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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1610)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 13 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

The committee is meeting on its study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to deliver information in both official languages.

[Translation]

Ladies and gentlemen, I have some information to give you to ensure the meeting runs smoothly.

It is 4:10 p.m. I must inform you that the hon. Jean-Yves Duclos can only prolong his presence with us until 4:45 p.m. Then, we will begin the second part.

I have a few details to give you very quickly.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members may have remarked that the entry to the meeting was much quicker and that they immediately entered as an active participant. However, this wasn't necessarily the case today because of technical problems.

[English]

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants at this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted. This fact was mentioned by Speaker Rota on September 29, 2020.

[Translation]

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice.

I also ask that members and witnesses speak slowly to facilitate interpretation. Before speaking, don't forget to click on the microphone icon. Since we have witnesses, I have the list of people who will speak.

[English]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair. Please note that we may need to suspend a few minutes, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[Translation]

If you wish to speak, you need to click on the "raise hand" button.

Without further ado, I extend a most cordial welcome to our witnesses. First of all, we welcome the hon. Jean-Yves Duclos, the President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Duclos, you have 10 minutes for your presentation. Afterwards, committee members will be able to ask you questions.

I would also like to welcome Roger Ermuth, assistant comptroller general of the Financial Management Sector at the Office of the Comptroller General, Carsten Quell, the executive director at the Official Languages Centre of Excellence, and Tolga Yalkin, assistant deputy minister at Workplace Policies and Services.

Go ahead, please, Mr. Duclos.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll take less than 10 minutes because I'm going to shorten my speech a bit to leave more time for discussion and questions. I'll also try to speak slowly even if it's not really my tendency.

First of all, I'd like to thank the members of the committee for their invitation. This is an opportunity for me and for us to talk about the importance of official languages, an important issue for our government, and one that is close to my heart as the member of Parliament for Quebec City, the riding that is essentially the capital of French North America, but also as a francophone, a proud Quebecker and a proud Canadian.

As you said, I am fortunate to be accompanied by Tolga Yalkin, Carsten Quell and Roger Ermuth, whom you have already introduced and who will be able to provide any clarification you may require.

As you know, bilingualism is at the heart of both the history and the identity of our great and beautiful country. In fact, it's thanks to the union of the two founding peoples, French and English, that Canada came into being a long time ago, in association with the indigenous peoples and with respect—which we want to increase, of course—for them.

Very early on in the history of this Confederation, Montreal patron of the arts David Stewart recognized this equality in a quotation that presents us with the advantages that this dual identity, this bilingualism, grants to Canadians: “Canada is the heir to the two great traditional civilizations of Western Europe. It is its responsibility to develop them, and it should be proud of it.”

Indeed, we have reason to be proud of it. In fact, more than 50 years ago, with the adoption of the Official Languages Act, we took another step forward in affirming, protecting and promoting the bilingual character of Canada. Today, millions of Canadians across the country can flourish and contribute to our collective success in the language of their choice. Canadians understand that official bilingualism is an asset for them and for us in many ways.

For example, in addition to being at the heart of our culture, our history and our collective identity, the French language and the presence of millions of francophones and francophiles from coast to coast to coast are an undeniable added value for our country on the international scene. This richness allows us to participate actively in the debates and the mission of the International Organisation of La Francophonie and to maintain privileged relations with all French-speaking countries around the world.

In 2021, we also understand that, in an increasingly globalized society, bilingualism is an important competitive advantage for Canada. In fact, Jean Johnson, president of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, clearly emphasized this in a recent article in the *Toronto Star*. According to Mr. Johnson, at a time when intolerance is unfortunately on the rise, it is important to reaffirm that our two official languages, our commitment to reconciliation with indigenous peoples and our diversity are part of what has made us successful over the years.

Strengthening our official languages, which fosters openness but also respect for differences, is as much a matter of the past as it is of the present and future of Canada. That is why the government is committed to modernizing the Official Languages Regulations under Part IV of the Official Languages Act. These regulations are very important because they cover the language obligations of more than 10,000 federal points of service across the country, and were last updated almost 30 years ago.

● (1615)

Last year, the government also marked the 50th anniversary of the Official Languages Act and made significant changes to the Official Languages Regulations. As a result of these changes, Canadians now have better access to federal services in both official languages than ever before.

Allow me to give you a few examples. These amendments allow for the designation of some 700 points of service across the country as bilingual points of service. Close to 145,000 Canadians living outside major urban centres will now have access to a Service Canada office in the official language of their choice. More than 60,000 others will have access to RCMP public safety services in the official language of their choice. In addition, services will now be provided in English and French at airports and train stations in all provincial capitals.

As this committee is aware, official language minority communities were very concerned that the previous method of calculating demand for services did not include enough people who spoke the minority official language, including members of bilingual families or immigrants. Our new, more inclusive method of calculation takes into account all of these people, and the next census will therefore be more representative of the realities experienced by francophones outside Quebec and anglophones in Quebec.

I would like to re-emphasize that respect for official languages is both a priority and an obligation for the Government of Canada. Every day, federal public servants provide services to Canadians and communicate with them in the official language of their choice. When it comes to creating an environment conducive to the use of both official languages, such as holding bilingual meetings today, the Public Service Employee Survey shows that most employees feel that their managers are succeeding in doing so. That said, we know very well that it is not a perfect system. We can and must always do better. The same survey also shows that there is still a lot of work to be done.

For an organization the size of the public service, making changes and improvements can obviously be complex and difficult, especially in the midst of a pandemic. For example, at the onset of the current health crisis, hundreds of thousands of public servants moved from their desks to makeshift desks in their living rooms, bedrooms or kitchens in a matter of days.

● (1620)

[English]

It was a massive shift. I'm sure many of my honourable colleagues will sympathize, given our own experiences and our own challenges that we faced with virtual House sittings and committee hearings.

As these public servants managed to adapt to work remotely during a time of great uncertainty, they also rolled out critical and complex programs and services to Canadians in record time.

We recognize there may have been times when managers did not address employees in their preferred language during a video meeting or other communications.

[Translation]

This is an unfortunate situation and should simply be corrected, and no excuses should be made. As soon as this situation was brought to our attention, we reminded all departments and agencies of their official languages obligations through the Human Resources Branch.

I have also made it my personal duty to remind all my colleagues in the council of ministers of these same obligations. I can also assure you that we are working closely with the Commissioner of Official Languages to ensure that the rights and needs of all Canadians, including those of public service employees, are respected, even in this time of pandemic.

Finally, I would like to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that the work environment in federal departments, agencies and organizations is not only favourable, but also conducive to bilingualism so that all government employees, wherever they are, can work in the official language of their choice.

[*English*]

We are committed to a Canada where everyone should—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I apologize. The time is up. We now have to move to questions from the members of the committee.

Let me remind members that, since the minister is with us until 4:45 p.m., we only have one round of questions left. All parties on the committee will have six minutes for questions.

If you wish to share your time, please say so at the beginning of your remarks.

We will begin with Mr. Blaney, who will ask the first questions.

Mr. Blaney, you have the floor for six minutes.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I will try to share my time.

First, I would like to welcome Minister Duclos to the Standing Committee on Official Languages and to remind him that the purpose of his being here today is about the Canadian government's lack of response in terms of official languages during the pandemic.

Mr. Minister, I'm not sure who prepared you for your presentation, but I wish you could have arrived in solution mode. All the witnesses we have heard so far have told us that the federal response to the pandemic in terms of official languages is a mess, and the Commissioner has reminded us that it is a safety issue.

Take, for example, my sister, who lives in Ontario. It is important for her to have access to information in French in an emergency situation, since it is her first language.

Mr. Minister, do you recognize that Canadian bilingualism is a safety issue and that it is even more important in a crisis situation such as the one we are experiencing?

• (1625)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: My dear Mr. Blaney, the answer is yes. As you so rightly said, it is a safety issue.

As you also implicitly suggested, when people do not have access to the information they need to protect themselves and their loved ones, it is not only safety in a collective sense, but individual safety that is at stake.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We want to prepare a report with recommendations. For our analysts, could you provide us with more information on the adjustments and tell us what the response was?

You mentioned that you have taken action, but it would be helpful to have more data. In any case, if it is possible, in order for us to

produce a detailed report, could you share with the committee the measures taken by the Government of Canada?

We know that the health representative was speaking only in English; it was a mess and there was some labelling. A series of measures have led to minority language citizens being treated as second-class citizens.

Mr. Minister, before giving the floor to my colleague, I want to come back to public servants. An investigation by the Commissioner of Official Languages, to which you referred, also points to a major problem:

French first- and second-language linguistic insecurity was a significant challenge in all regions studied: primarily when it came to speaking but also for writing and for asking to be supervised in that language.

You are the one responsible, the official languages champion in the government. Do you recognize that francophone public servants suffer from a systemic problem, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Actually, I will correct you and then I will agree with you. We are the official languages champions in Canada. We all have a role to play.

In fact, let me congratulate all members of the committee for the strong role they play not only in understanding the problems but also in finding the solutions to those problems.

In terms of information and language insecurity, you rightly referred to the report, which was published a few weeks ago. Linguistic insecurity is experienced by everyone, including anglophones, when they try to express themselves in French. However, it is also very true for francophones, who are often afraid—

Hon. Steven Blaney: Do you recognize that this is a systemic problem in the public service, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Whether we are francophone or anglophone, we can see very clearly what linguistic insecurity means in our personal relations with our colleagues in the House of Commons. It is the same thing among public servants.

As you were saying, linguistic insecurity is a reluctance to express oneself in one's own language or one's second language, and, sometimes, a lack of comfort in doing so. That is why insecurity must always be reduced by firm action and firm language on the part of all elected officials, and certainly on the part of the government.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I didn't get an answer to my question.

You have been here for four years, but it seems that the Canadian government, the Liberals, have just woken up. It has only been two weeks since your mandate letter made you responsible for the coordination of official languages within the government.

Mr. Chair, I am going to give my remaining time to my colleague Bernard Généreux.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaney.

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor for a minute and a half.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be brief.

Mr. Duclos, thank you for being here today.

We all know that the translation bureau reports to Public Services and Procurement Canada, not to Treasury Board.

I hope the interpreters are able to hear me clearly right now. The sound quality on Zoom, which we are required to use to do our parliamentary work, is poor for all the interpreters who translate what we say every day. Many of them are literally becoming ill.

We are going to do a study on this next week. Since your department is the official languages champion in Canada, I want to know your opinion.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Généreux, I am pleased that you are doing a study on it. Mr. Blaney actually referred to it earlier.

I am very pleased that you are highlighting your sense of gratitude and admiration for the interpreters, who have been working in very difficult conditions since the beginning of the pandemic. We all have a role to play in helping them, and we should all express our gratitude to them as often as possible.

Good luck with your study. I really look forward to the results.

• (1630)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Do you—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Généreux. That's all the time you had.

I must now give the floor to Mr. Duguid.

[English]

Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with my colleague, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Minister Duclos, thank you so much for being with us today. It was a great privilege to serve as your parliamentary secretary when you were our families minister, introducing transformational programs like the Canada child benefit and the national housing strategy.

Minister Duclos, in your new ministry, the Treasury Board, you play an important role in official languages, as we've heard. We're happy to have you with us as we study the impacts of the pandemic on linguistic minority communities across the country.

Can you expand on some of the proactive measures you have introduced as minister on the file since you became President of the Treasury Board, particularly over the last difficult year? Perhaps highlight some of the adjustments you've had to make during the public health crisis we've been facing.

As you know, I'm a Manitoban. Perhaps talk a little bit about French language services outside Quebec, which have been very challenged during this difficult time.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Terry.

I will very briefly mention that we did work together, you and I, to put into place a number of agreements on early learning and

child care. These recognized for the first time ever the importance of child care services in the language of minority communities in Canada, including in Manitoba, New Brunswick, Ontario and many other places where children now have the ability—and that's officially recognized in these bilateral agreements—to start their early learning in French, or in English in Quebec.

The second thing is about what we have done.

Obviously, there's been a real sense of challenge and gratitude for the public service that has served and delivered benefits to approximately 14.4 million Canadians who, in the last year, have received some form of income support during the pandemic. That has obviously generated a lot of contacts. I will recall, briefly, the impact of the new policy that we have been implementing, in which 145,000 additional Canadians, outside of large centres, will now have access to services in their official language from Service Canada.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Duguid, you may continue. Otherwise, Ms. Martinez Ferrada can go ahead right away.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I will continue, if I may.

Minister Duclos, thank you for joining us today. It is always a pleasure to see you and to have conversations with you. I wanted us to talk about the Borbey-Mendelsohn report on senior federal officials.

As you know, the Official Languages Act asks that the required language skills be objectively established according to the duties of each position. I would like to know what the Treasury Board is doing to ensure that senior officials can communicate with supervisors in both official languages.

Our government has appointed bilingual judges to the Supreme Court, so I think we want all senior officials to be able to speak both official languages. Could you tell us more about that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Yes, the report was very important. Its conclusions and the lessons for the departments concerned have already been released. Officials have started taking steps to remind their colleagues, superiors and all employees of their obligations with respect to working in the official language of their choice.

The Treasury Board Secretariat is currently studying the possibility of amending the policy to strengthen the minimum second-language proficiency requirement for bilingual supervisors in bilingual positions in designated bilingual regions.

• (1635)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: In terms of second-language testing, would you consider doing two official language tests instead of one?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much for pointing that out, because it's also part of the important discussions that the Treasury Board Secretariat is having.

Yes, there are issues related to the tests, particularly in terms of consistency and the development of competencies over time. These things are being discussed with employees and with the unions that represent them.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: In your opening statement, you talked about modernizing the Official Languages Regulations. This major update took place under our government, between 2016 and 2019.

Can you come back to that a little and tell us what the modernization consisted of?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The modernization was carried out under the direction of the minister responsible for official languages. I hear that Ms. Joly, the minister in question, will soon have the opportunity to appear before you. Clearly, we are working very hard together. Even though her agenda is very broad and, as you have seen, very ambitious, part of it is the responsibility of the Treasury Board, and I will continue to exercise my leadership in this area.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister and Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Mr. Beaulieu has the floor for the next six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you.

First, I would like to ask a rather general question.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, have you taken specific measures to solve the problems that have arisen?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Beaulieu, thank you for your question.

Could I ask you to clarify the problems you are referring to?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Many people, even in Quebec, have told us that they have difficulty working in French during meetings with officials from different regions, because everything is done in English. Just yesterday, I was told that, on the Crisis Services Canada site, the online chat and text services only work in English. I could mention a lot of examples.

Overall, have specific measures been taken to ensure that people can receive services in French during the pandemic?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's a very good question.

Let me tell you that the leadership and direction are very clear. The Treasury Board Secretariat and the Treasury Board have been very clear with other departments regarding their responsibilities. We know that the circumstances in which public servants are working vary greatly from one part of the country to another and from

one department to another. Some employees work on site, while others work from home. Some work inter-regionally, while others work within the same region.

However, the message remains the same: the requirement to work in both official languages applies to everyone.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I would like to come back to the interpreter issue. We are told that new contract provisions at Public Services and Procurement Canada will undermine the quality of public services in both languages and, by the same token, the working conditions of interpreters. Translators have told us that the translation bureau's new weighting system will compromise their working conditions in a big way. To save money, the trend seems to be to lower the quality of working conditions for interpreters and translators.

Could you do something about this? We could cut back in other areas. We already have a shortage of interpreters and translators and they provide very important services. Why are we seeing this trend to want to save a few pennies at the expense of these services?

• (1640)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The central message is clear and must be reiterated. That's what you are doing today, Mr. Beaulieu, and I commend you for it. No compromises can be made in our ability to ensure that people can work in both official languages. The message is clear and must constantly be repeated.

During a pandemic, we must insist on this even more for health and safety reasons, as our colleague Mr. Blaney pointed out. If you would like to discuss this further, you should contact the minister responsible for Public Services and Procurement Canada, since translation and interpretation services fall under that department.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have another example. The report on the Governor General, Ms. Payette, was sent out in English only. We don't know when it will be available in French. How do you explain that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is a perfect example of a report that must absolutely be delivered in both official languages. The same goes for all reports to which members are entitled. It's a basic rule of our parliamentary system. I would ask the people at Rideau Hall or the team that did the investigation.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have one last comment to make.

You spoke of the census. Since the Official Languages Act is based on the very vague criterion of "where numbers warrant", we tend to want indicators that increase the number of francophones. More inclusive indicators have been suggested, for example. However, this skews the picture. It would be better to have a more specific criterion and ensure that the "where numbers warrant" criterion is really met, rather than changing the indicators and skewing the picture by influencing Statistics Canada.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We have some very good news in this regard, Mr. Beaulieu, and I know you will be pleased.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You're talking about the rights-holders.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's right. Some wonderful news about the short form census came out last July, at the beginning of the pandemic. The experts who worked on it are extremely pleased. It's one of the biggest advances we have seen in recent decades. The members of this committee worked very hard on this and they need to know the great news. I can see them on my screen, and I congratulate them and encourage them to keep going.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have one last quick question.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but you only have five seconds left. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, thank you for being with us today.

I must admit I was quite surprised by three-quarters of your speech. In the first few minutes, I felt like I was in a parallel universe with unicorns where everything was beautiful and we had no problems. Unfortunately, you have made the headlines in recent months, since the beginning of this pandemic, but not for the right reasons. It's been the same old story. In an emergency or a crisis, French goes out the window, instructions are sent out in English only, meetings are held in English only, emails and documents are in English only.

How do you explain your department's failure to ensure respect for francophone language rights?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you for raising the issue, Mr. Boulerice. As you imply, we need to work on this constantly. Linguistic minority rights and the right to work in both official languages go back several decades, but they can never be taken for granted, and certainly not in a crisis situation.

It is a collective obligation. The Treasury Board must do its job, and I, as President, must continue my efforts and strengthen my leadership in this regard. The departments and ministers concerned obviously have an obligation here, and I strongly urge you to ask them what they are doing about this issue.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Yes, but you are here with us today. So I'm going to ask you some questions in your capacity as President of the Treasury Board responsible for the public service.

You have just told my colleague Mr. Beaulieu that no compromises must be made. Compromises are, in fact, being made, but unfortunately they are always made on the backs of francophones.

Are you aware that during the pandemic, this may affect public health and safety? If, after a meeting, a public servant doesn't fully grasp what was said and misunderstandings happen, they will give the wrong instructions and that will cause errors. This could be extremely serious, above and beyond public servants' language rights.

• (1645)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: You put it very well, as did our colleague Mr. Blaney very eloquently earlier. It's not just a question of

rights in a crisis situation, but also of safety and even health, both public and individual. That's why we must never let up, and certainly not in a crisis or pandemic situation.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: A number of measures or incentives can be put in place to promote bilingualism in the federal public service. I hope you are aware that, in several departments, the bilingualism bonus has not been increased for 28 years, since 1993.

Do you find it appropriate that a government that claims to be so supportive of bilingualism and of respect for official languages doesn't even provide a significant incentive such as a bilingualism bonus, which has been frozen for 28 years? How do you explain that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is another very good question about the general working conditions of public service employees.

As you know, in the past few months we have signed collective agreements covering more than 80% of public servants. We continue to work with them because it is an important clause, an important factor, in the working conditions. The clause must be negotiated with the workers' representatives, out of respect for what those workers and their unions do.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Speaking of unions, can you commit to working with those unions and with public servants to ensure that the mistakes we have seen in recent months do not happen again? What steps will you take? Are you going to act in a collaborative manner with the federal public service unions?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The colleagues who have preceded me since 2015 and myself since I started in the position, have been fortunate to have very good relations with the unions.

As you say, the work is going well because it's being done collaboratively, not only in terms of working conditions, but also in terms of providing services to Canadians, especially during this pandemic we have been experiencing since March.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Unfortunately, the Official Languages Act will not be modernized. There will just be a simple white paper.

Can you tell the committee what recommendations you gave to Ms. Joly, the minister responsible for the drafting and direction of the white paper?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Two things. First, I worked very well with my colleague Ms. Joly to prepare the next steps and was very pleased to do so. Second, you will soon see the result of our collaborative efforts. I believe you will be very happy with the results. Everything was done in a collaborative manner and with many organizations. It will change the face of Canada for the better and for a long time in terms of protecting official languages in many circumstances.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

I have one last question for you.

The Access to Information Act applies to 240 federal institutions, including 82 departments and nearly 160 Crown corporations.

Can you send the Standing Committee on Official Languages a list of federal institutions subject to the Official Languages Act, by March?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's a very good question. I will work with my team to make sure I give you the most helpful and accurate answer possible. You need a good answer, because you do important work on the committee.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's all the time we have.

As I said at the beginning, we only had one round of questions. We even went a few minutes over the time the minister said he could give us.

It is time for me to thank you, Mr. Minister, for appearing before our committee.

I would also like to thank Roger Ermuth, Carsten Quell and Tolga Yalkin.

We are going to take a break for a few minutes.

The session is suspended.

• (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: We now resume the session.

Before I introduce the witnesses, I would like to make some comments.

Colleagues, it is already 4:53 p.m. A number of us have other obligations, including myself. Other meetings will be starting immediately after ours. So I am going to have to adjust the time accordingly.

There will be interpretation. Our guests are used to appearing before the committee. In order to fully benefit from their presence, let us begin immediately.

First, I would like to welcome Jean Johnson, the President of the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, and Alain Dupuis, its Director General.

Mr. Johnson, I will give you a signal when you are approaching the end of your ten minutes.

The floor is yours. Once again, welcome

Mr. Jean Johnson (President, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, may I thank you for inviting the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, the FCFA, to appear today. We have much to tell you about the subject you are studying. The COVID-19 crisis is having a major impact on francophone and Acadian communities. It is shaking our Francophonie to

its very foundations and it will be felt for years. I will address two aspects of the impact in the time I have been given.

First of all, let us talk about the effect on the Francophonie's networking and affiliation. Last fall, the FCFA conducted a survey in which 247 francophone organizations and institutions across the country participated. After that survey, we conducted 25 interviews with respondents. Let me quickly provide you with some preliminary data that emerged from the study.

First, only 57% of the responding organizations have been able to maintain their services to the public. In fact, 78% of them have lost some or all of their volunteers. While 60% have lost some income, one organization in three has lost between 11% and 30% of its income. Actually, local organizations providing direct services to energize the Francophonie have seen the greatest losses. The result has been that 18% of them have had to lay off staff.

So what access do those organizations now have to government assistance? The encouraging news is that, of the 53% that applied, 91% have received support. However, not all the organizations received assistance that met their needs. More specifically, small organizations with few employees or little in the way of operational expenses have had to cancel their activities and plans and were unable to receive assistance.

So what are their prospects for recovery? Ten per cent of the responding organizations stated that their future is uncertain or that they face imminent closure. That number is particularly high in New Brunswick, Alberta and British Columbia, and among youth and media organizations and ethnocultural groups.

So what, specifically, are the needs of those organizations? Let me give you three. First, they need support in order to get through the crisis and to make up for their losses in income. Then they need support for transformation because things will no longer be as they were before. This means managing the change, facilities, new equipment and training for staff and volunteers. Finally, they need flexibility from funding agencies so that amounts can be reallocated and the approach to accountability can be tailored.

Those are the measurable effects, but the crisis has a consequence whose extent is only just beginning to be sensed: the loss of vitality of the French language and the francophone presence across the country.

Our kids spent months out of school in the spring of 2020 and, at this very moment, a number of them are once more attending school remotely. Extracurricular activities have almost all been cancelled. Festivals and gatherings where the young and the not-so-young can jointly experience life in French, no longer take place.

We just have to think about the Jeux de la francophonie canadienne, or about the myriad of other activities in the youth network. Those activities play a fundamental role in building the identity of young francophones and in training the leaders of the Francophonie. I cannot stress enough the potentially disastrous consequences of the lack of opportunity for our kids to come together in French.

The closing of cultural and community centres because of the pandemic means that communities no longer have any space to come together in French. As I told you earlier, the centres and organizations that stimulate life in French in our communities have lost their volunteers and their customers. They are going to need all kinds of time to repair that loss of relationships, that loss of vitality.

• (1655)

The phenomenon is yet to be studied, but we are already hearing accounts from worried parents. They are actually telling us that, for six months, their children have been using English more often at home or in their online dealings with their friends. The FCFA is in the process of working with partner organizations to try to better define this problem, which we see as a major one.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, the Francophonie is being shaken. Like other aspects of Canadian society, we will need years to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Let me conclude by providing you with some recommendations that stem from the observations we have just described to you. First, it is essential to maintain access to emergency funding until the pandemic ends. It has allowed groups in our communities to maintain activities and staff as well as to compensate for fundraising campaigns that the organizations have not been able to undertake. The conditions that make that emergency funding necessary will remain the same for as long as the pandemic lasts.

Second, it is important for federal institutions that support our community organizations to tailor their program criteria and their expected outcomes. Because of the circumstances, our organizations and institutions do not have the capacity to meet the same requirements as before the pandemic, or at least, certainly not in the same way.

Finally, although emergency funds are essential, they only let us keep the lights on. More will be needed in order for us to reestablish our core. The financial losses incurred by our organizations bring with them alarming damage, such as the collapse of our pool of volunteers that drive our communities forward, and the severing of the direct ties to the community that had been cultivated with patience and determination.

The vitality of the French language and presence at local level will require significant catch-up. That is why the government should establish an assistance fund for the recovery of the Francophonie. The funding would be flexible, so that specific needs can be addressed. We mentioned several of them previously: tailoring our services and activities, training volunteers and staff, and buying equipment so that services can be provided in a different form.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.

• (1700)

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

You have left us a little time, which is very good.

Once again, I want to advise committee members that will have just one six-minute round of questions per party represented on the committee.

[English]

The floor is yours, Mr. Williamson, for six minutes.

[Translation]

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

I would like to share my time with Mr. Dalton, please.

The Chair: Of course.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you very much to the witnesses who have identified these problems and made suggestions.

My province is New Brunswick. Mr. Johnson, can you talk a little about how our bilingual province has responded in terms of the links with our federal system, which is also bilingual?

Has that worked a little better or do you see the same weaknesses?

Mr. Jean Johnson: We see the same weaknesses all over the country. In addition, at the moment, the relationship between our association, which represents Acadians, and the provincial government is in disarray.

We have to find a way to assist them in order to convince their government that New Brunswick's bilingual status should not be called into question. It must be understood, that, like everyone, we are going through a crisis at the moment. Why provoke another one for our Acadian brothers and sisters?

Mr. Alain Dupuis (Director General, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): I'd like to add something.

Mr. John Williamson: Of course.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: Our study shows that 60% of the organizations consulted have suffered revenue losses as a result of the pandemic. However, in New Brunswick, this percentage rises to 70%.

Compared to the national average, organizations in your province are more affected by revenue losses.

Mr. John Williamson: Absolutely. It's very serious.

In terms of solutions, do you have any suggestions for how the two levels of government can work together? Do you think that the issues are really specific to each level of government?

Can they work together? If so, how can they work together?

Mr. Jean Johnson: In terms of relationships, in this type of situation, I believe that the two levels of government must find a way to work together for the benefit of their official language minority communities.

We also see the need for a fund that would be available to our community groups across Canada, where they can access additional funding.

• (1705)

Mr. John Williamson: Would this fund be like a safety net in the event of communication and program issues? How would it work, and what purpose would it serve?

Mr. Jean Johnson: On an operational level, in our communities, there are no longer any activities involving registration fees. Think of plays, for example, or other arts and culture activities, or events for young people.

So a group of organizations have put their activities on hold. How will we keep these organizations running if we can't find other ways to meet their needs? Of course, there could be online programming, but who would pay for that? The organizations would pay for it. Since they can't afford it, they're cutting back on their services.

Our concern is the investment that communities will need to make in human resources in order to move forward, restore services, engage volunteers and change the habits of our community members so that they'll once again participate in our activities and events.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

It's now Mr. Dalton's turn.

The Chair: Mr. Dalton, you have less than a minute and a half for the question and answer.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you for your presentation.

I'm a member of Parliament from British Columbia. During the pandemic, the situation was very frustrating. It was the province that showed leadership, even though British Columbia isn't an officially bilingual province. The federal government seems to be asleep at the switch.

Have you noticed this as well in your area?

Mr. Jean Johnson: I'm your neighbour. I live in Alberta. I think that the three provinces that have been hit the hardest are British Columbia, Alberta and New Brunswick.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Okay.

Let's talk about Service Canada. There are many immigrants in the Vancouver area, especially in the suburbs. They didn't have services in their language. This caused many issues.

Maybe the number of immigrants isn't the same in your area, but have there been issues with Service Canada as well?

The Chair: Please take a few seconds to answer.

Mr. Jean Johnson: I'd say that services in all sectors have been affected and that access to services and the ability to deliver them have declined.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dalton.

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Arseneault for the next six minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I want to congratulate my fellow New Brunswicker. I haven't heard him speak often, but his French is excellent. I'm pleasantly surprised, given that he comes from a part of the province where he didn't have the opportunity to benefit from French immersion.

Congratulations, Mr. Williamson, on your excellent French. Many people in New Brunswick could learn from you.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

Mr. René Arseneault: Mr. Johnson, on May 14, during the pandemic crisis, your organization issued its first report. Of course, we know that the questions were probably asked in March or April, well before the report was released in May.

All Canadians and non-profit organizations panicked, and your organization was no exception. We didn't know how the measures would be implemented or how the army of public servants would be used to get the job done. I'm speaking from the federal government's perspective.

Yesterday, I read your January report, for which the surveys were conducted in the fall. I noticed, and correct me if I'm wrong, that all your members and all the people whom you represent said that the current federal government stepped up to the plate. I'm providing a summary, since the report is quite long. In addition, all organizations spoke of a timely response and expressed a high level of satisfaction with the federal government's programs.

Up to this point, have I understood your report correctly?

• (1710)

Mr. Alain Dupuis: The report says that 80% of the assistance received by francophone community organizations came from the federal government and partially met their needs. That said, it's also necessary to understand from our report that the assistance must continue. If we were to lose the support provided for wages, rent or other items, the organizations would be in crisis. The support has helped prevent a crisis: 80% of our organizations still have most of their staff in place.

That said, as we move forward, funders will need to be increasingly flexible.

Mr. René Arseneault: I understood this, Mr. Dupuis. Sorry for interrupting you.

I'll address the motion. I'm conducting a little macroeconomic analysis. The FCFA, like non-profit organizations and businesses in Canada, has received federal assistance. This assistance has helped keep the patient alive, so to speak.

Let's look at the context of our current study. It's about how provincial governments have dealt with the challenge of providing information to minority language communities and the impact on these communities.

I want to know what assistance your members have received from the federal government compared to the assistance that they haven't received from their respective provinces. You have members in several provinces. How has this affected the ability to provide information to people in francophone communities outside Quebec?

How has the federal assistance made it possible for your members to take on this communication role in order to help our language minorities? According to your survey, your members haven't received any provincial assistance. How has this affected their ability to provide information to people in OLMCs?

Mr. Jean Johnson: This pandemic situation has demonstrated that several provinces consider that the francophone communities issue falls under federal government jurisdiction. Several provinces haven't made any financial investments to support the advancement of our communities. It's sad to say, but I think that's the reality.

I'll stop here.

Mr. René Arseneault: When we met with Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages, not New Brunswick's commissioner, he gave us some ideas on how we could help these communities.

Once again, I'll refer to the context of this study, which is crisis communications. The pandemic is a crisis. He told us about many opportunities for the federal and provincial governments to help each other, for example, to avoid duplication.

With the federal assistance that your members said that they received during the pandemic and in their current situation, how could they use this assistance to implement the Commissioner of Official Languages' recommendations for crisis communications?

Mr. Jean Johnson: I'll let Mr. Dupuis answer that question.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: Of course, when serving the public, our members who received assistance were able to purchase personal protective equipment and, to some extent, provide services remotely. That's good.

In terms of whether official languages are included in the crisis plans of governments, including the federal government, the answer is no. We've seen this at all levels. However, they should be. You have heard this recommendation, and we support it. Canada's Emergencies Act must include a reference to the Official Languages Act.

Mr. René Arseneault: Absolutely.

Mr. Alain Dupuis: On a broader level, the federal government must ensure that the provinces fulfill this role and incorporate official language elements. If the province can't fulfill this role, the community organizations should be able to play the role for the public.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dupuis and Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu now has the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentations, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dupuis. It's very useful.

When we hear you speak about the organizations and the results of your study, we understand that the situation is serious.

Let's go back to 1971, to the early days of the Official Languages Act. At that time, outside Quebec, the percentage of French spoken at home was 4.3%. In 2016, this percentage was 2.3%. Statistics

Canada predicts that, by 2036, 1.8% of the population outside Quebec will be French-speaking.

Just look at the status of French in British Columbia schools. There have been Supreme Court victories. However, it's necessary to keep returning to court to get the judgments enforced. We must have a realistic picture of the situation if we want to see change. Reversing this trend will require major changes. I want to hear your views on this issue.

One factor at stake is the "where numbers warrant" principle. It's completely absurd. When the use of the French language declines in a given area, French-language services are cut back. This requires an imaginative approach to find criteria to inflate the numbers. However, when the numbers are inflated, it gives the impression that everything is fine. The "where numbers warrant" criterion should be changed so that services are available to combat the decline of French and not cut back in response to a decline.

What are your thoughts on this?

Mr. Jean Johnson: We're currently working very hard with the federal government on the immigration issue. A great deal of work still needs to be done in this area. On that note, Canada is the only country that uses immigration to maintain the demographic weight of French-speaking communities in all its regions. This also creates a good opportunity to diversify our approaches to doing business and to strengthen the position of French across Canada.

You spoke of statistics and the "where numbers warrant" principle. I'd say that this issue was widely considered a few years ago, when the Treasury Board made changes and redefined the criteria for a healthy, vibrant and engaged community. We're talking about cultural centres, schools and things that didn't exist when the act was created in 1969.

While the demographic weight is declining, the number of our communities is increasing. We must never forget this. That's why we're working so hard to modernize the act and strengthen the position of our communities with a wonderful diversity of people from around the world. This places Canada in a strategic position to become an economic leader not only domestically, but also internationally. We've embraced a vision for bilingualism, and our communities are making this vision a reality. We need the government's help to support our communities. We're the cornerstone for advancing a Canadian vision.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In my opinion, the best way to increase francophone immigration and to thereby strengthen francophone and Acadian communities is to look at Quebec's approach, which has produced good results. It involves giving more points for knowledge of French to people from around the world who want to immigrate to Canada. This makes it possible to select more French-speaking immigrants or people from French-speaking communities. This has been done in some places. Do you think that it will be done more often?

• (1720)

Mr. Jean Johnson: We're very much in favour of this decision. It confirmed that the minister was really listening to our comments and our requests. It also showed that the minister was strongly motivated by a desire to find solutions. This was one way to do so, and yes, this applies to francophone immigration to Canada.

So you're talking about Quebec's perspective. For us, it's one factor. We want to do even more. When it comes to immigration, we consider that the concept of "by and for" is becoming increasingly significant.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Boulerice now has the floor for the last six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm very pleased to see you again, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dupuis. Obviously, like everyone else, we would prefer to see each other in person. Thank you for being here and for the information that you're providing.

I want to address the report that you're presenting. However, I first want to focus on the future and the preservation and vitality of francophone and Acadian communities. You have often said that your priority was the modernization of the Official Languages Act. It seems that we'll have to settle for a white paper. Once again, a major overhaul of the act and the passage of legislation are being postponed.

What are your thoughts on this?

Mr. Jean Johnson: We are surely disappointed and concerned that the bill will not be introduced in the next few weeks. We will certainly look carefully at the contents of the white paper, but it is still not a bill. The concern we have right now is about rumours that there may be an election. If there is an election, it will destabilize the security of the communities on the issue of modernizing the law.

We hope that the white paper will be something very brief, because at this stage we are in the process of refining the content of a bill that could be tabled as soon as possible. In our opinion, it's a question of political will. We want to move quickly in that direction.

We're counting on each and every one of you to put partisanship aside and champion the progress of this bill, which our communities really need.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Mr. Johnson, I share your disappointment. I think we are witnessing the can being kicked down the road. We don't need more consultation, we need a bill and a modernization of the law.

However, since we will have to be content with a white paper, what important messages would you like to see in it?

Mr. Jean Johnson: I'm going to refer you to a document we tabled in April 2019, a model bill that the communities wanted. In our view, the white paper should reflect this in large part, as well as all of our demands.

Our communities' requests have already been made public.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Fine.

There has been a lot of talk about CBC/Radio Canada this week, and rightly so, as the CRTC hearings have taken place. We have heard a lot of complaints from francophone communities about the lack of representation of francophone and Acadian communities on screen.

How would you like to see Radio Canada's mandate changed? We've even heard talk of a newsroom outside of Montreal, in the Maritimes, perhaps. That's interesting.

• (1725)

Mr. Jean Johnson: We feel we must ensure that the decision is not left entirely up to Montreal. At the moment, people try to represent these communities by working in the neighbourhood, and everything falls under Montreal's jurisdiction. To truly strengthen the place of French and our communities, we need to make them known, and the only way to do this is to create an office outside of Quebec to get the necessary content, one that reflects the reality of our brothers and sisters in Acadia, the three northern territories and the provinces west of Ontario.

There would then be a lot of cultural wealth to draw on. We're asking the people of CBC/Radio Canada to use what they have and set up a centre that would be responsible for occupying at least 15% of the CBC's major national news programs.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: It's an excellent idea, which I strongly support, and as a Montrealer, for that matter.

You have painted a rather problematic picture. Let me get back to direct services to the population. As you said, the organizations you represent are going through difficult times, given the loss of volunteers and funding. They are also at risk of closure.

If the federal government's assistance plans do not include targeted measures for francophone communities, do you not fear a lasting decline in services to francophones outside Quebec? Don't we run the risk of not playing our role properly in this matter if we don't act quickly?

Mr. Jean Johnson: My concern is that the most vulnerable are the ones who are closest to the population and who are losing their volunteers, employees and all sorts of things, not to mention their clientele, because people are rushed into new realities to which they are trying to adapt.

People are vulnerable. People on the ground are the most fragile at the moment. We have to find a way to support them. So we're going to need the help of committee members from all parties, as well as the federal government, to present and support a plan that will ensure the sustainability of our community groups.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Boulerice, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dupuis.

That is all the time we have. I want to thank you for being here and also for your contribution to the committee's current study.

Before adjourning, I would also like to inform members that next week's witnesses for the interpreter study have confirmed their at-

tendance. So there will be representatives from the House and also from the International Association of Conference Interpreters. We are working on the second session.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the clerk of the committee, the procedural clerk, the analysts and all the people on the technical team who worked very hard to make this meeting possible.

I thank you all and wish you a good evening.

That said, the meeting is adjourned.

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