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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

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• (1140)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 56th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages on this Thursday, October 25, 2012. Pursuant to Standing Order 108, we are here today to review the 2011-2012 annual report of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The report was referred to the committee on Tuesday, October 16, 2012.

[English]

I want to welcome our five guests today. We have Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages;

[Translation]

Ms. Charlebois, Ms. Cloutier, Mr. Giguère and Ms. Tremblay.

[English]

They are all from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Without further ado—

Yes, Mr. Godin.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Chair, I would like to provide the committee with the following notice of motion:

That the Committee invite the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages to discuss his report on official languages for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2011, by December 1, 2012, at a two-hour televised meeting.

The Chair: Thank you for introducing this notice of motion.

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

[English]

The Chair: Without further ado, we'll begin with an opening statement from Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, honourable members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

I'd like to thank your committee for its interest in the activities of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. The relationship between Parliament and my office is of the utmost importance.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, to present the findings of my 2011-2012 annual report, I am accompanied today by my team that you have already introduced.

[English]

Last week, I tabled my 2011-2012 annual report in Parliament. This is my sixth annual report.

I tabled the report within the context of the restructuring of the public service workforce and the streamlining of federal organizations following the budget cuts announced in the last federal budget.

[Translation]

Despite the fact that the Official Languages Act is now into its fifth decade, Canada's linguistic duality too often goes unnoticed. When everything runs smoothly, bilingual services are just a part of normal, everyday life. Only in their absence do they attract attention. Failure is obvious, success is invisible.

[English]

This year, I want to emphasize successes, and my report focuses on being pragmatic and encouraging.

I make some recommendations and I mention the importance of actions that need to be taken now to prepare for Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017. Canada's linguistic duality should always be visible and audible, and even more so when we celebrate our history.

[Translation]

I also present the findings of our observations in the National Capital Region that caused a media stir in August 2011. The observations sought to recreate the experience of English- and French-speaking visitors in the National Capital Region, and proved to be very encouraging.

[English]

I take a look at the approach of businesses that have chosen to promote linguistic duality in their business practices. I also discuss the complaints filed with my office and the results of some of our investigations.

As I mentioned, it's very important that linguistic duality be visible when Canada celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2017. Giving young Canadians more opportunities to experience the other official language is an excellent way to help Canada celebrate its shared heritage.

[Translation]

According to the figures published by Statistics Canada yesterday, Canada's bilingualism rate went from 17.4% in 2006 to 17.5% in 2011. Despite the various initiatives proposed by the government of Canada to promote English and French second-language learning, the proportion of bilingual Canadians remains low. Canadians are very interested in becoming bilingual. However, in some regions, the availability of programs in the second official language cannot keep up with the demand. Every year, 20,000 young people want to take part in exchange programs, but only 8,000 spaces are available.

• (1145)

[English]

Therefore, in my 2011-2012 annual report, I make two recommendations to promote second language learning in order to increase the number of Canadians who speak our two official languages.

I recommend that the Prime Minister take the necessary measures to double the number of young Canadians who participate each year in short- and long-term language exchanges at the high school and post-secondary levels.

[Translation]

I also recommend that the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages work together with provincial and territorial governments as well as post-secondary institutions to increase the number of programs in which students can take courses in their second official language.

[English]

This year, Ottawa takes centre stage in my report.

In the preamble to the Official Languages Act, the Government of Canada is committed to enhancing the bilingual character of the national capital region and to encouraging the business community, labour organizations, and voluntary organizations in Canada to foster the recognition and use of English and French. The act also mentions that it's the commissioner's duty to take all actions and measures within his authority with a view to ensuring recognition of the status of each of the official languages.

[Translation]

With these aspects of the act in mind, my office conducted a number of observations to find out whether linguistic duality is truly a fundamental value in the nation's capital.

We recreated a typical visitor's experience in the National Capital Region, on the Ottawa side as well as the Gatineau side. The objective was to determine whether it was possible to be served in French at various businesses in Ottawa and in English at various businesses in Gatineau.

[English]

Our observations showed that there is substantial bilingual capacity for visitors, but that it is often invisible. The bilingualism of businesses in tourist areas is Ottawa's best-kept secret. Few employees of these businesses used the "Hello, *bonjour*" bilingual greeting to show customers that they were able to provide service in

both official languages. Employees of federal institutions, for whom bilingual greetings are a legal obligation, are doing better.

[Translation]

In Gatineau, on the Quebec side of the National Capital Region, almost all of the businesses were able to serve visitors in English, but only 10% of them made an active offer. In general, most hotels and restaurants in Gatineau set an example that businesses in other Canadian cities should follow.

My office is interested in the private sector because linguistic duality is everybody's business. Although they are not subject to the Official Languages Act, businesses operating in Canada are more competitive when they use both English and French in their approaches with clients.

[English]

For example, Rogers Communications and Mountain Equipment Co-op have chosen to incorporate the principles of linguistic duality into their management models. Both offer services in Canada's two official languages.

This is why it's important for the Government of Canada to continue to encourage the use of both official languages among Canadian businesses and international businesses located in Canada. I therefore recommend that the Minister of Industry create a support mechanism to support Canadian businesses to develop their capacity to operate and provide services in both official languages.

[Translation]

The high-profile appointments of two unilingual Canadians—one to the Supreme Court of Canada and the other to the position of Auditor General of Canada—had a substantial impact on public opinion throughout Canada. The controversy surrounding the appointments has shown that both English—and French-speaking Canadians have greater expectations when it comes to the bilingualism of senior public officials. Unfortunately, these setbacks have obscured a number of successes.

[English]

As the preface in my annual report says, "failure is obvious, success is invisible". It is important to focus on the successes of Canadian language policy that go unnoticed, including the fact that many top government officials from western Canada are bilingual, that the majority of provincial premiers are bilingual, and that a great number of ministers and parliamentarians from all parties from across Canada are bilingual.

• (1150)

[Translation]

Part of my mandate is to ensure that federal institutions respect the language rights of their employees and of the general public. Sometimes, I do this proactively—for example, by intervening with institutions to help them comply with the Official Languages Act—and other times my office conducts investigations following complaints that were brought to my attention.

[English]

In 2011-2012, my office received a total of 643 complaints, 518 of which were deemed to be admissible. Out of these complaints, 341 involved communications with and services to the public, 79 pertained to language of work, 45 were related to the advancement of English and French, and 42 concerned the language requirements of positions.

[Translation]

My office investigated the federal institutions against which these complaints were filed. Some institutions reacted positively and took advantage of the opportunity to make changes.

The Department of National Defence corrected many shortcomings regarding the balance of English and French content on its websites, and ensuring the equality of English and French has become a higher priority for the Department of National Defence websites.

The Passport Canada office in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, which is not required by law to serve the public in both official languages, went beyond its obligations by officially designating the office as bilingual in order to better serve the more than 2,000 Franco-Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

[English]

Our investigations revealed an important truth: many of our federal institutions have an ongoing commitment to official bilingualism. This positive engagement deserves special mention.

Now let's take a look at the audits.

In September 2011, Air Canada published its linguistic action plan, at about the same time as the public release of our audit report. Because my office continues to receive complaints about Air Canada, it's important for the carrier to address all of the recommendation in the audit report as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

In 2011-2012, my office conducted an audit to determine how well Parks Canada was providing services of equal quality in English and French to visitors. Although there are a number of shortcomings that need to be addressed, Parks Canada has many strengths with regard to official languages.

In 2011, my office conducted an audit of Industry Canada. In the audit report, I made six recommendations to help Industry Canada improve its performance under Part VII of the act.

[English]

Before I answer your questions, I'd like to add one more thing: even though I am focusing on successes this year, we have to remember that success can be fleeting. If we are not steadfast in continuing to protect and promote language rights, the situation can degenerate rapidly.

Some organizations have chosen to centralize services outside of regions designated as bilingual for language of work purposes.

[Translation]

We have already received complaints about the impact of government cutbacks, including the closing of an experimental farm located in a rural francophone area, the closing of nine scientific libraries, two of which served French-speaking Canadians, and the termination of the co-operative development initiative, the only federal program dedicated to cooperatives.

We have also heard from public servants who are worried about losing their right to work in the official language of their choice. Other public servants are afraid to exercise their right to work in their preferred language because they don't want to be singled out in attrition exercises.

[English]

At a time when language issues are re-emerging on the Canadian political landscape, it is especially important to remember that the future of Canada's linguistic duality depends on our ability to foster a unified linguistic environment. English and French both have a place in every region of the country.

Thank you for your attention. I'd now like to take the remaining time to answer any questions you may have.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

We have one hour and five minutes for questions and comments.

We will begin with Mr. Godin.

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

I would like to thank Mr. Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages, for joining us today with his team.

Mr. Fraser, I am going to ask a number of questions, some of which concern me in particular.

You have taken the time to conduct a study about the private sector here, in Ottawa. This study was very important to you and you carried it out. It is over now. Some might say that you have gone beyond your mandate, but you have done the study and you have presented some surprising data. We should actually talk more about some of the results.

However, I am more concerned about something else, which really falls under your mandate. I am going to ask you a question by bringing an issue before you.

I am talking about temporary foreign workers who come here to Canada. If we look at the data from Statistics Canada, we see that the immigration rate has increased. So it is not so much about the fact that the use of English or French has gone down. That is what they are basically saying.

What are our francophones being told? The federal government has made cuts and changes to employment insurance. Yet it is saying that there are a lot of jobs in Canada and that employers are looking to hire people. What are our people told when they want to apply for a job in Alberta, as scaffolders for example, and the test is conducted only in English in Miramichi? There is no test in French. Yet, in Fort McMurray, Alberta, people from other countries are being brought in. They are temporary foreign workers who speak neither French nor English.

I believe that your mandate allows you to investigate that aspect. If you need a complaint, you have found the right person to file it. That is what I mean when I say that this falls under your mandate. Before providing permits to foreign workers who come to work here, the Government of Canada must make sure that there are no Canadians who can fill those positions.

Furthermore, women who would like to be able to work as chambermaids in the camps in Alberta are not allowed to because they do not speak English. That issue falls under your responsibility.

What do you think about that?

• (1155)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, I had not thought about that when I made the recommendation that Industry Canada develop measures to help companies to provide services in both official languages. However, that fully applies to this type of process. It makes no sense that francophones, who are in the situation they are in because of changes made to the Employment Insurance Act and who are forced to look for work farther away, are facing language discrimination.

The federal government has a responsibility to address this problem. You talked about permits. Often, there are other support programs for industries that hire workers, such as training programs, assistance programs...

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I know that the time is going by quickly, but this has to do with a language program. Our country has two official languages. How can we bring foreign workers here who speak neither English nor French, when we have francophones who can't even get first crack at the jobs in those places, with the permission of the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism? That is the point of my question.

Mr. Graham Fraser: This is the first time that I have heard of this problem. I am going to pay particular attention to the issue and see how it can be addressed.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am going to read my second question because it might be a bit complicated.

You expressed your disapproval when a Quebec minister described English as a foreign language. Yet, in the courts of Alberta, when a person speaks French, it is called "foreign language spoken". Francophones are even required to fill out the legal forms themselves. Even worse, over the past few years, we have seen that French-language statements made by the accused have disappeared from the official transcripts of the hearings.

You have recently refused to deal with a complaint like that. The Criminal Code, which falls under federal jurisdiction, provides for language rights provisions. In the Constitution, the procedure in

criminal matters clearly falls under the federal Parliament. In our view, the practice in the courts of Alberta could well be contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Since the federal government is not doing anything to address this serious violation of rights, what do you plan to do to ensure access to justice in Canada's two official languages and to ensure that French is no longer treated as a foreign language in the courts?

I would like to add something else along those lines. Imagine how a francophone in Alberta must feel if, in a case under the Criminal Code, the person sees that the transcript has the English part, but the French part is labelled "foreign language".

Mr. Fraser, could you comment on that?

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Fraser, you have the floor.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That is a serious situation, which has been reported. I think that the right of any person before the court to have access to justice in the official language of their choice is very important. Actually, to ensure that this right is upheld and that courts are able to respect it, we are in the process of undertaking a study on the issue of access to justice across the country.

Ms. Tremblay, could you maybe further explain the scope of this study?

Mrs. Johane Tremblay (General Counsel, Legal Affairs Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): The purpose of the study under way is to examine the bilingual capacity of the judiciary in the superior courts across the country. The study will deal with two issues, namely the judicial appointment process and the language training given to judges in superior courts.

I would like to add a comment to the case that you brought to the attention of the commissioner and that we concluded that we would not be able to investigate. We explained to the person that the court in question, the Alberta Provincial Court, was not an institution that we could investigate. We can, of course, investigate the federal Department of Justice, but not the courts that fall under provincial jurisdiction. That is one of the reasons we had concluded that we could not carry out an investigation. To my knowledge, I don't think that it was a criminal trial. We would need to check that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Tremblay.

Mr. Gourde, the floor is now yours.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to thank the commissioner for being here this morning.

I appreciate that you mentioned education in your report. Even though education is a provincial issue and we are very limited in what we can do, could we push further? We want to promote linguistic duality across Canada. Actually, we might have tools available, but we may not want to develop them or have refrained from doing so. I'll give you an example.

There are some programs for children aged two to five years in French and others in English. However, we don't see programs where the content is half and half. This would enable French-speaking communities to have contact with English and English-speaking communities to have contact with French. The same program could go all across Canada. We would be promoting our country, what we are, our culture and our linguistic duality, all at the same time.

I don't know if CBC/Radio-Canada could have this in its mandate. In any event, its mandate is to unite all Canadians. Could finding a way to include educational programs for young children, and perhaps for another age group, be an integral part of its programming? Perhaps it could conduct a pilot project on this.

I think this would help promote linguistic duality. It would enable children starting school to have a much stronger base in both languages and would follow them throughout their education. When a child gets to the secondary and post-secondary level, they must already have reached a certain level. But we are already losing a lot of people. However, if the base was broadened, that would enable all Canadians to discover both official languages.

I would like to hear what you have to say about that, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser: The issue of early childhood is of particular importance. During a regional consultation in Sudbury, Radio-Canada managers asked people what their priority was with respect to Radio-Canada programs. Their answer was very clear: their children.

Parents in official language minority communities are very keen for their children to have access to programs for children in French that target the problems and situations specific to their reality in a minority setting. Often, in official language minority communities, the concern is not so much learning a second language as reinforcing the mother tongue.

Furthermore, the most famous program for children in the world, *Sesame Street*, has traditionally included a segment on learning a second language. In Canada, it is French, while in the United States, the language is Spanish.

I am certainly no expert in that area. But this matter could be explored with broadcasters such as CBC/Radio-Canada, TVO, TFO and other educational networks that specialize in this area.

• (1205)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Do you think there have been studies on this? If not, will it take political will? Can you check what currently exists in the mandates? I know this, but minimally. I don't know if this may be of any significant value.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I admit that I am not an expert in this, and I do not know what resources have been allocated to children's programming and in what way university research is supporting this type of programming. It is a fairly specialized area of research and I hesitate to comment without background information.

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

The Chair: Thank you.

You mentioned *Sesame Street*. I think Mitt Romney is going to cancel it, along with Big Bird.

Mr. Dion, you have the floor.

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

First, I would like to welcome the Commissioner of Official Languages and his colleagues.

I have seven minutes, but I have three important questions to ask. The first has to do with the census, the second with complaints and the third with budget cuts. But I would like to clarify something first.

The first recommendation covers Canada's 150th birthday. My colleagues will understand why I'm bringing this up.

Mr. Fraser, you understand symbols and know that it's important. In 2017, we will celebrate Canada on the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation. We can't understand why French and English are our official languages if there is an impasse on what happened before 1867. No country abbreviates its history. We should not insult Canada's history. It is very important to speak about the 150th anniversary of Confederation, especially given your role. This is addressed to your team, as well.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's a very good point, and I readily accept it.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Now, let's address the issue.

These two recommendations seem weak to me, even if they are helpful. You ask that the number of exchanges involving young people be doubled and that much more effort be made with respect to the number of programs giving students the possibility of taking certain courses.

Unless I'm mistaken, the census data released yesterday indicate that, for the first time since the Official Languages Act came into force, the percentage of Canadians who can hold a conversation in French has dropped noticeably. The percentage dropped from 10.8% to 10.2% in four years. That is extremely alarming. But this decrease is due solely to what is going on outside Quebec.

In the past four years, there has been a flagrant lack of leadership from the federal government in this respect. I hope it will adopt both measures. I'm tempted to say "but still". In the testimony we have heard in committee as part of the report on the roadmap, we heard the following:

That the Government of Canada take the necessary measures to guarantee that Canadians have the right to learn a second official language as part of an educational continuum from early childhood to the post-secondary period.

I do believe that we must take this path. The federal government must show leadership, and allocate funding to this area, not for Spanish, even though it is a very beautiful third language. The funds must be for French. There is also English in Quebec, but things are going very well in that respect for now. It is important to be serious, but they aren't, and the recent results show that. We must demand that the Government of Canada also have a sense of symbols, realities, and that it inform Canadians that it has responsibilities. This means that the positions of responsibility have to be bilingual and that, if young Canadians want to occupy those positions, they must learn French. It's essential.

I'll let you comment on what I've said.

•(1210)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Mr. Chair, I thank the honourable member for his question.

I would like to mention something I found fairly frustrating with respect to the interpretation of the census data. It's the obsession with percentages.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If I may, Mr. Fraser, I would like to say that, even in terms of numbers, the growth is ridiculous. You're right, there is growth, but it goes from 2,561,955 to 2,584,680. It is almost within the margin of error. There is no change, even in terms of the raw numbers.

Mr. Graham Fraser: That's a good point. But, based only on...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: If it was only small variations, there wouldn't be anything to worry about, I agree. But we are losing almost a whole percentage point. It went from 10.8% to 10.2%. If you are talking about the proportion, that is more than a percentage point, and that is close to 10% in four years. With respect to numbers, we are just treading water.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I agree, we are at a standstill. But in terms of percentage, as a country, we cannot take in 250,000 people a year and still expect the same percentage, be it for the mother tongue, the language spoken at home...

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I'm sorry for interrupting you, but I do not like the answer you're giving. We are facing a failure. We need to call a spade a spade. The evidence is that, according to a study that has not yet been made public but that was mentioned in the *Globe and Mail*, this is affecting young people. We can see this drop even in our young people and it is having an impact. The percentage of young people outside of Quebec who can speak French went from 15.2% to 11.4%, in four years.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Clearly in light of this extraordinary challenge of being a receiving country, we need to accelerate the process and invest more. But it is important to acknowledge at the same time that, based on the census data, more people speak French in Quebec and outside Quebec, and more people are bilingual. However, the arrival of 1,250,000 people since the last census has clearly had an impact on the percentages.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would accept that answer if we were talking about the mother tongue, but not when it has to do with learning French. Everyone can learn French.

In my riding, some new immigrants speak three languages: English, French and their mother tongue. I am talking here about young people. The older people often barely speak English and French. But the young, 19-year-olds from Armenia and Maghreb or anywhere else are impressive. So people can learn three languages. It's not the end of the world.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I agree.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: But there is no leadership.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I quite agree, and that is why we made that recommendation about close collaboration between the federal government, the provinces and the universities to increase opportunities to learn a second language outside the classroom.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: My second question is the following.

With respect to complaints, a decrease seems good. The complaints received went from 1,729 to 643 in two years. Is that due to what we are hearing on the ground? Here is my fear. Would it be due to the fact that it is taking longer and longer to process complaints, which is deterring people from complaining?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Mr. Fraser, you have the floor.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I don't accept that it is taking longer. In fact, we have introduced service standards to ensure that complaints are handled within an appropriate period of time. We are seeing that there are more complaints being made with on complex topics, relating to part VII, for example, where the complaints make up only 13% of the total, but require much more time to process.

What has in part influenced the decrease over the past two years is that there were a larger number of complaints previously about specific incidents. I think the Aveos issue led to 400 complaints. There were 800 complaints last year regarding Radio-Canada in Windsor.

It is very difficult to explain exactly why there has been a decrease.

•(1215)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Do you have official numbers regarding the waiting time for processing complaints?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We can provide them.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: The committee would like to have them, I'm sure.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Trottier, the floor is yours.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Fraser, I would like to thank you and your colleagues for being here.

As you know, I am well aware of the often precarious situation of the francophone population outside Quebec. I liked your comment about not being obsessed with percentages when we look at the census data. In fact, since 2006, the actual number of francophones outside Quebec has increased. This tells me that the francophone population outside Quebec is doing fairly well.

As you said, when we think about the home countries of immigrants coming to Canada, we see that the Philippines is now the largest country. There is also China and India. These are countries where French isn't really spoken. No matter what the first language of immigrants from India is, they speak English, or English is their second language. We must be realistic, after all.

When we are talking about the services offered to francophones outside Quebec, is the government doing well? Have they been offered services of the public service in the past five years? What about more optional services and cultural support, for example? Has significant progress been made in the last five years?

Mr. Graham Fraser: You have studied the Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality in detail, which includes close to \$250,000 for culture. With respect to services, we are still seeing, through the complaints received, that Air Canada and Canada Post continue to have problems meeting their obligations.

As for some other departments, I have found that it all depends on the leadership and commitment of the senior executives. Some organizations, such as the Canada Border Services Agency, are committed to making improvements. They have an action plan and are making specific efforts to improve their performance.

When there is a change and less commitment to the obligations regarding linguistic duality, problems surface fairly quickly in the capacity to deliver services. The employees decode messages from upper management very quickly. If management doesn't take the issue seriously, the employees quickly understand that.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: On page 12, the Molson Foundation scholarships and other scholarships from the government are mentioned. I think that's very important for high school and university students. The francophone population outside Quebec can benefit from those scholarships, but should other populations be targeted instead? What can be done to target Canadians without an education or those who are not from a francophone family?

● (1220)

Mr. Graham Fraser: The Molson scholarships are funded by the Molson Foundation. The foundation gives a certain amount of money to anglophone students who decide to study at the Université Laval. Those students greatly benefit from the experience. I think that's a great model.

I'm always very inspired by the European example provided by the Erasmus Mundus program and by the considerable investment of the European community. Thousands of European students receive funding to study in another European country. Here, in Canada, there are often problems in terms of course equivalencies or course recognition. So there are still obstacles to those kinds of exchange programs. I think that increased investment in immersion and scholarships is a positive move.

The University of Ottawa also offers scholarships to students in post-secondary immersion. Those students greatly appreciate the financial assistance. Yesterday evening, I met two parliamentary interns who had both graduated from that program at the University of Ottawa. They thought the experience was incredible.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: The media, especially television, constitute another shortcoming that often affects francophones outside Quebec. Recently, the Prime Minister announced support for TV5 when it comes to Canadian productions.

Do you think access to a francophone television station is important?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think it's extremely important. TV5, TFO and Radio-Canada are some of the examples. People often underestimate the impact of Radio-Canada in official language minority communities where that station becomes almost like community radio.

In addition, discussions are ongoing to create a television network for and by francophones outside Quebec. I have been following the

progress of that project with great interest. I cannot comment on this directly, but I can say that, for minority families, access to a media environment at home is very important for maintaining the language.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Lauzon, go ahead.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Fraser. We have not seen each other in a few years.

You mentioned that this report was your sixth. I think I have been here for at least four or five of your reports. I have noticed that this report was much more positive than the first one, six years ago. Many improvements have been made, and I think we should rejoice at our successes. Your report mentions various successes around the country. I agree with you when it comes to the growth of bilingualism across the country, outside and inside Quebec. I think we should talk about a number of positive aspects.

You said that people could learn French or another language. You are a very good example of that. If memory serves me right, you started learning French at the age of 16.

● (1225)

Mr. Graham Fraser: It was actually at the age of 18 or 19.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I think you were an exchange student at the time.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I actually learned French more through summer jobs. All my education was in English in Toronto.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: So you are my role model. As you know, I also learned French as an adult. So you are a very good example for me.

You mentioned that, in your opinion, a lot of progress has been made within departments. We have heard from the senior officials of several departments. They have a very demanding action plan. I think that's the explanation for the improvements within departments. Would you agree?

Mr. Graham Fraser: It is a very good sign when an organization has an action plan. When there is no action plan or no clear message to employees, they may have a wrong impression of the department's or the institution's commitment.

When we were conducting an assessment in an institution that had invested great efforts, as part of the Olympic Games, to ensure an active offer of services, we discovered through interviews with employees that they thought this effort was only being made during the Olympic Games. When we brought that to the management's attention, they were very surprised. They told us they had never said any such thing. Obviously, they had not made it clear to the employees that their responsibility in terms of active offer would be ongoing.

Sometimes, the message about the active offer is sent, but people don't know what to do when other information is requested in French. For a service to really be provided, certain measures must be taken. In many cases, the employees don't receive the message. It's not sufficiently well defined, and there is no structure that helps employees understand what it means to provide a service in both official languages.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I think it helps a lot when departments have an official languages champion.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Exactly. The champion network in departments is a key initiative.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: I have two other short questions for you.

First, how do you define the term “bilingualism“?

This is your sixth report. Do you feel that many improvements have been made since your first report? I think that bilingualism and the promotion of both official languages have made tremendous strides across the country. What's your opinion on that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Please keep your answer brief, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Based on the Treasury Board's figures, I think some progress has been made within the public service. In fact, between 92% and 93% of positions designated as bilingual are held by people who have passed tests. Does that mean that the language of work is truly respected in those departments? Do the people who have passed the test use both languages? It is more difficult to answer that question.

As for bilingualism in the country, as Mr. Dion showed, the status quo has been maintained. As far the definition of bilingualism goes, that is a term I shrink from using because it may mean all sorts of different things to different people. To me, being bilingual means having the ability to speak both official languages. The official bilingualism policy that applies to the government has to do with the government's ability to provide services in both official languages. It also involves giving public servants the right to work in the language of their choice in regions designated as bilingual.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Benskin, you have the floor.

[*English*]

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

It's good to see you here, you and your colleagues.

I have two questions. I'll go with my first question first.

The government has recently decided that they're going to enter into agreements with the U.K. and share embassy duties. In my opinion—and I'm wondering if you share this opinion—whether or not there's a high percentage of French usage, I believe that in the spirit of what this country represents as a bilingual country, a country of linguistic duality, that should be represented, as you just said, in the official capacity.

I'm wondering if you feel that steps should be taken to make sure that there is access to French in what would be primarily anglophone-usage embassies?

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes, I do.

In fact, when I saw the announcement of the agreement, I noticed that in contrast to the agreement that was reached with Australia in the past, there was no linguistic clause, so my first reaction was to phone the department and point out that there didn't appear to be any reference to language obligations. I was assured that this agreement was a framework agreement and that it would be followed up by a more detailed agreement on individual posts in which there would be language clauses to ensure that Canadians who would be dealing with Canadian matters within British offices would be assured of being able to get service in their language of choice.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

I would think that in the overall framework of the image of this country, the language clauses would actually be in there. Maybe it would not be in detail, but the fact that there would be—

Mr. Graham Fraser: I was assured that they would be in detail once they got beyond the general agreement of understanding that was announced by Minister Baird and his British counterpart.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Okay. Thank you.

I'll follow up with one of the statements that you made earlier in terms of how our two official languages are influenced by the influx of new arrivals who speak neither English nor French. I'm wondering about something from the census of Canada in 2011 that said 63.5% of the population whose mother tongue was neither English nor French reported speaking English at home.

In your opinion, what kind of steps need to be taken to ease access and encourage the adoption of both official languages outside of Quebec by new arrivals? New arrivals coming into Quebec do have to achieve a certain level of proficiency in being in Quebec, and access to French language courses is slightly easier in Quebec than in the rest of Canada.

I think having both languages and encouraging new arrivals to take on both languages gives them an opportunity that many Canadians miss, in that by having both languages, they can travel any part of this country, whether for work or for pleasure, and be able to communicate.

What would you suggest, or what would you encourage the government to do in terms of making sure that new arrivals outside of Quebec have more fluid access to both languages as far as learning is concerned?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that it's very important that there be close collaboration between Citizenship and Immigration, provincial governments, and local francophone organizations. I know that the Government of Manitoba was very disappointed when the provincial choice program was basically repatriated by the minister, because the Manitoba government had made a commitment to significantly increase the francophone immigration to Manitoba, and the initial experience had been very positive, in part because of the close collaboration between CIC, the Manitoba government, and the Société Franco-Manitobaine, which had a member organization called Accueil Francophone, which greeted francophone immigrants and refugees at the airport, accompanied them to temporary housing, enrolled their children in French language school, and also provided courses for them.

One of the things that has struck me, and we've done a number of forums on diversity across the country, is the degree to which immigrants who come to this country want to learn both official languages. They see the fact that Canada has two official languages as something that draws them to the country. They see learning both official languages as a part of acquiring a greater Canadian identity.

I think that there are a variety of ways in which the federal government can assist them in doing this.

● (1235)

The Chair: Okay, thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Wilks is next.

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses for being here today.

My French is coming, but it's a little slow. You can respond in the language of your choice, but I'll speak in English, if you don't mind.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Not at all.

Mr. David Wilks: I wanted to focus in on something that in my riding is quite prevalent, and that's Parks Canada. I have four national parks in my riding, those being Kootenay, Yoho, Glacier, and Mount Revelstoke, and Waterton's not too far off. I must commend the staff of Parks Canada in western Canada that I'm familiar with for doing their best at providing both official languages.

However, I see in your report on pages 39 and 40 that you make nine recommendations to encourage Parks Canada to continue to improve on in this capacity, and you stated that you were satisfied with the action plan and timeframe proposed by Parks Canada to address eight of the recommendations.

I was wondering if you could expand on some of those recommendations, just so I have some understanding of them.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Yes. I'll probably ask Madame Charlebois to go into greater detail.

What we found was, on the one hand, as you say in reference to your riding, an exemplary use of active offer, of greeting people by saying, "Hello, *bonjour*". Sometimes employees weren't quite sure how to handle things beyond that if they were not bilingual themselves, even though Parks Canada at the time of the Olympics

had put out an excellent video for employees on precisely what to do if they were not bilingual but had somebody who was seeking information in the other language. It showed employees saying, "*Un moment, s'il vous plaît*", and taking the phone, knowing where they could get in touch with a bilingual colleague. There were a number of other structural recommendations that we made.

Ghislaine, could you elaborate?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Assurance Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): One of them mainly was to make sure that Parks Canada consults with the communities as well to make sure that they meet their needs in terms of the programs they offer in the different parks. That was one.

Another was to make sure that when they enter into service agreements with different organizations that provide services for Parks Canada, they would make sure that they had the linguistic clauses in the agreements as well. I can provide you with a copy of the report with the recommendation if you want.

Mr. David Wilks: Yes, please.

Thank you.

Further to that, Mr. Chair, within the national parks we also have police services from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I noted that was not in the report at all.

Have you made any observations with regard to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and its ability to provide in both official languages? I'd like your comments on that.

● (1240)

Mr. Graham Fraser: There's nothing specifically related to the Parks Canada report.

In the past we have had complaints about the RCMP. The RCMP has certain obligations in certain areas, but not in others. Where that has been problematic and ultimately became settled by the courts was in New Brunswick, where there was a conflict between what the federal government designated as a bilingual region and what New Brunswick designated as a bilingual region. Basically the courts said that the RCMP had to meet the higher standard. The RCMP has had some challenges in being able to offer services in both languages.

Mr. David Wilks: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have time for a very brief question and a very brief answer.

Mr. David Wilks: Thank you.

If you have any information, could you focus specifically with regard to Banff National Park, where the RCMP has a detachment, as well as Lake Louise? Have you noticed an improvement, shall we say, in providing both official languages?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I'll have to get back to you on that and I would be happy to do so.

The Chair: Prior to being elected, Mr. Wilks was an officer in the RCMP, so he knows a little bit about what he's talking about.

We'll now go to Mr. Dionne Labelle.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Dion shared his concerns earlier regarding the low bilingualism rate among young people in Canada. It is said that the example comes from our leaders. This year, the examples provided by the government are not very good. The trivialization of appointing unilingual anglophones to positions such as Supreme Court justice and auditor general sends a terrible message to young Canadians. The message seems to be that they do not have to learn French because they will have access to the highest government positions anyway. That is a very bad message, a very bad strategy.

In your annual report, you recommend that the Minister of Industry create a support mechanism to encourage Canadian companies to develop their bilingual capacities. That is how I have understood your recommendation. You probably know that our party introduced, through MP Robert Aubin, a bill seeking to harmonize the Canada Labour Code with the Quebec labour legislation, so that thousands of Quebec workers employed by companies that fall under federal jurisdiction can also have the language rights granted by the charter. Five months ago, the government struck a committee, but that committee has still not begun its work.

Yesterday, I looked at the statistics on the use of French in Montreal. I think the situation is worrisome.

The right to work in French is not protected for employees who work for companies in Quebec that come under federal jurisdiction. What do you think about that? We have not heard you say much about that situation.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have considered the issue. Our concern is somewhat technical, as some of those institutions are already subject to the Official Languages Act. The bill would make them subject to two different language regimes, which would be a problem. We have actually raised that....

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: It's better to protect twice than once. In Quebec, especially in some banks, all the top executives speak only English. Their employees have to communicate with them in English. Their right to use French at work is not being protected.

Those businesses fall under federal jurisdiction. It seems to me that a message is being sent when it comes to protecting French, at least in Quebec.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Exactly. We had waited, as we thought we would be able to better identify the problem once the committee you mentioned had examined the issue, but so far....

•(1245)

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: They have not been working hard.

Mr. Graham Fraser: We also want to consult the QCGN and the FCFA. This is an important issue, and we are paying special attention to it.

However, as those institutions are not subject to the Official Languages Act, I don't receive any complaints about them. That's why it is difficult for me to determine the scope of this problem.

That's actually why I wanted to see what the committee thought about this issue. However, I am not fully satisfied.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Yes, we aren't fully satisfied.

As I have a bit of time left, I will come back to the statistics.

Francophone communities outside Quebec basically have three ways to ensure their survival: their birth rate, their ability to integrate allophones and the control of the assimilation rate. However, based on what I heard yesterday and what we have seen since 1971, I would say that there's much work to be done in that area.

I see that there is no government plan, especially in terms of immigration. Although francophones represent about 14% of the population outside Quebec, their communities receive only 4% of allophone immigrants. Considering the other factors involved, the decline can be readily expected.

What kind of a plan should the government adopt—be it in terms of the economy, immigration or education—to ensure the longevity and development of francophone communities?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dionne Labelle.

Mr. Fraser, you have the floor.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think that, across the country, communities are increasingly recognizing the importance of immigration to their development. There is a government policy aimed at increasing francophone immigration in those communities, but the fact that the provinces have taken back the power to select immigrants changes things. Be that as it may, I think that few provinces have a specific target. I think that Manitoba and New Brunswick are the only provinces that recruit abroad. In my opinion, the provinces and their local francophone associations should pool their efforts and use immigration to improve their institutions and the vitality of those communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Bateman, over to you.

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us, along with your team. I am proud to be here.

I want to begin by specifying that I am an anglophone and that I have two bilingual children because our school system and our country value both languages. The fact that my children are bilingual is a gift. I am very interested in the comments from your report.

You talked about Manitoba. Like myself, you hail from that province, and I am proud of that.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I am not from Manitoba. I was only giving Manitoba as an example because of how successful its immigration program has been.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: No, but it's not just....

Mr. Graham Fraser: I have to admit something to you: I am from Ottawa.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Yes, but not only immigrants value both languages. It's very important to understand that.

In my riding, francophones account for less than 0.1% of the population, but many parents like me value both languages and enrol their children in late or total immersion programs. As I pointed out, that's a real gift.

So don't forget about the anglophones who value French, as they are a key element to your success.

• (1250)

Mr. Graham Fraser: I fully agree with you. Actually, one of the organizations whose work I greatly appreciate is Canadian Parents for French, which has done so much on the ground.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Yes.

Mr. Graham Fraser: I have noticed something in Manitoba's case. That's one of the only provinces, if not the only one, where the teachers from immersion schools and those from francophone schools belong to the same association.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I was a counsellor.

Mr. Graham Fraser: So there is a spirit of co-operation between the two systems, which is not always the case in other systems, where the approach is more competitive. In fact, one side tends to think that one group wins at the expense of the other. However, I was struck by the spirit of co-operation in Manitoba between those two groups of teachers.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I have heard my colleagues say similar things across the country.

I have two quick questions, one of which is very short.

On page 38 of your report, you mentioned that your office received 26 complaints about Elections Canada. Those complaints came from Canadians who said they were unable to vote in the language of their choice. Could you tell us how the 2011 election ranks when it comes to the number of complaints? That's very important.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Off the top of my head, the figures indicated that there was an improvement from 2006 to 2008, but that there was about the same number of complaints from 2008 to 2011.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Do you have the complaint breakdown by province?

Mr. Graham Fraser: I think the figure was a bit higher last time—36 or 38, or something like that. There was an improvement from 2008 to 2011.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Do you have the breakdown by province or by region?

Mr. Graham Fraser: For the complaints, we could....

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Could you check?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We could provide you with those details. I don't have the figures off the top of my head right now.

In the report, we recognize that Elections Canada is faced with a specific challenge in certain regions of the country. That's in part explained by the fact that, as you know, the people who work on election day are not public servants. They are not Elections Canada employees, but rather employees provided....

Ms. Joyce Bateman: That's a responsibility....

Mr. Graham Fraser: ...by political parties.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: My time is already up? That's too bad, as I had another question.

The Chair: Ms. Michaud, go ahead.

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know that other people want to ask questions, but I was beginning to fear I'd lose my floor time.

I want to thank the whole team from the office of the commissioner for being here. It's always very nice to have you with us.

I would like you to be fairly specific in your answer to my first question, as I want to broach another topic that is just as important but closer to my heart.

On March 30, you submitted a document to us according to which only 4 of the 39 recommendations you had made to the government since 2006 had been completely implemented. In addition, you received no response regarding 12 of them.

In the document you submitted to us, the follow-up covered 2010 and 2011. Have you had any new answers in 2012? Where do things stand in terms of that?

• (1255)

Mr. Graham Fraser: Ms. Charlebois, I turn to you again. Do you have anything to say about that?

Ms. Ghislaine Charlebois: Are you talking about the recommendations in the annual reports?

Ms. Éline Michaud: Yes, among others.

Mr. Sylvain Giguère (Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Communications Branch, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages): We keep it current by adding updates from time to time. We will check if an update has been made recently. If not, we will do one and send you the information.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Yes, could you do that as quickly as possible, please?

I would like to take this opportunity to clarify something. You mentioned before that you were going to send the committee information about how long it takes to deal with various complaints, did you not? Great, that clears that up.

Now, my main question is about the closure of the maritime search and rescue centre in Quebec. I come from the great region around Quebec City, so this particularly affects me. We have heard concerns from a number of fishers, pleasure craft operators and others. You received a large number of complaints yourself and you produced a report on August 9 in which you made a number of recommendations.

Has there been any response to those recommendations from the government?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We will follow up on that. Fisheries and Oceans plans to transfer the responsibilities in the fall. We are currently looking at the way in which that transfer will be done.

Ms. Éline Michaud: But, for the moment, there has been no response to your August 9 report? My understanding is that there has been no government response.

Mr. Graham Fraser: Not yet, as far as I know.

Ms. Éline Michaud: NDP members have asked to study this in committee on a number of occasions, actually. There really are a lot of things to consider. It is matter of life or death; often, every second counts. It is important that we study it here.

We hear the excuses that services will not be compromised, and even that it will create savings, although we know that that will not be the case. It is estimated that between \$2.5 million and \$3.5 million will have to be invested in the centres in Halifax and Trenton so that they are able to accommodate the new employees, and so on. So there are a lot of things to consider and a lot of questions remain.

You have already looked at this, but what concrete steps has your office taken, or are you planning to take, to ensure that services can be provided in French to those who really need them?

Mr. Graham Fraser: We have made a commitment to follow up on the matter in the spring. This is something that we are following closely.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Okay.

I have one more quick question for you.

Recent figures show that bilingualism among anglophones outside Quebec has been declining. We already spoke about it briefly. Could you tell us specifically what leadership role the government should be playing? The government has an important role to play, after all. Could you tell me a little more about that?

Mr. Graham Fraser: According to the annual report, the financial transfer from Canadian Heritage to the provinces for education, that is, for French and English as first or second languages, is a very considerable amount. We are presently conducting a study on payment mechanisms to see how federal institutions, including Canadian Heritage, can make sure that the money is well spent.

I have one fear about that approach, which is very laudable. Yes, it is important that the federal government play that role. But sometimes I am afraid that it takes responsibility away from the provinces, who may tend to feel that this is a federal matter while they only deal with real educational issues. I am afraid that the same commitment may not be there, that teaching French may decrease and not be treated on an equal footing with other high school subjects.

I am a great admirer of immersion as a system, but I add a note of caution because it takes resources, it takes teachers of basic French who are often not treated the same as teachers of other subjects.

Be that as it may, yes, I do feel that it is important for the federal government to play a greater leadership role, in cooperation with the provinces and with the Council of Ministers of Education Canada.

• (1300)

The Chair: Great. Thank you.

Yes, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: A point of order, Mr. Chair. Since we lost half an hour this morning, and since there are normally no committee meetings from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m., I am asking for everyone's agreement to continue the meeting for another 30 minutes, since we are fortunate to have the commissioner here. This is important.

I am sure that government members will be very happy about it, because they think that real progress has been made. For my part, I have questions to ask because there are areas in which there has been no progress.

For that reason, I would like the unanimous consent of the committee.

The Chair: Does the committee wish to extend the meeting?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: We do not have unanimous consent.

Anyway, I have to be at the Liaison Committee meeting at 1:30 p.m.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Can we extend the meeting for 15 minutes?

The Chair: No, we are going to finish the meeting now.

My thanks to our witnesses.

[*English*]

I want to finish with one thought.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fraser, in your remarks, you mentioned that Canadians very much want to become bilingual.

[*English*]

You go on to say that some programs in the second official language cannot keep up with the demand. One example you should look at is the fact that on September 26, the Peel District School Board—which is, I think, the second-largest school board in Ontario and represents Brampton and Mississauga and some 1.2 million Canadians—made a decision to cap French immersion program enrollment at 25.4%.

It's a good news-bad news story. The reason was that French immersion enrolment in grade 1 in these highly immigrant communities went from 9.4% in 2001 to 25.4% in 2012, and the school board simply can't find the teachers to teach the classes.

That's an example to prove your point about the fact that there is far more demand than we can keep up with in many of these programs, in part funded by the Roadmap. I will leave you with that thought.

Thank you very much for your appearance. We appreciate it very much. *Merci*.

This meeting is adjourned.

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