

## PSAC PRESENTATION TO THE COMMITTEE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

MARCH 21, 2024

### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) made a presentation to the Standing Committee of Official Languages in the context of a study on language obligations related to the process of staffing or making appointments to key positions.

We would like to emphasize a few points we made during our presentation for the committee to consider, especially regarding the increase to the bilingual bonus. As mentioned during M. Silas' presentation, we strongly believe that increasing the bilingual bonus in the federal public service is an essential step to recognize the value of working in both official languages. However, we are aware that some witnesses have expressed skepticism regarding the added value of the bilingual bonus, and we hope that the following will contextualize our position.

The bilingualism bonus is a taxable fixed amount of \$800, paid annually to employees of all departments, Crown corporations and separate agencies listed in schedules I, IV and V of the Financial Administration Act. The bonus is governed by the Bilingualism Bonus Directive and is an integral part of several PSAC collective agreements. Employees are eligible for the bonus if they are in a designated bilingual position and have Second Language Evaluation results confirming that they meet the position's language requirements.

An essential aspect to understand is the context in which the bilingual bonus was born. In the early 1960s, public service employee unions proposed giving federal workers a bonus for working in their second official language. This position was reflected in Bill C-96, an Act Respecting Employment of Bilingual Persons in the Public Service and in Crown Corporations, which was tabled in Parliament in 1963, The Bill was presented to put an end to the *"discrimination which marks at the present time the hiring and employment of French speaking personnel, and it would give preference to bilingual candidates."*<sup>1</sup>

Even though Bill C-96 died on the Order Paper, PSAC kept advocating in favor of a bilingual bonus that would apply to all federal public service workers. The effort culminated in boycotts to services in both languages before an agreement was eventually reached with the government<sup>2</sup>. In 1977, Treasury Board officially established the bilingual bonus that is still in effect to this day.

The introduction of the bilingual bonus was not simply rooted in a desire for higher wages, but it was rather the result of the government's continued inability at the time to implement bilingualism within the federal public service.

Moreover, when looking at the evolution of bilingualism in the public service, there is a clear correlation between the introduction of the bilingualism bonus and an increased bilingual capacity in the federal public service. In 1965, barely 9% of positions in the federal public service were designated bilingual; many services were only offered in English; and Francophones made up just 21% of the workforce in federal institutions, despite representing around 28% of the Canadian population at that time<sup>3</sup>. Since the introduction of the bilingual bonus, the proportion of public service workers who are in receipt of the bilingual bonus has slowly increased and eventually more than doubled from 16% to about 33% .. However, this number has plateaued in the past 15 years.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, Debates, 1st Session, 26th Parliament, 2 October 1963, p. 3109.

<sup>2</sup> "Civil servants will speak only mother tongue in campaign to get bonus for being bilingual," Globe and Mail [Toronto], 31 December 1975

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, "Looking back: A defining moment – The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism," Beyond Words: Canada's Official Languages Newsletter, No. 5, Fall 2009.

Past committees and witnesses have expressed that the knowledge of the two official languages should be considered a professional skill that is reflected in the salaries of federal employees. However, this view does not consider the complexity of the classification system in the federal public service. Under the current classification system, multiple positions are lumped together under single groups and levels which makes it simply impossible to differentiate between unilingual and bilingual employees.

Over the past 50 years, the bilingual bonus has been deemed the most appropriate way to recognise the additional value of speaking both official languages. However, the bilingual bonus has become nothing more than a symbolic payment. It should genuinely reflect the value of the additional skill and the actual service rendered. If this initial amount had been indexed to inflation, the bilingualism bonus would now be worth approximately \$4,000.

Fortunately, the bilingual bonus directive is about to be reviewed for the first time since 1990 and we are hopeful that this will lead to the first meaningful increase of the bonus since 1977.

During his presentation, M. Silas also indicated that PSAC is advocating for a bilingual bonus that would help recognize the value federal workers who speak an Indigenous language bring to the federal public service.

This would be another important step towards reconciliation as recognition of, and support for Indigenous languages in Canada which is a significant part of the Calls for Action included in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 2015 Report. The recommendations notably call for federal funding for the "preservation, revitalization and strengthening" of Indigenous languages.

The Federal Government itself has shown commitment to Indigenous languages by passing Bill C-91 – the Indigenous Languages Act. It is therefore incomprehensible to PSAC that the Treasury Board of Canada continues to resist a modest monetary recognition of use of an Indigenous language by its own employees. The addition of a bilingual bonus would recognize the role that federal government workers play in supporting the delivery services and programs in Indigenous languages, which is required in many departmental mandates, and recognize their contribution to the overall aim of promoting access to, restoring and reviving Indigenous languages in Canada.

#### Recommendations

PSAC respectfully ask the committee include the following recommendations in its final report:

- 1) The Committee recommends that Treasury Board significantly increase the bilingualism bonus to genuinely reflect the value of the additional skill and actual service rendered by bilingual employees.
- 2) The Committee recommends that Treasury Board implement a language allowance that would recognize the role that federal government workers play in supporting the delivery services and programs in Indigenous languages.