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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[Translation]

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.

This is the last meeting on this study.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

[Translation]

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants to this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted, as the Speaker of the House has determined.

[English]

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either the floor, English or French.

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

Please speak slowly and clearly.

[English]

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely.

[Translation]

Should any challenges arise, please advise the Chair or the clerk. We need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Since no one is in the room, I can now welcome our witnesses. First of all, they have my thanks for accepting our invitation.

You will have seven and a half minutes in which to give your presentations. May I ask you to glance at me from time to time, be-

cause I will signal to you when you have a minute left. I will use my red card to tell you that your time is up.

My dear members, given that we will have two opening statements of seven and a half minutes each, and given our start time, the final five-minute round of questions will not be possible. If you wish to share your time with others, please feel free to do so.

It is my great pleasure to welcome the officials from the Canada Border Services Agency. We have with us Denis Vinette, Vice-President, Travellers Branch, and Louise Youdale, Vice-President, Human Resources Branch.

From Ombudsman Ontario, we have with us Kelly Burke, French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, and Carl Bouchard, Director of Operations, French Language Services Unit.

We will start with the Canada Border Services Agency.

Mr. Vinette, the floor is yours.

• (1540)

Mr. Denis Vinette (Vice-President, Travellers Branch, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, good afternoon. I am pleased to be with you today.

I am Denis Vinette, Vice-President of Travellers Branch. I am responsible, amongst other things, for the Agency's Border Services Officers. I am here with Louise Youdale, Vice-President of the Human Resources Branch at the Canada Border Services Agency, who oversees the Official Language programme of the Agency.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share with you all that has been done by our Agency to provide services and information in both official languages, despite the ongoing pandemic and in respect of Canada's Official Languages Act.

The CBSA takes its Official Languages obligations seriously—whether dealing with external clients or with its own employees. The most frequent ways we interact with the public are: in person at a point of entry, by telephone on our Border Information Service Line, and with visits to our website and on our social media channels.

As you all know, the pandemic required the Agency to implement a number of public health measures at the border, in a dynamic environment. It was, and still is, an evolving situation. However, I assure you that we have not compromised on providing services in both official languages. In fact, not only have we continued to embrace linguistic duality during the pandemic, but we have prioritized it to ensure that essential public health measures were well understood by Canadians and travellers alike.

The CBSA is committed to offering travellers services of equal quality in the official language of their choice at all ports of entry designated as bilingual. At our ports of entry, services, signage and information material are provided according to the Official Languages rules for that region and where there is a significant demand from the official language minority communities.

Should a situation arise where a language barrier exists, the CBSA officer handling the situation will either switch languages, ask another officer who speaks the language to engage, or contact an interpreter. In fact, in a 2020 public opinion research study by Ipsos, 98 percent of respondents who had interactions with a border services officer said it took place in the official language of their choice.

The CBSA considers that it has consistently provided service of equal quality when travellers arrive at a bilingual port of entry. Every traveller is greeted in the official language of their choice. Every traveller is served by an officer with the required language skills. Every traveller receives all documentation in the official language of their choice.

[*English*]

The CBSA's shift scheduling system includes the ability to identify the linguistic profile of employees in order to prioritize the scheduling of bilingual officers at a port of entry when required. The technology in use at ports of entry is available in both official languages. Our primary inspection kiosk can be used by travellers in either English or French.

People seeking information from the CBSA are also welcome to contact us by phone. Our business information service line provides information on CBSA programs, services and initiatives. There's an automated telephone service that provides recorded information in both French and English. In addition, live agents are available during business hours to answer questions in either official language.

Even before the pandemic started, visits to our websites were trending up to become the main way that information is shared with the public. Our statistics tell us that we had more than a million visits to our web pages between June and December 2020. We ensure that all information is available in both official languages at the same time and that the linguistic quality of our text is of the highest standards.

In fact, all content produced for our social media, our websites and applications is always available in both of Canada's official languages from the moment it is made public. During the pandemic, signage at our ports of entry has been bilingual from the start. All brochures shared with the travelling public have also been available in both official languages from the onset of the pandemic.

I know I have focused so far on the services we provide to our clients, but rest assured that our internal practices are equally as important. All internal correspondence to our employees is available in both English and French. Our intranet, messages and bulletins are available in both languages—again, at the same time.

That said, we can always improve our external and internal practices, and more can be done in support of Canada's official languages.

● (1545)

We know the concerns of the Commissioner of Official Languages with regard to the CBSA in his 2019 audit report. The commissioner mentioned recruitment, mechanisms to assess bilingual service delivery, and challenges in building and maintaining relationships with official-language minority communities.

To respond, the CBSA has developed a comprehensive action plan to increase bilingual capacity. By September 2021, tools and reference documents will be developed for managers, and workshops will be provided on bilingual meetings. By February 2022, we will have updated our active-offer training and relaunched it online so that CBSA officers can proactively offer quality service to the public in both official languages. We also expect to establish a national advisory committee for official languages composed of regional and branch ambassadors.

Finally, I want to assure you that all allegations or complaints regarding official languages are always taken very seriously and are thoroughly investigated and acted upon accordingly.

In closing, let me assure you again that the Canada Border Services Agency is fully committed to the Official Languages Act.

We would be happy to provide more details and answer the committee's questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Denis Vinette. It was right on time.

Now I would like to invite Madam Burke.

[*Translation*]

You are the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario. Let me invite you to give your presentation. You have seven and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Kelly Burke (French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, Ombudsman Ontario): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I am accompanied by Carl Bouchard, my Director of Operations in the Ombudsman's Office.

My sincere thanks for this invitation to share with you my experience as French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, with reference to my monitoring of the French language services that the Government of Ontario has provided since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Ontario is the economic heart of the country and has the largest francophone population of any province in Canada outside Quebec. The province therefore plays an essential role in Canada's Francophonie and in our Canadian identity. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to re-examine our work methods, our operational structures and our personal lives. Now that vaccination has begun, questions arise. How are language rights to be guaranteed in a completely changing world?

Regardless of the changes that may occur, official languages must remain a priority. The changes must strengthen and improve the delivery of services in both official languages. Most provinces and territories have laws or policies dealing with the official languages and, often, with French-language services. Their experience varies but their concerns are often similar. So I thank you for your interest in Ontario's experience as you continue your deliberations.

On December 10, 2020, the Office of the Ombudsman published the 2019-2020 report of the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario. I issued eight recommendations as a result of the cases we dealt with. Here is what I would like you to take from my comments today: for the delivery of services in French as an official language to be successful, governments must make the language a priority, by strategically planning in advance, by evaluating the results of their strategies, and by learning from their experiences, in order not to do the minimum, but to achieve excellence.

In a conversation I had with the Premier of Ontario in April 2020, we both agreed that francophones in Ontario have the rights to receive communications in French equivalent to those provided in English, and that it is even more appropriate in this time of crisis. Good intentions aside, however, the need is also for effective strategies. So today, I bring you solutions.

Seventy-three per cent of the cases we dealt with in preparing our annual report dealt with written, in person and online communications. This is a trend that continues to this day and that is apparent elsewhere in the country. Let me give you some examples of the cases we dealt with in Ontario.

We received many complaints about the Premier of Ontario's daily press briefings. When the crisis began, they were wholly in English. I heard complainants tell us that their elderly Franco-Ontarian parents, who do not know English well, had to find their information about COVID-19 in Quebec or at federal level. Of course, the instructions to the public from the neighbouring province and from the federal government were not the same as those being sent to Ontarians by their own provincial government. Confusion arose as a result. Our response helped to have simultaneous interpretation provided for the press briefings. I have recommended to the government that the practice become permanent.

We received a number of complaints about the government's websites that went online during the pandemic, either because they were first launched in English, with the French version following after a significant delay, sometimes of several days, or because the sites were only partially translated.

We received many complaints about the government plans that were developed during the pandemic, such as the one entitled Keeping Ontarians Safe: Preparing for Future Waves of COVID-19. It was published in English first and in French 24 hours later.

• (1550)

We also received complaints about local public health units, over which the government has little authority and to which the French Language Services Act does not apply.

Those who contacted us were concerned. Some were afraid for their safety or the safety of their loved ones. A number considered that the lack of services in French showed the government's lack of respect to francophones.

These examples, these and many other accounts, have led me to make the following observation: it is essential to plan the delivery of services in both official languages from the outset and in a strategic manner.

This means that recruitment and the professional environment must be conducive to attracting bilingual professionals into key positions and to keeping them in the organization. The capacity for translation and simultaneous interpretation must also be strengthened in order to provide the accommodation that is often both necessary and justifiable. Finally, the legislation must be consistent in allowing for the uninterrupted delivery of services, particularly when the health of Canadians is at stake.

In addition, my recommendation to the Government of Ontario is to ensure that each department submit a French language services plan to the Executive Council by April 1, 2022, that those plans be made public, and that annual updates be made available to the public.

Governments must work together and assist each other in finding solutions and in ensuring that both official languages truly enjoy the same status.

This is even more critical in emergency situations, when the minority language unfortunately tends to become a second priority.

Thank you for your attention this afternoon. I am available to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Burke.

This is very interesting. Both two groups of witnesses ended their testimony right on time.

We will now move to the time set aside for questions. The four members who come next will have six minutes each in which to talk to you. I will start with the vice chair, Mr. Blaney.

Mr. Blaney, the floor is yours for the next six minutes.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am going to try to share my time with my colleague Mr. Godin, if he is ready to take over.

First, I want to welcome our two groups of witnesses.

Mr. Vinette, as the virus got in by crossing the border, unfortunately, you were on the front line.

You said that you had reacted to the comments of the Commissioner of Official Languages. It must be said that he mentioned receiving many complaints about the Canada Border Services Agency. In the course of our studies, we have seen how important it is to be served in one's own language, especially in an emergency situation with the pandemic.

You began to explain how you were in the process of making improvements within the agency. You even mentioned September as a deadline.

Could you tell us what steps you are presently taking to respond to the recommendations from the Commissioner of Official Languages?

• (1555)

Mr. Denis Vinette: With pleasure. I will ask my colleague from the Human Resources Branch to add to my comments, if necessary.

One of our major concerns for a number of years has been to make sure that we have measures, policies and practices in place for our officers, in order to ensure that service is always offered and is available at all times. That obligation has no exceptions.

We must therefore make sure that we have an internal action plan that responds, not only to the commissioner's observations, but also to our own internal observations, in two aspects. First, we must always be in a position of having the staff we need to provide service to the public. Then, internally, we have to make sure that we uphold the rights of our employees everywhere in the country, in Quebec or elsewhere, in all regions, that we have guiding service principles, and that they are able to provide bilingual service to Canadians at all times.

Our action plan has several themes. I will ask my colleague Ms. Youdale to take over and talk about them.

The Chair: The floor is yours, Ms. Youdale.

[English]

Ms. Louise Youdale (Vice-President, Human Resources Branch, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you.

As Denis mentioned, there are various facets to our annual plan and, really, they're really grounded in, first, strategic planning and governance, as well as training and development and general people management. As I talk about our themes, I'll try to make reference to the findings that we learned as a result of the report by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

First, one of the key actions is that we have made the responsibility for establishing an appropriate culture that gives due attention to

both official languages in the workplace a mandatory commitment in performance agreements of our leaders within the organization.

Secondly, we have looked at the actual designation of positions, and we've ensured that, when opportunities present themselves, we are continuously reviewing the bilingual designation of positions and elevating them where there are opportunities. Here I'd like to make reference to one of the findings of the report where the commissioner was satisfied with the work that we had done to increase the number of superintendents, and as a result we partially met the recommendation. It was partial because the commissioner was disappointed that we had increased the gap in terms of the number of employees who did not meet the linguistic profile. We are happy to report that we further elevated the number of bilingual superintendent positions, which are now at 214, and 99.1% of the incumbents meet the linguistic profile of their positions.

Hon. Steven Blaney: There are 214 superintendents. What percentage is that of the total number of superintendents that you have?

Ms. Louise Youdale: That would be 31.2%.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much.

Ms. Burke, my sister lives in Ontario. She often listens to the news from Radio-Canada or the press briefings by Mr. Legault in order to find out what to do during the pandemic. You mentioned that in your comments.

Have corrections been made?

Ms. Kelly Burke: A few weeks after the crisis began, our office, community members, and the speaker of the legislature, intervened on the matter. On the YouTube channel, press briefings are now broadcast in both official languages, which has greatly helped to meet the needs of the province's francophones. Because of our response, Premier Ford has recognized the importance of communicating in both languages in an equivalent manner.

The situation has been corrected in large part in terms of the press briefings. We are still busy improving the service and it continues to be provided.

• (1600)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much.

Madam Commissioner, we have realized that official languages are particularly important in a crisis situation. It is not just a social or cultural issue, it's a matter of safety.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaney.

Mr. Duguid, the floor is yours for the next six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank both of our delegations for coming to see us today on this important topic.

My questions are for our friends from the CBSA. First, let me just thank you for all your hard work, as Mr. Blaney said, on the front lines. We know that the pandemic has been challenging for all of us. We've had to be flexible. Public measures have been changing rapidly, as you know, and undoubtedly will change again, particularly as we ease our way out of this pandemic.

I'm very interested in some of the additional measures that you put in place during the pandemic when some of these measures were introduced by the federal government, particularly the closing of the border, just in terms of staff complements and beefing up the complement of bilingual officers. This won't be the last pandemic we have, by the way. I'm certainly told by public health officials that more are on their way.

As a bit of a corollary to that question, my understanding is that there is a shortage of bilingual officers. Can you give me a little more detail about your plan, targets and dates by which you will fulfill the conditions of your plan?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Certainly, Mr. Chair. That's an excellent question.

In my 29 years—and this is all I've done, as I started as an officer on the front lines and have been with the organization ever since—I've never seen the type of escalation of border measures that we have in the last 12 months. In order to be successful in responding to both the pandemic and the government directions, we established within the CBSA a few task forces. I'm responsible for the CBSA's COVID border task force, which has been implementing the measures right from the get-go. One of the immediate measures in establishing that task force, which is a subgroup of experts, was bringing in some dedicated translation services so that as we needed to develop bulletins, procedures and work with our regions, we had the ability in our own in-house translation services as things came into effect—and oftentimes decisions were made and orders in council signed late in the day that required implementation one minute after midnight—to have the products ready to go.

From a communications perspective, we've also established an internal task force and a strategic policy task force. The three task forces work together. Our strategic policy task force encompasses our communications directorate. Again, we ensured that we had dedicated translation services so that as we started our information campaigns, including on our social media and web pages, we were able to do so in both official languages. Certainly we did that successfully.

Maybe I'll pass it over to my colleague, but I would thank the chair for the recognition of our men and women on the front lines and the work they've been doing and what we've asked of them. It has not been an easy task, and I appreciate the recognition.

Thank you.

Ms. Louise Youdale: Thank you.

In addition to the measures that Mr. Vinette spoke to, we also ensured that we were continuing to supply bilingual candidates to the front line. The agency has its own school of 16 instructors. During the pandemic we switched to a virtual classroom to be able to continue to provide that French language training. We will be graduating 736 participants from that training.

In terms of goals that we're hoping to achieve, currently when we look at the front line, 96.8% of individuals in those bilingual positions meet the requirements of their position and, of course, we would like to elevate that to the same number that we are seeing with our superintendents now, which is approximately 99.1%.

In addition to the training, we are continuing to develop our recruitment program. We have a frontline officer recruitment program that has been informed as a result of our engagement with the official languages minority communities across the country. Once we establish the new national advisory committee on official languages that was previously referenced, we will continue to learn from that engagement and inform that national officer recruitment program.

● (1605)

Mr. Terry Duguid: I think I have time for one more question.

The Commissioner of Official Languages' audit of the agency was referenced earlier in your presentation and by some of our questioners. He indicated there was a need for more bilingual superintendents within the CBSA. What are you doing to close the gap on that particular item that the Commissioner of Official Languages highlighted?

Ms. Louise Youdale: The gap that the commissioner highlighted was that we had actually increased the number, but the superintendents were not meeting the linguistic profiles of their positions. We further increased the number to 214 and have focused on ensuring that the incumbents receive the training they require to meet their linguistic profiles, and 99.1% of them now meet those profiles.

Mr. Terry Duguid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Duguid and Ms Youdale.

We now move to Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Beaulieu, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): I'm always a little concerned when there is a major difference between the reality and what is presented to us.

If I understand correctly, the Canada Border Services Agency, CBSA, says that it has always provided service of equal quality when travellers arrive at a bilingual port of entry, and that each traveller is greeted in the language of their choice. However, in 2015, the Commissioner of Official Languages published a report and made recommendations. Four years later, he looked into the matter again and concluded that the agency was not moving forward and that work remained to be done. He said that there are major systemic obstacles it comes to providing service in French at the border and the nub of the problem is the inadequate bilingual capacity among border services officers.

Between 2015 and 2017, for example, no improvement was observed in the hiring of bilingual officers. It was even said that the number of bilingual superintendents had decreased, going from 80 to 76 in 2017. I would like to know exactly how many there are today.

Moreover, the Commissioner of Official Languages said that it is impossible to assess the bilingual services, because there is no oversight mechanism for officers and no monitoring of the traffic through the airports to allow bilingual service to be provided. In his report in 2020, he again noted the lack of bilingual services provided by the Canada Border Services Agency in COVID-19 matters, either in international airports or at land borders.

How do we explain this discrepancy between what we have been told and what seems to be the reality, according to the Commissioner of Official Languages?

Mr. Denis Vinette: My thanks to the member for his question.

For us, it is a constant effort. As you know, at the moment, during the pandemic, all incoming flights are limited to four airports. By moving staff to new positions, we have made sure that we have the people we need to carry out the border controls, including the new health controls, and that we have an adequate complement of bilingual employees. We are always looking to increase the number of bilingual officers in the organization, including by providing internal training, as my colleague mentioned. This training is provided by a school created inside the agency itself and that therefore always reports to it.

We have also continued our recruiting efforts. For example, in Ottawa, where I am at the moment, we go to career fairs at the University of Ottawa and the Cité collégiale. We focus on francophone environments, but the RCMP, the municipal police services and the correctional services, for example, are also looking for bilingual people. It's a little difficult therefore to find people who are already bilingual.

As for our services, one complaint is always one complaint too many. We certainly have measures in place to ensure that the officers offer and provide bilingual services at all times, which may mean calling on a colleague or an interpreter. So when someone wants service in the language of their choice, we make sure they get it.

So we will keep making these efforts, guided by our action plan, which is designed to respond to the commissioner's observations.

• (1610)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's fine, but when you consider the commissioner's findings, the number of complaints and the numerous stories reported in the media, they all seem to add up to one thing: it is very hard for people to receive services in French at border crossings.

Do you acknowledge that there are problems?

According to the assistant commissioner at the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, nothing will change until CBSA commits to overcoming the barriers.

Do you acknowledge that there are numerous problems that call for drastic changes?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I can assure you that there is an ongoing commitment.

As a francophone and someone who has worked for the agency for 29 years, I certainly appreciate the importance of having all the necessary measures in place. Our president is also committed to ensuring bilingual services are delivered in accordance with the Official Languages Act.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some 97 million travellers, on average, crossed the border, and we received 31 complaints about the services provided to the public. That is 31 too many, of course, but we are working hard to make sure the tens of millions of people crossing the border can be served in the language of their choice, and those efforts will continue.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: First, can you tell us how many officers CBSA employs? How many officers and supervisors speak French?

Second, I spoke to a lawyer who deals with CBSA frequently. He told me that, when he speaks to CBSA representatives in French, he almost always receives a response in English. How do you explain that?

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but you're out of time. Your question was too long.

You'll have another turn, so you can ask Mr. Vinette your question then.

We now go to Mr. Boulerice for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today and participating in this study, which is coming to a close soon.

My first question is for the CBSA officials.

The official languages commissioner identified shortcomings in the delivery of bilingual services to travellers by CBSA in the office's 2015 and 2019 reports. Can you tell us the measures that were put in place to reverse the trend?

Can you send the committee a list of all the recommendations made by the official languages commissioner that you have not been able to implement thus far?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Thank you for your question.

I will ask my colleague to comment in a moment.

That amounts to a review of the findings made by the commissioner, with whom we are in constant contact.

We introduced a three-year action plan encompassing a series of initiatives that are based on four themes. The themes were chosen to reflect the commissioner's findings and to make sure we have sufficient organizational capacity to provide bilingual service. By capacity, I mean the number of employees, as well as the tools our unilingual and bilingual officers need, and the technology to ensure we interact with travellers in the language of their choice at all times. That includes in-person interpretation in major centres and telephone-based interpretation in smaller centres.

My colleague can tell you a bit more about the action plan.

• (1615)

[English]

Ms. Louise Youdale: We were provided with eight recommendations, two of which we fully met. They related to engaging the official languages minority communities, as well as our efforts in the area of training. Those recommendations were fully satisfied.

Four were partially satisfied. One was with regard to our need to ensure that our superintendents were bilingual. I've addressed that we now have 99.1% of them meeting their linguistic profiles.

The other recommendation related to our need to increase efforts in designing targeted recruitment strategies. We have now developed the frontline officer recruitment program that was informed by our engagement of the official languages minority communities. That is in play. We are hoping that will assist us in achieving our goals.

The other recommendation had to do with a review....

Sorry, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: As for the six outstanding recommendations—the ones that were not implemented or only partially implemented—I hope you'll be able to meet your obligations within the established time frame.

I have another question.

As you know, of course, Canada and the U.S. have a joint program for low-risk travellers called NEXUS. The main purpose of the program is to make it faster for citizens to cross the border than it would be if they were following the normal process.

Does CBSA ensure that bilingual employees are always posted at NEXUS points?

Mr. Denis Vinette: In regions designated as bilingual, where service must be provided in both languages, we have to make sure staff can provide the service at all times. In certain other areas where we have more than one lane, we also make sure to have a designated bilingual lane.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: The reason I ask is that, on two occasions, constituents in my riding were told to use the regular lane where a bilingual officer was available. Failings like that force fran-

cophones to choose between their rights under the NEXUS program and their language rights.

Can you give us assurance that it won't happen again?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I can assure you that we will continue striving to have individuals designated as bilingual at bilingual points of entry. We have put procedures in place. As a result, when a traveller looking for a French-speaking officer comes to a booth that is not designated as bilingual, we go and fetch an officer from another booth who can provide the service, so that the individual does not have to move to another lane. I can't speak to the specific case you mentioned, but I can assure you that we make certain bilingual officers are always posted at lanes designated as bilingual.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: How many front-line officers speak only French, how many speak only English, and how many are bilingual? Do you have those numbers broken down by province?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I would have to check with my colleague. We may have to get back to the committee with that information.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: If you could, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Denis Vinette: We will do our best.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Ms. Burke, I have a very simple question. Have you noticed a major difference in the bilingual or French-language service provided prior to the pandemic versus that provided during the pandemic? Has the number of complaints remained unchanged or risen significantly?

Ms. Kelly Burke: The number of complaints has been steady over the past year, hovering around the annual average, 300 to 325. However, during the pandemic, we've seen a marked increase in the number of complaints about pandemic-related communications, particularly health messaging. I mentioned press conferences and documentation overall, which is not necessarily translated. The complaints we received had a lot to do with those communications.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Burke.

We will now begin our second round. The next two members will have five minutes each.

Mr. Dalton, you may go ahead.

• (1620)

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be splitting my time with Mr. Godin.

Four airports have been designated for international passenger flight arrivals, two being out west, in Vancouver and Calgary. Canada's official languages commissioner has said that CBSA does not provide bilingual service related to COVID-19 at the international airports. We all recall the stories of French-speaking Canadian travellers who were repatriated last year; they had trouble obtaining French-language information on COVID-19 and quarantine measures.

Now, there are all kinds of problems related to the quarantine measures and hotels. Can you comment on the quarantine process when it comes to hotels?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Thank you for your question.

I can give you a partial answer. A significant number of travellers returned to the country between March and May 2020. When people were being repatriated from various places around the world, things were changing rapidly, and we were trying to keep up. We already had bilingual border officers we could send to border crossings at the four airports, so we reassigned people as needed.

The quarantine information we provide to people comes from the Public Health Agency of Canada, which puts together the information handouts and documentation. The Public Health Agency of Canada runs the quarantine program in hotels, so I can't comment on what goes on in hotels.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you, Mr. Vinette.

We now go to Mr. Godin.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a ton of questions, but little time.

I want to revisit what Mr. Boulerice asked about the NEXUS program.

Your answer surprised me, Mr. Vinette. You said you assigned bilingual officers to regions or places where there is a demand for French speakers. I take it you don't assign bilingual officers to places other than those. I must say that wasn't what I was expecting of a federal government institution in a bilingual country.

I'm looking for some reassurance. If, I, as a francophone, go through the NEXUS lineup in a predominantly English-speaking region, will I be served in French?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Thank you for your question.

Wherever our programs are available, we provide them in both official languages. The active offer should always be made, but not necessarily by the officer in the booth at the time the traveller is crossing the border. Other procedures are in place to ensure the traveller is served in the language of their choice. That means travellers should be able to receive service in the language of their choice at all times, regardless of which point of entry they use.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Vinette.

I also have a question about the use of bilingual officers. It's quite straightforward. When senior employees at CBSA meet, which language do they hold the meeting in?

Mr. Denis Vinette: When it comes to senior management meetings, we undertake to hold management meetings and regional management meetings in both official languages. All of our executives are bilingual. Rest assured that people can speak in the language of their choice.

Mr. Joël Godin: Do managers address participants in English or in French?

Under the policy, they have a choice, but what really happens on the ground?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Meetings take place in the language of the individuals they are speaking to or the language of the person who asked the question. For example, as a francophone, I strive to answer in French when I am asked a question in French, and in English when I am asked a question in English.

Mr. Joël Godin: I have a solution for you. Instead of looking for bilingual workers, you might be better off finding francophone workers and putting them in the right place at the right time. It is indeed hard to find people who are bilingual, not to mention how difficult it is to find workers at all.

That's my suggestion to you.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to Mr. Arseneault for five minutes.

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

My questions are for the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, Ms. Burke, whom we are honoured to have with us today.

Ms. Burke, whether in New Brunswick, Manitoba or Acadian areas in the Atlantic provinces, you have witnessed the trend on the ground—the French language is receiving second-rate treatment—and the pandemic has only exacerbated that feeling among people. That was my understanding when you were describing the complaints you had received.

Between 2009 and 2010, the H1N1 influenza pandemic hit. Your predecessor wrote a report and recommended that clear services be provided in French during an emergency.

Let's turn the clock back to April 2020, when you met with Premier Ford. In connection with the H1N1 pandemic, the then commissioner said in his report that, in an emergency, being able to deliver high-quality communications to the public in both official languages is essential. When you met with Mr. Ford, you both agreed doing so was essential in this pandemic as well. That was in 2020. What has happened since? Where do things stand today, after your meeting with Premier Ford?

Ms. Kelly Burke: Thank you for your question.

One thing is for sure: between the two pandemics, there was a lack of planning. The planning should have happened immediately, in the wake of former commissioner Boileau's recommendation. I have been asking myself why that never happened since January of last year, when I took on the role of commissioner. I realized very quickly, just eight weeks before the pandemic hit, that the government was not adequately prepared for such situations. Of course, I am referring to not just the Ford government, but also the provincial government overall, which had not put forward plans to ensure the delivery of French-language services in a crisis.

My understanding was that the government was prepared to help the province's French speakers receive the services they were entitled to. As French Language Services Commissioner, I was adamant that that happen, in accordance with the French Language Services Act. I received a message from the government indicating that it was able to put the necessary technology in place, and that's what was done.

Since April, there has been a commitment to post information online, especially from the ministries of health and francophone affairs. The Ministry of Francophone Affairs has been working around the clock, since April of last year, to make sure the service is available to Ontario's French-speaking community.

Mr. René Arseneault: Very good. I have under a minute left. We could spend a lot longer on this, but my time is running out.

If I understand correctly, when you met with the premier in April 2020, he accepted and understood his responsibility to communicate in both official languages, especially during a pandemic. Today, you told us about all the services that had been added, namely online.

Fingers crossed it never happens, but let's say another pandemic strikes in three, four or five years' time. Do you think Ontario will have learned from this pandemic and automatically address the needs of French-speaking communities?

Ms. Kelly Burke: I like the word "automatically". That's exactly the message I want to drive home to the government. Taking an automatic approach would make French one of the government's priorities right from the get-go, as soon as communications and discussions happen in relation to policies being implemented. In other words, French would come first, not second.

My expectations of the government are clearly laid out in my annual report. The report makes it very clear to the government the planning that has to happen immediately. We expect the plans to go to the executive council by April 2022. Furthermore, the Minister of Francophone Affairs should report annually on the implementation of these plans in relation to ministries' obligations under the French Language Services Act and the quality of services provided in the province.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Burke.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

The Chair: The next two committee members who will take the floor will each have two and a half minutes for their questions. So I would ask that the questions and answers be short.

I give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I will ask my question again. How many agents of the Canada Border Services Agency are bilingual?

The Chair: Mr. Vinette, we are listening.

Mr. Denis Vinette: My colleague, Ms. Youdale has the data on hand.

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Youdale: We have 6,500 employees at our ports of entry, and 30.3% of them are bilingual.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, go ahead.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's pretty surprising. It's considerable.

I will move on to my other question. I said earlier that it was sometimes, even frequently, difficult to get served in French in Quebec. I spoke to a lawyer who does a lot of work in immigration. He told me that he very often communicated with the agency in French, but that he was responded to in English. I would like to know what you think about that.

As the common language in Quebec is French, I would like to know what proportion of superintendents primarily speak French there.

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Youdale: The proportion of bilingual officers in Quebec is actually quite high. A review of the data shows that, in most locations, it's close to 100%. So, while 30.3% of our frontline workforce is bilingual, that percentage is not equal across the country, and it's highest in Quebec.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Vinette: To complete this answer, I would add that, in Quebec, all our positions are designated bilingual. That is why the numbers are so high.

Concerning your question about correspondence, people who address us in French should receive a response in French. It is not out of the question for them to receive reports drafted by other agents and containing information provided in only one language, but the correspondence should be drafted in the same language as the one used in the request made.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: As far as I have been able to check, that was not the case. It was rather the opposite.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Beaulieu, but your time is up.

The remaining two and a half minutes will go to the next speaker, Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Boulerice, go ahead.

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

My first question is for the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, Ms. Burke.

Do you think a significant bilingual bonus would be a useful tool to attract and retain bilingual employees, which would help provide better services, especially in French?

Ms. Kelly Burke: That is always an incentive. Of course, I think the labour shortage may be related to the fact that we don't have enough bilingual individuals. However, the incentive to also work in French is among the options to consider.

I think that is the case at the federal level, where there is a bilingual bonus. That's not necessarily the case in Ontario. It is obviously an option that could be used as an incentive.

• (1635)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay.

Do you think the Official Languages Act has an impact on the quality of services in French in Ontario?

If so, what is that impact?

Ms. Kelly Burke: I do believe that is the case. The Official Languages Act and all the pieces of legislation that protect language rights have a clear impact on the francophonie in general.

In the federal act, it is a matter of language rights that are attached to the federal government's services. In Ontario, we also have a legislative instrument, the French Language Services Act, which is very useful to us. However, what I am seeing in the Official Languages Act is the duty to do more to help the provinces ensure that their services would be provided in French. This is a legislative framework that, in Ontario, helps us ensure that the availability of services in French and English is protected.

My role as a commissioner is to make sure this is the case.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay.

I have a question for the Canada Border Services Agency.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Have you heard about the fact that people may be subject to searches in retaliation for asking to be served in French?

Radio-Canada talked about this.

The Chair: You have between five and 10 seconds, Mr. Vinette. Be very brief.

Mr. Denis Vinette: I have not heard about this situation. That should not be happening, as it clearly violates our policies.

The Chair: Thank you, that is all the time we have for this panel of witnesses. It is already 4:37 p.m.

On behalf of all the committee members, on my own behalf and on behalf of the committee staff, I would like to thank you for your participation. Please do not hesitate to send us any complementary information or your briefs. I know that we received briefs from Mr. Vinette and Ms. Burke.

I would like to begin by thanking Kelly Burke, French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, and Carl Bouchard, Director of Operations, French Language Services Unit. From the Canada Bor-

der Services Agency, I would like to thank Denis Vinette, Vice-President, Travellers Branch, and Louise Youdale, Vice-President, Human Resources Branch.

Thank you for your participation.

We will suspend the meeting for one or two minutes while we welcome our next witnesses.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Today, 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.

I am now speaking to the witnesses. Before you take the floor, make sure to unmute your microphone. If a question is addressed to you, you don't have to wait for me to give you the floor. You can go ahead right away.

• (1645)

[*English*]

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

You have access to interpretation services, and you can choose between the floor, English or French.

I also ask that you speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

So I officially welcome you to the standing committee on official languages. Each group will have seven and a half minutes for its opening remarks, which will be followed by a period of questions by members. I will let you know when you have a minute left and when your time is up.

Let's give a warm welcome this afternoon to Alex Silas, Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital Region, and Chantal Fortin, Alternate Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital Region, both from the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and Louise Imbeault, President of the Société nationale de l'Acadie.

I must inform you that, during this hour of discussion, we may stop if the bells ring to indicate that it is time to vote.

I would ask the representatives of the Public Service Alliance of Canada to make their presentation.

Go ahead for seven and a half minutes.

Mr. Alex Silas (Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital Region, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Mr. Chair, members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, thank you for inviting us to testify about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to provide information in both official languages.

My name is Alex Silas, and I am the Regional Executive Vice-President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada for the National Capital Region. With me is my union sister Chantal Fortin, Alternate Regional Executive Vice-President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, PSAC.

I was born in Moncton, New Brunswick. My family moved to Ottawa when I was younger. I am a proud Acadian, a French-speaking and bilingual people willing to stand up and defend our rights.

PSAC represents more than 48,000 members in the National Capital Region. A little over a year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic entered our lives. As weeks turned into months, our members rolled up their sleeves and continued to provide essential public services to Canadians to support them throughout the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, the truth is that problems had been noted with bilingualism in the federal public service. Lacking measures to protect bilingualism, the right to work in the official language of our choice and our ability to communicate with the public in both official languages, our response to the pandemic has been affected.

If bilingualism were a priority for the Treasury Board, it would put concrete practices in place to support French in the workplace instead of simply sending out memos to encourage its use. The pandemic has made the situation worse.

To talk about what we see in workplaces, I would like to yield the floor to my union sister, Chantal Fortin.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Fortin.

Ms. Chantal Fortin (Alternate Regional Executive Vice-President, National Capital Region, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Apologies, I was on the telephone with the technician to try to resolve my video issues.

Thank you very much for this welcome.

My name is Chantal Fortin, and I am the Alternate Regional Executive Vice-President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, National Capital Region. I am a proud Franco-Ontarian who was born here in Ottawa. I am comfortable speaking in both English and French, having lived my whole life in the National Capital Region. Although I am bilingual, my mother tongue is French, and I was educated in French. So it requires more time and effort for me to work in my second language—time and effort that, at work, would otherwise be devoted to my main duties. I have been working for the Government of Canada for 19 years, and I am very concerned about the ability of workers like me to use the official language in which they are most comfortable.

The following is what we hear from PSAC members. Important information is not always sent by managers in both official languages. When documents are sent only in English, management

tells us that [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] French translation. Often, Francophones have the impression that they have to use their second language—

• (1650)

Mr. René Arseneault: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

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

The Chair: Yes.

I apologize, Ms. Fortin. Can you wait a minute?

I am stopping the clock. Two committee members have raised a point of order.

Mr. Godin, go ahead.

Mr. Joël Godin: We lost a small part of her remarks. I would ask the witness to repeat the last 15 seconds of her presentation.

I apologize, Ms. Fortin. I understand that you have a technical problem, but your testimony is very important, so I would ask you to repeat your comments.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Clerk, go ahead.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Nancy Vohl): Ms. Fortin, I would remind you that, since we cannot see you right now, you need to speak a bit slower because, without an image, it is difficult for the interpreters.

Ms. Chantal Fortin: Okay. I understand.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Arseneault, was it the same point of order? So we will continue. Everything is going well.

Ms. Fortin, as has been proposed, could you repeat your two or three last sentences and continue your presentation?

Ms. Chantal Fortin: Certainly.

I will make sure to speak a bit more slowly.

I have been working for the Government of Canada for 19 years, and I am very concerned about the ability of workers like me to use the official language in which they are most comfortable.

I would like to share with you some testimony from our members.

Important information is not always sent by managers in both official languages, and when documents are sent only in English, management tells us it will take more time to get a French translation.

Often, francophones have the impression that they have to use their second language so as not to be left behind by their co-workers, because the translation is either not available or not ready on time.

Francophones sometimes have trouble understanding what is said in English during meetings and, owing to virtual work, they no longer have easy access to their co-workers to ask questions and get a better understanding of what was said during the meeting. Conversely, anglophones feel uncomfortable speaking French in a formal meeting context where everything is being done in English.

Bilingual workers are sometimes expected to step in and translate during meetings in place of organized translation services. This means that bilingual people have a double duty: to carry out their regular work and to provide backup translation services. I hope you agree with me that this is unacceptable.

We also hear that, in client contact centres, more unilingual anglophones are hired than unilingual francophones and are then offered private training to improve their French, but the same opportunities are far fewer for unilingual francophone applicants. This is a disadvantage and inequity for francophones and immigrants from francophone countries.

Francophone members must fight to gain access to work tools in French, such as software, documentation, programs and applications. This is unacceptable.

The Government of Canada regularly stresses its pride in having a competent, diverse, dynamic and bilingual public service. However, to maintain and improve its capacity, the necessary support systems and tools to support the use of French in the workplace must be put in place.

I would like to name a few solutions that could help improve bilingualism in the federal workplace. The bilingualism bonus has remained at \$800 per year for 30 years. We have pushed the government several times to review its policy, but it refuses to budge.

The bilingualism bonus must be increased to recognize the value of working in both official languages. More language training must also be provided to encourage anglophone and francophone employees to improve their second language.

If the government seriously wants to increase bilingualism in the federal workplace, it should enhance the bilingualism bonus and extend second-language training. This is not a case of one or the other.

The Treasury Board must also stop all subcontracting of language training and focus on bringing back a public-sector training program delivered by public service workers.

• (1655)

The Chair: Ms. Fortin, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Can you wrap up in 15 or 20 seconds, please?

Ms. Chantal Fortin: I was just about to give the floor to Mr. Silas to finish our presentation.

The Chair: Mr. Silas, can you wrap up in 10 seconds, please?

Mr. Alex Silas: In conclusion, if the Government of Canada really wants to preserve our bilingual identity and improve its ability

to communicate and provide services to Canadians in both official languages, it will take work, investment and a concrete mandate.

As part of this discussion on our country's official languages and colonial languages, we mustn't forget the importance of preserving indigenous languages. We must all—

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Silas, that's all the time that we have. You can add to your comments when you answer the questions.

I'll now give the floor for seven and a half minutes to Louise Imbeault from the Société nationale de l'Acadie.

Ms. Louise Imbeault (President, Société nationale de l'Acadie): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. I know several of you, to whom I've spoken. I'm pleased to have the chance to reiterate the message of the Société nationale de l'Acadie.

The Société nationale de l'Acadie was founded in 1881 to advocate for the interests of Acadians, in particular the interests of ancient and contemporary Acadia. We represent the four associations that advocate for Acadians in the four Atlantic provinces, along with the youth associations in these four provinces and many members from around the world, including Quebec, Ontario, Louisiana, the United States and France. Thank you for having me here today.

I want to address four points.

I'll start with an anecdote. It's now an anecdote, but it wasn't an anecdote when it happened. You'll recall that, at the start of the pandemic, the Canadian government agreed to allow drugs or products that weren't labelled in both official languages on the market. We were told that this was the result of an emergency. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

For years, the francophones in this country have been saying that the Official Languages Act isn't being complied with and implemented, or isn't always being implemented, and that, as a result, we aren't prepared to deal with emergencies. Mr. Silas and Ms. Fortin made similar points.

For the past two or three years, if not more, francophones across the country have been calling for an update of the act. They want the act to be modernized, to have more teeth, and to include penalties for people, businesses, and especially government services that don't comply with it. We've already heard this afternoon about many instances where the act wasn't complied with or enforced.

First, the pandemic resulted in the delay of the bill, and we had been waiting for this bill for a long time.

Fortunately, in February, Minister Mélanie Joly announced her overhaul plan. I must say that most of the communities that I represent were satisfied that the overhaul plan took into account the considerations that we proposed, whether these considerations concerned compliance with the act, the enhancement of certain standards, incentives, or the recognition of the language regimes of each province, particularly New Brunswick. The first impact of the pandemic on the Official Languages Act was a major delay with regard to the bill that we had all been awaiting for a long time. That said, I'm not sure whether the pandemic was responsible for this delay. It may have been a good excuse.

Second, the impact of the pandemic meant that all the development efforts abroad of the Société nationale de l'Acadie and Acadia in general were put on hold. Relationships that had been established with France, Belgium and Louisiana couldn't be maintained. Of course, the pandemic is partly responsible for this. However, we must also consider the fact that we didn't have the tools to continue these relationships. With the exception of Quebecers, there aren't many francophones. Our ability to take action must be based on international recognition.

Third, I want to talk about the strategy for the promotion of Acadian artists on the international stage, or SPAASI. The Acadian artistic community is abundant, but the audience isn't very large. For the past 20 years or so, we've been working on promoting the artistic ability of our artists, meaning their artistic products, at the international level. This isn't only a key part of their development. It's also an economic issue. Since the markets are small, when our artists have the chance to perform on the international stage, it can triple the investments. An artist who goes on tour in France, Belgium or elsewhere will increase their very minimal income five-fold. For each dollar invested, there's a significant return.

• (1700)

This isn't the same as funding or subsidizing organizations such as Cirque du Soleil, where millions of dollars are generated. However, for individuals and groups, these benefits are significant. Since Canada has put a dollar sign on these foreign investments, they must generate benefits. However, we must take into consideration the fact that these benefits can vary depending on whether you're a solo artist, a small theatre company, an exhibit or a large ensemble such as the ones that we have in Canada.

Fourth, I want to draw your attention to the issue of francophone immigration. The Canadian government committed to expanding immigration opportunities and to ensuring that francophone immigration for the country as a whole reaches at least 4.4%, and an even higher rate in some provinces, such as New Brunswick. However, these targets have never been met and certainly won't be met this year either, because of the pandemic.

If you want to renew this commitment and ensure the survival of French, you must invest resources in this area. Given what has happened, you must focus on francophone immigration in the coming years. You must give it a boost so that the pandemic doesn't have a negative impact and the proportion of francophones in the country doesn't decrease any further.

These are the four points that I wanted to address. Obviously, I'm more than willing to discuss these matters further with the committee members.

The Chair: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Imbeault.

We'll move on to the question period. Each committee member will have six minutes.

I would like to take this opportunity to ask Ms. Fortin to speak loudly and slowly if she answers questions. We can't see her, so the interpreters can't read her lips.

Mr. Blaney, you have the floor.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for telling us about two realities of bilingualism and about the status of French in Canada and in the public service.

Ms. Fortin, your description of the status of French in the public service is rather alarming. I would say that this goes beyond the scope of our study on the impact of the pandemic. However, it falls in line with the reform of the Official Languages Act.

Ms. Imbeault, you touched on several important issues for our communities, including immigration. Speaking of culture and development, the program entitled *En direct de l'univers* celebrated the francophonie last Saturday with a beautiful musical performance by the Salebarbes group. Culture is a very good ambassador of the language.

I would like to ask a few questions. However, since the vote may cut our work short, I'll turn the floor over to my colleague, Mr. Godin. I want to thank you for your presentations, which will be of great value to this study. I also want to thank you for giving us a broader perspective of the troubling status of French in the public service, among other things.

• (1705)

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to thank my colleague.

The Standing Committee on Official Languages has an artist in its midst. The artist is Mr. Arseneault. I would like to acknowledge his potential and expertise, but warn Ms. Imbeault that we want to keep him here.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here. I just wanted to ask the Public Service Alliance of Canada representatives a question.

Our study concerns the impact of COVID-19 on official languages. Your well-structured presentation referred to an issue that existed before the pandemic. What new issues have arisen with the pandemic? How can we try to help public servants and make them more comfortable? Without getting into a renegotiation of the past, in concrete terms, what additional pressure has the pandemic exerted on official languages?

Mr. Alex Silas: Thank you for your question.

One negative impact of the pandemic has been the further decline in opportunities to communicate in French and break the ice, such as the chance to run into each other in the office or chat in a second language.

Our members are also reporting that they often receive messages in only one language and that, when they ask managers to send the messages in both official languages, the request is denied. Issues of this nature have been compounded since the pandemic.

Mr. Joël Godin: My next question is for Ms. Fortin.

You spoke earlier about the fact that francophones don't always understand when they attend meetings.

Can you say that, in the pandemic era, this situation has put the health of Canadians at risk?

Ms. Chantal Fortin: This is certainly the case from a mental health perspective. People who have trouble understanding are worried and more stressed...

Mr. Joël Godin: I apologize for interrupting you, Ms. Fortin, but I don't have a lot of time.

I am interested in effects on the population. There is indeed an impact on employees, and you are right to protect employees. Beyond that, what are the effects of this on the Canadian population?

Ms. Chantal Fortin: If employees do not feel well equipped to speak French, whether it is their first or second language, it will affect the population receiving services. We see this with employees who are contracted out to agencies. They claim to be bilingual, when in fact they are not. So they have tremendous difficulty providing adequate services to the population in one language or the other.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Fortin.

I will now address Ms. Imbeault.

You have outlined four consequences of COVID-19 on our beautiful French language. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when life returns to normal, what will be your organization's priority for the Canadian government to help revive the French language with our friends, the Acadians?

• (1710)

Ms. Louise Imbeault: Thank you very much for your question, Mr. Godin.

Clearly, the new version of the Official Languages Act must be passed as soon as possible. We've been waiting for it a long time.

Throughout the pandemic, it has been demonstrated that elements of the act that were not followed resulted in many people not receiving the services they were entitled to.

I heard questions earlier about the rights of people to speak in French. They didn't and they probably didn't advocate much for that during the pandemic because they were dealing with the emergency. If there's a priority, that's it.

The second would be to fund organizations and institutions, whether it be universities or groups like ours, that can accelerate the pace so that the backlogs are eliminated.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Imbeault.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Ms. Imbeault.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We may continue with Ms. Imbeault as the next six minutes belong to Mr. Arseneault.

You have the floor, Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Imbeault may be the one who's running a risk.

I thank our witnesses. It's always a pleasure to hear from them.

I would like to say to the new participants that we are a bit informal on the committee. So I can't help but take a moment to ask Mr. Silas if his mother's name is Linda.

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes, that's my mother all right.

Mr. René Arseneault: In that case, your presence here explains a bit about my salt and pepper hair.

My first questions will be for Ms. Imbeault, since she represents the SNA, of course.

Today you are here to talk about the effects of the pandemic on the government's ability to provide information in both official languages.

Ms. Imbeault, what have we heard in our four Atlantic provinces about the ability of provincial governments to provide information?

What was similar and what was different in the four Atlantic provinces?

Ms. Louise Imbeault: In terms of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, the medical examiner responsible for this case in each of those two provinces was very articulate in French and was able to answer questions from reporters on television on a daily basis. We saw the difference it makes when people have that ability. In the other two provinces, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, medical examiners speaking on behalf of public health could not interact with reporters or the public in their language.

Although these are provincial services, the federal government can play a role, given that it is an exceptional funding partner for health services in the provinces.

We have seen differences. In Nova Scotia, for example, where the new premier can speak in French, it reassures people that the messages are the same in both languages. Not everyone has this ability; the ability to speak in both languages is like a gift. However, this should not be the case when it comes to providing public services, especially in a pandemic.

I think people...

Mr. René Arseneault: Excuse me for interrupting, but we only have five minutes. I would like to come back to the public services provided by the provinces.

What have you found with respect to the Province of New Brunswick?

Ms. Louise Imbeault: There is no doubt that the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick, which I also represent in some way, deplored the fact that the Premier of New Brunswick did not deign to be accompanied by someone who could have delivered his messages in French for the French-speaking population. However, the demand was there. On the other hand, Dr. Jennifer Russell, New Brunswick's Chief Medical Officer of Health, was so competent that it made up for it.

People did notice that the premier did not consider it important to address his population in French. He did it in English, and there were some small translations after a while.

Mr. René Arseneault: I'd like to go back to the provincial responsibility for services in both official languages, particularly in New Brunswick for the constitutional reasons that we know.

I remember an event where a reporter was asking our premier a question. You remember that. Since you are our witness, I will let you explain what you remember from that event.

Also, what do you think was the responsibility of the Province of New Brunswick at that time?

• (1715)

Ms. Louise Imbeault: The Province of New Brunswick has defined itself as a bilingual province. Its commitment to bilingualism is enshrined in the Official Languages Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is therefore certain that this event violated the law.

However, I don't want to get ahead of myself on this subject. It is not for lack of conviction, it is simply because it is the Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick that is driving these issues for the people of New Brunswick.

I have tried to outline the situation that concerns all Acadians in the Atlantic provinces. What happened in New Brunswick is one thing. However, in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, the situation is surely slightly different because the obligations are different.

The Canadian government, on the other hand, has an obligation across the board. Since it funds a very high percentage of health care, it should use this leverage to ensure that these services are truly recognized for each and every francophone.

Mr. René Arseneault: I have less than a minute left, Ms. Imbeault. It is always a pleasure to hear from you.

I have one last question with respect to Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, related to the pandemic.

We heard from the Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Raymond Thériault, that there is now a way to work together to be able to send, for example, notices or instructions on taking medications or providing services in both official languages.

Have you been made aware that the provinces have reached out to the government to help them with this?

Ms. Louise Imbeault: I would like to answer you...

The Chair: Ms. Imbeault, you have between 15 and 20 seconds left.

Ms. Louise Imbeault: I don't know the answer.

The Chair: Fine, thank you.

Mr. Arseneault, your time is up. Thank you.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll move on to Mr. Beaulieu.

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

The Clerk: Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, Madam Clerk?

The Clerk: I would like to advise you that the lights are flashing and the bell is ringing. I believe your voting application should indicate this and that you should suspend the meeting, unless you get unanimous consent to continue.

The Chair: I do indeed see that the bell is ringing. I don't know if we have 15 minutes.

Hon. Steven Blaney: We have 30 minutes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: It is up to you, members. It is 5:17 p.m.

Do you want us to continue the meeting until 5:30 p.m.?

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's fine.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Perhaps we could finish this round of questions.

The Chair: Yes. Since we have two six-minute rounds left, we will use them. That will give us time to vote.

Thank you very much.

We'll go back to Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Good afternoon. I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

I would like to begin by addressing the representatives of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

We had the opportunity to have a representative from the Public Service Alliance, but for Quebec. His testimony was quite amazing. This witness was saying much the same thing as you, particularly about the difficulty of working in French. He even said that he had observed, in terms of language, a deeply rooted systemic discrimination in the federal government. He pointed out that it was taken for granted that everything was done in English first, and then in French.

Do you agree?

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes. Obviously, being a French-speaking public servant is a disadvantage. Often, in a hiring process, a unilingual English-speaking candidate is given a position and then trained to become bilingual. This does not work the other way around. Indeed, a unilingual French-speaking candidate is not offered the same opportunity to be considered for a position and then receive training in English.

Certainly, on paper, the rules seem fair. In practice, however, we see that things are different. Often, meetings are conducted squarely in English, even though the majority of people, whether meeting in person or virtually, are francophones. The meeting is held in English because that's the practice; that's what people think they should do.

It is clear that being a francophone in the public service is a disadvantage.

• (1720)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's illogical because it's much easier, especially outside Quebec, to find people who know English than it is to find people who know French. It should be the other way around. If unilingual francophones are hired, they will definitely be in the minority. At the very least, we can always ask someone who speaks English to take over. We can also encourage training.

We were told that there was a real problem in the staffing process. We were told about the knowledge requirements. We were even told that the bilingualism test was much easier for anglophones than for francophones.

Do you agree?

Mr. Alex Silas: Yes, absolutely. Our members tell us that the level of difficulty of the test isn't the same for francophone candidates as it is for anglophone candidates.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You said, and this was consistent with Mr. Barrière's observation, that during meetings, especially when they were virtual, managers often spoke to people in English. You even said earlier that correspondence was sometimes sent to you in English, that you asked that it be sent in French, but that your request was denied. This is really a violation of the Official Languages Act.

What can you do in cases like this? Do you routinely submit a complaint when it happens?

That said, if employees file a complaint, they should be a little afraid of reprisals.

How do you see this situation? What action could be taken?

Mr. Alex Silas: We work case by case. We advise our locals to file a complaint or grievance where appropriate.

From a broader perspective, we propose increasing the bilingualism bonus so that it provides greater incentive for public servants to work in both languages. The bilingualism bonus is only \$800 and hasn't been increased since the 1990s. This amount doesn't have the same value today as it did 30 years ago. That could be one solution.

Another solution would be to offer more language training and to stop outsourcing that training. It should be offered by the public

service so that federal employees are trained by other federal employees.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I think it was you, Ms. Fortin, who said earlier that we should stop outsourcing language training. Could you tell us a little more about that? Is it because the training offered by subcontractors is of lower quality? What's the rationale for your recommendations?

The Chair: Ms. Fortin, you have a minute and five seconds to answer the question.

Ms. Chantal Fortin: Not only is the quality lower, but the context isn't the same. The federal government has its own jargon, and it's very difficult for subcontractors to use that particular language in training. So there's a quality problem in several respects.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Have you noticed recently that there has been more outsourcing?

Ms. Chantal Fortin: Yes, there is more outsourcing in the public service in general, not just in language training.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We've noticed the same thing with respect to interpreters employed by the Translation Bureau.

The Official Languages Act has been in force for 50 years. After all this time, Ms. Imbeault, do you think it's normal that you still have to fight to get services in French?

Ms. Louise Imbeault: Of course not. That's what I was thinking as I listened to my colleagues talk.

If the public service hasn't been able to fix these problems in 50 years, then something's missing somewhere. There's certainly a lack of will. You're right, 50 years is a long time to institute a cultural change. The new act needs to come into force quickly.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Imbeault.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the last six minutes.

• (1725)

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

I'm glad we were able to finish this round of questions. I'm also glad to see Ms. Fortin appear on our screens.

Mr. Silas, you talked about the need to increase the bilingualism bonus, which has been \$800 since the 1990s. What do you think would be a good amount? Should a lump sum still be offered or would it be better to offer a percentage of salary?

Mr. Alex Silas: I'm not prepared to suggest a figure. The National Joint Council of the Public Service of Canada is responsible for these negotiations. We would like to see the discussions move forward; every time we try to raise this issue, we're threatened outright with the abolition of the bonus.

It would be nice if these discussions were more productive and if there was an honest admission that it's time for the bilingualism bonus to be higher than \$800 a year.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I'm sorry and surprised to hear that they're threatening to abolish it, when it should really be going the other way.

You also talked about the impact of telework on your members, which then has an impact on services to the public. Has the government given you all the tools you need to work well in these times of telework? I'm talking about laptops and headsets, but also reimbursement for the high-speed Internet connection that is needed to provide good service. Was all of this in place when the pandemic happened?

Mr. Alex Silas: It was very uneven and unstable in the early days of the pandemic. Some members didn't have all the tools they needed to do their jobs at home. This situation has stabilized somewhat over the past year, but it still differs from department to department. Some decisions are sometimes left to the manager's discretion, when it should be set out in general policies.

So the situation is better than it was a year ago, but there are still gaps.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: There's still work to do.

Ms. Imbeault, I want to ask you a question about the demise of the public diplomacy program. You talked about the importance, particularly for Acadian artists, of exporting their art to other francophone countries and having ties with them. In fact, the money from these exports represents a large part of the income of francophone artists.

However, for reasons unknown, cultural diplomacy no longer seems to be in the government's plans. Shouldn't it be reinstated in the Official Languages Act?

Ms. Louise Imbeault: Cultural diplomacy is of the utmost importance for the influence of francophones on the international scene. Canada wants to be a bilingual country on the international stage. It's not a fad, it's not something we invented; it's part of our world.

I want to take this opportunity to come back to the issue of the Internet. I don't know if you know this, but many parts of Canada still don't have access to the Internet. The major providers charge the public for cell towers for Internet services. The service is not equitable across the country.

As part of the review of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission Act, we made a submission asking that this issue be considered in certain rural and less populated areas that don't even have access to the Internet. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it's clear how important this service is.

Cultural diplomacy allows our artists to shine. However, it needs to be available to small businesses. In recent years, this has benefit-

ed large businesses with high economic coefficients, but not small businesses or individuals. New measures or a new program should be included that would be designed with the outreach of the country and the well-being of artists in mind.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: The economic impact may not be as great for small businesses as it is for large businesses. That said, cultural diplomacy allows individuals and small businesses to make a living from their art in French, so the impact is much greater for them.

Ms. Louise Imbeault: Yes, it is. And the entire Canadian community benefits from a healthy cultural sector. This sector represents a lot of jobs. We often think of large companies that employ 2,000 or 3,000 people, but the cultural industry is made up of a lot of people who aren't all in one big company, but they are there.

● (1730)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: This is very important. I'm aware of that.

As part of the overhaul of the Official Languages Act, why is it important to also name representative organizations such as yours, and not just institutions?

The Chair: Ms. Imbeault, I'd ask you to answer the question in 30 seconds or less.

Ms. Louise Imbeault: It's because only these organizations can speak for everyone. Universities and colleges have their own interests to defend. Advocacy organizations, on the other hand, can speak for the community because they don't have personal or institutional interests to defend.

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

I know the bells are ringing in the House to call the vote, but let me acknowledge the witnesses and thank them for their interventions. If they have a brief to send to us, they shouldn't hesitate to do so.

I'd like to thank both representatives from the Public Service Alliance of Canada, Alex Silas, regional executive vice-president, and Chantal Fortin, alternate regional executive vice-president, both for the national capital region. I also thank Louise Imbeault, president of the Société nationale de l'Acadie.

Dear colleagues, this is the last day of our clerk, Josée Harrison, on this committee. On behalf of all the committee members, I'd like to thank her for her work and support. I'm sure you'll join me in wishing her well in her new endeavours.

I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Nancy Vohl, who will be our new clerk. She's been doing the sound tests recently. I want to wish her success.

Lastly, I would like to thank the staff, technicians and everyone who supported us during this meeting.

On that note, ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is adjourned.

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