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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

Standing Committee on Official Languages

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•(0945)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today, Tuesday, June 3, 2014, marks our 28th meeting.

We are here to discuss two items: a motion by Mr. Godin and our draft report.

The second part of our meeting will be held in camera.

Mr. Godin, would you like to propose your motion?

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

My motion is as follows:

That the committee invite the minister of Employment and Social Development Canada to appear before the committee before June 19th 2014 to explain why his department has refused to finance the project « Développer des pratiques innovantes en ACE pour la main-d'oeuvre qui vit en contexte linguistique minoritaire » which was developed by the Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences (RESDAC).

A letter from RESDAC President Isabelle Salesses was handed out. A copy of the letter was sent to me and to the following individuals: Minister Jason Kenney; Shelly Glover, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages; Graham Fraser, Commissioner of Official Languages; Jacques Gourde, Parliamentary Secretary for Official Languages; Jamie Nicholls, Member for Vaudreuil—Soulanges; Stéphane Dion, Member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville; and Marie-France Kenny, President of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne, or the FCFA.

I am going to take the time to read the letter because we need to understand how this decision could affect the communities. The subject of the letter is the timeline for the implementation of the official-language minority communities literacy and essential skills initiative under the *Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-18*.

Translated, the letter begins as follows:

In March 2013, the Canadian government announced the implementation and funding with respect to the *Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-18*. Since the announcement, we have not received any information or communication about the actual mechanisms to implement the official-language minority communities literacy and essential skills initiative.

It was May 12 and—

The Chair: Kindly slow down.

Mr. Yvon Godin: My apologies to the interpreters. When this kind of thing happens to me, I think of how the same kind of thing could happen to the interpreters at the Supreme Court of Canada.

You are good interpreters, but you don't have an easy job. You no doubt understand my distress around the Supreme Court situation. It has nothing to do with you, however. I sincerely appreciate the work you do. This is, in no way, an attack against you. You know how much I like you. If not for you, some people at the table wouldn't be able to understand me. Again, thank you.

Carrying on with the letter:

This component of the roadmap falls under the authority of the Department of Employment and Social Development. The situation is the same with respect to the social partnership initiative.

We are wondering about the reasons for the delay, given that we have already entered the second year of the roadmap. You will certainly appreciate that this state of affairs undermines, in our view, the very objectives of the roadmap, which are to collectively give the government “the means to take concrete action in the fields that Canadians consider important: education, immigration, and community support.”

More specifically, the goal of this component of the roadmap is to “help adults in both English- and French-speaking minority communities gain the essential skills they need to obtain and/or maintain employment.”

I am sure you will agree that this problematic and worrisome delay is having a negative and serious impact on the quality and delivery of programs and services for Canadians affected by the roadmap as regards employability and economic development.

Thus far, our efforts to contact the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Employment and Social Development to ascertain the reasons for the delay have been unsuccessful. We have not received any reply.

In light of the situation and given the importance of the roadmap, its funding and various fields of action for Canadians in our community, we are requesting that you intervene as quickly as possible to help us obtain the answers we are seeking. We would be glad to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter at your convenience.

The project listed in the motion is not a roadmap project but does address skills development in official language minority communities. In that case, the project did not come under the roadmap, but the stakeholders concerned had made a request.

Mr. Chair, you may recall this group, as they appeared before the committee, giving a wonderful presentation and making a request. The roadmap is not closed to new clientele. These people clearly described their needs to us. The government may say it prefers to invest in efforts on the ground, rather than funding agencies, and that is understandable. Wanting to invest in on-the-ground efforts is a valid argument. However, agencies and organizations have to sponsor those efforts in the form of projects, engage people in the programs and support them.

I'll give you an example. When I worked at the Brunswick mine, some people weren't able to read or write, and I'm not telling you to disparage them. One day, a literacy program was set up. I should mention that some people used all kinds of clever tactics to avoid having to admit that they couldn't read or write. For instance, they would ask other people to write things down for them, on the grounds that their hand or arm was hurting and so they couldn't use a pen to write. All manner of excuses were used.

So an internal program was established, and the guys who worked with us in the mine were encouraged to participate. They were told it wasn't a sin not to be able to read or write. In order to help them, the company made an effort to work with them, putting a training program in place.

● (0950)

The training program became so popular that work teams were created, with the company's help. By the end of the program, some people had obtained their grade 12 education and ended up going to community college to learn a trade. They found jobs as mechanics and electricians. It was incredible. A real success story.

And that success story wouldn't have been possible without the teams helping those individuals, people like those who work at RESDAC promoting programs and seeking out participants. Because people do indeed need to be sought out and encouraged to participate in a program. We can offer all the programs we want, but if we can't attract the right people and encourage them to take part in order to improve their circumstances, if we can't give them the opportunity to get their education, we're simply missing the boat.

It's never too late. We saw it for ourselves. Minors in their 40s, and even 50s, who went back to school and were proud of their achievement. Over the noon hour, some of them would sit and read the paper, something we never would have seen them do just three or four years prior.

In any case, that is what my motion is about. It requires just one thing. At the end of the day, the government will decide what it wants to do. I know I sound like a broken record, but why do we even have parliamentary committees? To spend more than six months, as we just have, working only on a single study that we won't even have completed by June? Shouldn't we spend our time considering concrete actions to address problems that have been identified?

We are asking the Minister of Employment and Social Development to appear before the committee to give us an explanation. He may have a perfectly good reason for not coming, but perhaps we can convince him to change his mind. There's no harm in changing your mind. Isn't the business of committee members to work together and make suggestions to the minister so that he can make more informed decisions, instead of simply refusing the request, under the pretense that funding had already been given to the organization a few years ago?

In this situation, the organization never even got a response from the government. To my knowledge, the government didn't even contact the organization, unless it did so last night. I think the organization may have gotten its answer thanks to my colleague, who questioned the government about it in the House of Commons.

That's not acceptable. The organization submitted a formal application. I would think that, as a matter of courtesy, the government would give the organization an official response. It did nothing, much to the disappointment of the people who work at the organization.

Minister Kenney usually has no problem appearing before the committee. Someone else, probably from the Prime Minister's Office, must be calling the shots and refusing to send a government representative to appear before the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

How funny if I were to rise in the House this afternoon to ask Minister Kenney if he would like to appear before the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I think he'd be the first to say he would.

When ministers are knowledgeable about their portfolios, endorse their decisions, and believe in the democratic process, in our Parliament and in our parliamentary system—which consists of committees tasked with examining various issues, like the official languages committee—they usually have no objection to coming and speaking to those committees.

I have explained my motion. I sincerely ask the government to support it. If it chooses not to, we will know that the government is refusing to allow any minister to appear before the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

To date, every minister we have asked to appear before the committee has not come, including the Minister of National Defence and more recently the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages. The very minister responsible for the issue with which our committee is charged is refusing to come and give us an explanation.

Every minister we have asked to appear, by way of a motion has not come. We have no choice but to conclude that their not coming is due to the fact that someone somewhere has decided no one will appear before the committee. We specified the deadline by which they were to appear. That deadline has almost passed and they have yet to appear. Something of an improper nature most definitely happened somewhere and that is why no one is coming. It's not hard to guess what's going on.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, that is the motion I propose to you and the members of the committee. Thank you.

● (0955)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Gourde, go ahead.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Chair, are we in camera right now?

The Chair: No.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Can we move in camera?

The Chair: I will therefore ask the clerk to proceed with the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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