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Chair: Mr. René Arseneault



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• (1540)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

[English]

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, November 25, 2021, and members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[English]

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in the light of the recommendations from health authorities, to remain healthy and safe all those attending the meeting in person should follow the directives of the Board of Internal Economy.

[Translation]

I thank the members in advance for their cooperation.

For those of you who are attending virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

First, you may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either French, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. Please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

Those in the room, your microphones will be controlled as usual by the proceedings and verification officer.

When speaking, do as I do and speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

[English]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me immediately. Please note that we might need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, December 15, 2021, the committee is undertaking its study on the importance of official languages at Air Canada.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses from Air Canada, who are participating in the meeting by video conference. They are Michael Rousseau, President and Chief Executive Officer; Marc Barbeau, Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer; and David Rheault, Vice President, Government and Community Relations.

Mr. Rousseau, you will have a maximum of five minutes for your remarks, after which we will have a series of questions. I will signal to you when you have about one minute of speaking time left.

The floor is yours, Mr. Rousseau.

• (1545)

Mr. Michael Rousseau (President and Chief Executive Officer, Air Canada): Members of the Committee, good afternoon.

[English]

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today on the work of the committee on official languages. I am accompanied today by Marc Barbeau, our executive vice-president and chief legal officer, and David Rheault, our vice-president, government and community relations.

I would have liked to deliver more of my opening remarks in both official languages, but my ability to speak French is not yet equal to the effort I've been investing into learning it.

On November 3, during a scrum before the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal, I regret having made a statement that was insensitive to the status of French. I have apologized for my comments, and I have been taking French lessons ever since.

[Translation]

I'm sorry. I apologize once again, and I take responsibility for my remarks. I regret the impact that my remarks have had on our employees, who serve our clients in both official languages every day.

[English]

I say to Canadians, and to Quebeckers in particular, that I am sincere in my commitment to advance Air Canada's official language efforts. I've also reinforced this commitment to our employees and to the management team.

[Translation]

Air Canada has a special connection with Canadians. We understand our responsibility with regard to bilingualism and our obligation to provide service to our clients and to communicate with them in both official languages.

[English]

Air Canada embraces the unique expectations of bilingualism and is doing its utmost to ensure we meet them.

We have an ambitious language action plan adopted in 2020. We have established our own language learning programs to help our employees improve their language skills and use French in serving our clients. We have always prioritized the hiring of bilingual employees. In fact, almost half of our employees who serve our customers are bilingual.

[Translation]

At Air Canada, serving our clients in both official languages is a priority.

[English]

Like with many of our corporate priorities, over the decade leading up to the pandemic, we had made strides in improving our track record on official languages. Our linguistic services team maintains regular communications with the commissioner's office, and we work with them to treat complaints diligently.

In addition, in 2020, we filed our 2020-23 action plan and have since put in place a cross-functional management committee to monitor and co-ordinate the initiatives stemming from that plan.

I am pleased to share with you today that Air Canada is implementing new measures to improve and strengthen its commitment to bilingualism. Thanks to our employees who shared their suggestions and perspective helping us develop these new initiatives.

[Translation]

We have announced additional measures to reinforce bilingualism at Air Canada.

[English]

As we emerge from the pandemic, we will continue to increase our efforts to consult with employees, and to mobilize our teams to improve our approach and initiatives. Again, I hope my mistake, which I have taken full responsibility for, does not take away from the hard work of our dedicated employees who work every day to serve our customers in the language of their choice.

I am very proud to be Air Canada's CEO. I have worked for 14 years with this company's great people. I know that the challenges we faced during those years prepared me to lead them in what has been a very difficult and uncertain period for the industry. Canada

needs a vibrant, global airline. We will work tirelessly to rebuild it for all Canadians as we recover from the pandemic.

Embracing linguistic duality and bilingualism is a responsibility of ours, a matter of pride and principle, and a sign of respect for Canada and all Canadians.

Bilingual service is aligned with our business objectives, and it is also proudly part of our brand and identity. Mostly due to the complexity of our business, sometimes we do not meet our aspirations. We know we can do better.

[Translation]

I am determined to do better, and I know I have the support of the entire Air Canada team.

Thank you for your attention.

● (1550)

[English]

I am now available to answer your questions.

[Translation]

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

We will now go to our first round of questions. They will be asked by all the members of the parties represented on the Standing Committee on Official Languages, each of whom will have seven minutes to speak with the witnesses and to ask them questions.

I will now give the floor to the first vice-chair of the committee, Joël Godin.

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

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, Mr. Rousseau, I'd like to thank and congratulate you for your effort to address us in French. It's entirely laudable. My comment doesn't concern your ability to learn French. Since I take English immersion courses virtually every season, I can understand your situation. Please rest assured that I'm not directing my questions to you as an individual but rather as the president and chief executive officer of Air Canada.

You saw the scope of the impact of the remarks you made to journalists during a media scrum following a conference at the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal. That raised some serious question marks in people's minds, my own included.

Before continuing, I'd like to warn you that, given our limited time, I'm going to ask you questions in quick succession and to interrupt you at certain points. I don't mean to be rude. Don't take it personally; I just want some answers to my questions.

You say you want to do better on bilingualism at Air Canada. However, for the past 45 years, most commissioners of official languages have shown that French is a systemic problem throughout the business. I'll grant that you haven't held your position for 45 years, but, as president, you're taking measures and you want to do better on bilingualism. The first question I'd like to ask you is this: how many unilingual francophone members sit on Air Canada's board of directors?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, our board of directors consists of 12 individuals, including me. Air Canada is a global company. We attract board members from around the world and from across Canada. Currently, there are eight—

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me for interrupting, but I'd just like you to give me a number.

How many board members are unilingual francophones?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: How many are unilingual francophones? Of the board of directors, four members can speak and understand French.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Are you saying there are four unilingual francophone members? That's my question. There are no unilingual francophone members.

Four out of twelve board members can speak French. That means that eight out of twelve members are unilingual anglophones.

If a board member asks questions or presents a project in French, can you understand what he or she says?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, again, our company is a global company, and like other global companies, we attract board members from around the world. We have board members from outside Canada and from across Canada. For the most part, the language used at the board is English.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: As you know, you operate under the Official Languages Act, and I believe you're required to allow your employees the opportunity to speak in both official languages.

If the board works solely in English, and if the president of Air Canada makes comments like the ones you made in Montreal last November, you can understand that that troubles us.

There's been a systemic problem at Air Canada for 45 years, but the pilot, as it were, doesn't seem concerned about it. If neither you nor the board uses French, how can respect for the French language be transmitted down the chain of employees and to Air Canada's operations as a whole?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, we adhere to all parts of the Official Languages Act in communication with our employees. When we speak to our employees, we speak in both official languages. They can ask any question in any language they so choose when they speak to management. That has been in place for as long as I know, and that will continue.

Additionally, approximately 50% of Air Canada's employees who are customer-facing are bilingual.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Pardon me for interrupting, but I only have one minute left.

Did you consult the Minister of Official Languages or members of her staff when Bill C-13 was being developed?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I did not personally consult with the commissioner on Bill C-13, but, if possible, I would like to delegate the question to David Rheault, who would have been much closer to that situation.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: The question's intended for you, and I'm referring to the Minister of Official Languages, Ms. Petitpas Taylor, or her team, not the Commissioner.

Were you or your team of senior officials involved in drafting Bill C-13? You're concerned by the bill and the connection with the Commissioner of Official Languages.

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting, Mr. Godin. Mr. Rousseau may be able to clarify his thoughts in response to further questioning.

The next speaker is Francis Drouin.

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

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I too want to congratulate the president of Air Canada for his efforts to speak French. I will never judge anyone because he does or doesn't have an accent. We should celebrate our accents, and Lord knows there are a lot of them, even in the francophone world.

Mr. Rousseau, you may delegate this question to someone who can answer it. I'm mainly interested in the services that Air Canada provides to its clients.

What procedures does Air Canada put in place to ensure it serves consumers in English and in French?

When employees are unable to serve them in both official languages, what internal processes are in place to ensure the issue is resolved?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I will take that question, and if needed, I will refer to David.

At our call centres, customers would indicate whether they wanted to be served in French or English. That would go to a call centre employee who can speak that respective language. At the airport, if a customer approaches one of our staff, and that staff cannot speak French, they say, “*Un moment s’il vous plaît*”, and they go find a French-speaking employee.

If there's no one around, or if it can't be done in time, we have a special number for that employee to call, so that a bilingual agent can speak to that customer and rectify the issue. In the aircraft, with our flight attendants, we have a very sophisticated manpower planning system that puts a bilingual flight attendant, at least one bilingual flight attendant, on every flight. That's a requirement. Again, on the plane, if customers speak to an English-only-speaking flight attendant, that flight attendant does say, “*Un moment s’il vous plaît*”, and finds the bilingual flight attendant to respond to those customers in the language of their choice.

Mr. Chairman, I'll ask David to make any other comments.

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault (Vice President, Government and Community Relations, Air Canada): Actually, I think Mr. Rousseau accurately summarized the procedure that's applied to ensure we meet our official language obligations.

As regards the assignment of flight attendants, for example, we obviously verify our compliance rate every month to ensure the system's working. I can also confirm that, last year, service was offered in both official languages, in accordance with the act, 99.95% of the time on all Air Canada flights, for both high- and low-demand flights.

Mr. Francis Drouin: What other barriers is Air Canada facing? I'm thinking, for example, of a crew that have to deadhead to a destination where they're assigned to another flight. The first flight is delayed for some reason, and those crew members can't work their assigned flight. I bet we've all been in that situation.

How can you assure us then that you're complying with the Official Languages Act and that your clients are being served in both official languages when that kind of situation arises? Is that how you'd explain the 0.5% rate of non-compliance with the act?

• (1600)

Mr. David Rheault: Allow me to provide some additional information, Mr. Drouin.

Non-compliance with the act doesn't necessarily occur because many flights aren't high-demand. Our policy is to assign bilingual personnel to all flights no matter whether they're high- or low-demand.

Regional carriers such as Jazz, which is one of our regional partners, operate flights with only one flight attendant since the regions

are mainly served by smaller aircraft. Jazz has instituted a personnel assignment system to ensure that bilingual attendants are on all high-demand flights.

There may be operational problems, as you mentioned. For example, if flight attendants are unable to get to work on time as a result of inclement weather, we call in a reserve attendant who's bilingual. If no reserve bilingual flight attendants are available, we may be forced to assign a unilingual attendant to a flight at the last minute. We've received complaints about this and immediately checked to see whether those situations were caused by what we call extraordinary unforeseen circumstances.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rheault.

We will go to the next speaker, our second vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, Mario Beaulieu.

Mr. Beaulieu, go ahead for six minutes.

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

Mr. Rousseau, the board announced on November 9 that you were starting intensive French-language training. When you were appointed to your position, *Le Journal de Montréal* asked whether you spoke French. Your representative answered that you had been living in Quebec since 2007, that you were functionally proficient in oral French and that you were constantly improving.

Were you aware of that statement, and did you approve it? Also, do you think that giving out false information is a good strategy?

I'd like to hear your comments on that point.

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, first of all, giving out false information is never a good strategy. That would never be our intent.

I would have to go back and check with our people as to what was discussed in my absence and before the chamber of commerce presentation or after the chamber of commerce presentation.

I don't have visibility as to what was indicated to the media at that point in time.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We can send that information to you. The journalist asked that question and was given that information roughly a year before 2020. If my understanding's correct, you weren't aware of that statement and didn't approve the strategy of giving out false information.

I'll move on to my second question. As you said earlier, the board of directors announced in November that you were starting intensive French-language training.

Would you please tell us a little more about how your French language training is going?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I have daily lessons each morning with two different tutors from a well-recognized firm. They assign me homework at night, which I complete for the next session. The routine is every morning, and then homework virtually every night.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's good.

When you said you had always been able to live in Montreal without speaking French and that that was a testament to the city, weren't you simply reflecting what the Official Languages Act states, that people must have the right to be served and to work in English or French, even in Quebec?

We know that approximately 30% of anglophones in Quebec don't speak French.

Ultimately, don't you think you were simply reflecting a state of affairs that the Official Languages Act prescribes?

• (1605)

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I admit I made a mistake by not learning to speak French when I joined Air Canada. I'm obviously correcting that mistake at this point in time. I look forward to being able to communicate much better in French with an appropriate accent over the next little while.

For me to participate fully in Quebec society, I recognize I must be able to speak French. That is my challenge. That is my commitment. That is my objective as soon as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would Air Canada be prepared to meet the requirements of Bill 101 rather than those of the Official Languages Act?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, as you know, we are currently subject to the Official Languages Act because we operate across Canada and, frankly, across the world. Although we have some challenges and are continuously trying to improve our performance under the Official Languages Act, it is more appropriate given our scope of operations.

I'd like to defer the more detailed aspect of that question to David Rheault, who has been speaking to the Province of Quebec about Bill 101.

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: I'd like to expand on Mr. Rousseau's comments. The Official Languages Act is a comprehensive code governing the language rights of Air Canada passengers and employees, including the right to work and to be served in French in Quebec and Canada. Air Canada obviously focuses its efforts on meeting its obligations under the Official Languages Act.

That being said, some of the activities of the Air Canada family...

The Chair: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Rheault, but your six minutes are up. I try to do this as politely as possible. You could come back to this in response to further questions.

Mr. David Rheault: I understand. I'll be pleased to come back to it.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: The next question will be asked directly from Manitoba by Mrs. Ashton.

You have six minutes, Mrs. Ashton.

[Translation]

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Good afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to express my concerns. As we requested, today we have Mr. Rousseau, president and chief executive officer of Air Canada. We were expecting at least a minimum amount of effort on his part. However, half of his presentation wasn't in French, and none of his answers were either.

The purpose of this committee is to advocate the importance of French in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, to ensure the administration of the Official Languages Act and to make sure that businesses and business sectors, including Air Canada, protect the use of French. Consequently, I want to tell you today that we're disappointed with Mr. Rousseau's presentation.

We have to look to the past, beyond last November to previous years, to help us understand the situation. As other members have said, Air Canada has demonstrated a systemic lack of respect for French. In 2016, former Commissioner of Official Languages Graham Fraser submitted to the committee a report in which he stated, "The vast majority of complaints are about language of service to the public." He further noted, "Complainants also mention the negative attitude they get from Air Canada employees when they request service in French."

Those lines were written in 2016. By the time, you'd been at the head of Air Canada for nearly 10 years. It's clear you still weren't taking what Mr. Fraser said seriously.

If that's the example you're setting, how can we expect Air Canada to respect French when providing its services?

• (1610)

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, in response to the question, let me say first of all that Air Canada very much respects both official languages and the Official Languages Act.

We do our best to adhere to all of the rules. As we've spoken about before to many commissioners, the complexity of our business and the volume of interactions we have with customers give rises to the highest number...versus other companies, but we're not comparable to other companies.

I can commit to you, certainly in my 14 years with Air Canada, that there has been continuous investment in trying to improve our performance. We hire every bilingual flight attendant we can possibly get, and we'd like to have more. We hire as many bilingual employees as possible outside of the province of Quebec, which is a challenge given the current situation.

This bilingualism and this approach to both official languages is part of our brand and part of our equity, and we take it very, very seriously. We promote bilingualism across Canada. We partner with many different organizations to promote the French language in all parts of Canada. Certainly it is my commitment that this will continue, and it will improve as we continually find better ways of delivering service in both official languages.

[Translation]

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to tell you that we understand that. You're talking about an effort that's being made within the organization and you've apologized for your lack of sensitivity to the language issue in Quebec. However, I'd like you to answer the following question: what are you doing to improve the supply of language training courses for people who work for Air Canada?

That's not a theoretical question; it's more a practical, substantive question. We know that official languages commissioners have spoken clearly about the complaints that have been filed against you. So what is Air Canada doing to improve the provision of French-language services?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, since the report from Commissioner Fraser—and David Rheault can provide more details—I believe we've provided over 130,000 training hours to over 10,000 employees to learn how to speak French. We have substantial resources within the company to have anyone learn a second language.

David, can you provide some other details?

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: Yes, we have a comprehensive language program at Air Canada. We've offered more than 130,000 course hours to 10,000 employees since 2016. We also want to adapt our program to the new realities and needs of our employees. We do a lot of skill maintenance, by which I mean that people who are recognized as bilingual at advanced levels take sessions every year to retain what they've learned. Since it's hard to put this into practice in certain regions of the country, we offer special training to enable them to retain the knowledge they've acquired.

We've realized that it's increasingly difficult to recruit a bilingual labour force across the country as a result of the pandemic. Consequently, we'll be developing new course offerings so that people can reach higher levels and be recognized as bilingual. What we're doing...

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rheault. I apologize for interrupting once again. Time goes by so quickly. Your six minutes were already up.

We now go to the second round of questions, in which speakers will be allotted five minutes.

Mr. Gourde, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rousseau, thank you for having the courage to appear before the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Mr. Rheault just told us that 130,000 training hours have been offered to 10,000 employees. Based on a quick calculation, that means 13 hours per employee. You're currently taking French courses. Do you really think only 13 hours of training can make a difference in the skills employees acquire?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to delegate to David on that more detailed question.

• (1615)

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: That's a very good question.

Thank you, Mr. Rousseau...

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Pardon me, but I asked Mr. Rousseau a question. Since he's currently taking courses, he knows it's very hard for a unilingual anglophone to learn French.

Is a total of 13 hours enough to improve the language skills of Air Canada employees who provide services to francophones? Air Canada could increase the number of hours to 130. Thirteen hours is really ridiculous.

Mr. Rousseau, as president and chief executive officer of Air Canada, you're in a position to answer that question. You know it's hard to learn French. Is 13 hours of training enough?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, for an anglophone to learn French in 13 hours would be very difficult. Again, I think the math has to be explained by David Rheault.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Pardon me. We'll move on to another subject.

Mr. Rousseau, you understand that training is important. Many Air Canada employees were laid off during the pandemic because there were no flights. There were no operations, as we all know. However, there were programs to provide more training.

Was Air Canada able to use the Canadian government's programs? Did you receive money from the federal government to pay employees during that time? Could employees have been paid by the Canadian government to improve their French?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, there is no doubt that the most difficult decision we had to make during the pandemic was to lay off almost 20,000 of our employees. Luckily and with good fortune, they're almost all back to work—the ones who chose to come back.

We accessed the CEWS fund, as many companies did, and we retained roughly 40% of our staff, yet during the pandemic we only flew about 10% of our regular flights from 2019.

The money for French-language classes and support was not part of those funds from the government. We've always funded separately the French-language aspects of our business. As CFO for 12 years, I certainly was always supportive of sufficient funding to meet our goals and objectives on the French-language file.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Rousseau, since the Canadian government has always maintained relatively close relations with Air Canada and was quite generous with you and other businesses during the pandemic, couldn't you have returned the favour? This morning, the media informed us that Saint Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Montreal needed air transportation to ship 40 tonnes of essential goods—clothing, pharmaceuticals and food—to Poland to aid refugees. However, it's all stuck in Montreal because no one's paying to ship it.

Since you've received hundreds of millions of dollars, even \$1 billion, from the federal government, couldn't you have taken charge of shipping those essential goods to aid Ukrainian refugees?

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

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We've never relied on government assistance for humanitarian aid. Air Canada has a rich history of providing humanitarian aid all by itself in Haiti and in British Columbia, in response to the fires. A week and a half ago, we sent a 787 aircraft full of cargo to Warsaw for the Ukrainian situation.

We stand ready and we've spoken to several ministers about helping.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau. You can elaborate on your ideas later on in response to any further questions on the subject.

Ms. Lattanzio, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question will be addressed to Mr. Rousseau.

Thank you so much for being here this afternoon. More importantly, we note that you've improved your French. We salute you for that and encourage you to carry on, as we want as many of our heads and directors as possible to be fluently bilingual in the very near future.

Mr. Rousseau, I'm interested in the services that are being offered to Canadians. There was a linguistic plan that was filed prior to 2020, because it covers the years 2020-23. Have you considered updates since that plan was filed? If so, what are they? If you have not, what are you planning to improve, or what are you planning to add to your next plan as we move forward?

• (1620)

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We filed the 2020-23 comprehensive plan built on three pillars: governance, service delivery and people. However, in November, I tasked two of our executive vice-presidents—one of whom was the official languages sponsor, our champion for Air Canada—to speak to our employees about what else we could do. Just recently, we sent a note out to all employees, indicating that we were going to put in three additional recommendations effective immediately.

First, from a focus perspective, we created a new official languages department. We think this will provide more focus. This department will report to the executive committee of the company—made up of me and five executive vice-presidents—on a regular basis on the progress that's being made in improving our performance.

Second, we've allocated more funds and more resources to more training.

Third, we created an incentive program. We created the dialogue award, which will be given to the person in the company who best promotes bilingualism. This will be on par with our service excellence, and it's the highest reward that we have at Air Canada. In addition to that, we are going to start paying our employees a special bonus if they refer a bilingual employee to Air Canada.

Again, those three measures have been put in place in the last week or two.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Will you be able to verify the benchmarks that are set in your plan? What are your indicators? How will you be able to verify that you've met those benchmarks of having both French and English bilingual services given to Canadians?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We get feedback from customers and from the commissioner's office. The number of complaints dropping would be a key indicator for our going forward.

We also do our own audits and tests. We have bilingual ambassadors at each of our major airports to reinforce the—

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: I'm sorry, Mr. Rousseau. I don't mean to cut you off.

I want to know how often you do those verifications, and then I'm going to ask a quick question of your colleague David Rheault.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I'll save you some time and I'll defer that question to David, as well, because he has a better understanding of the details on the frequency.

Go ahead, David.

[*Translation*]

Mr. David Rheault: We verify personnel assignments and compliance with our obligations at the flight service bases and airports across the country on a very regular basis.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Rheault.

This time, I'd like to give you a chance to expand on the operations in Quebec that you discussed earlier. You said that, despite your efforts, they might be partly bilingual, but we understand that your Quebec operations may be slightly more concentrated.

So this time I'm giving you an opportunity to respond.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left.

Mr. David Rheault: All right.

You mean our efforts to meet our obligations under the Official Languages Act. Is that correct?

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Yes, that's correct. Earlier you didn't have time to answer the question. So I'd like to give you a chance to do so.

Mr. David Rheault: Oh, yes, that was the question about the Charter of the French Language.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: That's correct.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but, once again, you'll have to come back to that later.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Rousseau, earlier you told us that you preferred the Official Languages Act. So you understand that there's a distinction between the two. You confirmed the view of the Bloc Québécois, which condemns the fact that application of the Charter of the French Language would be optional under Bill C-13. Our understanding is that, if you had to choose between the two, you would choose the Official Languages Act.

In 1976, the first commissioner of official languages, Keith Spicer, wrote this about Air Canada: "Seven years, roughly 371 complaints and some 232 recommendations later, one hardly knows what else to suggest for improvement."

That was also the view of Graham Fraser and all other commissioners of official languages. Complaints filed against Air Canada by francophones have constantly accumulated since 1969.

How do you explain that?

• (1625)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, complaints may be slightly higher in 2019 versus previous years because our traffic levels more than doubled over that period of time. The service that we provide on our routes to all of the destinations we fly to around the world has increased, so it's just a matter of larger numbers of people we're serving. We are one of the largest airlines in the world, and our traffic levels, our customer levels—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

I think you're dragging in a red herring here. Air Canada hasn't responded from the start. There really seems to be resistance on its part. You don't acknowledge the problem, and that doesn't look good for the future. You say there's one bilingual flight attendant per aircraft, but I'm not sure that's enough. If there are 200 passengers and a flight attendant who isn't bilingual, there will definitely be some problems.

Are you aware that French isn't just one of the two official languages in Quebec; it's the only official and common language.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I'm well aware that French is the official language of Quebec.

Air Canada works very, very hard—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Rousseau. Two and a half minutes fly by very quickly.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rousseau, first I want to say that it's disappointing that you haven't learned French after nearly 15 years in Montreal. It's also very troubling that you answer the committee only in English.

I also want to outline our position. The federal government is obviously responsible for administering the Official Languages Act, and that's also part of the modernization of the act.

We discussed the fact that the act applies to Air Canada, but do you think the federal government should provide programs to support workers in the industry?

Also, if the Commissioner of Official Languages can impose monetary administrative sanctions on Air Canada, do you think it should have the authority to penalize other businesses in your sector as well?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, we're still reviewing the draft act, but there are certain areas that we take note of. Certainly the government's commitment to improve immigration and education is key to us. Our biggest challenge is finding enough people, enough bilingual people outside the province of Quebec to hire. We would love to hire more bilingual employees. The supply, unfortunately, is just not sufficient, so the government's commitment to both immigration and education is key to our performing better in the future.

In regard to other airlines being subject to Official Languages Act, we think that is also a good idea. We only represent about 50% of the customers flying within Canada. The other 50% of customers flying within Canada, of course, do not receive our level of service. We think that all Canadians should receive the level of service we provide.

[Translation]

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for your answers. I have another question—

The Chair: You have five seconds, Ms. Ashton, which is a little too short.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Will you use bonuses to encourage workers to learn French?

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Perhaps Mr. Rousseau can respond in his answers to further questions.

Now it's the turn of a former member of the standing committee who has come back for a visit, Bernard Généreux.

Mr. Généreux, you have five minutes.

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

Greetings to all the members of the committee, and thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Rousseau, it's my understanding that, before the speech you gave in Montreal—I'll go back over this very briefly—the Quebec government and the Commissioner of Official Languages warned you of the danger involved in testifying and delivering a speech in English only. Do you agree with that statement?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, ultimately I made the decision to attend and speak at the event. My intentions were absolutely sincere.

It's a very challenging time for Air Canada. I wanted to update the business community and our many partners in Montreal about our plans for the future. We are an integral part of the community in Montreal. We have been instrumental in making Montreal airport one of the busiest airports in North America.

I took the decision with very good intention, and I wanted to ensure that the audience at the event understood clearly what I needed

to say. At that point in time, my French was not strong and so I chose to do the speech in English.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Chair, the Government of Canada is probably the slowest learner when it comes to respect for official languages, in every one of its departments. It constantly makes mistakes across all its websites. There are always things that don't work.

What's your take on the fact that, under Bill C-13, the government would impose penalties on organizations subject to the Official Languages Act without itself being subject to that act? It's as though the teacher is worse than the student. It wants to punish the student, but not itself. That's one question.

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, we believe in a culture of continuous improvement and not penalties. We are a heavily regulated industry, with one of the primaries being safety, and so our focus would be more on continuous improvement.

If I can, I would like to defer that question to David Rheault, who is much closer to Bill C-13.

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

I'm essentially going to repeat what our president said. We truly believe that compliance with the act can't be achieved through penalties. For a business that has a scope and number of employees as large as Air Canada's, sustained effort is the way to go. We intervene at various levels, and we don't think that fining a private business such as ours will improve the situation.

We understand and think that the government could provide greater support to businesses that take Canadian bilingualism seriously. As Mr. Rousseau said, aspects of the bill tend in that direction.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: What business in the Canadian transportation sector is subject to the Official Languages Act? There's probably Via Rail, but are there any others, apart from Air Canada and Via Rail?

Mr. David Rheault: There are the airports, Mr. Généreux. The airport authorities in Canada are subject to it. The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, or CATSA, the security service, is also subject to it, but other airlines currently have no official language obligations. That's why they can choose between the Quebec regime, for example, and the new obligations proposed under the bill. Air Canada doesn't have that choice because it's considered a federal institution within the meaning of the act.

The other point I wanted to add is that we have a francization certificate for all our operations, such as Air Canada Vacations, which are subject to provincial rules. However, we're the only business subject to the Official Languages Act at the federal level. Furthermore, the commissioner has said that complaints have been filed against carriers, particularly against Air Canada, but there can be no complaints against other air carriers because they have no official language obligations.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Mr. Rheault, the pandemic was hard on us, and on many entrepreneurs and businesses across Canada. What impact did that have on bilingualism and bilingual personnel? I imagine you had to lay off staff, including bilingual employees. Do you think you'll be able to rehire all those people, if you haven't already done so?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. David Rheault: Yes, absolutely. That's a good question. All the employees who were laid off have been called back because we're rebuilding the company. The aim of our strategy is also to review training in order to offer more intensive courses to raise the language levels of certain employees.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rheault.

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Rousseau.

What's the current situation regarding percentages of francophone and bilingual employees at Air Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, currently we have approximately 30,000 employees across the world, the majority of whom are in Canada, and almost 10,000 of whom are in Quebec, principally Montreal. We have approximately 40% who are fluently bilingual. These people have been tested—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Rousseau. I'm going to ask you my question again, and if you don't know the answer, please send us those numbers. You no doubt have a file for every employee, and since you provide bilingual service, every employee should have a kind of ID indicating the languages he or she can speak.

So I'd like to know the number of francophone employees in Quebec and the other provinces. I don't mean those who speak French, but rather those who are considered francophone. That's very different. Someone who speaks French isn't necessarily francophone.

How many employees are identified in their employee files as francophone or have declared themselves francophone on their job application forms?

Furthermore, in spite of the initiatives under the Official Languages Action Plan 2020-23, an average of 80 complaints a year

have been filed against Air Canada, particularly for not actively offering bilingual service or failing to provide service in French.

How is Air Canada planning to correct these official language deficiencies and to make constant efforts to resolve them in the short and long terms?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, with respect to the first part of the question, we will provide the exact numbers on francophones. I don't have them right now. We'll provide a breakdown whichever way you would like it as soon as possible.

To the second part of the question regarding what we're doing about it, again, we have a very sophisticated and aggressive plan to train our employees in the second language and to hire as many bilingual personnel as we possibly can. We interact with francophone groups around the country to try to find that source of bilingual employees. It starts there. It starts with hiring a bilingual employee. To my earlier comments, that's why we're encouraged by the draft Bill C-13, which speaks about enhancing immigration and education, because that would help us hire more bilingual employees so that a larger percentage of our staff would be bilingual.

But I would say to the question that we do have a large number of bilingual staff within the company: 50% of our customer-facing employees are bilingual, which I feel is a fairly strong number. It could certainly get better with some of the suggestions I just mentioned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you for your two answers.

Could you provide us with details on the number of employees per year who enrol in French courses?

Does Air Canada pay for courses in French, English or other languages?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, again I'll defer that detailed question to David Rheault, but certainly, from my perspective, I have no issue with providing that level of information to the committee.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left to answer, Mr. Rheault.

Mr. David Rheault: Sir, the courses are paid for by Air Canada. We can provide you with the details.

Air Canada has its own language teachers, who provide courses in French as well as courses in, I believe, 12 other languages. Those courses are also divided into various levels. Consequently, we have a full range of courses and are reviewing it so we can provide more options for our employees.

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

We will begin our third round of questions with Joël Godin.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rousseau, did the Commissioner of Official Languages warn you not to deliver a unilingual speech to the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, again, ultimately I made the decision to attend and speak at that event and present the speech in English.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I apologize for interrupting Mr. Rousseau, but I have five minutes of speaking time.

Mr. Rousseau, I'm asking you this question: did you have a discussion with the Commissioner of Official Languages in which you were advised that the speech should be made in both official languages? Had the Commissioner of Official Languages previously warned you that, when you are the president and chief executive officer of a business such as Air Canada, all public speeches must be subject to the Official Languages Act, meaning that they must be bilingual?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I did not speak to the commissioner myself. I'll defer that question to David Rheault who may have spoken to the commissioner.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: No, there's no need for Mr. Rheault to answer, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

I do have another question for you, though.

Ms. Lattanzio asked some questions earlier about your Linguistic Action Plan 2020-2023. You said that complaints to the official languages commissioner were indicators. Mr. Rheault replied that audits of linguistic performance programs were carried out on a regular basis.

That's where the problem lies: you conduct regular audits. Has Air Canada demonstrated any rigour in ensuring respect for the French language? That's what's discouraging, Mr. Rousseau.

Can you tell us whether you have a restrictive program in place to get results? Earlier, you said that you were doing your utmost. That's all very well. Lots of companies are doing their utmost. But rather than "doing its utmost", your company needs to take action to achieve results. That's what's discouraging, Mr. Rousseau.

We are all working together. We have nothing against you personally, but we want to protect the French language. That's the nub of the issue, which came to the fore in your scrum.

So can you reassure us and tell us how, and with what tools, you're going to protect French and prevent its decline?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, our interests are aligned. We do take our responsibility to promote bilingualism and to adhere to the Official Languages Act very seriously.

I believe we have a very rigorous system to ensure that we continue to improve. Enhancements have been made, as I just mentioned, over the last couple of weeks. This comes to the executive committee on a regular basis to review progress and potential new initiatives.

This is a very important area for the company. It's a very important area for me personally. I do believe that promoting bilingualism is in the best interests of Canada and Air Canada because this is part of our brand. It's part of our equity and I take that very seriously.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I have no doubts about his intentions or the intentions of management.

Mr. Rousseau, in your Linguistic Action Plan 2020-2023, why aren't bilingual applicants prioritized when the time comes to hire managers? The plan only covers front-line employees. Why not make it applicable to all workers, regular employees as well as members of senior management, including the president and chief executive officer, who is well aware of, and concerned about, the French fact?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, we do consider French to be a core asset when we promote and when we hire, no matter where it is in the company—customer-facing or otherwise.

Although it may not be specifically in the 2020-23 plan, it is an objective of Air Canada to hire as many people as possible who are bilingual.

On a more detailed level, I'd like to defer to David Rheault to provide some more colour.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

The plan clearly emphasizes the importance of employees who are in contact with the public, because it's through them that we meet our obligations to the public.

Mr. Joël Godin: Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Rheault, but I would like to ask Mr. Rousseau a brief question. I have less than 30 seconds left.

The Chair: What you have left is five seconds, but go ahead and ask your question.

Mr. Joël Godin: Why doesn't your linguistic action plan state, in black and white, that all employees have to be bilingual and hired on the basis of their level of bilingualism?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin and Mr. Rheault.

Mr. David Rheault: I can answer that question.

The Chair: I'm afraid it's too late. You could perhaps return to it later.

Ms. Kayabaga now has the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking our witnesses for being here today.

My colleague asked you a question earlier, Mr. Rheault, and I'd like to give you time to answer it.

Mr. David Rheault: Your colleague Ms. Lattanzio's question was about areas of jurisdiction. I pointed out that Air Canada complied with provincial legislation in every province in which it conducts operations, including laws to protect French in Quebec.

Air Canada Vacations, a subsidiary of Air Canada, is a travel agency and tour operator. It is subject to provincial laws and has a francization certificate issued under Quebec's Charter of the French Language.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

Mr. Rousseau, I know that there has been a lot of talk about the speech you gave on November 3, but what I'd like to know is what lessons you might have drawn from the experience following the reaction of francophones from Quebec and the rest of Canada and from Quebec anglophones in particular. What lessons have you learned from it?

Given this reaction, what would you do differently?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, what I learned is that to participate fully in Quebec society, I need to learn French, and I should have started that earlier in my career at Air Canada. That was a mistake on my part. I'm correcting that at this point in time with relatively intensive lessons. I hope to be able to converse as soon as possible in French with all Air Canada stakeholders, francophone stakeholders, as soon as possible.

[Translation]

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you.

I'm delighted about the efforts you're making to learn French, but beyond the fact that you're going to take French courses, what, more than anything else, did this experience teach you about our country, which is bilingual and believes in protecting both official languages?

Secondly, what did it teach you about francophone minority communities, which are in decline in Quebec and outside Quebec, in places like London, Ontario, where I live?

What have you learned about the people who live in official language minority communities?

What would you do differently to support the survival of French in Canada?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, there's no doubt that French is a minority language in North America and it cannot be taken for granted. It needs a sustained effort to ensure that we preserve it. I believe a key strength of Canada is that it is bilingual; it has two official languages. I believe a key strength of Air Canada is that it does promote bilingualism.

I certainly hope that my example of learning French can be an example for others living in Quebec and outside Quebec, that supporting both official languages is important for the entire country.

• (1650)

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: I'd like to add my own comments, Mr. Chair.

You're right, Ms. Kayabaga. With respect to official language minority communities, we are all collectively responsible for supporting these people and improving their conditions. At Air Canada, we reviewed our community support program specifically to develop an aspect of it that would support organizations across the country involved in promoting bilingualism. We support events in every province, including the Rendez-vous de la Francophonie. We have been partnering with them from the very outset. We have also been providing assistance to the Festival fransaskois, and Vancouver's Festival du voyageur.

So, for us—

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, but I have only 10 seconds left.

I just wanted to emphasize the fact that we are not just talking about a language, but an entire culture.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kayabaga. I try to interrupt as politely as possible, but those are the rules.

It's Mr. Mario Beaulieu's turn now, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Mr. Rousseau, you're saying that Air Canada is complying with the Official Languages Act, but Air Canada generates the most complaints to the official languages commissioner's office.

Do you believe this is a credible response?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I do find my response credible. Our performance has been improving on a relative basis over the last several years.

We know we can do more. We know we can do better. My objective is to do that.

Again, we recently put in some new enhancements. We are encouraged by what's in the draft Bill C-13 regarding immigration and education. We do believe our performance will continue to improve.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would you hire a unilingual anglophone in Quebec?

You're taking your time to answer that.

I have a second question for you. You say that you try to have a bilingual flight attendant on every plane. Was this always the case?

Mr. David Rheault: Can I provide some details, Mr. Beaulieu?

The number of flight attendants per aircraft depends on the size of the plane and its route. For flights leaving from Montreal, there are a lot more bilingual flight attendants. We are aware of high customer demand.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

I also find it rather simplistic to say that it's impossible to find enough employees who speak French. Is it a priority? Do you offer bilingualism bonuses?

I find it hard to imagine that you can't find enough bilingual employees, particularly in Quebec.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David Rheault: Mr. Beaulieu, At every step of the recruitment process, we take the available bilingual applicants into consideration. All bilingual applicants who successfully complete the recruitment tests, who have the ability to serve customers, and who meet the security clearance requirements, are offered a job.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rheault.

Ms. Ashton gets to ask the next question.

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: My question goes back to what I asked at the end of the first round of questions with respect to bonuses. Are you going to offer bonuses to encourage workers to become bilingual if you can't find applicants who are already bilingual?

As you were saying, there don't seem to be enough bilingual applicants available.

Mr. David Rheault: We announced that we intend to start paying our employees a special bonus if they refer bilingual employees to us, with a view to increasing the number of bilingual employees at Air Canada.

Ms. Niki Ashton: All right.

In view of the picture you've given us, there seems to be a serious problem in finding bilingual applicants. This needs to be acknowledged and more far-reaching options need to be found, such as offering direct bonuses.

I'm also concerned about the fact that Air Canada intends to wait until the passage of the modernized Official Languages Act before hiring francophone employees, because that's still going to take a while, even though we hope it won't be too long. We are looking forward to being able to welcome francophone immigrants, for example. I think it's irresponsible for Air Canada to say something like that.

• (1655)

Mr. David Rheault: With respect, Ms. Ashton, that's not what we said. We said that this could help.

Ms. Niki Ashton: With due respect to you, we heard it several times.

Excuse me, but it's my turn to speak.

What we want to see are initiatives from Air Canada, paid for by Air Canada, to hire francophones not only in Quebec, but in the rest of Canada. Let's look at your brand name. Your airline is called Air

Canada. I think that everyone around the world knows that Canada is a bilingual country.

We therefore expect Air Canada to improve its hiring practices and its services in French everywhere in Canada. We would like to see ideas like direct bonuses introduced, and more than the 13 hours of French-language instruction mentioned by Mr. Gourde. Air Canada is clearly going to have to take more forceful action.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ashton; that's all the time we have.

The next question will come from Mr. Jacques Gourde.

You have the floor for five minutes, Mr. Gourde.

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

I'm going to return to the issue of language training at Air Canada.

Mr. Rousseau or one of the people with him could answer my question.

Do your teachers give training to one person at a time or to a group?

Mr. David Rheault: That's a good question, Mr. Gourde. I'd have to check. I believe that different courses are given on the basis of requirements and the bilingualism proficiency level of the various employees.

If you want further details about the bilingual courses we give, we could write to provide the committee with further details about these questions.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Yes, we'd like that.

Carry on, and I'll continue afterwards.

Mr. David Rheault: As for your question about the number of hours of training in relation to the number of employees, we looked at the number of employees who took courses each year. It's very likely that some employees took courses over several years. That means that some of the same people show up in the numbers twice.

We'll provide you with more details on this.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Excuse me, but were the 130,000 hours of training in one year or over a four- or five-year period?

Mr. David Rheault: Since 2015.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay.

So it's 130,000 hours since 2015 over seven years.

Mr. David Rheault: That's about 20,000 hours—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: So that's 20,000 hours of training per year for 10,000 employees.

Mr. David Rheault: Less—

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Let me finish my question and you can answer afterwards.

For these 130,000 hours of training that you mentioned, is it an hour of training received by one employee or an hour of training given to a group by a teacher?

Mr. David Rheault: It's an hour of training received by one employee.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If you have a group of 20 employees with a teacher, that's counted as 20 hours of training received.

Mr. David Rheault: I'll give you further details on that. I think it depends on the type of course.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay.

This means that if we divide these 13 hours by 10, it's approximately 1.3 hours for each of the 10,000 employees. The way you're explaining it makes it even worse than before.

The 130,000 hours amount to approximately 20,000 hours of training spread over seven years. If there are 10 employees in a group, that means 10 hours of training. That leads me to conclude that there is no language training at Air Canada.

I am flabbergasted. I'm truly shocked.

Mr. David Rheault: No, these are the hours received by the employees.

We'll be providing you with further details to explain the numbers. I'm sorry about the confusion.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: It has nothing to do with confusion. The situation is even worse than I thought.

If a teacher gives an hour of training to a group of 20 employees, it means that an hour of training is calculated as 20 hours of training per employee. That means you can divide the 130,000 hours either by 10 employees or by 20 employees over seven years. You have to admit that doesn't amount to many hours of training per year.

Language courses at Air Canada amount to a lottery. It's really a lottery. There is virtually no language training at Air Canada.

That's it for me. I've had it. I really can't take any more of this.

I'll give the floor to my colleague.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The French language is a subject that generates highly emotional debate because of the decline in French.

Mr. Rousseau, I would like you to reassure us. I would simply like you to tell us what concrete measures will be taken as of now. Air Canada has been going in the wrong direction for 45 years now.

Why should we believe Air Canada now when it tells us that the problem has been solved, that it is on track to achieve effective results that will stop the decline of the French language within the company and move it in the right direction?

Could you please reassure me?

• (1700)

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, first of all, the percentage of employees at Air Canada who can speak both official languages has stayed the same or increased over the last several years. That is a reflection of our efforts to attempt to recruit and retain as many bilingual employees as possible. I think that's a good thing from our perspective.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. I have a brief question. I still have 50 seconds.

My question is as follows and I'd like you to answer it.

You said earlier that your record was improving. On what indicators is this claim based?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: One of our key indicators, Mr. Chairman, is the number of complaints per number of customer interactions that we have. That ratio has been dropping. I understand from the commissioner's perspective that he's looking at raw numbers. We look at relative numbers in—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau. I'm sorry to have to interrupt you.

Mr. Serré, you have five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the Air Canada personnel and Mr. Rousseau for being here today.

As you did not have the opportunity to answer my colleague Mr. Godin's question, I'll continue in the same vein.

As you know, the past six months have been rather difficult. You have a plan, the Linguistic Action Plan 2020-2023, and you are going to introduce measures to ensure that French is improved within your company. You gave a brief explanation of the activities introduced in response to the growing number of complaints in 2019.

What specific measures in terms of French resources and services are you currently taking under your linguistic action plan, and what measures do you intend to implement under the next linguistic action plan?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, let me first of all confirm that even during the darkest days of the pandemic, we were still committed, and we continue to be committed, to training our employees in both official languages. That is one resource we never touched during the pandemic, given its importance to Air Canada and to Canada.

From a specific perspective, again, we have a rigorous 2020-23 plan. As I mentioned earlier, recently we introduced three new measures: more training hours, a separate department for official languages which reports directly to the executive committee, and a series of incentives to try to recruit more bilingual employees. Those are three specific measures that have just been introduced, in addition to the other measures that were introduced, like ambassadors at the different airports and a management committee that oversees the progress we're making on the Official Languages Act.

There are a series of different initiatives that have been put in place over the last several years to improve our performance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: Mr. Rousseau, you mentioned earlier that you had brought back employees who had been laid off and that you had more or less re-hired them. Needless to say, the past two years have been very difficult for you and other companies.

There is a shortage of employees in Canada and recruitment is very difficult. Can you tell us about your strategies for dealing with this?

How might the federal government help you attract francophones from other countries? Have you consulted any countries about this? What could the federal government do to facilitate Air Canada's recruitment of francophones?

• (1705)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, certainly we would love to have a discussion with the relevant departments in the government about recruiting from countries. We have that dialogue already, and I think those discussions are progressing.

To your first point, we did bring back the majority of our staff. We were lucky that the majority of our staff came back to us after being off for some period of time. From our perspective, we did not lose any—maybe none—of our bilingual employees, which I think is a testament to the Air Canada focus on bilingualism.

To your point about a difficult labour market, I totally agree; it is a difficult labour market. Certainly we would look to speak to the Canadian government about opportunities to bring in additional bilingual people, and we would certainly provide them a job offer as a condition.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left, Mr. Serré. Is that it for you?

Thank you.

[*English*]

The next question will be asked by a new member.

Welcome to our committee, Mr. Tako Van Popta.

There are five minutes for you, my friend.

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rousseau, for being here and spending time with us to discuss this very important topic.

Mr. Rousseau, I identified with your opening comment that your skills in the French language do not yet meet the effort you've put into it. I identify with that because, as a unilingual member of Parliament from Canada's west coast, I, too, feel that I need to learn French. I've been taking French lessons, and I know how difficult it is. It's a big challenge. Congratulations, and keep going.

Mr. Rousseau, the news of your unfortunate statement to the Montreal Chamber of Commerce last year made news even in British Columbia, where I'm from—a very unilingual British Columbia, I might add. It was news because people in B.C. are quite proud of being in a Canada that is bilingual and bicultural. I would say that is measured by how popular French immersion is in schools. There are just not enough chairs, not enough seats, not enough spaces available. If there's one thing that maybe comes out of this and your comments today, it's that there should be more emphasis put on French immersion, particularly when you're saying you can't even find enough employees who are bilingual. Perhaps that's a challenge for all of Canada,

Sir, you're saying that the bilingualism of Air Canada is important to you and to your company, but doesn't the inspiration for fulfilling a company's mandate and building on the strategic plan start from the top? How does your inability to speak fluent French impede your ability to inspire your employees?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I don't think it does impede my ability to inspire our employees. Certainly, by taking lessons, I hope, as I mentioned earlier, to show an example to all employees. What's important is my commitment and my focus on this very, very important issue, the discussions we have at the executive committee on it and what progress is being made. Our employees understand I'm committed to this. Our executive committee is committed to this. Our board of directors is committed to this. I think that's what's very, very important to inspire our employees.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: I understand that Air Canada is the only airline company in Canada that is subject to the Official Languages Act. Do you see that as a competitive advantage or disadvantage? What are some of the challenges around that?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, we see it as a competitive advantage. As I mentioned earlier, it is ingrained in our brand, our mission and our equity. The better we do with this, I'm convinced the better we do as a company. That's why there's a strong focus on this area.

• (1710)

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you. I didn't hear the last part of that answer.

As I said, I'm from British Columbia and have spent some time in Quebec and Montreal, but I don't understand the culture like, obviously, a resident would.

You did apologize to Quebeckers and francophones. Does that include English-speaking Quebeckers as well? Could you explain some of the dynamics around that?

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, first of all, I apologize to anyone who was insulted or hurt by the comments made on November 3, whether they are francophones across Canada or anglophones within or outside Quebec.

As to the anglophone community in Montreal, I really don't have a perspective at this point in time. My focus right now is learning to speak French and certainly returning Air Canada back to where it was in 2019. That's what I'm focused on.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Van Popta.

I'm going to exercise my privilege as chair to ask a few questions that were raised in connection with the answers you gave to my colleagues. My colleague Mr. Francis Drouin has given me his speaking time.

First of all, in response to Mr. Godin's question, you said that staff who could not speak French, whether at the airport, the check-in counter, or on the plane, had learned to say "*Un moment s'il vous plaît*".

Do you consider that to be service in French that complies with the Official Languages Act or do you measure service in French as a function of the time required for a customer to receive the requested service? It might take a minute, 15 minutes, or a half-hour before a francophone attendant can provide the service, and sometimes, the service is never received.

Given that the Official Languages Act requires Air Canada to provide equal service to anglophones and francophones, how do you measure service in French?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, first of all, it would not take 10 or 15 minutes to find a bilingual employee. As I said earlier, if we can't find a bilingual employee to respond to the customer in the language of their choice, then we can call a special number at the call centre where a francophone employee would respond to the customer. All that would be done within minutes, frankly, not 10 or 15 minutes. We know that typically customers are in a hurry, so we've put in this two-layered approach to ensure that we satisfy the customer in the language of their choice.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You know very well, Mr. Rousseau, that if a customer is in a hurry and has to wait for three, four, or five minutes—based on my own experience, which has been that it sometimes takes longer than that—the service will end up being rendered in English.

Don't you think that a better way of handling this might be possible?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I don't disagree that once in a while an employee may respond in English, and that is not our policy: It's not how the employees have been trained. We

will continue to think about ways to better deliver that service. We believe the way we have now is fairly efficient—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

I have two other questions for you.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Are we going to be able to ask more questions?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Rousseau, in 2016, we welcomed your predecessor, who told us exactly what you have said, which is that Air Canada has trouble recruiting bilingual employees.

What has changed since 2016 in how Air Canada goes about recruiting bilingual employees? How has Air Canada's strategy changed?

Mr. David Rheault: Can I answer your question, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Rheault: We work with community groups across the country to recruit bilingual staff. We also advertise jobs in Canada's francophone newspapers.

• (1715)

The Chair: Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Rheault, but I was referring to the question you were asked earlier, about whether you are offering bilingualism bonuses.

Mr. David Rheault: We take notice of the committee's suggestions on how to improve our recruitment efforts.

As we mentioned, we are now going to offer a bonus to those who help us recruit bilingual applicants.

The Chair: Okay.

I have a minute left.

I have a final question for you. In your answer to the second question that my colleague asked earlier, you said that you were making sure that bilingual service was provided on flights with significant demand.

How do you define flights with significant demand in Canada?

Mr. David Rheault: That's a very good question.

The answer is specified in a regulation. Demand on a flight must be 5% to be considered significant. We believe that this method of calculation ought also to apply to other carriers with obligations.

The Chair: We are discussing Air Canada today.

Where is the demand coming from? Who determines the percentage?

You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David Rheault: Among other things, we calculate passenger demand from the language they used when they booked their flight.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Beaulieu, It's over to you now for two and a half minutes.

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

It's not very reassuring to find that after six months of intensive French-language training, Mr. Rousseau is unable to answer questions in French.

I'll ask my earlier question once again.

Would Air Canada hire a unilingual English person in Quebec?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: We hire based on merit. As I said earlier, we focus on hiring bilingual employees. As David said, we've been relatively successful in doing that, although not as successful as we'd like.

[*Translation*]

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

I'll take that as a "yes".

You know, about half the francophones in Quebec don't speak English. Would you hire a unilingual French employee?

Mr. David Rheault: Perhaps I could answer your question, Mr. Beaulieu.

When I began working at Air Canada, I had a lot of trouble speaking English.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: So you were hired even though you did not speak English. But you haven't answered my question directly.

Mr. David Rheault: I spoke French, but I had a lot of trouble with my English.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If you're short of people who speak French...

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Yes, we would hire a francophone, as well. We hire based on merit with a view of trying to hire as many bilingual employees as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: All right.

I have a final question.

At Air Canada, I believe Ms. Arielle Meloul-Wechsler, Executive Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer and Public Affairs, is responsible for compliance with the provisions of the Official Languages Act.

Why isn't she here to answer questions?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds to answer.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: David Rheault reports to Arielle, so we chose to have David here. Arielle could certainly have been here and addressed these questions, but we chose David, given his understanding.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

Ms. Niki Ashton has the floor now for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: My first question is for Mr. Rousseau.

We've discussed the number of hours of instruction at length. How many hours, approximately, have you spent on learning French?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: In the four months that I've been taking lessons, from mid-November until today, it's been approximately 10 hours a week of lessons and homework.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: On another front, an official languages management committee was to have been struck to support linguistic matters involved in implementing your linguistic action plan. It says so in your plan.

Has the committee begun its work? If so, what are the concrete results?

• (1720)

Mr. David Rheault: I can answer that question.

The committee began its work, even during the pandemic. It meets on a quarterly basis. One of its objectives is to establish centralized communications among the various sectors to remind everyone about the importance of our official languages obligations and procedures.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to talk about a comment you made, Mr. Rousseau.

[*English*]

You said, "We hire based on merit."

[*Translation*]

Don't you think that the ability to communicate with French-speaking customers in their language ought to be one of the skills required for hiring your employees?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I apologize. The audio of the question broke up, so I didn't fully hear the question.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Could you repeat your question, Ms. Ashton?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Earlier, you told this committee:

[*English*]

"We hire based on merit."

[*Translation*]

My question is this: Don't you think that the ability to communicate with French-speaking customers in their language ought to be one of the skills required for hiring your employees?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: I think I said that. I said we hire on merit, with a focus on hiring bilingual employees, so they can speak in both official languages to all our clients.

[Translation]

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

Thank you, Mr. Rousseau.

The next question will be asked by the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Godin.

You have the floor for five minutes, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rousseau, you said earlier that your record was improving. I asked you about what indicators you might have used as a basis to make this statement, and you mentioned the numbers reported by the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada and other figures you might have used.

Can you tell me precisely what indicators you use? I'd like to remind you in passing that the data for the 2020 year and the 2021 year may be unreliable, because Air Canada was less active and there were far fewer passengers. It's therefore only to be expected that the number of complaints to the commissioner would have decreased during that period.

Can you tell me precisely which indicators you used as a basis for saying that your record was improving?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, that's absolutely correct. Although we monitored 2020 and 2021, we're not using those years as an indicator, so we have to go back to 2019, when we had almost 52 million customers travel on our planes throughout the year. Again, on a relative basis, on a rate basis, the number of complaints declined year over year, given the growth in customers.

[Translation]

Mr. David Rheault: I'd like to add something.

We were, of course, hit hard by the pandemic, but we nevertheless carried between 13 million and 14 million passengers...

Mr. Joël Godin: I apologize for interrupting, Mr. Rheault. I appreciate your presence with us today, but my question is for Mr. Rousseau.

He said that he had indicators showing that his record had improved. As president and chief executive officer, what were the indicators he used? Don't tell me that there were fewer passengers, because I understand that very well, and mentioned it in my question.

Mr. Rousseau, here is my question. On the basis of what specific indicators can you make that claim—you questioned some of the figures used by the commissioner—can you clarify this point? Your answer is very evasive, once again. Can you please give me an answer?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, again, I'll reinforce my answer that one of the key indicators is the rate of complaints to the number of customers whom we serve and the interactions we have with them. That is one of the key measures that we would apply to our performance.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: If we rely on the official languages commissioner's numbers when the time comes for us to look at your record for 2022, Mr. Rousseau, we will likely see an increase in the number of complaints. If that's the case, will you promise this committee that you will take steps to heighten the French fact at Air Canada?

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, that's always been our objective, and we will certainly continue, as David mentioned, to look at new measures to improve our performance as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Rousseau, I understand that this is your objective and that it was also the objective of your predecessors, but it's not working. The results are not there. Can you do some brainstorming or go on a retreat to come up with new ideas, and introduce mechanisms that would actually yield results? What we want is to protect the French language.

• (1725)

[English]

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, I agree with the member's question. We have the same objective, so we will find different measures, if required, to improve our performance. That's what continuous improvement is. We have committees internally that look at this. Arielle and Lucie, our two executive vice-presidents, just spoke to many of our staff to solicit their input as well, so we continue to find ways to improve our performance, and that will never stop.

[Translation]

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Rousseau, I know that you are full of good intentions.

Now, what I can claim is that the methods used in the past don't work. I'm dismayed, Mr. Rousseau, about the highly evasive answers given earlier. You spoke about hours of work, first over a year, and then over seven years, one hour per person, one hour per teacher, it was anything but convincing.

We would simply like to be reassured. Are you willing to make a commitment to the committee? Stop exploring possibilities, analyzing things and consulting your committees. Can you do something concrete and set something up that would yield the right solution?

I don't have the solution, Mr. Rousseau, but I would simply like you and your senior management to take the steps required to achieve short-term results. Can you commit to doing that before this committee today?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

We are now going to move on to the final questions for today's meeting.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio, you have five minutes.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In closing, Mr. Rousseau, could you speak to us about the roles and responsibilities that are unique to Air Canada in maintaining the official languages of Canada?

[English]

Did you hear the question, Mr. Rousseau, or...? I see you hesitating. I can repeat it.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chairman, just to confirm, the question was what roles and responsibilities are integral to Air Canada with respect to the Official Languages Act.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Rousseau, I would just like to hear you speak to us about the roles and responsibilities that are unique to Air Canada in maintaining the official languages of Canada.

Mr. Michael Rousseau: Mr. Chair, as mentioned earlier, one of our executive vice-presidents, Arielle Meloul, is the official languages champion for Air Canada. She oversees the department headed by David Rheault, as well as training. As David mentioned earlier, we have a dedicated set of trainers in French, and other languages, as well, but primarily French.

As I mentioned earlier, the progress that we're making or the ideas that we're generating come to the executive committee, which is myself and our five executive vice-presidents, all of whom are bilingual.

[Translation]

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Mr. Speaker, if I may, I would like to ask Mr. Rousseau to give us his answer in writing. Ms. Meloul-Wechsler is not here today and all of us understand the question. The response could be sent to us in writing.

I would now like to get back to you, Mr. Rheault.

You spoke earlier about the regulation. In response to a question from my colleague Mr. Arseneault, you said that one of the regulations stated that at least 5% of passengers on a flight had to be francophone for bilingual services demand to be considered significant.

Could you provide us with a copy of your regulations so that we could understand how it works?

Mr. David Rheault: The manner in which significant demand for bilingual services is to be calculated is set out in one of the government's regulations. We can, of course, send the reference to the committee.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: Do you think this particular regulation should be bolstered?

Mr. David Rheault: In the bill that was introduced, the government announced that it intended to make other airline companies subject to the requirement to serve Canadians in French, but we be-

lieve that the flight routes subject to this obligation would be the same as those specified in the regulations. Otherwise, confusion could be created for passengers.

• (1730)

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: You mentioned flight routes. What happens if a route changes?

Mr. David Rheault: We measure demand for new flight routes. It's an exercise for airline companies. That's a very good question, because it's dynamic. Air Canada has much more than a single office in one region of Canada. Owing to the nature of its activities, its presence is global. Every time we offer a new route, we measure demand.

However, some flight routes are automatically identified in the act. This means every flight leaving from Montreal, all flights within Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario, or between these three provinces, and all flights departing from Moncton and Ottawa, if my memory serves me correctly.

We can send the committee the list of automatically designated flight routes, the method for calculating significant demand for routes, not only for in-flight services, but also in airports.

It would be helpful if the committee were to implement these requirements for identifying francophone regions and to make them applicable to other air carriers.

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio: The 2022 fiscal year is nearly over, and the 2023 year, at the end of which Air Canada's linguistic action plan will expire, is approaching.

According to you, will other improvements, additions or changes be added in the next plan?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David Rheault: That's a very good question. We will be preparing a report on our efforts. We will look at the results for recruitment and training. We will consult our employees as we establish the next objectives.

Air Canada is going through a recovery period, which provides opportunities to review how we do things. We are determined to improve this aspect of our activities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lattanzio.

Mr. Rousseau, Mr. Rheault and Mr. Barbeau, thank you for having come before the committee today.

You agreed to send us a number of documents in connection with certain questions. If you think that other relevant information could be sent to us in writing, please do not hesitate to do so. Any documents that you might send will be received as evidence, even though it is subsequent to this meeting. So don't hesitate to do so.

Thanks to my colleagues. It was a good meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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