important to realize that the learning of both official languages should be valued in Canadian society. When people attend university or start their professional lives, they must have access to language training tailored to their careers.

However, I must say your idea is also an interesting one to explore.

• (1000)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you.

I'll hand the floor over to my colleague.

The Chair: Mr. Williamson, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. John Williamson: I'd ask you to come back to me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Trottier, would you have any questions?

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Yes. I would like to go back to the roadmap question because it has been a concern of ours for a very long time. I would like to address the issue from the standpoint of the return on our investments in official languages. You may not be in a position to give your opinion on this, but you might be able to help us all the same.

It's always a matter of priorities when it comes to determining fields in which we can invest, whether it be early childhood, primary education, post-secondary education, health or economic development. In your opinion, what should the future roadmap priorities be for supporting official languages in Canada?

Mr. Graham Fraser: As I had started to tell you, the government's analytical criteria should be the vitality and visibility of the communities, as well as the learning opportunities of the members of the majority communities. That would make it easier to evaluate priorities, to determine whether the investment will increase a community's vitality or profile, access to learning and opportunities for members of the majority to get to know the other community, the other official language. If we undertake the evaluation bearing these principles in mind, it may be possible to better establish a list of priorities.

I don't have the means or the skills to say whether something works or not. We can do it in a limited way. We have previously tried to determine, for accountability purposes, what evaluation resources the federal institutions have at their disposal when they send money to the provinces or other institutions. These are major principles that should be used to assess priorities properly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dionne Labelle, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Good morning to you, Mr. Fraser, and to your entire team. Thank you for being here.

We haven't heard you comment on the budget, particularly the cutbacks in the various institutions that are of major importance to the linguistic communities. I'm thinking, in particular, of Radio-Canada, where 650 positions will be cut over three years, 256 on the anglophone side and 243 on the francophone side. We feel, on this side in any case, that the number of francophones is quite high given their demographic weight.

I am also thinking of the budget cuts at the NFB, which has historically helped extend the outreach of the francophone community, of the French fact, in Canada and around the world. There are also cuts at Destination Canada, which is an essential tool to encourage immigrants from various countries to settle in official language minority communities. Aren't you concerned by those cuts?

•(1005)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Let me answer this way. I have always been concerned by CBC/Radio-Canada's role in the minority communities

and by the harmful impact that service cuts can have on the communities. I take that so seriously that I am taking CBC/Radio-Canada back to court over the way it has cut service in the Windsor area. I acknowledge that it will be a hollow victory if we win in court. CBC/Radio-Canada's budget has been cut so deeply that it is unable to maintain adequate service for the official language minority communities or the majority communities. Am I concerned? Yes, I am.

I have another, more general concern. I see there have been cuts in the audiovisual field, which I believe is a future-oriented field. Those institutions are being transformed. Change is necessary for any business in the audiovisual industry, but—

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: There's the whole digital question too.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, when I use the word "audiovisual", I mean all dissemination methods. I am not limiting myself to broadcasting; I also include digital.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: I would like to hear you comment on one aspect of the cost-cutting process. Under subsection 43(2) of part VII of the Official Languages Act, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages must, in principle, conduct consultations when he redirects or amends programs to determine what impact that will have on the official language communities.

Do you think those consultations were conducted in advance, before the cuts were imposed on Radio-Canada? What do you know about that?

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's hard to know. The budget process is not a process involving the same kind of consultation. Some budgetary consultations are conducted, but many issues are concealed by budget secrecy. I try to keep telling the federal institutions that the statutory obligations have not changed, that every federal institution has obligations under part VII of the Official Languages Act and that it must ensure it conducts consultations, but it must also take measures to reduce the harmful impact of program changes, funding reductions or cuts. So I am not in a position to tell you about the nature of the consultations. I know that some institutions are conducting them. I am afraid that others are not thinking about it. Some institutions still believe that part VII of the Official Languages Act does not apply to them. This is a message I am still sending them.

•(1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Mr. Williamson, it's your turn.

Mr. John Williamson: Now I'm ready.

You spoke a little about the Royal Military College of Canada. That didn't just have an impact for a few months or years; it lasted a long time. Can you tell us about that? I would like to know this story a little better. Here I have a chance to hear you talk about this issue. It has been about 17 years now. I remember the news in the paper, but perhaps you can tell us more about it.

Mr. Graham Fraser: It happened following the 1995 budget, when substantial cuts were made. In a spirit of fairness, the government decided to shut down the Royal Roads Military College and the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean.

However, the closing of the Collège militaire has had a long-term impact because the college played a special role. First of all, the student officers at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston often spent a year or a semester in Saint-Jean taking French courses. Closing down Saint-Jean had an effect on the francophone recruitment effort and on the long-term linguistic capacity of the Canadian Forces, since the officers emerging from Kingston did not have the same learning opportunities as the senior officers.

In the early 1990s, a number of books claimed that the Canadian Forces had really turned a corner on bilingualism, that there had been some achievements and that they were on the right track. The closing of the college was a setback. It was harder for the Canadian Forces. Several generations of officers have not had the same learning opportunities as those who received their entire training at the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean or who spent a year or a semester there.

That wasn't intentional. There was no intention to reduce the linguistic capacity of the Canadian Forces. The decision was made in good faith, in a spirit of fairness. In fact, if cuts were made in Victoria, they should also be made in Saint-Jean. However, there has been a considerable long-term effect and we still see it today.

When Mr. O'Connor was minister of National Defence, he decided to restore the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean, but to make it a CEGEP. They intended to restore Saint-Jean and make it a university, but they haven't reached that point yet.

Mr. John Williamson: Do you believe that the two official languages are well served in the Canadian Forces?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I have a great deal of esteem for the approach of General Natynczyk, the current Chief of Defence Staff. He has been very clear about senior officers' obligation to be bilingual. However, we are still receiving complaints. We audited the training of military personnel across the country, particularly in the trades, and there are still major challenges.

I just received quite a moving letter from the father of an officer. One of the members of his unit died in Afghanistan. The soldiers wrote a piece in memory of that soldier. According to tradition, a chaplain reads that kind of text. The chaplain was a unilingual anglophone. Consequently, rather than a tribute to the soldier, they were treated to quite an embarrassing event.

That said, I must say that we have received no official complaints from francophone members who have served in Afghanistan. That is partly due to the fact that the infrastructure of the Royal 22nd Regiment based in Valcartier is shipping out to Afghanistan. These people were in Afghanistan to support them.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Godin, go ahead, please.

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

That must have been a chaplain who was entitled to be unilingual. That's still the Conservative government's philosophy.

Commissioner, I want to go back to the \$6.4 million allocated over the next four years. How do you intend to find the money you

need, since your funding has not been increased, but rather frozen? Can you send the committee a breakdown of the \$6.4 million by the end of the parliamentary session? That will show us how those funds will be spent.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes. I won't ask my colleagues to give you all the details here on how we intend to manage that, but we will be able to send them to you in writing.

Mr. Yvon Godin: All right.

Commissioner, I want to thank you for starting a study on transfers to the provinces. I am simply a bit concerned about certain parts of the letter you sent me, at my request. You mentioned that certain ministers in the provinces had told you they had decided to forward the transfers made to the provinces elsewhere once they received them. However, part VII of the Official Languages Act—is it believe it's sections 41, 42 and 43—is very clear on that point.

You say in your letter: "I am confident you will understand that this audit will be conducted in accordance with my responsibilities and the resources at my disposal." The first part of the sentence does not trouble me, but I would like to understand what you mean by "resources at my disposal". Is that related to the budget? Does that mean you won't have enough money? What resources are you talking about? What is the problem?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I don't see any problem.

The topic is so broad. That's the reason why we are conducting a horizontal audit. It isn't a financial audit. In any case, that kind of audit is not within our authority. That was one way of saying it was not an unlimited audit. Some audits almost seem like criminal investigations, and we hear—

Mr. Yvon Godin: What is criminal is that this money should go to the minorities. It's as simple as that, and it is your responsibility, as Commissioner of Official Languages, to see to it.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Absolutely. We are trying to do that as effectively as possible.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Let's go back to the officers of Parliament. You said very clearly, and I agree with you, that we don't want to personalize this. We want to consider the person's responsibility. I am pleased to hear you say that. It's about the way we respond to the public, about treating both official language groups equally. Have I clearly understood what you said, commissioner?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Now I'm going to talk about the Supreme Court judges.

The Supreme Court's responsibility is to achieve justice for citizens. You agree with me, don't you? The Supreme Court was not established for a lawyer appointed judge to feel he has a right not to speak both official languages. Let's be serious. Who is most important? Isn't it Canadians and Quebecers? Isn't the idea to ensure equal treatment for the Canadian people and for officers of Parliament? Citizens want to be treated equally, to be heard in their language, to be able to speak with the officer of Parliament. Commissioner, I cannot see how you, as Commissioner of Official Languages, could not speak both languages. Let's get serious. That would be the most ridiculous thing imaginable.

● (1020)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Let's say I have always thought that my ability to speak to you in your language was an essential skill for me in discharging my responsibilities.

Mr. Yvon Godin: We are talking about 10 officers of Parliament who perform appreciably the same duties as you. We call them the watchdogs of democracy. We are not talking here about a right to a promotion. You say that citizens should be treated equally. That is the question. Do you agree with me?

Mr. Graham Fraser: With regard to the importance of a bilingualism policy, I have always based on my analysis on the right of citizens to be understood by the state, not on a privilege—

Mr. Yvon Godin: What you are saying, commissioner, although you haven't said it that way, is that, if a signal were sent out in advance to the effect that the judges of the Supreme Court of Canada must be bilingual under the act, people would be trained accordingly. And the training institutions, the universities, have said so themselves. They would be given training in advance. If you want to become a judge of the Supreme Court of Canada, you have to learn both languages. So the message would be sent. You currently don't need to be bilingual to become a judge. That is a bad message being sent to our people who are studying and who want those positions.

In addition, Parliament and the Supreme Court of Canada are not schools; they are institutions. The schools are the universities and training institutions. Once you are there, it's no longer the time to come and learn a second language. It should be learned before that, when you want to obtain that kind of position. There are 31 million people in Canada; I can't believe that we cannot find a bilingual auditor general among them. When the Auditor General submitted his report on the F-35s, for example, the francophone community did not hear him speak French. It was all well and good, but he spoke English on Radio-Canada, and the francophone community was unable to understand him. That's the situation. The goal is not to determine who will get the position, but rather who will benefit from it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Trottier, go ahead, please.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: I have some questions and comments. I admit I am not a legal expert, but it seems to me that it isn't citizens who plead before the Supreme Court of Canada. All arguments are in writing. I believe that, of all the courts, the Supreme Court is the one where there is the least need for language skills. In fact, it is not like a lower court. That's how it operates; that is to say that we have

translation services. I'll say it once again: I am not a legal expert and I have never appeared before the Supreme Court of Canada, but that is how it operates.

The question I would like to ask—

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, may I respond?

There are two points to bear in mind in this debate. First, one-third of appeals from the provinces come from Quebec, and all the argumentation, all the decisions, all the briefs are in French. They are not translated. So a unilingual judge has only the little brief written by his clerk to assist him in understanding a lot of files.

Second, the Official Languages Act was passed in order to make the public service, which was operating in English, aware of the fact that that was discriminatory toward francophones, who were required to work in their second language. People said at the time that the introduction of linguistic obligations would discriminate against everyone from the west. Now we see that the Chief of Defence Staff, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, the Prime Minister of Canada and the Clerk of the Privy Council all come from the west and they are all bilingual.

We are now hearing exactly the same arguments against the bilingualism requirement in the Supreme Court of Canada as we heard 40 years ago about mandatory bilingualism for public servants. Under the bill that I have supported before parliamentary committees, a lower level of bilingualism would be required of judges than that required for public servants.

● (1025)

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Thank you for your comments, but that was more in a broader context. In fact, it was for public servants, for access to federal government jobs. I learned both languages when I was young, but I am an exception in this country. It must be said that most people in the country are not bilingual. People want to prevent these positions from being awarded to people who come from bilingual places in the country, that is to say Montreal, Ottawa and New Brunswick. From the standpoint of equality, whether for unilingual francophones or unilingual anglophones, can those people have access to these positions even if they have not had the opportunity, in their training or from their experience, to learn both languages?

Mr. Graham Fraser: In fact, 60% of federal public servants do not have any linguistic obligations; that's the majority. In British Columbia, where there are 15,000 or 16,000 federal government employees, only a few hundred of them have linguistic obligations. That's less than 3% of federal government employees.

I think it's important to ensure that people who want to have a career in the federal government or on the national stage have access to quality training. That is why, when I began my term, I conducted a study on learning opportunities. We did a follow-up study—that is one of my messages—in the federal government and the institutions that are major recruiters. We told them to go into the universities to let people know they needed bilingual employees and that it was their responsibility to offer learning opportunities to their students.

Public administration schools are increasingly starting to see a need to offer courses in French. Dalhousie University is considering offering some courses in French, and Glendon College has just introduced a French-language master's degree in public administration. The University of Windsor has realized that many students in the French system cannot stay in the region and is therefore considering introducing a bachelor's degree that can be taken completely in French. It is important for young people to have access to quality language training across the country.

The Chair: Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would like to continue along this line, commissioner. You have courageously said that officers of Parliament must be bilingual, not just their offices, but they themselves.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's our interpretation of the act, since the officers are really the public face of their office.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You have made quite similar remarks concerning Supreme Court judges.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: All right.

What do you think of the difficult situation we are in? One of the duties of the parliamentary secretary for official languages is to assist the minister in building relations with all the official language communities. If, after one year, that parliamentary secretary apparently refuses to meet one of the official language groups,

[*English*]

saying, "I don't handle the language enough", is it acceptable?

The Chair: Mr. Dion, I'm going to rule that question out of order.

First of all, it doesn't pertain in any way, shape, or form to the estimates we're examining today. Secondly, it references another member on this committee in a very personal way that is not in any way, shape, or form consistent with government policy or law.

If you could rephrase your question in a more general way, I'll allow it, but I don't want questions referencing specific members' language capacities on this committee.

• (1030)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I did not mention a specific member.

The Chair: You mentioned the parliamentary secretary.

Members on this committee have various contributions to make to the official languages committee. Some members on this committee are perfectly bilingual.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I understand. Can I frame it differently?

The Chair: Yes, you can.

I just want to make a point. Some members are perfectly bilingual, some members are unilingual, and every member has a role to contribute.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

The Chair: I just want to make the point that if you want to ask a question of general import, I'll allow it.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: My question is very general.

The Chair: But please do not reference a specific member.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I didn't ask my question.

The Chair: I will allow you your full time. This will not take up any of your time.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Godin has a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, with all due respect, Mr. Dion did not mention the committee member. He did not name the committee member or speak about a committee member. He spoke about the government's parliamentary secretary and his duties, which, in particular, are to meet with people in the communities. We are not talking about here, in committee. Here we have never asked whether people must be bilingual or not. We have translation and all that. We are talking about the duties of the parliamentary secretary. The Commissioner of Official Languages can answer on that basis. Would it be normal to have a minister of official languages who does not speak both languages? Is it normal for the parliamentary secretary not to speak both languages?

In 2006, Ted Menzies, who had been appointed parliamentary secretary, was withdrawn from the position when the question was raised. The parliamentary secretary, without naming names, could be assigned to another department, to work elsewhere. Here this is the Standing Committee on Official Languages. We are talking about the parliamentary secretary, and I believe that question is admissible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

[*English*]

I think it's too fine a point. The title of the member was mentioned, which in effect is the same thing.

As I said before, I'll allow questions of general import, but not questions that reference a specific member's language abilities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you.

Your point is well taken, so let me try again.

You mentioned that agents of Parliament must be bilingual because of their function. There are two questions.

First, do you think the parliamentary secretary for official languages, whoever he or she is, must, generally speaking, be bilingual because of their responsibilities?

Second, if your answer is that there is no obligation that this person must be bilingual, should this person be ready to meet all official language communities, even though the language barrier must be handled with more difficulties in these circumstances?

Mr. Graham Fraser: First of all, Parliament and parliamentarians are exempt from the application of the Official Languages Act. If I were to receive a formal complaint, it would not be a receivable complaint.

Secondly, throughout my time as commissioner, when I have dealt with issues concerning positions and roles, I have taken real care not to personalize them and mention any individuals.

Third, unlike the other roles that have been a matter of public discussion, I don't know what the formal responsibilities of a parliamentary secretary are. Informally, my understanding is that some parliamentary secretaries play virtually shadow roles to ministers, and others play very minor roles. It's really up to the minister to decide what role a parliamentary secretary plays. So it is impossible for me to have a clear sense of exactly what any parliamentary secretary's role is because it is such an informal designation.

That being said, one of the things that has struck me about this incident is that it comes from a minority community that feels particularly marginalized. The English community in Quebec is not even recognized by the Quebec government as a minority. It is increasingly in a situation where its aging population is not getting the same kind of access to health care that was available to it in the past. It is increasingly being demonized by various elements of the media.

It is a community that feels insecure and does not have the same recognition by Canadian Heritage as the francophone minority communities, which are recognized as a national minority. Because the English community in Quebec is by definition only within one province, it doesn't have the same access to Canadian Heritage at the same level of the bureaucracy.

I heard this expression as a cry of frustration from a community that feels frustrated, marginalized, vulnerable, and on the defensive from a whole variety of forces.

The question I have is, how is the government responding to this fragile, vulnerable, frustrated community?

• (1035)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser. Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Mr. Williamson, go ahead, please.

[English]

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This is a difficult topic. Bilingualism should be something that unites this country and doesn't divide it. I come from a province that is bilingual, but it also has a political history that when language politics emerge, they can be very divisive.

I think the worst thing we could do as legislators, members of Parliament, officers of Parliament, is to ever suggest there are two

classes of Canadians in this country, one class that is fluently bilingual and a secondary class that is unilingual.

Members from across this country were elected to this Parliament. Some couldn't even speak the language of the men and women they were elected to represent. That is up to those constituencies, those voters, to decide if that is appropriate, and apparently they thought it was.

The same thing goes for committees as well. I just worry that if this line of questioning continues, not only do we begin to question the language proficiency of every single member on this committee, but then to suggest....

And here is where I think you made an error, sir, and I'd appreciate a clarification. You basically suggested that if a member of the executive, perhaps even a member of this committee, was not fluent in both languages, they could have a title, they could have a role, but it's clear it might not be an important one. They would, in fact, be a place holder. At least, that's what I took from your comment when you said that you weren't clear on the roles. But if it wasn't an important role, then language wouldn't matter.

So I would ask you to clarify it a little bit, because that's what I took away from it.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I don't think I said that. What I said was that I don't know what the role is, and my understanding is that a parliamentary secretary carries out the responsibilities the minister assigns to a parliamentary secretary and it is up to each minister to decide what those are. So how can I evaluate whether it's appropriate for a parliamentary secretary to master whatever skill when I don't know what the job description is? The reason I don't know what the job description is, is that as far as I know, there is none. It is at the discretion of the minister how he uses the parliamentary secretary.

The question I would like to focus on, which I think is the important question, is does the English minority in Quebec get the same level of service from this government and from this minister that francophone minority communities do across the country, because they don't feel they do for a whole bundle of reasons? They don't get the same level of financing, they don't get the same level of access to Canadian Heritage, and they don't feel they have the same access to the minister's entourage, describe it how you will.

I'm not in the business of deciding what the responsibilities of a parliamentary secretary are, but I am in the business of monitoring, keeping in touch with, and defending the interests of minority language communities.

• (1040)

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you. That's a good answer.

You would agree, then, I suspect.... In parts of the country there is a view that minority language groups already receive too much. I'm not saying I agree with that; it's just that it is a view. You would agree with me, I think, that when we politicize this issue like this, and we make personal attacks on the members who have been elected to this House, we're actually doing relations between the two language communities a disservice.

Just listen to how the temperature has gone up in this room in the last 15 minutes when the competence of the person we shall not name was raised. It has gone through the roof here. I find it completely unacceptable, this line of attack, and I think we should focus on the issue at hand, which is to provide the services to both linguistic groups across the country and not engage in partisan political attacks.

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

We're going to finish with your intervention.

[*Translation*]

There are only five minutes left.

The commissioner has proposed expenditures of \$20,611,000 for this fiscal year.

[*English*]

Of that amount, \$2.25 million is the statutory amount that does not require further approval. So the remaining amount the committee is being asked to approve today is \$18,361,000.

I'm going to put two questions.

Go ahead, Monsieur Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to ask a question about that amount.

You referred to \$18,358,000, but, in the commissioner's testimony, when we look at the total estimates, which were \$20,659,000—

[*English*]

The Chair: That's for the previous year.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, it's for 2011-2012.

[*English*]

The Chair: No, but to the left of the column it's for 2012-13.

The proposed spending the commissioner has made is \$20,611,000.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, but a little earlier, he referred in his testimony to \$21.9 million. So there is a difference of approximately \$700,000.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, because in that amount are statutory amounts that include benefits....

I'll ask the commissioner to clarify the difference between the \$21.9 million he mentioned in his opening remarks and the \$20,611,000 that appears on the Privy Council's summary.

Mr. Graham Fraser: My understanding is that this relates to a number of statutory amounts that we are obliged to pay out, but I will ask Madame Cloutier to respond in greater detail.

Ms. Lise Cloutier: The numbers the commissioner mentioned in his speech are the numbers that we put in our report on plans and priorities, which is our planned spending. The main estimates are the moneys that you are voting on.

The planned spending includes an estimate of what our carry-forward will be, plus other spending authorities, so it's not the same amount.

What you're really voting on is the main estimates, which is the base budget.

The Chair: Okay, understood.

● (1045)

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Godin.

The commissioner has proposed expenditures of \$20,611,000.

[*English*]

Subtracting the statutory amounts, the remaining amount that the committee is being asked to approve, it is \$18,361,000.

PRIVY COUNCIL

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages

Vote 20—Program expenditures.....\$18,361,000

(Vote 20 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall I report vote 20 of the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much to the committee members and to the Commissioner of Official Languages. We very much appreciate your testimony.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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